

Stewards of our Bodies



By Peter H. Holtvliüwer

Why do I do it? Why do I keep snacking when I need to lose weight? What causes me to eat more than I should? In a recent editorial I introduced the idea that in many cases our struggles with weight gain/loss come out of the choices we make each day.

Choices, of course, arise out of Healthy Living our hearts and the problem with our hearts is that by nature they are corrupted by sin. That means that very often it is my sinful impulses which govern my food and exercise choices. But what exactly are those sinful desires? Can we do anything about them?

Thinking as Stewards

It should be clear that the bottom-line issue at stake here is not what's happening around our waist but what's happening inside our heart. It's not in the first place about our weight per se but about our thoughts and desires. Good health is more than weight management. We have been appointed by our Creator as stewards of our bodies and so we have to think like stewards. We have a responsibility, even a calling to see to the overall health of our body (and mind!) to the honour of the Lord. This is doubly so for us Christians since our bodies have become inhabited by God Himself, making us temples of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 6:19)! This involves a clear awareness of and making choices toward good health, all out of respect for our Maker. If that is our over-riding thought then that's half the battle already.

Now, just because a person is "slim" that doesn't mean he's thinking along this track yet. Becoming a good steward isn't just for those of us with extra padding. For example, it is possible to be relatively trim because of a high metabolism and yet have no notion of managing one's body to the glory of God. You are the way you are and that's that – and no more thought goes into it. Some keep lean by eating infrequently or eating poorly or under-exercising, not caring about the strength, fitness or endurance of their bodies.

For others it may be giving in to the cravings, eating like a glutton but then relying on that high metabolism or high levels of exercise to work it off. For those of us who are obsessed with self-image it may be caring too much about the look of the body that prevents us from eating a balanced diet (i.e. mal-nutrition) and exercising properly, or even over-exercising. Trimness does

not in itself mean good health nor (most importantly) the right attitude of the heart. The relatively fit appearance of the body on its own does not yet mean the Lord is being honoured.

Bodies of Circumstance

I'd also like to be clear that not all over-weight persons are this way because of sinful desires of the heart. Sometimes body chemistry, faulty glands, or needed medications play a significant role in the metabolism of even a modest diet. Cognitive impairment can be another major factor. Nor do I wish to minimize the struggles of (much less offend) those who deal with serious, diagnosed eating disorders. Such situations are mainly the result of the general corruption of sin. As such they need to be dealt with primarily through other means, quite often with medical intervention.

Yet also in these situations, as much as is possible, the heart needs to be trained by the Word and Spirit to see the body as God's gift and so to make choices for good stewardship as God's image-bearer. But it remains a fact of life in this fallen world that unhealthy body conditions brought on by circumstances beyond our control must often be endured while waiting for the complete redemption of all creation.

Choices

However, when it comes to the majority of us I am suggesting that these choices can be traced back to the particular corruption of the heart. Sinful desires compel us to make bad food and exercise choices which result in an unhealthy, mis-managed body, all of which fails to honour our Creator. And for that there is hope and opportunity for change today through both the blood and Spirit of the Lord Jesus Christ! Christ has come not only to wash us clean from the guilt of our sin but equally to set us free from the reign of sin (Rom 6:18) and to lead us forward in obedience by His Spirit (Rom 8:13). That means that these inner corrupt desires can be combated and overcome!

But then we must know our enemy. We must assess what triggers these choices and target these areas for spiritual battle. Last time we examined some motives for desiring weight loss, but what motivates our weight gain? Of course, we don't normally set out to gain weight but what is the thinking of our heart and mind that leads to the pattern of over-eating and under-exercising? What desires cause us to eat without regard for the consequences, to treat our bodies in a way that does not serve to honour our Maker? Once we have exposed and confessed what's happening in our heart, then we can pray for the Lord's help to fight those sinful desires.

Driving Forces

These inner impulses may vary from person to person but among the common ones are these: we eat it because it's there and we like it; we see food as a source of pleasure and eat to be happy; we eat for comfort. With respect to exercising, normally the problem is finding excuses not to be active: I don't have time; I don't like it; it doesn't help much. What these all have in common is their "me-centeredness" and the absence of God from our thoughts.

In our decision making we aren't busy grappling with what God expects of us or how best to

please Him. Instead, we are focussed on how best to please ourselves and in so doing we have raised up idols in our hearts. Once we've identified the idol(s) we serve, then we can seek the Lord's help to break that sinful habit and be assured that He will help. Jesus Christ is in the business of smashing down our self-made idols and being Lord over all parts of our lives.

Because I Like It

It may not sound like a bad thing to simply eat because it's there and we find it enjoyable. And it would not be if we ate in moderation, exercising self-control. It's quite biblical to enjoy eating (Eccl 8:15). Food is not the enemy. Like all of God's gifts, it needs to be appreciated and used with an eye to serving our Master. The occasional festive occasion where extra food is brought out can also be enjoyed with thanks to God as can be seen in the feasts appointed by God. So long as feasts (or parties) remain exceptions (as they were in Israel), they will not interrupt a normal pattern of balanced eating and can fit into a healthy lifestyle.

