



ASK THE
CHRISTIAN
COUNSELOR



STRUGGLING WITH BODY IMAGE

SEEING WHAT
GOD SEES

LAINY GREER

“In a society where ‘fixing’ your negative body image requires changing your body, Greer provides a fresh biblical perspective to combat enslavement to this quick-fix, image obsessed, perfect body cultural ideology and helps you experience the true freedom of seeing your body as God does. This book is a must-read for parents, counselors, and teachers.”

Pamela Cubas, Biblical Counselor,
Gospel Care Collective

“Miles. Calories. Gains. Restrictions. Indulgences. Heavy. Thin. Broken. Ruined. Can we even count the ways our relationship with our bodies may become unhealthy? *Struggling with Body Image* helps us take honest inventory of how we think of ourselves and points us to God’s ever-needed grace and help.”

Nate Brooks, Associate Professor of Counseling,
Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary; founder,
Courage Christian Counseling

“Lainey Greer is both an expert on human embodiment and an author who winsomely addresses this critical topic. Most people at some time in their life wrestle with poor body image, and Lainey’s book will help Christians see themselves truly as God sees them. If you struggle with body image or know someone who does, this book is for you!”

Gregg R. Allison, Professor of Christian Theology,
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary; secretary,
Evangelical Theological Society; senior fellow for
gender and sexuality, Ethics and Religious Liberty
Commission; author of *Embodied: Living as Whole
People in a Fractured World*

“As a counselor, I am incredibly grateful for this book. Lainey sheds necessary light on the complexity of a negative body image throughout the lifespan but rightly brings God’s Word to bear directly on that complexity. She shows us how to care well for brothers and sisters who struggle with a negative body image. I highly recommend that any counselor read this book!”

Kristin L. Kellen, Associate Director of EdD Studies
and Associate Professor of Biblical Counseling,
Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary

“Lainey winsomely offers a comprehensive cultural analysis and biblical exegesis related to body image. Her research addresses related issues from childhood to adulthood and deep reflections on the body and soul. Most importantly, her Scriptural principles counteract the evil in and around us so that we can honor God with our bodies. Her book is a must-read!”

Robert K. Cheong, Founder and Executive Director,
Gospel Care Ministries; author of *Restoration Story:
Why Jesus Matters in a Broken World*

“Lainey Greer presents a helpful resource to understand body image and the significance of the body from a Christian perspective. Whether it’s age-related changes, eating disorders, or the body positivity movement, Lainey challenges men and women, young and old, to glorify God with their bodies.”

Lilly Park, Associate Professor of Biblical Counseling,
Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary

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Lainey Greer



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INTRODUCTION

For some people, body image is not a topic they spend much time considering. For others, a negative body image is a major impediment to their lives, plaguing their thoughts and interfering with their daily schedules. And then there are those few who are content with their bodies, whose body image is primarily healthy. No matter where you are on that spectrum, body image is an important topic—especially for Christians, who believe that God created our bodies and, in the incarnation, took one himself. But the body in general and body image specifically are seldom discussed in the church. How sad that such an important topic is often ignored, leaving Christians of all kinds of bodies trying to sort out their body image based on what they hear or see in popular culture!

This book aims to address this problem directly. After all, if God cares about the body, then *the way we see our bodies matter to him*. Because God calls his children to glorify him in the body (1 Corinthians 6:20), it is important to treat and think about the body in ways that honor him. Thus, body image—the way you think

about or see your body—is of great consequence to the Christian faith.

So the goal of this book is to help believers develop a biblical understanding of the body that is foundational for a God-honoring body image. Everyone has a body image, and whether from popular culture stereotypes, social media, physical struggles, or age-related changes, most people battle a negative one. But because your body matters to God, it is important that his Word, and not the world, informs your body image.

