

Weighty Matters

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How are your New Year's resolutions working out? As January comes to its end, so do most of our commitments made in bold determination New Year's Eve:

This year, I'm going to quit smoking! I'm going to pay off my debts and control my spending! Starting tomorrow, I'm going on a diet and lose weight!

It's seems so difficult for so many of us to keep the resolutions going, especially this last one. With food being such a big part of our day, with an appetite that cries out for more and with eyes that see so many tasty treats, we find ourselves unable to stick to our plan. Before we know it, we're going for a second helping at dinner, a brownie with our coffee or a bag of chips with our cold drink. The late night snack calls our name and seems to have our number – we just can't say "no!" The problem with food is that it tastes so good and goes down so nice!

Out of Control

Only, as we all know, it goes down but not all of it goes out. The excess soon gathers around the waist, pads our thighs and back-side and doubles up under our chins. For those who struggle with weight gain, we don't like the way it looks or feels. We want to be healthier, to look and feel better, to lose weight but we are forever losing the battle. We take in more energy (food) than we output (exercise) and it shows. Diets typically last only weeks or days and then it's back to the old patterns. Many of us will have prayed about this struggle too, asking God to grant success but it seems so often to no avail. In the end, we can feel hopeless and desperate, like things will never change – even like they can never change.

In that downward spiral we begin to feel like a "loser" who can't control his eating and exercise. For many of us, this is a silent struggle because it's too embarrassing to talk about openly. We're easily ashamed of our weakness and get down on ourselves. This in turn often feeds the urge to eat. We eat in order to make ourselves "feel better" – only we end up feeling worse than before! In our ever-deepening shame it is not uncommon to feel worthless and depressed. Once we're in that state of mind it is not surprising that we begin to retreat from social interaction and, worse, from interacting with God. After all, we think, there's no point praying – certainly not about this problem anyway. What difference does it make? So we stop asking the Lord for help. We instead make another resolution based on our will power but soon discover that there's not much power in our wills.

The Spiritual Side

If you can relate to the above description then you've already sensed there is a spiritual side to our struggle with food and weight gain/loss. Yet, it's an angle we may not consider deeply enough. If we think about it, the way we deal with our weight certainly affects our spirits, our mood, our view of self and even our view of God. On bad days the frustration may lead us to say or think: prayer doesn't have any effect! The Holy Spirit isn't concerned about my weight! Without realizing it, our spirit soon gripes against God's Spirit and that shows how deeply spiritual this issue really is. We either think God is unable or uninterested in helping us with this battle.

But could it be that we're fighting the wrong battle? Or fighting the battle in the wrong manner? If we look at the battle as strictly a matter of wanting to lose weight, and if we pray to God to help us take off the pounds so we can feel better, do we have our focus in the right place? Are we asking God for something He's promised to give us? The truth is, we do not find in the Bible a promise for God to help us lose weight. Nor do we find a commitment from the Lord to make us feel better about our body image. If we seek this kind of help from the Lord and are continually disappointed, we may well ask in desperation: can we really expect any help from the Lord in this wearisome struggle or must we go it alone?

Never on Your Own

But a Christian has hope! One of the beautiful things about belonging to the Lord Jesus Christ is that we are never on our own. As Lord's Day 1 says, we belong to Him "with body and soul" both in life and in death! We are instructed in the Bible to cast all our anxieties upon Him for He cares for us (1 Peter 5:7). The Lord Jesus has promised to be with us till the end of the age (Matt 28:20) and has fulfilled that promise by pouring into our bodies (not just our souls!) His very own Holy Spirit (1 Cor 6:19). All of this means that our covenant God is concerned also about our bodies. He is therefore committed to help us in all the struggles of our flesh.

But then we have to properly understand our struggle with food, exercise and being over-weight and ask for the right kind of help. What has God in the Bible promised and what has He commanded in this area of life? We need to drill down into our brains and hearts and analyze why we are asking for help with weight-loss, help with exercise. Am I seeking to fulfill God's commandment? Am I leaning on His promise? Does my goal, my intention line up fully with God's will as set out in Scripture?

