

## **"Get With the Program"**

*Rehab series.<sup>1</sup> 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Lent*

John 2:13-25

Has anyone ever invited you to join a health program? It seems like these fads come and go. I remember in high school, there was this big craze about oat bran. Did anyone get on the oat bran program? I didn't. But I did find some other strange programs in the Reader's Digest online this week. Listen to these:

### Prancer-cise

Described as a "springy, rhythmic way of moving forward, similar to a horse's gait and ideally induced by elation..." Whoo-hoo!

### Paleo Fitness

A "primal" way to stay in shape. The basic forms of building strength are hanging from tree branches, carrying boulders, and lifting logs.

### Surfset Fitness

"Ride the waves" in an exercise program that takes place on a machine that looks like a miniature surfboard and simulates the instability of waves. (Picture)

### Cycle Karaoke

This combines stationary cycling with Karaoke. Each fearless soloist belts out the words to his or her favorite song from the gym's collection, while the rest of the class pedals along. Exercise your arms, legs, and vocal chords.

### Minimalist Fitness

Described as short, intense workouts such as four to six rounds of high intensity stationary biking or 30 seconds of sprinting, followed by a brief rest, or three intense four-minute runs per week. A little goes a long way!

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship/lent-2018-worship-planning-series>

## JumpLife

A combination of mini trampolines, disco balls, and neon lights for an effect that's more like a dance party and less like an exercise program.<sup>2</sup>

Or you can do something like this guy. (*Church Appropriate Dance Moves*)

We should be concerned with our physical health. God gave us our bodies, and we should take care of them. However, Paul says in I Timothy 4:8 that, while “physical training is of some value, godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come.” As we take care of our bodies, we need spiritual health programs, too.

This is why we need God’s word. Consider: Exodus 20 is the original Ten-Step Program, also known as the Ten Commandments. This program was given to Moses and the Israelites in the wilderness, and remains a standard we can all live by today: worship God only; honor the Sabbath; honor your parents; don’t steal, lie, murder, cheat or covet... That is a good program. Follow these commandments to keep your spirit in shape.

As you read the Old Testament, you can see how various people followed, or didn’t follow, that program. Look at King David and King Solomon, for example. When they stuck to God’s program, trusting in God and worshiping God alone, then God would continue to bless them and keep their kingdom safe. For David, this seemed to work pretty well, but Solomon quickly abandoned the program; he married many foreign wives who stole his heart away, and the kingdom of Israel fractured.

Much later, the prophet Daniel and his three friends were tempted to abandon God’s program by King Nebuchadnezzar; his program included

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.rd.com/health/wellness/6-unusual-exercise-programs-worth-trying/>

worshipping Babylonian gods and eating their food. But Daniel and his friends resisted and stuck to God’s plan, earning blessings and seeing miracles as God protected them from the fiery furnace and the lion’s den.

Good programs are helpful. But there is danger in believing that a program can save you. You might get carried away and forget your priorities. You might modify the program from its original purpose, or start skipping steps.

In Jesus’ time, the Jewish people were into God’s program. They knew they were supposed to worship the Lord only. They taught that everyone had to celebrate Passover at the temple in Jerusalem. But they forgot the Author of the program and started to modify the program to suit themselves. They started looking for ways to make worship more convenient.

Most of the faithful Jews had to make a long journey to the temple, and transporting animals for sacrifice was a big inconvenience. They might have been eaten along the way! So the Jewish leaders offered to “help.” They began selling animals for sacrifices. If you forgot your cow, sheep or dove, no problem. You could just purchase one inside the temple, at outrageous prices, of course. If you didn’t have the proper “non-idolatrous” coins for the offering, that was covered, too. You just had to go to the money changers’ tables to get the right currency, with a hefty exchange fee, of course. In some ways, I imagine the whole scene was like going to an airport. It was noisy, chaotic, smelly and expensive.

The problem is, all this activity was happening inside the temple, specifically in the court of the Gentiles, the only place where foreigners were allowed to pray and worship. The distractions must have been overwhelming! And the noises and smells must have reached the inner courts, too.

This is the scene Jesus encountered when he went up to Jerusalem to worship at Passover. Instead of a place of worship, he found a chaotic market. The scripture describes a scary scene at his entry. Jesus, the gentle shepherd, took a whip and cleaned house. He drove out the animals and their handlers. He yelled at the sellers of doves: “Get these out of here! Stop turning my Father’s house into a market!”

This story is recorded in all four gospels, but I noticed that John specifically says Jesus told off the dove handlers. Remember, there were cattle and sheep there as well. The doves were the cheapest option available for sacrifice, which means that they were usually purchased by the poorest people. You might recall from the Christmas story, Jesus’ parents sacrificed doves. (Luke 2:24) This extortion was very personal for Jesus.

