

The Nature of Embodiment

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[0 : 01] We've been in a series for the past few weeks called This Is My Body, and it's a series looking at our bodies and its scripture and trying to understand how to think about our bodies.

One of the biggest questions in our society right now is what does it mean to be a human being and what role do our bodies play in our humanness? And so we're thinking about that and we're looking at scripture to help guide us in that conversation.

And so for those who are Christians who are here, we are essentially trying to help you build a theology of embodiment. So that you can think biblically and live faithfully in this culture where so many of the issues that we wrestle with have to do with the meaning that we attach to our bodies.

And if you're here and you're not a Christian or if you're listening, joining online and you're not a Christian, the hope is this is one of the ways that we make it evident that the gospel is the best news there is for every aspect of our lives, including and especially our physical bodies.

It may sound weird to say that there is good news for your body, but the gospel is that. It is good news for your body, and I hope that becomes clearer this morning. Two weeks ago, we talked about our bodies as being gifts from God, handmade gifts.

[1 : 26] And then last week, we talked about our bodies being made in the image of God and what that means. And this morning, what we're going to do is we're going to focus on the nature of our embodiment, how we think about our embodiment.

And we're going to do that looking at Genesis chapter 2, verses 4 through 6. So first, we're going to spend a little time looking at the most common view of embodiment that you see in our culture, the most common view of embodiment.

And then we're going to look at Scripture and we're going to see what the gospel has to say about our embodiment, how the gospel transforms our view of embodiment. So let's pray, and then we will get started.

And before I pray, I just want to let the guys in the sound, there's a hissing coming from this monitor. I don't know if there's anything you can do about that. But let's pray. Lord, we thank you for your word, and we thank you for being a God who dwells in our midst.

And we thank you for the fact that you speak to us in ways that only you can. This is a room full of people, and we each need probably something a bit different from you. And you're the kind of God who's able, through the same word, to speak to each of us in the ways that we in particular need to hear.

[2 : 37] Lord, that you can apply your word specifically to us. And so I pray that you would do that, Lord. I pray that we would all be able to sit under your word and hear what we need to hear from you this morning. I pray this in your son's holy name.

Amen. So first of all, a little bit about the common view of embodiment that you might come across in our culture. A friend of mine, Ann Snyder, wrote this recently in Comment Magazine.

She writes, In other words, a trend that she observes for centuries now in our society has been the gradual displacement of our bodies.

Now, this has been happening for a very long time. It's not a new idea. In fact, there are numerous ancient philosophies and religions that hold a very low view of the physical body.

Plato famously said that the body is a tomb. That our self, our soul, is trapped in this tomb until hopefully it might be liberated.

[3 : 52] The early Gnostic religions held much the same view. The body is a prison. Many Eastern religions also say this. The Bhagavad Gita teaches, As you put on fresh new clothes and take off those you've worn, you'll replace your body with a fresh one, newly born.

So you can take off your body like an article of clothing and replace it with a new one. And then the rise of rationalism during the Enlightenment further solidified this dualism in the Western imagination.

By dualism, I mean the separation of body and spirit or body and mind. And coming out of the Enlightenment, we see this kind of heightened focus on the mind and this disregarding of the body as though the body exists merely to serve the mind.

So we see this trend continuing. And then, not surprisingly, technology has followed along and in many ways exacerbated this. And often what we see in culture is this interplay between technology and philosophy, sort of shaping culture.

So inventions such as the telephone, the automobile, the printing press, air travel, they all radically changed the world.

[5 : 14] They're all amazing. We're not saying these are bad things. But how did they change the world? By giving us ways to overcome the limitations of our bodies.

And now that's very significant. The Internet has done the same thing on steroids. Our social lives, our work, our entertainment are more and more disembodied as everything goes online.

Now, there is a material infrastructure to the Internet. It's just not something that we see. It's giant server data centers in a giant warehouse somewhere.

And miles and miles and miles of cable. Now, we don't see that. What we see is a disembodied virtual reality as everything goes online.

