



GOSPEL *for* LIFE

What God Has to Say About Our Bodies with Sam Allberry

Season 2, Episode 6 Transcript

[00:00:01] – Announcer: Welcome to the Gospel for Life podcast. We help churches make disciples. And now, here's your host, Darryl Dash.

[00:00:16] Darryl Dash: We are not our bodies, they're just containers. What really matters is what's inside. I hear words like that all the time, I heard them on the radio recently, and I read them in books and articles. The whole idea that our body is really incidental and that our souls or what is inside our spirits really matter. I guess what's surprising to me is that I hear this from Christians too sometimes. Recently I heard a pastor talk about the fact that he heard on the radio that really the body is unimportant and the spirit is all that matters. And he said, isn't it good that we share that understanding? It really seems that as Christians, we are struggling to understand what the Bible teaches about the body and its importance, not just now but for eternity.

[00:01:05] If any of you know me a little bit, you know that my wife is passionate about the centrality of the body, the importance of the body being a neglected truth.

And as I wrote the couple of books that I've written, she threatened that if I didn't include parts of the body and the importance of the body and discipleship, that we would have words. And by her encouragement, and I think by her wisdom, I've been able to write a little bit about that, but not as well as my guest today. I'm really grateful for Sam Allberry. I've appreciated his Ministry, his writing, his speaking, and his podcasting. His latest book is *What God Has to Say About Our Bodies*, and it's such an important topic. Sam has done a great

job helping us. He is a pastor, an apologist, an author, a speaker, and most recently, a podcaster. So Sam, welcome to the Gospel for Life podcast.

[00:01:56] Sam Allberry: Hey, thanks for having me. It's good to be with you.

[00:02:00] Darryl Dash: Sam, why are we so confused about our bodies these days?

[00:02:05] Sam Allberry: Yeah, that's a good question. I think there's probably more than one reason, but I think in the last 15, 20 plus years, there's been a shift just in Western culture about how we think about who we are. The focus is very much shifted on to I am who I feel myself to be deep down inside. And because we've kind of given that the priority, it means that the body has just become more and more incidental in how we see ourselves. And even irrelevant, in some cases, to how we see ourselves and hence the kind of language you were referring to, that it's who you are inside that counts. And there's truth to that, obviously the Bible is very clear that we see beyond the surface when it comes to others. But I think it means that we don't believe that the body means anything in the Western world. We don't have a doctrine anymore of us having been created by God, we just have come into being randomly. And the only thing that seems meaningful is what we feel deep down.

[00:03:07] Darryl Dash: There's a bit of a conflict there, and since this is my community, there's such an emphasis on physical fitness. As well on the weekends, I look out and I see everybody is dressed amazingly well and going out. There's this real emphasis on beauty and youth, and yet at the same time, this idea that the body doesn't really matter. So how did we get to this point where it is almost like a dual view of the body, that it really matters and that it doesn't matter at all, and it's not even coherent.

[00:03:44] Sam Allberry: I think some of that is a contradiction, and I think some of it might not be. I think part of our focus on physical image really comes down to how we brand outwardly who we see ourselves to be inwardly. So the body itself doesn't carry any kind of intrinsic clues as to our identity and who we are. It is increasingly, I think, the blank canvas on which we paint our identity, and therefore the body is the medium through which we advertise our true sense of identity. I think that the fact that the body is incidental in showing us who we are, it doesn't matter to us in terms of our appearance mattering to us. So I think we've become interestingly far more self-conscious as if we've got to be making a visual statement in some way. Perhaps in a way we wouldn't have felt as much need to previously.

[00:04:45] I've noticed here in the UK, 20 years ago, if you went to the men's grooming section of a supermarket, it would be pretty slight. There would maybe be a couple of brands of cologne and aftershave, and some deodorant or something, but now it feels like there's a whole aisle. And that's good in lots of ways, I'm all for men smelling better and not worse, but again, it speaks to me that we're more physically self-conscious than we used to be, men and women alike. Again, I think it's bound up with this shifting idea of who we are and having to physically present who we are in a way we didn't need to before.