Not only was the temple atmosphere being destroyed by noise and odors, the Jewish leaders were focused on profit, not worship. They were taking advantage of a captive market. We may be annoyed that a soft drink and a pizza slice costs \$15 in Tiger Stadium, but I doubt any of us would crack a whip at the vendors. But this racket was taking place in the house of worship, God’s house. No wonder Jesus was upset. This was not part of God’s program.

Now, the Jewish authorities, the “program experts” supposedly, confronted Jesus, but take note: they made no attempt to arrest him. I think this was a sign of their tacit admission of guilt: they knew these actions in the temple courts were unethical. So instead, they challenged Jesus, demanding a sign as proof he had the authority to change the temple set up. It is as if they said, “We think this program works. What do you have?”

So Jesus offered a sign. “Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days.” (John 2:19) Jesus was intentionally misleading them. He was talking about his own body. And interestingly enough, the other three gospels say that mockers hurled these words back at Jesus at the cross.

Jesus was saying his program was not about a building. It was about his body. Jesus would build up the church through his own life, death, and resurrection. Now that is a radical program!

God’s program can be boiled down to two words: follow Jesus. If anything - money, video games, gossip, food, whatever – if anything steals your heart away from God, you need to give it up and get back on God’s program. Various scriptures talk about this, but my favorite is Matthew 6:21- “Where your treasure is, that is where your heart is, also.” From their actions inside the temple courts, it was clear that the merchants’ hearts were in their greed, not their God.

If Jesus were your personal trainer, what would he tell you? Are there some tables in your life you need to turn over to him (literally)? Are there times when you are too concerned with making a profit and managing your money, than you are about maintaining your relationship with the Son of God? Are there times when you do not prioritize your schedule, and you give God the cold shoulder?

I know. It can be easy to compromise. It is easy to take a day or two off from the program. It is so easy to flat out quit the program when it’s tough, especially when the results aren’t instant. Or when we make mistakes.

God knows. As followers of Jesus Christ, we do not have an easy life. It is not easy to follow the program. Matthew 7:14 says the road is difficult and narrow, but it leads to life. When the road gets tough, those are the times we

want to throw in the towel, and give up on God altogether. We quit church. We quit reading the Bible. We quit talking to our brothers and sisters in faith. We even give up on ourselves.

God gave us the commandments, but he surely knew we would break them. That’s not the point. The commandments are meant to expose our need for God, our need for grace and mercy. Faith is not about doing the right thing for the sake of the law – it is about having a right relationship with the One who gave the law. The question is whether we will stick to the program and stick with each other.

Look what happened in John chapter 2. Temple worship had been compromised. The poor were being taken advantage of. People were more focused on profit than on worship. I bet even some faithful Jews had had enough and stopped coming to Passover. But Jesus cleansed the temple. He set things right. I don’t know how long his reform lasted, but it lasted long enough to have an impact on those who listened, namely, his disciples.

The same thing happens in our world. Our worship is compromised by our own thoughts and desires to the point that others who would faithfully participate are excluded. Instead of worshipping the true God, we worship ourselves. We have fallen off the program.

I know there are many families in this church who have come and gone over the years, some even recently. We cannot control their actions, we can only love them and pray for them.

But look what God does in his grace. He restores people. He restores us. If we let him, God can restore our churches. Not just this one. All of them. It might be disruptive, even as surprising as seeing Jesus with a whip. But if we stick to

God's program, passion for God will consume us, in a good way, just as it consumed Jesus himself.

Communion is part of God's program. In the bread and cup, Jesus calls us to remember the length that he went to restore us, to get us with the program, to bring us back to God. Let's take that step together now, starting with this prayer of confession.

*O God, Your light has filled our lives, but we have not shared it with others.*

**Lord, have mercy on us.**

*You have marked us as your own in baptism, but we have not lived as your faithful people.*

**Christ, have mercy on us.**

*You have called us to be a light to the nations, but we have hidden our light under a bushel.*

**Lord, have mercy on us.**

*Transform us by the power of your Holy Spirit so that we may live out our baptism as your new creation, forgiven and made whole by your matchless love in Jesus Christ our Lord.*

*(Moment of silent reflection)*

Pastor: In the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven.

People: **In the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven.**

**All: Thanks be to God! Amen.**

(Continue with Holy Communion.)

Memory Verse: Micah 6:8

“...What does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.”

Reflection Questions:

1. What programs had you tried? What was the most helpful? Least helpful?  
Why?
2. Do you think God intends for us to follow his commandments perfectly?  
Why or why not?
3. Why do you think Jesus cleared the temple? What would you have done if  
you had been in his shoes?
4. Have you ever left an organization, or even a church? Why? Did you ever  
rejoin?
5. What is God asking you to do this week to stay with him in the “program”  
of the gospel?