Mark Zuckerberg has recently announced his vision for the future of the Internet, which is actually a virtual world, the metaverse. Facebook's going all in on this being humanity's future.

[6 : 16] And, of course, all of this is exacerbated greatly by COVID. You know, COVID comes along and all of a sudden other people's bodies are dangerous.

Our bodies are dangerous to one another. Your physical presence is a threat. And so we now live in a world where safety means physical isolation.

And we've sort of been pushed headlong into this semi-virtual disembodied way of life that I think has become the new normal. A kind of combination of at-home Zoom and public in-person, but probably a combination that is here to stay.

And the more our bodies are displaced, right? So these trends are all showing this kind of displacement of the body, as Ann Snyder wrote. The more our bodies are displaced, the more open we become to our bodies being replaced.

Right? If our bodies are secondary, if they don't matter, if they're ancillary to our lives, what do they really matter and why not then replace them or upgrade them or do away with them if we don't like them?

[7 : 33] So think about movies like Freaky Friday or Avatar or The Change-Up, right? There are dozens and dozens and dozens of movies with the same premise. They're all films where people exchange one body for another.

My family and I recently watched the movie Soul, which I have to say I greatly enjoyed. I mean, it's a wonderful, delightful movie on many levels. But the premise of the movie Soul is that before we are born, we all exist as spirits who must at some point descend to Earth to inhabit a physical body. And so you have all of these sort of proto-souls living in the great before, sort of waiting to be ready to go down to Earth and inhabit a physical body.

I actually think if you polled many Christians in our country, they would probably say, yeah, I think that's probably how it works. You're up there hanging out with God, and then at some point God says, okay, let's get you in a body, right?

And so this movie is, of course, takes this turn that for a lot of comedic effect where two spirits end up in the wrong bodies, right?

[8 : 41] You have a female spirit in a man's body, and a man's spirit ends up in a cat's body. And it's a funny film, and in many ways it sort of makes light of the metaphysics.

But I want you to see that underneath this and films like it, there is a very powerful metaphysical claim being made. And that is that your real self, your true self, exists apart from your body.

But it's separate. And if that's the case, then it's entirely possible to end up in the wrong body. I've heard many people describe their body as kind of luck of the draw.

And I say that this is a metaphysical claim, it's a metaphysical belief, because, of course, we can't prove any of this with science. When we begin to try to articulate the relationship between yourself

and your body, we are on the plane of religion.

We're on the plane of metaphysics and ontology. These are what we would call unfalsifiable claims. There's no way to scientifically back it, so it's a faith-based belief.

[9 : 49] Nevertheless, that is the way many people in our culture imagine things to be, including, I think, many Christians. So the most common view of our embodiment is this.

It's to see our bodies as containers. At best, they contain us. At worst, they confine us. They're cages.

They're tombs, as Plato said. And as a result of this view of the body as a container, there's a lot of confusion in our culture when it comes to our bodies, because we live in a culture where instinctively we know that our bodies are probably important, and yet at the same time we are bombarded with messages that tell us that they're not really that important.

And so we live in a culture that at the same time celebrates and idealizes the human body and denigrates and displaces the human body. We live in a culture where, on the one hand, we pour time and energy into making sure our bodies are healthy and attractive, and we promote body positivity.

We promote greater and greater acceptance of your body regardless of what it looks like or what standards of beauty it might appeal to. And yet, on the other hand, right alongside that, we feel more and more disconnected from our bodies, and we increasingly see them as obstacles to be overcome or problems to be solved.

[11 : 18] We live in a culture where people who struggle to accept their bodies receive very mixed messages. Some people struggle with body dysmorphia, and a lot of times, along with that, eating disorders like anorexia.

That means seeing your body as being ugly or overweight even when it's not. It's perceiving that something is wrong with your body even if it's not.

Some people also struggle with gender dysphoria, which is seeing your body as being the wrong sex. Right now, these are distinct struggles.

They're distinct struggles, and yet they have a lot in common. Both involve the way we perceive our body, perceiving your body as in some way being wrong.