[00:05:28] Darryl Dash: And something has changed, and you hit on this, it used to be that women would feel this pressure to have a certain kind of body image, and I think they still do. Now I think maybe men felt that before, but I think it's really accelerated, you hear of men with body image issues. So what's happened? Has it changed for men or has it always been hard? I know we all carry a sense of shame around our bodies, but what's changed there?

[00:05:55] Sam Allberry: Yeah, I think it has certainly accelerated and all the stats seem to suggest that there's a very strong increase in this amongst men, and I found that myself. I started working on this book five or six years ago, and as it would come up in conversation, I lost count a very long time ago of how many men have started opening up to me about how they feel about their bodies. People I wouldn't necessarily have expected it from. So that sense of self-consciousness of unease, of am I what I'm supposed to be as a man, is profound and widespread and is certainly growing and increasing. I'm sure part of it is that the standards of what male beauty is meant to look like have just sort of gotten higher and higher over the years I guess with social media and technology. We're being presented with a vision of male beauty and attractiveness that is increasingly unattainable even for the people whose images we're seeing.

[00:07:00] You look at the Billboard poster for the latest superhero movie and for the actor to get into that shape was a full time job for many months before the movie and would not be sustainable for the rest of his life. And yet we presented that as if that's what a guy is meant to look like. So I think the idea of what beauty is has become more and more unrealistic, and as a consequence, I think we've all got uglier. I think that's been a sort of net effect, as we all feel uglier now than we used to.

[00:07:35] Darryl Dash: I don't think my father would have touched a beauty product in his life, and he would have been horrified at some of what guys do. Maybe he would use Brylcreem or something like that, but that's about it, but now the norm is that guys get beauty treatments. So something significant has changed. And, Sam, it's interesting to see the change in culture, but there's also

a corresponding problem within the church about what the Bible teaches about our bodies. Even in your book, you mentioned that Christians are often surprised to hear that their bodies will be resurrected. And I just find even at funerals, I've heard rank heresy being taught about our bodies, that this person has already been resurrected and their body is still there. There's just a misunderstanding about our bodies. So it's one thing for unbelievers not to understand what the Bible teaches about the body, how did we miss something that's so clearly taught in scripture?

[00:08:36] Sam Allberry: Yeah, there's no better place for me to sort of explain how that happened, but I think it's a combination of things. I think partly our understanding of the age to come has been increasingly dominated by you think of renaissance art and clouds and harps and angels floating around. We've got it into our collective mindset that that's the age to come, so there's been a misfiled doctrine. We're taking images of heaven, and we're treating them as if that is what our eternal destiny is in the age to come. We've missed actually the physicality of the age to come as the New Testament presents it. And bound up with that, I think has been this sort of epicurean idea that the world is bad, we've got to get out of it and we've got to be released into a better place.

[00:09:31] And the direction of travel the New Testament seems to give us is of heaven coming down to Earth rather than us going up to heaven. Obviously, if we die in Christ before the end comes, we will go to be with him spiritually. But what we await at the end of Revelation is the heavenly city coming down to Earth and us being here with our feet on the ground in a new creation in resurrected bodies. So some of that has been missed or twisted, and it became part of the standard Christian thinking that our long term destination is something called heaven and that it would be nonphysical.

[00:10:12] Darryl Dash: Yes, it's amazing news to actually get the biblical teaching, which is very body-affirming, the whole idea that we'll eat in heaven and that we'll have bodies in heaven. So yeah, it's much better news than floating on a cloud somewhere.

[00:10:27] Sam Allberry: Which does not sound fun. I think there was a Far Side car two months of a guy sitting on a cloud and he just says, I wish I brought something to read because you know...That doesn't feel like it's the kind of thing that is going to outweigh our present trials in this age. Whereas Paul seems to think the glory to come is going to make what we go through now feel so trivial by comparison.

[00:10:57] Darryl Dash: I love the part of your book where you talk about the idea of the bucket list and how you have to get all this stuff done before you die.

And just this feeling of we'll have eternity to enjoy all of God's blessings, so we don't have to cram everything into this life. Actually, if you read the Apostle Paul, you don't get the sense that he's trying to cram all this stuff in his life except for pleasing God with the limited time that he has to win the lost. So certainly not to visit all these great locations.