The book will unfold in six chapters, beginning with an overall explanation of what body image is and why it matters. Next, we will consider where a negative body image comes from and then discuss the disordered responses that a negative body image can create. From there, the ways the world responds to a negative body image will be explained before looking at Scripture as the foundation for learning to see our bodies as God does. The book will wrap up with helping Christians think biblically about how to have a body image that honors God and helps us recognize the unique goodness of our bodies. This framework will then be applied to six case studies that represent common negative body image struggles for a disabled child, a teenage girl, a young adult, a postpartum mom, a menopausal woman, and a midseventies man.

This book is for those who personally struggle with negative body image, and also for those who want to help a loved one, or seek deeper understanding in order to advise those in your care. It will help you to hold a body image that honors God by seeing your body as he does, and it will help you to guide others to do the

same. Reflection questions will also guide you to think about each chapter's content more deeply and apply it practically.

MY STORY

But before we get into those discussions, I want to share some of my body image struggles.

I remember feeling troubled by my body in elementary school. Always in the back row on picture day, I towered over classmates, including most of the boys. For years, my grandfather affectionately called me “hoss,” while my grandmother explained that I was “big boned” like other family members. According to my mom, I was “stocky.” You know that good kind of big-boned-stocky-hoss that every girl wants to be.

My hair was a combination of wavy and poofy, which meant it was totally unmanageable before the days of straighteners and curling wands. Thankfully, before sixth grade, my mom stopped crafting the biggest, bushiest bangs you ever saw, and braces corrected a massive front tooth gap. I am beyond grateful that Facebook did not exist in those days.

Amid all the awkward teenage body angst, a middle school boy heard that I liked him. To make matters worse, he glibly told my friend that he would not go out with me. His reason? I was too big to be a girl. With one passing comment, my fears about my big-boned, stocky frame were confirmed by an eleven-year-old, prepubescent boy.

Those mortifying days of middle school slowly morphed into high school where my body type was sought after for sports like basketball and softball. I used my

hoss-like frame to box out and grab rebounds on the basketball court. In softball, my stature was an asset, as it increased my range, helping me to play first and third base. Though I was an athlete, I was still self-conscious about my body. My stomach was not exactly flat, and my hips were wide—so wide that I was mocked with an embarrassing nickname. To top it off, I also had a serious bike wreck that left large, noticeable scars on my knee, which people often mistook for dirt. So the discolored skin on my knee was a constant bother. The list could go on.

Thinking back over these “flaws” now sounds ridiculous. But in those formative years, I obsessed over them. I was uncomfortable and ashamed of my body. I realize now that my issues were like the struggles experienced by others, because nearly all of us—men and women, young and old—struggle with body image at some point.

After those formative years came years of change, growth, and preparation for the work I do now. It began with a severe trial in my early twenties and a period of depression and anorexia which only added to my negative body image. During that time, I worked in church ministry and was a personal trainer where I mostly trained Christians. In those two seemingly divergent career paths, I recognized that many believers, including myself, failed to think about or treat their bodies well. Additionally, I disciplined many young women who struggled in similar ways I once did. I was able to comfort others with the comfort God had given me in my own battles (2 Corinthians 1:3–4). So I became passionate about helping believers with two things: a growing

understanding of theology and how to care for themselves physically.

With those emphases, I devoted my doctoral work to developing a theology of human embodiment that I applied to body image. In this focus, I could see the Lord bring together my two passions: theology and the body. So I worked on discerning a biblical view of how God sees our bodies, and connecting that to what it means to glorify him in our bodies (1 Corinthians 6:20). I believe glorifying God in our bodies plays out in two main ways: how we think about our bodies, or body image, and how we treat our bodies, or body stewardship. While this book is not about body stewardship, it is also an important subject for Christians to connect with a biblical view of the body, especially for those in ministry. Burnout is an unfortunate reality in our fast-paced society, but the added stress of serving others makes it essential to treat the body well. With my background in personal training and own experience with ministry burnout, some of my work focuses on helping believers steward their bodies in the areas of nutrition, exercise, rest, and stress management.