Actually, both tend to occur together. The need for treatment for body dysmorphia and anorexia is four times greater among the transgender population than it is in the general population.

[12 : 22] They both cause tremendous suffering. Often, it's a kind of suffering that people feel a lot of shame attached to. They feel like they can't talk about it with most people in their lives.

It's a quiet, hidden, isolated form of suffering. And in both cases, it can lead to self-inflicted harm or death. So these are very serious struggles, very serious issues.

However, if you're a person who struggles in both of these ways, and you go to a therapist, you're going to be told two different things. In the case of your body dysmorphia, treatment is going to involve bringing your feelings in line with your body.

In the case of gender dysphoria, treatment is going to involve bringing your body in line with your feelings. And so it creates an enormous amount of confusion.

There are even many medical professionals who are very confused as to how to treat these conditions. As distinct as they are, they're very much related. So there's a lot of confusion.

[13 : 25] And when people are really suffering and struggling, the last thing you want among people who are trying to help is confusion. So what does the gospel have to say about our bodies?

And how does the gospel offer hope in some of the ways that we've laid out? Genesis chapter 2 verse 7 says, Then the Lord God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature.

Sam Alberry wrote a wonderful book on embodiment, and he says of this passage, God didn't create a soul named Adam and then look around for a container to put him in like a piece of Tupperware.

Right? Which is, I think, what we often think. Right? That God, we're hanging out with God, and God says, let's get to it. Here's your body. You know, enjoy your physical life.

But what we need to understand here in Scripture is there was no Adam that existed before his body. Adam is matter and spirit combined as one.

[14 : 34] God starts with matter and then breathes his spirit into it. And this is something very important when it comes to our own understanding of our nature.

We do not merely have a body. We are a body. There is no you, there is no me that exists apart from your body.

We are our bodies. Now, we are more than our bodies, but we are not other than our bodies. And so when the Bible uses the word soul, because people say, well, doesn't the Bible talk a lot about your soul?

What we need to understand is if we read that in a dualistic way, we're really seeing it through the lens of our own culture. The Bible uses the word soul in a much more holistic way.

And very often, by far the most common usage of the word soul in the Bible is referring to the whole person. Not just the non-physical part of you. God's vision for creation from the very beginning was to see matter and spirit joined together.

[15 : 43] The heavens and the earth joined together. God and his people in his world joined together. That was God's vision when he created all of this.

The reason that matter and spirit are separate now, the reason that there is a sense of alienation between matter and spirit is because of sin.

It's because of brokenness. When Adam and Eve sinned, as we said a few weeks ago, what was the very first symptom that things were not as they should be? They felt shame over their physical bodies.

The very first sign that all is not well in the garden is that Adam and Eve are alienated from their own physical bodies. And then, right then, they begin to use technology to try to compensate for that alienation in the form of fig leaves.

And ever since, human beings have been using technology to cover or alter or even transform physical bodies we have into bodies we think we want.

[16 : 58] So shame over our bodies is a symptom of the fall. Disembodiment. By that, I mean all of the ways that we feel disconnected from our own physicality is a symptom of the fall.

Feeling trapped in the wrong body or feeling that there is something profoundly wrong with your body is a symptom of the fall. And this is why the gospel is such good news for our bodies.

Jesus Christ shows us what human beings were created to be. This is the season of Advent and we are often asking during this season, what does it mean that Jesus came? What does it mean that the word became flesh?

One of the things that we've said it means every week is that Jesus shows us what a human being should be. And when we look at the essence of Jesus, Jesus is fully God and fully man, fully flesh. It is not as though there is some part of him that is God existing within a kind of fleshly shell. Right? Many of the heresies in the early church concerned the nature of Jesus and a lot of them tried to say, well, he only looked like a human or there was a spirit but the spirit just put on the body but then it took the body off again and various sort of versions of that.

[18 : 20] Those were considered heresies from the very beginning. What we see in scripture is that Jesus is fully God and fully man. Every cell, right? Every nucleus, every proton, right?

