



GOSPEL *for* LIFE

Embodied with Gregg R. Allison

Season 1, Episode 9 Transcript

[00:00:00] Announcer: Welcome to the Gospel for Life podcast. We help churches make disciples. And now, here's your host, Darryl Dash.

[00:00:21] Darryl: Welcome back to the Gospel for Life podcast. I'm excited to chat today with Gregg Allison, professor of Christian theology at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. I'm talking to him about his new book, *Embodied Living as Whole People in a Fractured World*.

I want to give you a little backstory. While I was working on my first book *How to Grow*, my wife Charlene said to me that I'd better include a section on the body, and she said it in a way that didn't really leave much of an option. She's convinced that we've ignored the body and what it means to follow Jesus as embodied creatures.

I didn't have as much time to develop it as I would have liked, but I included this in the book,

God cares about our bodies. I'm always amazed by how physical and sensory the Bible is. We're told about people eating, walking, sleeping, moving to various locations, defecating, fighting, having sex, and more—all very physical things. Even the resurrected Jesus shows up in a body that can be touched, a body that eats. In eternity, we'll have physical, resurrected bodies on the new earth, not disembodied spirits floating on the clouds. We're not souls trapped in a body; we are physical beings. God cares about what we do with our bodies: how we eat, who we sleep with, what we wear, and more.

Well, it was good to include this in the book. And in *8 Habits for Growth*, which is coming out in August, one of the habits is called "Care for Your Body,"

because the body is such an important and overlooked topic within the church and within christian discipleship. And so I was thrilled to come across Dr. Allison's book *Embodied* because I touch on the subject briefly, but Dr. Allison spends a whole book helping us understand the importance of our bodies to God. It's such an important book and really, I hope it gets a wide reading. I'm so grateful that he's written it.

So Gregg, thank you for writing *Embodied*, and welcome to the podcast today.

[00:02:12] Gregg: Thank you so much. So I applaud your wife for pushing you to include that. And I agree with everything you wrote, even if it was brief, it really does summarize exactly what I say in my book. So kudos to you and to your wife.

[00:02:26] Darryl: I'll pass that on because it's really her she has this passion. And it's interesting because part of her walk with God, I would say she hit a phase where she was a little stuck. And the pathway to rekindling her relationship with God was beginning to get in better physical shape. That led to a whole conviction of hers that we really need to pay more attention to the body as part of our discipleship with the Lord.

[00:02:52] Gregg: Again, applause to her and to you.

[00:02:54] Darryl: I've been in the church a long time, and yet I've rarely heard teaching about what it means to love God as embodied creatures. So why do you think that we tend to ignore this topic?

[00:03:03] Gregg: I think even early on in the church's history, it was negatively impacted by a movement called Gnosticism, which really emphasizes the goodness of the immaterial aspect of human nature, the soul or the spirit and denigrates the physical aspect of human nature. So anything that is spiritual or immaterial is good, anything that's physical, anything that is embodied tangible is evil. And sadly, the church, I think imbibed some of this Gnostic tendency. So it really emphasized the whole idea of nourishing the soul and the spirit and then overlooking or even denigrating the body.

[00:03:51] Darryl: It's interesting that one of the verses that usually gets quoted is that — I think the King James Version says that "bodily exercise profiteth little." People would take that and say, "Oh, Paul there is saying don't worry about the body. Right, that's not important." And actually Paul wasn't putting down the body there. So maybe the translation played a bit of the role. I remember hearing that as a kid growing up in almost putting down the role of physical exercise.

[00:04:15] Gregg: Yeah, I think it's a poor translation. Paul is emphasizing obviously the eternal benefit of spiritual discipline, but then he also says at least in this earthly existence, physical discipline is good. Even as your wife was talking about, physical exercise and things like that helps her in her relationship with the Lord. That's true of all of us. And so yeah, Paul is not disparaging the body, but just putting it relatively in relationship to our spirit or soul.

[00:04:49] Darryl: So what's the story behind this book? What led you to write it?

[00:04:52] Gregg: Early in my career teaching at Western Seminary, I was approached by a student. He came into my office complaining of a lot of physical difficulties. He was having trouble sleeping, He wasn't eating well. There are a lot of gastrointestinal problems, excretory problems, kind of a lethargy, couldn't concentrate.