It is essential that Christians develop a theology of the body that can be a foundation for a healthy body image. In my doctoral work, I set out to develop a theology of the body based on 1 Corinthians 6:12–20. This passage will be discussed at greater length in chapter 6, where we will consider how Paul develops a trinitarian approach to body image in order to correct the way the Corinthians thought about their bodies, which led them to sin and dishonor God with their bodies. Throughout the book, but largely in that chapter, I use some of the content from my dissertation.

Paul's argument and its connection to the body has significant implications for body image. This book reflects my dissertation research, which aimed at laying a theological foundations for godly living. Once you finish the book, my prayer is that you will see the connection that Paul made to the Corinthians—that the command to glorify God in the body began with the call to think rightly about their bodies. In other words, God wants us to see our bodies the way he does.

So what about you? When you picture your body, does it measure up? Are you concerned about the size of your nose? What about a double chin that shows up when you move your head a certain way or your seemingly extra-long torso? When you forget to suck your stomach in, are you worried that others notice? How about your lack of muscle mass or short stature? How do you feel when you cannot wear a hat that covers your receding hairline? Or what about when your body limits you, keeping you from activities you once enjoyed with ease?

Because a negative body image can focus on a specific body part or the body's size and shape, the troubling issues are endless. Just about any physical feature can lead to a mental judgment about whether your body is good enough. If you conclude that it isn't, you begin to develop a negative body image. While some people might assess their bodies positively and others with indifference, most people suffer from negative body image. For that reason, this book will focus on negative body image (although there will be some discussion of body image in general), and then equip you with biblical tools that will help you build a God-honoring body image.

Chapter 1

WHAT IS BODY IMAGE AND WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Clay is starting college. Last season, his high school teammates teased him about being “too thin.” He knew they were just kidding, but as he gets ready to meet new people, he can’t get it out of his mind. He decides to make a plan to start lifting weights. Beginning college with a new, more muscular body would help him meet friends, even get a girlfriend. But looking through social media for the best weightlifters to follow begins to consume Clay’s time. Finding the biggest guys, following their eating plans, and building the most effective lifting routines is all he focuses on. He’s about to leave for college, but all he really cares about is achieving the perfect body before he gets there.

If you have ever looked in the mirror and reflected on what you saw, you might have had similar thoughts to Clay. How he thinks about his appearance is an important part of his body image. The same is true for all of us. Perhaps you’ve provided a description of your

physical form to someone else. The bodily characteristics, flaws, or hang-ups you highlighted would be a good indicator of your body image. Or maybe you are noticing changes in your body's form or function, and these changes creep into your mind throughout the day. Perhaps you are troubled by your body image, even more than you realize.

Before we can address a negative body image, we first need to understand what body image is and how it develops. This chapter will define body image and trace its development as we age, so that we can identify challenges at various life stages. Finally, we will set body image in its proper context within a biblical worldview, which is a key step toward altering negative body image and seeing your body the way God sees it.

BODY IMAGE DEFINED

Body image has three components: a mental picture, subjective filter, and resulting assessment. First, body image involves a mental depiction of your physical form. Second, that mental picture gets passed through a self-defined, subjective framework or filter. Third, that biased filtering results in an assessment, and the outcome describes your body image.

Essentially, body image is the way you visualize your body. It is an internalized picture of your physical appearance that may or may not reflect reality. Usually, that mental picture is skewed because it gets passed through a framework that springs from internal, idealized standards that you set for yourself. When that

framework leads you to judge your body as inadequate and unsatisfactory, your thoughts, emotions, and actions are influenced by the negative ways you assess your body. All of this is included in what we mean when we talk about negative body image.

But to see our bodies as God does, Christians need to switch out the middle component. Rather than passing the mental picture through a subjective framework that results in a harsh assessment, Christians can replace their framework with a biblical one. No matter the mental image we hold, as it passes through God's Word, we focus our minds on truth, regardless of the perceived flaws in our mental picture. Then, by depending on God's grace and choosing to agree with the way he sees our bodies, we release societal expectations that lead our minds and hearts away from truth to lies and negativity. In this way, once we exchange the filter, we can assess our body according to Scripture, which produces a God-honoring body image. Just as doing other things God's way is part of his good plans for us, so is viewing our bodies the way he does. As we move toward this goal, we need to learn about body image development.