Fully God, fully man. And what we see in Jesus is the perfect merging of spirit and matter.

And after his death and resurrection, he still has a physical body. And in John chapter 20, our gospel reading for this morning, when Jesus appears to his disciples after his resurrection, they note and they see his physicality.

And then he breathes on them and they receive the Holy Spirit. You say, well, that's a really weird way to do that. He could have just laid hands. Breathing feels kind of like a boundary violation. But this is a deliberate allusion to Genesis chapter 2, verse 7, our Old Testament reading.

There's a deliberate look back. Jesus is saying, do you remember that time when I first created human beings? And I took matter and I breathed my spirit into matter and that matter became a living thing.

[19 : 30] Well, I've come back and I'm now breathing my spirit into you once more. And it's a way of saying to his disciples and to us, I have come to, just as I came to create humanity, I have now come back to recreate humanity.

This is a new creation and it's the inauguration of a new humanity. And he's bringing us back to the first time that God breathes spirit into matter. And this is a way of saying that Jesus came to restore our humanity, including our bodies.

And Paul picks up on that theme in 1 Corinthians 15, where he says, just like Jesus was physically raised, one day we will all be physically raised. And your body will be a glorified body, but it will be a

physical body.

And you say, well, what about when we die? And all that the Bible says about when you die, you go to heaven. And what about that? Well, the truth is, that is called a kind of intermediate state. And it's not good. Right? For a time when we die until Jesus comes again and everyone is raised, for a time, spirit and matter must be separate.

[20 : 41] But the Bible doesn't see that as a good thing. It's a necessary thing because of the fall. But that's why the Bible says almost nothing about that. If you want to know what the Bible says about life after death, it always points to the hope of the physical resurrection because that's God's plan for dealing with death.

The intermediate state, we know almost nothing about. The Bible says almost nothing about it. And it's an aspect of the fallen world. It's not part of God's plan for new creation.

And so we need to understand that all of the hope in Scripture points to our resurrection where our body and spirit will be one again. And by the way, all of salvation history aims in that same direction. From the time God created the heavens and the earth, the goal was that one day matter and spirit would be one, God and his people would be one, Jesus and his bride, the church, would be one, the heavens and the earth would be one.

And that is the vision that Jesus enacts when he comes to earth to give his life to make all of this possible.

[21 : 57] So then we think about that and we think, okay, well, what does that mean for how we think about our embodiment? And I would say this, the most popular view is to see our embodiment as a form of confinement.

But a gospel-centered view of embodiment sees it not as confinement but as a calling. Embodiment for the Christian is a calling.

It's a calling that we live into. And you say, what does that mean? That's kind of a weird thing to say. I have to point to Neve Colbrook for inspiration here.

She's a Christian who has struggled for years with an eating disorder. And one of the core features of an eating disorder, and those of you who have or are struggling with this, hopefully this resonates with you.

One of the core features of an eating disorder, as I have been told, is extreme ambivalence about your embodiment. Just extreme difficulty being in your own body.

[22 : 58] And so Neve wrote an essay about her recovery where she says that through her relationship with Jesus, she has come to realize that, and I'm quoting her here, embodiment is not just a given, it is also a calling.

There is a difference between living with our bodies and really inhabiting them. And that really captures it in a nutshell. If the fall disconnects us from our bodies and alienates us from our bodies, the gospel seeks to reconcile us to our bodies, to move us toward greater and greater love and acceptance and acceptance of our bodies so that we don't just put up with them or tolerate them, we inhabit them.

Fully. Right? And I think that really needs to shape how we, as a church, view embodiment. You know, you don't often think of inhabiting your body as an aspect of following Jesus, but if what we have just seen is true, then it very much is a part of what it means to follow Jesus.

Jesus intends to restore your body, and he gave it to you as a gift and it bears his image. Therefore, as disciples, we're called to inhabit fully these bodies that we've been given.

So what does that look like practically for a church like ours to embrace embodiment as a calling and view it as a part of our life of discipleship?