And so he said, so what's my spiritual problems? And I began to ask a series of questions, What are you eating? You know, potato chips while I sit on the couch, Are you exercising? No, I don't have any time for that. How about sleeping? He rebuked me because one of his problems that he had mentioned was he was not getting sleep. What about rest and things like that? And he says, "You know, my body is going to be sloughed off at death. I have no time to give attention to it. It would be worthless anyway. And please give me the spiritual problem at the heart of what I'm experiencing." And I said, "I think it really is a physical problem that you're not caring for yourself as an embodied person." He got off and a kind of huffed and puffed and left the office at that point, but it put me into a crisis.

He had approached me and I'm a seminary professor at an evangelical institution. He was expecting something from the word of God, and I had nothing to give him. And that will be launched me on a decades old search for what does scripture and sound theology affirm about life in this human body as embodied beings. That's the backstory.

[00:06:26] Darryl: Well, I'm sad that that happened, but I'm grateful that the result of that is this book because it really is a neglected topic.

We've already touched on this already, but you write in the book that the theology of human embodiment will help us become more connected with God and his design for us. That seems counterintuitive to a lot of people. We think that if we want to become more connected with God, we need to pay more attention to our spiritual condition. It's like we segment our beings into spiritual and physical sides. Would you expand on that? How does focusing on our human embodiment help us become more connected with God?

[00:07:00] Gregg: In the very first chapter of the Bible, when we read about God creating human beings, he creates us in his image, and we are embodied. And so the very fact that we are embodied image bearers speaks very loudly about what kind of relationship we have with God. God is not physical, he is spirit, but he has created human beings to be embodied image bearers. And so right away the very foundation of who we are, our very identity, the ground, the foundation for our relationship with God is the fact that we are embodied. That's the beginning point.

And then a lot of people wrestled with body image. We're constrained by our culture to think in terms of the perfect body that's different for men, different from women and all like that. And when we always or almost always have bodies that failed to meet up to those cultural expectations, those cultural norms, we are disappointed, we despair, we were worried and anxious, and we give a lot of attention to our body, and we sense a separation from God himself. We're not pleased with the way that God has created us.

So if we understand our embodiment and embrace the fact that God has created us as we are and as we care for ourselves as embodied image bears, I think it really does help our relationship with God grow.

[00:08:28] Darryl: I think it gives us hope for the future too. I remember originally thinking Heaven sounds awfully boring, which sounds awful. I think what I had in mind was this image of being a disembodied being floating on clouds. I couldn't even picture it, whatever it sounded like, didn't sound very good at all. Just coming to understand the new earth and the physicality of our new bodies and it's much more compelling even when we think of the afterlife and the life to come.

[00:08:55] Gregg: It's absolutely true. So, in 1 Corinthians 6, Paul talks about our bodies are for the Lord, but he also adds the Lord is for our body. And how is that? He says, because God will raise it up when Jesus returns. So even our salvation won't be complete until Jesus returns, and we will be re-embodied with our glorified resurrection bodies. We will not be fully conformed to the image of Jesus until he returns and gives us our new glorified resurrected bodies. That is our future. And as you just mentioned, it is an embodied future in a physical new heaven and new earth and that is our destiny. It gives us great hope for what is to come.

[00:09:42] Darryl: I hear a lot of false teaching at funerals. I remember attending a funeral and somebody was saying, "Praise God, this person has already been resurrected." And I said, "No, they haven't been." And people saying that really,

the body doesn't matter. The body is not important. What matters is that their soul is with God. And really a lack of understanding of the physicality of our future. And you do touch on this. At intermediate state, there is a period of disembodiment, but that's an abnormal period. I think a lot of Christians think that's our permanent future. Have you experienced that at funerals?

[00:10:14] Gregg: Even my own mother's funeral. My mother was wracked with intense pain, horrific back problems, scoliosis, and things like that. And so, yeah, I remember there at the memorial service, people just talking about how now she's running and leaping and things like that. And I'm not going to correct the person at that moment. But it's like, "No, my mom is disembodied. She longs for that new body, but that awaits the return of Jesus Christ."

So, in this intermediate state between our death and Jesus return, we are disembodied, which is an abnormal state, Paul in 2nd Corinthians, chapter five looks at it. He talks about not wanting to be naked, not wanting to be unclothed, that is not wanting to be disembodied. And my understanding of passages is that he shudders in horror. Yes, we are with Jesus, we're face to face with the Lord, but we are not what we should be. And so we will have a longing, I believe, for our resurrection body.

So there's a lot of misunderstanding, Yeah, the intermediate state being disembodied is not our ultimate hope. Our ultimate hope is for the return of Jesus and re-embodiment with our resurrection glorified bodies.