BODY IMAGE DEVELOPMENT

Everyone has a body image because we are all embodied beings, living in a place and time, experiencing physical changes and external factors that influence our mental picture, subjective framework, and resulting assessment. The process of body image formation begins at a young age.

Body image in children

Bodily recognition and comparison occur in both boys and girls from our earliest years. In children twelve and under, body image steadily changes, beginning with infants who distinguish between themselves and other babies in pictures and videos. By age two, children refer to themselves in the first person and recognize their personal characteristics in the mirror. At four to five years, children start to assess and compare their appearance to others. If their body is different in weight, height, or disability, negative body image can form even then. By age six, children become preoccupied with their bodies in new ways, noticing things that cause dissatisfaction with their bodies. At eight years old, there is significant progression in evaluation and comparison, as children become aware of other factors that shape body image like achievements in school, the number of friends they have, their athletic ability or lack thereof, along with physical form.¹ From a young age, the three components of body image—mental picture, subjective framework, and resulting assessment—take shape, and many people feel displeasure over their physical appearance, even in their early, developmental years.

Many factors that influence body image in children are similar to those that affect adults. One factor that seems to have the greatest influence is body mass index (BMI), which is a ratio of height and weight. Higher weight results in a higher BMI. While an increased BMI often has a negative impact on body image in adults, it seems to be the main cause of negative body image in children. This is especially the case in the US, where

childhood obesity impacts 1 in 5 children.² As children grow and perceive differences in themselves and others, they connect their self-worth to whether their bodies are like those of their peers.³ Take boys ages six to eight as an example. One study found that 35 percent believe they should be thinner to achieve an ideal body. This is a hard thing for a first grader to feel.⁴ This early formation of a negative body image can create a pattern of harmful thoughts and feelings that contributes to a poor body image for years to come.

Additionally, BMI can pose another threat to body image. If a child with a lower BMI assesses higher weight as something to avoid, this desire can manifest in a fixation on weight that may lead to body image disorders on down the road. Over 80 percent of ten-year-olds are reportedly afraid of being “fat,” and this fear can drive extreme behaviors like diet obsession in order to actualize an idealized body image. With this idealized image already formed within the first decade of life, it comes as no surprise that 46 percent of nine-to-eleven-year-olds admit to regular dieting.⁵

While there are several factors that teach children body ideals, the most influential come from their social context—parents, media, teasing from siblings, or comparisons with their peers.⁶ Given the rise of smart phones, social media has come to strongly influence body image formation, as a compilation of studies in seventeen countries have shown.⁷ Early on, children gain awareness of appearance ideals from pictures that are shared on social media platforms. These posts give viewers a sense of what is a “good” or “bad” picture, which

children typically connect to their self-worth. Seeing the number of likes or comments can further link their appearance to how they feel about themselves. Children learn that being called pretty or handsome in pictures is a good thing, which reinforces their own satisfaction.⁸ In many ways, because of social media, children are often taught to care about their appearance at much younger ages than ever before. As parents and caregivers consider social media exposure in children, they should recognize that in 2023 the Surgeon General failed to “conclude that social media is sufficiently safe for children and adolescents.”⁹ Christians should avoid being uninformed about the implications of social media exposure, especially among children. Because it is such a challenging topic that requires wisdom and discernment, social media’s impact on negative body image will be treated more fully in the next chapter.

Body image in adolescence

After childhood, body image development accelerates for teenagers. When you think about all the social, behavioral, and physical changes that occur in these years, it’s easy to see how this is an essential period for body image development. While I will primarily address social media’s influence on body image in the next chapter, it is important to recognize that many teens receive their own phones around this age. With a device for constant comparison in their hands, these years can dramatically heighten body image concerns. And, even without their own phone, a teen may appear in others’ pictures, which are often “liked” and commented upon by others.