[24 : 34] And I want to give you four ways that I think this plays out in our community. Number one, this means that we cultivate a culture of healthy, appropriate touch in our community.

Now, I know just even saying that is probably a bit creepy for some of you. You know, and I'm an introvert, and you know, I'm very affectionate, but I, you know, like most people, I'm like, I'm okay if we're not touching each other.

You know what I mean? But this comes straight from Sam Albury, I know this sounds odd to very many people, but this is evidence that I think this is actually pretty important.

Right? If me saying that we need a healthy culture of touch strikes us as odd, it's probably a sign that we don't have a healthy culture of touch. And you know, he says that many people associate touch with being sensual rather than familial.

And I think that's very much the case. As one person put it that he quotes, in our culture, we are sex-obsessed but touch-deprived. And I also think that that's very true.

[25 : 46] And there are some people who, because they live alone or for various other reasons, are forced to go months or even years without ever really having any physical contact with another human being.

And I think that's another kind of quiet, unspoken form of suffering that is excruciating and can happen right under our noses and we're not even aware that it's happening.

There are people probably in this room who may have gone years without any real physical contact, familial, loving physical contact with any other human being. That is debilitating.

It's dehumanizing. And so I think that churches should be places where you can find a remedy. That churches should provide a kind of remedy for this by being places where healthy, appropriate, familial touch is encouraged.

You know, the Bible talks about Christians greeting one another with a holy kiss. That is a cultural reference. I don't want anybody trying to kiss me. No offense, I love you all.

[26 : 54] That's not culturally appropriate. The principle behind that is you should greet one another in a physical, familial, appropriate way. So a hug, a handshake, a fist bump.

I know that COVID makes this more complicated, but my hope is that our fear of our own physicality would not permanently do away with what I think is a very valuable thing that happens here, which is the casual interactions of hands on shoulders, hugs where appropriate, handshakes, ways of acknowledging our physicality as a family when we come together.

And I know everybody's not comfortable with that, so part of this means navigating and negotiating what people are comfortable with. And I recognize that this is sort of awkward ground for most of us, but I think naming that as a value is very important if we seek to be a church that embraces the calling of embodiment.

Number two, I think it means we take a gospel-centered approach to those who are suffering in their embodiment. I mean, I know right now that there are people in our midst who suffer because of body dysmorphia and eating disorders.

I know that there are people in our midst who struggle and suffer because of gender dysphoria. I know that there are people in our midst who struggle and suffer because of chronic pain or chronic illness.

[28 : 19] I know that we have people who, because of trauma, feel completely alienated from their bodies. The church needs to be a place where people who are suffering in these ways are loved and cared for with no fear of shame or rejection.

I would love for the church, our church, to be a place where a person might be able to talk and share these things with their immediate community in the church with confidence that they're going to be embraced and loved and understood.

I would love for that to be true of us and where, through the gradual, gentle grace of Christ and the ongoing ministry of the Holy Spirit, people move toward greater and greater acceptance and love for their bodies.

Right? That that is always the goal, to embrace the calling of embodiment and inhabit the bodies that God has given us. Number three, I think that it means worship has to involve our whole body and not just our mind.

And this is something, this is one of the reasons that I love the Anglican tradition, but I think that, I think that there's a whole lot more that we could do to embrace this, right? Including, you know, raising our hands when we worship, right?

[29 : 40] Responding physically when we feel the spirit moving. the value of the liturgy and the sacraments is that they give us ways to worship that are embodied and physical.

You know, we process, we kneel, we bow, we cross ourselves, we raise our hands, some of us do, we pray, we confess, we sing aloud, we physically receive and eat the elements at the table, right? We jokingly refer to these as liturgical calisthenics, but they're more than that, right? These are ways of involving your body and when you involve your body, you are making theology physical. Another way the Bible might say it is, you're making words into flesh. Engaging our bodies is a recognition of our human nature.

We're not just brains on a stick. We have bodies, we are our bodies, all of our bodies are meant to be brought into God's presence and utilized for his worship and glory.