Trouble starts when our normal, daily pattern becomes imbalanced. We abuse food when we develop the regular habit in our homes of going to the cupboard or fridge and snacking every time we think about food. We upset the balance if we always extend our hand when food is within reach when we've already eaten well at the meals. At that point, we are letting our appetite control us. We know we don't need the food and, worse, that it will add to our weight problem, yet we indulge anyway because it's there and we like the taste. We are convinced we have a right to eat as we please (and how dare there be consequences!).

Anytime we show a lack of self-control we give evidence of a spiritual problem. Something has mastered us and we must have only Christ as our master (Rom 6:13-23). The antidote in this case is to confess the sin of desiring to satisfy the appetite, to serve the god of the stomach (Phil 3:19) rather than to serve the living Lord in caring for His creation – our bodies! We need to pray for forgiveness and then to ask for the specific fruit of the Spirit called self-control (Gal 5:22).

It Gives Me Pleasure

Food is (or can be) pleasurable and tasty food brings a certain delight. Some of us will even say that we “just love food!” It tastes yummy, it satisfies my desire and leaves me feeling happy. This motivation is slightly different from the previous one in that we deliberately seek out food to provide us with the pleasurable sensations and feelings we know it brings. Long before the party, we're thinking about how delicious the food will taste!

Now, on the one hand, Scripture recognizes the physical pleasure which food brings as something good in itself. Proverbs 24:13 advises, “Eat honey, my son, for it is good; honey from the comb is sweet to your taste.” The Promised Land, God's gift to His people, is described positively as a land “flowing with milk and honey.” The food at the Lord's feasts was to be tasty, sweet and rich (Nehemiah 8:10; Isaiah 25:6). But on the other hand, this pleasure is not to consume us. Proverbs 25:17 exhorts, “It is not good to eat too much honey...” and other proverbs warn us against over-eating or gluttony (Prov 23:2; 21). God wants us to keep a balance between enjoying the sweet pleasure of food while at the same time caring for the health of our bodies and that is where our problem often is. Our desire for pleasure often trumps our concern for

being stewards of our God-given bodies and so the weight piles on.

How can we diagnose if this is our problem? A key question to ask ourselves is: does the desire for pleasure dominate or even dictate my food choices? Some of the signs of this are: I must have some sort of food every time I sit down for coffee or have company over; I consider a visit, party or an event a failure if there is no food or if the food is lousy; I feel unhappy and disappointed when food isn't offered to us at such an event; one of the first things I report to others about the visit or party is how good or poor the food was; if there is no tasty "treat" in the house, I get depressed.

If the pleasure food brings governs and directs our lives in this way, it has become an idol for us. The happiness we get from food means more to us than taking proper care of our bodies and so we bow to our desire for pleasure rather than find pleasure in obeying the LORD's command. The answer is to acknowledge this sin of our heart, repent and in the renewing power of the Spirit of Christ, make a new start in being a good steward of the body God has given.

It Makes Me Feel Better

Related to the pleasure motive is the comfort motive. If we are feeling down, blue or depressed, we instinctively go to the cupboard or drop by a coffee shop to pick up some delicacy as a way to improve our mood. We even talk about "treating" ourselves after a rough day. We turn to food in an effort to soothe our emotions, calm our hurt feelings or generally cheer ourselves. It is even a known phenomenon in the secular world to speak about "comfort food." And as we turn to ice-cream or apple pie or cream puffs to provide our comfort, we ignore the calling we have to take good care of God's temple, our bodies. Moderation is often thrown aside in a bid to get the good feeling that comes with eating certain foods. And again, the rolls in our hand quickly become rolls around our waist which is all that remains once the "comfort" disappears.

But should we find our comfort in food? When we are honest, we soon realize that we have neglected the only source of true comfort and been using food as a substitute, and a very poor one at that! Does food provide lasting comfort? Does it bring more than momentary pleasure? To ask the question is to answer it. Food brings at best a temporary sense of relief or joy but we all know it has no power to keep us comforted or filled with pleasure – only the Lord Jesus Christ can do that! He is our only comfort in life and in death. Would it then not be far better for us to open our Bibles instead of our fridges and search in the Word for consolation, encouragement, relief and happiness?

Why do you turn to food? What draws you to the cupboard or fridge? This is where the hard work begins, the work of assessing our deepest needs in this area of life. If we can clearly identify the sinful desire that triggers our choices and habits, then we can do what we do with any other sin: repent. Let us seek forgiveness in the cross of Christ and a new obedience through the Spirit of Christ. The needs we have are real but the way to fill those needs is in Christ alone. Then we'll find ourselves more and more becoming good stewards of our bodies to God's glory. More on that next time, the Lord willing.