[00:11:24] Sam Allberry: Yeah, it takes the pressure off, it's actually quite liberating. I still do find myself kind of getting that slight pinch of am I wasting my life, am I missing out? And I probably am in terms of many worldly pleasures that I'm missing out on. But I'm not actually missing out on them because I'll have the sanctified version of them in the age to come anyway. I can actually give myself to the service of others if I really do believe in what the Bible says about my resurrection.

[00:11:57] Darryl Dash: Sam, one thing I appreciate in the book is you talk about how we all struggle with our bodies. Since Genesis 3, we all feel a sense of shame. We're getting older as well, and life is brief. And to add to that, you have the reality that so many people have been mistreated by others. In the book, you talk about words that have been said to people about their bodies. Or even worse, people have suffered at the hands of other people, and that leaves very real damage. What good news is there for really, everybody who struggles with their body?

[00:12:30] Sam Allberry: Yeah, that's a great question. I think part of the good news is no one is alone in this. That itself is a comfort. And so often our experiences of shame because of how we look or how we've been treated or things that have been said to us. That feeling of shame can often feel as though it's very isolating, and it's unique to me, and I'm the only one. So it is a huge comfort to know that the vast majority of the rest of the human race is facing some version of what all of us are facing. But more than that, the Bible speaks to these things, it names them and accounts for them, so it's not completely random. It's not a sign that my life has especially gone off the rails that I feel these ways. It's part of the course when it comes to living in a fallen world. And Christ has come to suffer with us so he went through himself the extremes of bodily affliction, both in terms of the physical agonies he suffered for us, but also the shame he bought for us.

[00:13:33] I've been very struck recently thinking that men couldn't bear to look at Him, as we're told in the prophecy in Isaiah. So the various things that we experience, Jesus is not unfamiliar with as Hebrew said, He's not unable to sympathize. He gets it. He's been here, He's done it, but more than suffering with us obviously is the wonderful truth that He suffered for us. In His body we're told, in His physical body, He has brought us Salvation, He has borne our

sins in his flesh. And so His body went through ultimate brokenness, ultimate shame, ultimate affliction, so that we would one day have the hope that we have of redeemed bodies and the perfect life in the age to come.

[00:14:24] Darryl Dash: You really talk about some very difficult issues in the book and sensitive issues. I think in one part of the book, you're talking to a friend who's struggling with gender dysphoria, and you talk about having to have a very truthful conversation with him. And yet at the same time, there's just a kindness that permeates your tone. And you say that Christians should be the most compassionate people on the planet. Even now, there might be people listening who are struggling. It's a very raw topic. I was talking to somebody the other day and just bringing up the subject of gender, I could tell that I touched a nerve and there was a lot of hurt and even trauma there. How can we learn to speak in a way that's truthful and yet compassionate to people knowing that it's not just a theological issue, but it's a very personal issue, this cluster of issues around the body?

[00:15:22] Sam Allberry: Yeah, I think one significant thing is that we learn to listen well. I think sometimes our lack of sensitivity is often a function of we just don't understand what other people are going through. And the more we listen to someone and get a sense of what life is like for them, hopefully that can build in us a sense of compassion and understanding. We can have some measure of sympathy for them, even if their experience is very different from ours. I've never experienced gender dysphoria myself, so I'm not going to claim to know what it feels like, but I do want to do all that I can to understand someone else's pain. Also, even if it's not the particular kind of pain I've experienced, I do feel a sense of solidarity because here I am, another broken human being. Ultimately, we are in the same boat.

[00:16:13] So I think having a sense of our own shared fallenness can help. It stops us from being aloof, it stops us from being superior or condemning or judgmental. Hopefully it humbles us to be mindful of our own failings and limitations as well, and just to continue to absorb what the Bible says on these things. The message of the Gospel should make us more compassionate. We realized that apart from Christ, people really are helpless and therefore scolding them and having a go at them is not going to achieve anything. And that wasn't how we came to the Lord either, yet he just loved us. So trying to have that same tender heart of Christ himself, and as we see His tenderness to us, it begins to make us tender towards others. And at the very point of our most ugliness, fallenness, shameful, He didn't withdraw from us, He actually moves in love towards us. I need to hear that every day of the week, and I hope as I do so, it will make me one who moves towards people in their pain, not away from them.