[00:11:22] Darryl: We hear a lot of a statement like this — you mentioned it in the book — “You don't have a soul, you are a soul, You have a body.” And really this idea that the body is kind of this messy container to carry around what's really important, which is inside, your soul. You hear that all the time. Instead, you argue that we should be able to say, “I am my body.” I remember reading that the first time and wrestling with that. I believe that, and yet could I say that and feel comfortable saying, “I am my body?” So why is it important that we say, “I am my body”? And how does that alter our understanding of God's plan for us?

[00:11:59] Gregg: “I am my body” is that which I would affirm. I'm not affirming, “I'm only my body.” That would be incorrect, but “I am my body” in the sense that my proper state or condition of human, of humanness, is to be embodied in the very body that God has given to me. Just think, if you and I exchanged bodies, we would be completely different people. Just imagine if you exchanged bodies with your wife, you would be completely different people. We are our bodies.

And again, understanding that we are our bodies means we can't just treat our bodies as something to steward to care for like we would do our time and money and resources. These are external to us. We are our bodies, and so we care for ourselves as embodied people. And so that's that's the idea at the heart of "I am my body."

[00:13:00] Darryl: Does that touch with what Paul says that when he's referring to sexual sins, that other sins are different, but there is a sin that is against our body? And Paul seems to indicate that's a whole other category of sin. So does that begin to speak to the importance of the body? And that it's more than something that we steward. It's actually beyond that.

[00:13:19] Gregg: It is, so sexual immorality, like you said, is in a category by itself. When we join ourselves in sexual immorality, we wrench our body away from its proper membership in Christ, and we join it to something that's improper. But it's not just something that's external to us. We are our bodies. And so it really does mess with who we are, our identity and our intimate relationship with Jesus Christ.

[00:13:46] Darryl: Well, Gregg, I know that the past few decades have marked a real shift and not only how we see our bodies, but with issues like gender and sexuality. As Carl Truman writes, is now possible for somebody to say that my body is lying to me, right? "I'm actually a man trapped in a woman's body," or vice versa. 20, 30 years ago, 50 years ago, that would have been unthinkable to anybody, not just Christians but to anybody. And it seems like that's really tied to our understanding of what it means to be embodied creatures.

How would you explain the importance of understanding the body and how that relates to issues like gender and sexuality?

[00:14:25] Gregg: Yeah, I really agree with my friend Carl Truman on that. Timothy Tennent who is president of Asbury University, has recently come out with a book and embodiment, and he talks about Jeremiah 17: the idea of the heart is more deceitful or deceptive than anything else, but then he adds, "But the body always tells the truth." We are sexed all the way down. We have to make a distinction between sex and gender. Sex is XX, YY. It's genetic, it's physiological, it's anatomical. Gender is now one's self-concept, one self-identity, one's imagination. So our sex, our embodiment, always tells the truth. We are either a male or we are a female.

And that is I think the foundation for from which we approach all these contemporary issues like gender dysphoria, gender incongruence, gender transformation, transgenderism, things like that. If we don't have a robust

theology of human embodiment, then we give way to this cultural impetus towards imagining that were something other than our body. But our body always tells the truth. I can't as hard as I might want to I can't imagine or construct my identity as a woman. It's just not possible. I can mimic behavior, I can dress a certain way or speak a certain way or act a certain way, but I can't ever become a woman. Even if I have hormone treatment and sex replacement surgery and all like that. I'm a man, gendered sex all the way down and my body always tells the truth.

[00:16:18] Darryl: How do we begin to help our people understand the importance of the body to our sexuality and issues of gender?

[00:16:26] Gregg: I think whenever we have the chance, we should preach and teach and disciple about embodiment. We should talk about not only spiritual disciplines, but also physical disciplines, exercise, nutrition, rest, sleep. I'd like your listeners just to think, when was the last time they ever heard a sermon or a Sunday school class on those matters? And my guess is they've never heard them. We can talk about sins of the body like lust and sloth and gluttony. We just never talk about this because again, we're uncomfortable. This really pushes a lot of buttons for us. It's like whenever we have the chance, beginning with the first chapter of Genesis, we should emphasize that we are embodied. We're not just these souls driving around in race cars that are called our bodies. We are embodied by God's design and that's beautiful. It's wonderful and it's the proper state or condition of humanity.