Motivation

It's time for self-analysis. We need to ask ourselves: why do I want to lose weight? If I want to lose weight simply to improve my looks or impress the people around me, will the Lord give that request a hearing? The motivation there is my personal vanity and not only does the Lord not cater to our vanity but He condemns it as worldly (1 Peter 3:3,4). Such a prayer will not be accepted by God.

If I want to lose weight to make myself feel better about my appearance, to feel good about myself, does that agree with God's Word? Certainly the Lord considers us valuable and people of worth, but does God base that worth on how we look and feel? The Lord is clear that He does not judge our value by exterior looks (1 Sam 16:7) or whether we feel confident in ourselves

(Luke 18:9). The Bible rather teaches that in myself, I – as a fallen sinner – am worthy only of condemnation and that we are to humble ourselves on account of that fact (Luke 18:13). Any value I have depends entirely on my connection to my Maker and Saviour. It is God alone who assigns me my worth. It is God who places value upon me – first as a work of His hands, created in His image and then especially as a redeemed work of His hands, being re-created in His image through the work of His Son! (Eph 4:22-24). Because of this, I and all God's people are truly precious.

Living as God's Image

And that's where God wants our focus to be, on living as His image for His glory! This applies to all areas of life including also the care of our physical bodies. In the beginning God created us in His image and commanded us to be stewards over all creation on His behalf. We were instructed to rule over the animals and subdue the earth as God's managers, reflecting His character in the way we did so (in holiness and righteousness). We were commanded also to represent Him to all creatures as His appointed rulers. Everything man needed to do that task was liberally supplied and promised to him by the LORD.

Part of managing creation for Adam and Eve would have been managing their God-given bodies. We can be certain that Adam and Eve in paradise did not have a problem with either over-eating or being over-weight. They would have managed their food intake and their exercise (likely by way of physical labour) in such a way so as to keep their bodies healthy and fit. Their appetite would have been perfectly controlled by their heart which wanted only to manage all the resources of creation to the honour of the Creator. There would have been no waste or gluttony but joyful eating in thankfulness to match the need. Keeping one's body healthy and strong (to the best of our ability) is being a good steward of God's creation and thus obedient to His command.

Renewed Focus

It is now obedience to this command which God has and is renewing in us through the Spirit of Christ! We are called and equipped to be God's stewards once again – also of our bodies! God's purpose in Christ is to retool our spirits to once again reflect His image in this world. Part of doing that is to serve as faithful stewards of all He gives to us, including our bodies!

Sin has corrupted our flesh so that our heart produces evil desires and it's out of those desires that we tend to act – and eat. I'll come back in another article to legitimate exceptions to this rule but for most of us the battle of the bulge is first of all a battle of the heart because out of the heart comes thoughts, words and ultimately actions (Matt 12:34,35). For a lot of us, eating more than is healthy and choosing to exercise less than is good for us is a result of sinful desires rooted in our hearts – more on that in a future article too. Stay tuned!

But this is the specific fight God calls us to fight! He commands us to live as His image and He promises to help us do so – that is to be the focus of our prayers and our lives! He will certainly hear and answer all prayers that appeal to Him in faith on this basis. When I by God's grace set out to honour the LORD in my body by watching what I eat and how much I exercise; when I seek to combat my inner impulses toward vanity, laziness, selfishness, carelessness or other idols of my heart, God promises to help with all the resources of His Holy Spirit who lives in us. As

surely as the Lord Jesus has purchased us with His blood, so surely will He renew us by His Spirit to more and more flee from sin, obey His commands, and be shaped into His image (see Romans 6). Can things change in this battle? They can and will because Jesus Christ has won the victory over sin!

Our task is to pray and work along these lines, keeping in step with the Spirit. Then those New Year's resolutions will turn into new creation realities as God helps us manage our health for His glory.

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