[00:17:30] Darryl Dash: Your podcast with Ray Ortlund has been such a lesson in civility and gentleness. I think even as a pastor listening to it, I'm often surprised at how I'm just ready to eat up the encouragement that you offer. And man, this world needs more tenderness and gentleness along with a commitment to truth, but they're not mutually exclusive. And sadly, sometimes I think we've said it for people of the truth, that we need to be harsh, and that's just not true. It really does lead to gentleness.

[00:18:02] Sam Allberry: It does, and John says that Jesus was full of grace and truth, and so in Jesus, those things go together. If we ever think we have one without the other, we have neither. So if my truth is always harsh and unfeeling, it's not actually biblical truth, because biblical truth is gracious, just as biblical grace is truth-telling and honest. So I think we sometimes think we're allowed one or the other, and we're meant to always embody both because Christ himself does.

[00:18:35] Darryl Dash: Yeah, absolutely. Sam, where I live, sexuality is not just a topic, but the topic, and as a church, it seems like every time you touch on issues of sexuality or gender, you're really stepping on landmines. And not only that, but people come into the church, and one of their first questions isn't really about Jesus or the resurrection, but it's about issues of sexuality usually. What business do you have to tell me what I do with my body? And I know this book isn't really a book just about sexuality, you've written other books about that. But how does understanding our body from a Christian worldview help us to make sense of our gender and our sexuality?

[00:19:19] Sam Allberry: Yeah, it helps us enormously. And again, as you say, these are very tender topics for so many people, and for so many reasons. We don't have to be wrestling with gender dysphoria to find the topic of gender itself painful. Many of us will have a sort of complicated understanding of what does it mean to be a man or a woman, and there'll be pain involved with that. Which is why we can be so thankful for the teaching of Scripture, they're a way finders for us along the way that can give us guidance. So I think fundamentally, we see in Scripture that maleness and femaleness is part of our physicality. It's not simply part of our psychology, it's part of our biology. And that's a very countercultural thing to affirm in today's world, but it's actually a grounding and assuring fixed point for us to have as Christian believers. It means I can receive my biological sex as a gift from God. And sometimes for some people, that will be a very long process to get to the point where they can do that.

[00:20:30] So the Bible, I think, gives us a far more liberating way of thinking about what it is like to be a man or to be a woman, and then our culture often

does. And our culture often narrows these things down into quite arbitrary stereotypes. I think the Bible gives us a much broader range of what it can look like than our culture does. So there's a lot there to help us, there's a lot there that is obviously going to be confronting as well because none of us steward our physicality, and that includes our gender in the way that we're supposed to. And the other thing I've been struck by and it's an obvious point but I'm good at missing the obvious things, and that is the vast majority of what the Bible says to us as men and women without distinction. And so as significant as our differences are as men and women, we shouldn't overstate them, we're not different species. And I think that can be a reassuring word to many people today.

[00:21:34] Darryl Dash: You talk in the book about the importance of the body and discipleship, what do you mean by that?

[00:21:40] Sam Allberry: Well, it struck me again as I was studying all of this to realize how much of our discipleship in the New Testament is spoken of in bodily terms. There's stuff there about your posture when you pray, just take something as seemingly innocuous as eating. And there's a lot the Bible says about when to eat, when not to eat, with what kind of attitude to eat with, who not to eat with. And these things apparently are spiritually significant. Paul talks in Romans 12 about offering our bodies as a living sacrifice. In Romans 6, he's a little more detailed and talks about offering the members of our body as instruments of righteousness. So we live out our discipleship in a physical world, and we can't avoid the physicality of it. And the idea that my physicality is spiritually irrelevant is so far from what the Bible says. It actually matters. I can right now glorify God with my body. It doesn't have to look like the kind of body you see on the front cover of a fitness magazine for me to glorify God with it, but I can because our bodies matter to him.

[00:22:58] Darryl Dash: What advice would you give to pastors about how to teach about the body?

