

Keeping In Shape

Dear Kurt,

I was happy to bump into you in the weight room at the football stadium this afternoon. It was good to be able to lift weights and enjoy time with you and fellow athletes who are agonizing under the discipline of growing stronger. I'm not sure why, during the sixth decade of my life, I am subjecting myself to this physical torture. I guess intellectually I know that it is good for my body to be strong, both for physical vitality and as a means of resisting the frequent maladies that attack the body's immune system. There is also a psychological well-being that comes from being physically fit rather than sluggish and flabby. Perhaps the most important benefit of this effort for me comes from the sheer discipline of doing what is profitable. You might be wondering: *Where does all this lead?* Believe it or not, for me, physical discipline helps me develop my relationship with God!

I see faith as a spiritual muscle. Communication with an invisible God is a spiritual muscle that grows stronger with regular exercise. Enduring values like faith, hope and love are spiritual muscles that become flabby without regular and disciplined exercise. To be spiritually out of shape, thinking that you can be at your best for Christian witness, is as unlikely as competing in a 100-meter dash or running a marathon without training. It just won't happen! God wants us to run to win! So to that end we must pay the price of tough spiritual training.

You know the thrill of a critical play in a game. The team needs three yards to keep the winning drive alive and the ball is handed to you. All your hard work in preparation for this game—strength training, running and conditioning, mental commitment—comes into play at that moment. You are prepared, and you make it happen!

Now carry that over to your relationship with God. In life's critical situations—temptation, disappointment, tough decisions—your regular exercise of spiritual muscle will help you to stand tall for what is good and right, even under the pressure of adversity. Spiritual wimps can talk a good game, but that is not where it counts!

God's grace in our lives enables us to grow stronger. Just because grace is God's work, however, doesn't mean that growth is painless. Growth calls into action new parts of our minds, our emotions and our bodies. What we experience at these times often feels like pain. We are not used to stretching ourselves in these ways, but that comes as no surprise to you. Remember how sore you were after two practices a day back in August? A commitment to Christ and obedience to His commands stretches us beyond ourselves, and that hurts! But in the big picture, this growing pain leads to health and strength.

There is another important lesson I learned in the weight room, and that's the benefit of working with a partner. I know you understand the role of the spotter: First, he coaches and encourages you to get the best out of your workout; second he assists physically when certain muscles have become exhausted, again, so you can get the most out of your workout.

Likewise, it is important to understand that the development of your spiritual muscle will also be enhanced by working with a partner, or a *spiritual spotter*, who can help with accountability and motivate you to grow strong in grace. There is a time and place for personal intimacy with God. Jesus taught his disciples the importance of a quiet solitary retreat for prayer and communion with the Father. But He also guided them into shared intimacy. Two and three getting together in his name gave added impetus for building the spiritual muscle of commitment, fellowship and service.

On Saturday, you and your teammates will compete in a nationally televised game on *the fields of friendly strife*. You have been taught to play the game to win. And you know you must play by the rules. The prize will be another *W* in your season record or, at least, the knowledge that you gave it your best.

As a follower of Jesus, the battle in which you are engaged is a much more significant contest, the reward of which is an eternal prize that will not fade in its significance. The disciplines and sacrifices that you make in your daily life will be investments for eternity.

My prayer for you, Kurt, is that you will make the time and effort to keep yourself spiritually fit. Physical fitness has great value—you know that. But spiritual fitness is valuable in every part of life, both here and beyond. I place you in God's care. Remember the message about His great kindness! This message can help you and give you what belongs to you as a child of God.

Cordially,

Richard P. Camp, Jr.

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Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. Therefore, I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air. No, I beat my body and make it my slave so that after all I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.

1 Corinthians 9:24-27