[30 : 45] And then number four, I think it means we adopt practices in our lives outside of Sunday worship that re-embody us. If we live in a culture and use technology that disembodies us, and by the way, that's unavoidable.

That's unavoidable, right? A lot of this technology is very mixed and brings a lot of benefits as well as challenges, but most of us now couldn't do our jobs if we didn't live in this culture and use this technology.

So it's here to stay and it's continuing to move in that direction. So for most of us, if that is the case, it simply means that we need to be much more intentional about bringing balance into our lives through re-embodying practices that help us to re-inhabit the bodies that we feel disconnected from. You know, years ago, I came across the philosopher Albert Borgman and he makes this distinction. He was writing, I think, back in the 80s, but he makes this distinction between devices and what he calls focal things or focal practices.

And I love, I think it's very helpful, it's even more true today. He says, here's the difference. Devices are passive. They give us something without asking anything from us in return.

[32 : 04] So they minimize the involvement of our bodies and they are designed with the assumption that minimal involvement equals greater satisfaction.

What I find, so think of like scrolling for an hour on Instagram. Right? That is a device that is designed to make it as easy as possible for you to consume without any cost.

Right? And what that, it makes it profoundly easy to just veg out, space out, lose track of time and become completely forgetful of our bodies. You know, if you scroll for an hour on Instagram, you're not aware of that time passing and you become completely forgetful about the existence of your body.

You sort of space out. That's disemboding. And he says, focal things or focal practices ask something of you.

They cost something. They make you work for it. And the joy and satisfaction actually comes from using your body to build skills and capabilities and produce something tangible.

[33 : 08] So think about baking bread, for instance. Baking bread is profoundly embodying. I think there's a, not a surprise that during COVID there was a big uptick in people who started baking.

It's because people felt so disconnected in their virtual world that they needed something to get them back in their own bodies. So people started doing things like baking. So device versus focal thing or focal practice, this would be the difference between listening to the radio or listening to streaming music on Spotify and playing a musical instrument.

Right? One engages you. One uses your body. This is one of the reasons that I love to cook. I love to fish. I love to go biking with my boys. You know, I don't love to cook because I'm necessarily the best cook out there or I, the 99% of the reasons I love to cook is because most of what I do is in my brain.

It's disembodied and it's something that gets me out of my head and into my body where I'm using my senses to create something tangible. So for me, cooking is a profoundly spiritual act.

And I think if we take the calling to embodiment seriously in our community, it means we begin to recognize all of these things as spiritual behaviors and spiritual practices.

[34 : 25] We have prayer. We have reading scripture. We have worship. We have the sacraments. We have solitude. We have fasting. We have all of these things that we do. But we also have walking and hiking and biking and climbing and playing musical instruments.

And, you know, this year, one of the things my family's doing for Advent is we are putting a puzzle together. And I know that sounds like a very simple thing.

I think it's a great Advent activity because you have this kind of unclear image that is gradually becoming clearer. You know, it's a kind of great metaphor for the weighting of the Christian life. But for us, it gets our kids, it gets us off our devices, it gets us at the same table, and it gets us using our bodies, and it gets us working together. And it's been awesome.

All of these, I think, we see as spiritual practices that help us inhabit fully the bodies that God has given us. So during this Advent season, whether you go for a run or paint or bike or bake some bread or whatever it might be, I hope you recognize that as a spiritual practice that is reconnecting you to your body, which is a good thing.

[35 : 39] Because the truth is, as we said, you are your body. You are your body. So in a way, becoming reconnected with your body is really a way to become reconnected with yourself.

Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for your word, and we thank you for our bodies, and we thank you for your body that was broken so that ours might be healed and restored.

And we pray that in a little while when we come to your table to receive your body and your blood, that in our receiving of your body, our bodies might be made more whole, that we might be healed of our alienation and our disembodied, that we might experience our bodies the way you do, Lord, as being intimately and spiritually connected to your body.

And I pray that in your body we would find the wholeness that we see. And we pray this in your son's name and for your glory. Amen.