[00:17:25] Darryl: One of my favorite chapters — they were all really good — but one that I think began to blow my mind because of the theological richness, is thinking of Jesus' embodiment: that Jesus became human. And I remember being in seminary, I never thought this before, but my theology prof said, “Okay, we know what Jesus took on a body. Is he still embodied?” And of course the answer is yes, but I had never thought of it. That reflects maybe that we don't emphasize this doctrine of the importance of the body, but even thinking that Jesus to this day is embodied. Even at Christmas, I don't even hear many sermons about the embodiment of Jesus and what that means for our humanity. Reflect on that a little: what it means that Jesus is actually embodied?

[00:18:09] Gregg: Yes, Jesus' embodiment, Jesus' resurrection, the fact that Jesus, the ascended exalted one, is still embodied, screams about the importance of our embodiment. In order to rescue us as flesh and bone human beings, Jesus had to become exactly like us. He took on the fullness of human nature, which is not just a soul or spirit is not just a mind or motions, will, but it's a body. And again, that emphasizes the importance of and God's design for our body.

[00:18:46] Darryl: So picture you're talking to somebody who is tracking, and maybe their lights are going on, and they're, "Man, This sounds true. I never realized the importance of the body before." And they're beginning to see the importance of caring for their body, but also maybe they're frustrated, they've tried different things before, fitness programs or our nutrition approaches, and they just met with failure in the past. What are some positive steps that they can take to begin to care for their bodies?

[00:19:16] Gregg: I think gaining this perspective, a perspective or robust theology of embodiment as a foundational way of relating to God, relating to one's self, relating to others would be the proper starting point, because I think it's not just nutrition and exercise, rest and sleep, as important as those events or activities are. It really is a worldview approach, thinking, "I'm not just a spirit or soul. I'm not just worried about spiritual disciplines. I am my body, and therefore I relate to God, I know myself and relate to myself, I relate to others as embodied beings."

Think too about just what happened during the pandemic, being separated physically from people, how it threw all of us off. Why is that even in our relationships, virtual relationships just don't cut it? They're not as they should be. And so thinking like that, I think approaching this as a new vision of how we should approach God, ourselves and others is the right starting point. And then from that would flow specific activities and things like exercising, nutrition. Again, we don't have to do these things alone, what we can get help from others. Do it in community, encourage one another, exhort one another, things like that.

[00:20:42] Darryl: How do we avoid falling into the other extreme of becoming too obsessed with their bodies and maybe spending too much time on physical fitness and our appearance and having the right body image?

[00:20:54] Gregg: I think it's to apply Scriptures' warning about idolatry to also this care for our embodiment, that anything including attention to our body can become idolatrous. In Philippians 3, Paul even talks about this. And so just, realizing that we have a worldview embracing our embodiment. We engage in bodily disciplines and things like that, but we do so in moderation like we do everything in terms of God's gifts and don't become obsessed. And we should again ask friends and colleagues, "Help us realize when we become obsessed with this." If we start planning 3, 4 hours a day in the gym, we hope to have friends in our life who will say, "That seems like an obsession. Is your body becoming an idol?" And just realize that it can, and then do what we need to do to avoid that idolatry.

[00:21:55] Darryl: And I wonder if you would speak to pastors. I think it's fair to say that a lot of pastors might struggle in the area of their own physical health. Certainly some stats reveal that pastors can lead sedentary lives and sometimes manage their stress through overeating and that makes it difficult to preach and teach on this topic too. What advice would you give to a posture?

[00:22:17] Gregg: This is a huge topic, isn't it? Pastors are very sedentary. The denomination of which I'm a part, the pastors are the most obese of all pastors in terms of denominations. I think again there's a lot of emphasis on the spirit or the soul, and neglect of the body. So all that has to change.

There's this notion that I have to be engaged in ministry 24/7. Otherwise, God's will for my life, for the church, for the world is not going to be accomplished. I'm almost indispensable. And, so I can't take time out, 10 minutes every hour, to walk around and get some exercise, or to rest well or to prioritize things and say no to things that we shouldn't be involved in. And so there is this obsession, this workaholicism, as if we are indispensable to God's plan and will for this world. That has to change.

I think too, it's conceiving Christian ministry as a marathon rather than a sprint. And if you're 35, 40 years old and you're sprinting in Christian ministry, you will burn out after a couple of years. And, and the Christian church is littered with all kinds of pastors who are burned out for this reason. And so looking at it as, "I'm in this ministry for the long haul. It's a marathon. I can't sprint. I have to imagine. And this is my whole life. And so I need to pace myself well."