During adolescence, teens begin to listen to peers over parents and desire the body type and abilities of others. In the transition from elementary to middle school, teens frequently have to learn how to navigate new social settings, including new schools, friends, and teachers, on top of learning how to handle normal teenage angst. The desire to fit in socially increases during these years, perhaps more than at any other time in life. If fitting in means looking or dressing a certain way, negative body image can be exacerbated. Media weighs more on body image in adolescence primarily because a teen's exposure to new TV shows, movies, or social media access also increases in these years. Increased media exposure often promotes body image issues, with one study finding nearly 50 percent of adolescents between the ages of thirteen and seventeen report a worsening body image.¹⁰

For teenagers, whose emotions are often volatile, negative emotions are frequently linked to the way they view their bodies. To fit in, teens may begin to change their eating and exercising behaviors. To meet a physical ideal, boys might turn to spending hours in the gym, while girls restrict their food intake. These new behaviors, especially in the teenage years, can lay the foundation for an eating disorder or exercise obsession.

Puberty occurs during adolescence as well. If a teen's body begins to change sooner than others, it can create a negative body image. Think of the girl whose body has begun depositing fat in her hips before her friends. She might perceive these changes as unwanted weight gain without understanding that puberty began earlier for her than it did for others. Similarly, when a teenager's body fails to change as fast as his peers, negative body

image can develop. Consider the thirteen-year-old boy whose friends have grown taller and more muscular than him. Comparison and dissatisfaction commonly occur when a teen perceives his or her body as inadequate or different from others in these years. While comparison still drives dissatisfaction in adults, age-related physical changes also play an important role in adults' body image development.

Body image in adults

Adults continue to face the pressure of societal body standards as they age. With age comes significant shifts in our bodies, such as weight variations from a slowing metabolism, pregnancy, or menopause, hearing and eyesight decline, skin wrinkles, hair loss, and muscle atrophy, along with general aches and pains that limit motion, balance, and normal everyday activities. When men and women struggle to balance shifting physical realities and appearance expectations, negative body image frequently results. While these struggles are understandable and common to most people, an increasing awareness of them can be a helpful recognition in the development of body image.

Most adult women report displeasure with their weight and body shape.¹¹ Typically, the same bodily areas that frustrate teenagers and young women still trouble older women, and weight gain remains a significant determiner of body image. Pregnancy and menopause most commonly contribute to higher weight, which highly impacts body image. Women who gain weight despite engaging in healthy eating and exercise habits can be especially frustrated and vulnerable to negative

body image. As their body image develops, most women continue to compare themselves to others, which only serves to reinforce undue physical expectations. The process generally continues until elderly years when women display more realistic body expectations that are less dictated by cultural standards. This decrease in appearance issues comes with a lesser emphasis on temporal concerns and greater acceptance of current life stage.¹²

Compared to females, male body image is more difficult to determine as adult men are less inclined to admit body displeasure.¹³ Though the majority of college-age men acknowledge a negative body image, it has commonly been accepted that fewer men struggle with negative body image than women.¹⁴ However, men are also influenced by cultural ideals. For example, as men reach middle age, some articulate the ideal body as much slimmer than their current perception of themselves, which indicates a struggle with negative body image. Many men report a desire to rewind the clock and look like they did earlier in life.¹⁵ Men also admit their body image worsened around age sixty, which differs from women. This change in body image often occurs when men began to desire their former, youthful body.¹⁶ If men cannot alter expectations for their aging bodies, they can develop a negative body image, perhaps for the first time in their life.

UNDERSTANDING BODY IMAGE FROM A BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE

The question for believers is, How should we think about our bodies? Is God really concerned with our thoughts, specifically our body image? Yes! Because he commands

us to glorify him in our bodies (1 Corinthians 6:20), this instruction informs our actions and should include the thoughts we nurture about our physical frame. We need to recognize that a God-honoring body image falls within that command, a command that is meant to guide all thoughts and actions for our good. To develop a biblical framework that allows us to see our bodies the way God does, we need a theology of the body.

