

What I Learned about Church at the Gym

Mike Glen

Someone smarter than me once said, "98% of success is just showing up." Like most of these quips, they are sort of true. There is a lot to be said about showing up and being present in the moment. Dads need to show up at ball games. You don't have to cheer or coach, but as a dad, you do need to be there. Moms need to show up. Friends need to show up. Most of the time, you don't have to do or say anything, but you do have to be there. People often tell me that if they showed up in certain situations, they wouldn't know what to say. I remind them that people rarely remember what you say, but they'll never forget that you were there.

Showing up is important, but showing up isn't all of it. You still have to do the work. This is what I was thinking about while I was running hard but getting nowhere on the treadmill in my gym.

The gym is a lot like a church. If you watch the advertisements for your local gyms, they'll sound a lot like a church. Most gyms promise community, truthful life teachings, and a place to work on your life to make things better. Most gyms are now trying to become a "third space." That is, the gym wants you to do more than just work out. These gyms offer a cafe so you can eat there. There are spaces for you to work and relax. It's like the gym never wants you to leave.

That's a little too much showing up for me.

As I was people-watching during my workout, I discovered that the people who go to the gym are the same ones who go to church. First, there are the bare minimum exercisers. They were told by their doctors to work out thirty minutes a day. They come in, go to their machine, clock thirty minutes and they go home. It's the same time and the same machine every day. They don't do any more than they absolutely have to.

I have those folks in my church. They come to church most Sundays. They sit in the same place. They come in when the service starts, and they leave when the service is over. I'll never see them at anything else. They give, but it's probably not a tithe, but they give their bit. They were told that going to church was good for them. So, they go.

There's another group of gym goers and these people are serious about getting in shape - at least for now. They show up early and eager, most likely in January. They have been told that they need to get in shape, and they've made their new year resolution. They change their diets. They buy expensive workout gear and sign up for everything the gym offers. They'll work out until they get too sore or too tired and decide they need to rest and recover - and they never show up again.

It's the same with church. Some people will attend church during traumatic situations, and they will determine to get their life together. They'll show up at worship services - every one of them. They'll be here at 8:00, 9:30, and 11. They'll be part of every recovery group the church has, and they'll be excited and eager until something gets hard. Maybe they'll have to face a childhood trauma or deal with the consequences of a bad decision. They'll tell you they have some things to think about and then, you'll never see them again.

Of course, every gym has its social media stars. These are the guys who show up at the most crowded time of the day wearing brightly colored outfits that are embarrassingly tight. They will do one exercise and then, pose for three selfies in the mirror. They'll usually have a few acolytes around them, and their main function is to stand close enough to the star to make the star look good.

Every church has this type of person as well. They go on one mission trip and then, want to tell everyone their testimony from then on. They will surround themselves with people more wounded than they are for the purpose of gathering around the star to make sure the star looks as good as possible. The wounded never seem to get better. They just stay in constant awe of the most spiritual one among them.

Then, there are the pluggers. They show up and do the work. They never break a record. They never grunt really loud when they're lifting weights. They work their program and gradually over time, they lose weight. Their body becomes more defined. They come to the gym as only part of their regiment. They're also managing their nutrition, spiritual, and mental health. Their body is becoming healthier because their whole life is becoming healthier.

These are the ones I love hanging around with at church. They show up. They're doing the work. They're serious about Bible study and while they may not read a lot, they read deeply. There is a kindness about them, a gentleness they didn't have before. Their spouse loves being around them. Their children do too. They don't have a multitude of friends, but the friends they have are deep and valuable. They'll help out when they can and when they do, they don't make you feel like you're in debt to them for the rest of your life. They're just good people and every day, they get a little better.

Showing up may be 98% of success, but that last 2% is pretty important. In the gym, and in church, real success happens when you show up and then, do the work.

Successful people, in every area of life, show up and then, they do the work.

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