[00:23:04] Sam Allberry: I would advise them too, on the body, I think it's a much neglected area of crucial thinking, and we didn't need as much in the past, but I think we have neglected [inaudible 23:18-26]. I think 1 Corinthians is the one book of the Bible that most [inaudible 23:31-32] read so that might be a place to begin.

[00:23:36] Darryl Dash: Sam, I've got so many questions I could ask you. I just want to ask you two more personal questions, if that's okay as we wrap up the interview. What are you learning? It could be a book, it could be just something you're thinking about.

[00:23:50] Sam Allberry: Yeah, that's always a great question to ask. Right now, I think I'm learning more and more about what it means for Jesus to be the bridegroom. It's something I thought about and talked about and even written about in the past, but I feel like I'm learning it again for the first time. I've had some heartache recently seeing some very dear Christian friends get into the kinds of relationships the Bible teaches us not to get into. And there's been a steady stream of friends who've done that over the past year, and that's caused me a lot of heartaches. But I realized I really need to reread the Song of Songs, and just revel in the fact because the message of some of those friends, whether they're saying it consciously or not, is this is where real life is found Sam. You need romantic fulfillment, you need these relationships. And actually, Song of Songs is showing me I am being pursued, I am being desired by the lover of my soul. He is inviting me into an intimacy and a richness and a depth I won't find anywhere else. So to be completely honest, I'm right now reading the Song of Songs as if my life depends on it because I think it does, and I don't think I'm going to make it otherwise. So I'm drinking that in very deeply at the moment and really grateful for that part of scripture.

[00:25:18] Darryl Dash: That's a part of Scripture that scares us sometimes. It's so powerful, right?

[00:25:23] Sam Allberry: More than for us, this is the book for our culture right now as we go completely crazy about sex and romance, this is the part of scripture to go to.

[00:25:34] Darryl Dash: I was preaching on Sunday and talking about the whole image of us being the bride of Christ. And I don't know about you when you perform weddings, I love to look at the groom to see his face when the bride walks in. And to think about Jesus' love for us, and that being a small mirror of Jesus' love for us, that blows me away, so that's incredible.

[00:25:54] Sam Allberry: Yeah, I love that. I'm the same whenever I take a wedding, as everyone else is looking at the bride, I just look at the groom's face at that moment. It's amazing, and it's not like he hasn't seen the bride before, it's not like he doesn't know her very well, and yet still that kind of moment of "wow". It's very moving.

[00:26:17] Darryl Dash: Yes, absolutely. And what's encouraging you lately? These are tough times, I think everybody's struggling a little bit with being discouraged, and it's just not easy. So what's encouraging you these days?

[00:26:28] Sam Allberry: Well, Song of the Songs is encouraging me too, I should add. Yeah, these Christian friendships encourage me. Ray and I started that podcast in part because the world is getting angrier and lonelier and less joyful, and we've got to fight to keep our joy. I mean, that's a discipline. Being around someone like Ray makes it easier to rejoice in Christ. I think being British, we're always a little bit reserved and stupid in that kind of way, but the New Testament tells me I need encouragement. The New Testament tells me my Christian brothers and sisters need encouragement. I think we just need to get over whatever cultural things we need to get over and really lean into that and say, I'm not going to wait until someone says they need a bit of help, I'm just going to already assume. Every Christian I meet needs some encouragement today, and goodness knows I do. So the more we can practice that with one another, I think we'll have our spirits lifted a bit.

[00:27:35] Darryl Dash: Absolutely. Sam, where can people find more about you and your ministry?

[00:27:39] Sam Allberry: Yeah, I never quite know how to answer that, but I'm on things like Twitter. I do have a website, I just haven't updated it for about three years, so you can find out what I was up to three years ago by looking at that. But probably social media is the best thing.

[00:27:52] Darryl Dash: Sam, I just want to tell you how much I appreciate your ministry. Every book that you've written has been immensely helpful. They are uniformly just so helpful. And I want to thank you for your ministry, not just with writing, but I've heard you speak in person a number of times. And certainly your podcast with Ray has been a huge blessing. So thank you for your ministry and thank you for being with us today.

[00:28:16] Sam Allberry: Well, it's a pleasure to be with you, thank you for having me, and thank you for that encouragement.