Very simply, a theology of the body recognizes the major ways that Scripture talks about the body and then organizes the Bible's teaching into clear themes. A theology of the body helps us understand how our bodies were made, how to value them, who they belong to, what they should do, and where they are going. All of these aspects are essential for truly seeing our bodies as God sees them. When we study what Scripture says about how our bodies were made, we find that you and I were created as God's embodied image-bearers, a fundamental reality that means God formed us as immaterial and material, soul and body beings. God designed us in his image as embodied men and women, whose souls and bodies are purposeful, full of dignity and value.

Let's look at some of the key passages of Scripture on which we can build a biblical foundation for how we view our bodies.

A BIBLICAL FOUNDATION FOR HOW TO VIEW OUR BODIES

In Genesis 1:26–28 we learn that God creates humans as soul and body beings, made in his image, as either male or female. Filled with value and dignity, we reflect God's image as embodied beings with physical and spiritual

capacity to enjoy creation and be in relationship with our Creator. We need a body to fulfill his creation commands to be fruitful, multiply, and fill the earth. And through our physical senses, we experience the material world that declares his beauty and majesty. We also have a soul so we can personally know the One who created us for life with him.

Our birth as either male or female was miraculously planned according to God's perfect will. Though our culture might question or deny fundamental truths like biological sex, we hold fast to what God says about the body. We believe that our bodies bear his image and are purposefully made male or female. Because God declared the creation of his embodied image-bearers to be *very good*, then believers can embrace this remarkable declaration as the path to true flourishing.

In Psalm 139:13–16 we learn that just as wondrous creations in the natural world inspire worship and awe, so should the wondrous creation of our physical bodies. In these verses, David proclaims God's sovereign knowledge over his whole life—his thoughts, words, struggles, and every part of his body. As God is the Creator of all, so he created David's inward parts, knitting them together in his mother's womb. To knit requires time, intentionality, and care. David knows the work God did in constructing his body is praiseworthy. His intricately woven and stitched-together body was known by God before David came into being, a body through which he will live out the days God has written in his book. David marvels over and praises God for two things that he so wonderfully formed: his body and the days God planned for him to live out. These truths proclaim that nothing

about your existence is accidental. Every part is integral to making you the person God created you to be to live out the life he planned for you.

In Acts 17:24–28, Paul confirms that God created each of us as an embodied being and has determined the exact time and place we will live. God wants the people of Athens (and us!) to know that God desires a relationship with his image-bearers and plans for our location and life circumstances to drive us to him. That means everything about your existence is within God's sovereign plans—your family, ethnicity, sex, disability, genetics, everything that makes you, you. These precise details are experienced through our bodies as we rely on God for our very life and breath. So we view our bodies through the lens of his providential plans worked out in a particular place and time with a specific physical makeup. Rather than being dissatisfied with our shape or form, we find reason to trust God's plans for when and how he created us. As we shift our focus to God's good plans, he will use every circumstance, including times of body dissatisfaction, to teach us that lasting satisfaction is found in him alone.

Recognizing the body as part of the image of God is a crucial component of seeing the body as God does. After all, if we fail to respect the body, then we will excuse all sorts of behaviors. If we dislike our bodies, we will be more likely to mistreat them. If the heart posture toward our bodies is one of disdain, it will be difficult to honor God in our body. These types of bodily conceptions will never provide a solid foundation for a God-honoring body image. Because God created us as embodied beings and commands us to glorify him in our bodies, surely we

must conclude that the thoughts we entertain about our bodies matter to him. He desires that we see our bodies the same way he does.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. How do you see your body?
2. Do you find body image a common struggle? If yes, can you recall how these struggles began?
3. How has your body image changed with age?
4. Why do Christians need to have a theology of the body?