And then again, have people who can really speak into our pastors lives. Often either pastors put themselves on platforms or they allow their congregations to put them on platforms. They're on a platform, and they're untouchable. That's just not healthy for them. In lots of different ways to have a group of people, close friends who will say you've got to do something about this area in this area because you're falling apart. One day, you're going to be no good for God, yourself, your spouse, your kids, your church, your ministry. And it's just not right.

[00:24:26] Darryl: That's so helpful.

I appreciate your book. Near the end, you write:

If you accept my invitation, it will radically alter your view of your createdness, your genderedness, your particularity, your sociality, your sexuality, your sanctification, your blessedness and discipline, your

worship, your clothes, your suffering and healing, your death, and your eternal future. It will decisively enable you to live as a whole person in a fractured world. And I think it will give new meaning to your relationship with Jesus Christ.

I couldn't agree more. I hope many people take your message to heart. It's such a valuable book and such an important message.

If you were willing, I have a couple of unrelated questions to embodiment. What are you learning right now? It doesn't have to be books.

[00:25:20] Gregg: I'm really doing a lot of work on transgenderism, which flows from this interest in embodiment. I'm doing a lot of reading in terms of complementarianism and egalitarianism, which also relates to this. And then I'm doing a lot of work on Roman Catholicism. I've already written a couple of books on Roman Catholicism. In September, I'm coming out with a book *40 Questions about Roman Catholicism*. So, I've been doing some extra reading on that. And then I'm just exploring philosophically the whole notion of "What is a person?" which, again, is tied to embodiment, but I really want to go deeper. And so reading some philosophical books on what is personhood and things like that. So that's what I've been working on.

[00:26:09] Darryl: That's great. The whole idea of personhood, what does it mean to be a person I think is one of the most relevant topics today, that whole area. And I'll look forward to reading about that.

[00:26:20] Gregg: Yeah, again, a person is someone who contributes, who can communicate, who can work, who can engage socially. And so those who are at the beginning of their life, like I have a 10-day-old grandson, he wouldn't count as a person. Older people as they lose their mental capacities, dementia, Alzheimer's they're not counting as persons because they're not contributing. This whole notion of persons being a certain kind of being that contributes and communicates and engages, it's going to undermine the glory, the dignity of image bears. We're going to be killing babies, or we're going to be killing old people doing away with them. And it's a culture of death that has settled, at least in the West, and it's appalling.

[00:27:16] Darryl: What's encouraging you right now?

[00:27:19] Gregg: What's encouraging me right now? God is sifting me in a way that I've never been sifted before. Very solid, steady, hard discipline. I am more aware of my sinfulness, my need to not just daily, but hourly confess my sin not only to myself, but to my wife, to my friends. I've been coming undone and it's

been really, really hard, but very sweet because I am learning in a way I've never learned before that the gospel of Jesus Christ is my only hope and self righteousness. And trying to merit and earn God's favor and trying to clean up my life, it's absolutely futile. And, so I've been blessed by God through very difficult Hebrews 12 kind of discipline. And I'm I'm experiencing in part the good fruits of holiness and righteousness. And I long for that to continue and to multiply.

[00:28:34] Darryl: Amen. Those are uncomfortable times. And yet always the times when you look back and see God's hands all over them.

Well, Gregg, I want to just add something about your book that I really appreciated in the footnotes so many times. You would reference different people who have spoken into the book. I don't remember seeing many books that are both scholarly and practical as yours is, but also just reflect the community of people who are contributing to your understanding of things. And I felt that reflected a lot of humility on your part and also just the way that you're learning from people. That was deeply encouraging to read.

[00:29:10] Gregg: I do believe obviously authors write, But I am learning that we are authors in community, and I have been blessed by the Lord to be able to teach on embodiment for 25 years. So, I have classes that I hold regularly. I have family members who I asked to speak in this. I've students, former students, current students who have said, who have really worked through my book and given the extremely important counsel and advice. So it was a joy to give them credit. I'm a much better writer and that book is much better because of them all the errors and all the junk in that book are mine. But they have made it much, much better and I appreciate them for that.

[00:29:58] Darryl: How can people keep track of what you're writing and if they want to follow a bit of your ministry?

[00:30:03] Gregg: I'm just on Facebook. I don't have anything more than that, but I'm glad to befriend people if they want to follow me on Facebook.

[00:30:10] Darryl: And I hope you people do pick up your book and maybe follow you on whatever bookseller and definitely order this book and look at your other books as well. Well, Gregg, thank you for joining us today. I appreciate your ministry, and it's good to get to know you better.

[00:30:22] Gregg: Darryl. Thank you. Wonderful interview. You've been a wonderful host so much. I so much appreciate it.