

Biblical Living (13) – Eating Disorders (Part 1)

Eating and Christianity:

The apostle Paul notes in Romans 14:17 that the Christian life and spiritual maturity are not about the mechanical process of eating.

Romans 14:17. *For the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.*

However, those who practice destructive eating habits, such as anorexia, bulimia, and consistent overeating, experience little of the joy and peace of the Holy Spirit.

Six General Biblical Principles Regarding Eating

- 1) God is the Creator and Provider of food.

Psalms 145:15-16. *The eyes of all look to You, and You give them their food in due time. You open Your hand and satisfy the desire of every living thing.*

Psalms 104:27-28. *They all wait for You to give them their food in due season. You give to them, they gather it up; You open Your hand, they are satisfied with good.*

- 2) Jesus declared all foods clean.

Mark 7:18-19. *... Do you not understand that whatever goes into the man from outside cannot defile him, because it does not go into his heart, but into his stomach, and is eliminated?" (Thus He declared all foods clean.)*

- 3) One's standing with God or spirituality does not hinge on whether one does or does not eat certain foods.

Colossians 2:16-17, 20-21. *Therefore no one is to act as your judge in regard to food or drink or in respect to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day—things which are a mere shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ If you have died with Christ to the elementary principles of the world, why, as if you were living in the world, do you submit yourself to decrees, such as, "Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!"*

See also Rom 14:1-3; 1 Cor 8:8; Gal 4:9; 1 Tim 4:3; Heb 13:9

- 4) Eating is a gift from God to be enjoyed both as a means of nourishment and as a pleasure.

Nourishment: Ecclesiastes 10:17. *Blessed are you, O land, whose king is of nobility and whose princes eat at the appropriate time—for strength ...*

Pleasure: Ecclesiastes 3:13. *... moreover, that every man who eats and drinks sees good in all his labor—it is the gift of God.*

Ecclesiastes 5:18-20. *Here is what I have seen to be good and fitting: to eat, to drink and enjoy oneself in all one's labor in which he toils under the sun during the few years of his life which God has given him; for this is his reward. Furthermore, as for every man to whom God has given riches and wealth, He has also empowered him to eat from them and to receive his reward and rejoice in his labor; this is the gift of God. For he will not often consider the years of his life, because God keeps him occupied with the gladness of his heart.*

Ecclesiastes 9:7-9. *Go then, eat your bread in happiness and drink your wine with a cheerful heart; for God has already approved your works. Let your clothes be white all the time, and let not oil be lacking on your head. Enjoy life with the woman whom you love all the days of your fleeting life which He has given to you under the sun; for this is your reward in life and in your toil in which you have labored under the sun.*

- 5) Thankfulness to God for His provision is the proper attitude of eating.

1 Timothy 4:3-4. *... men who forbid marriage and advocate abstaining from foods which God has created to be gratefully shared in by those who believe and know the truth. For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with gratitude.*

- 6) A concern for God's glory should govern our eating habits.

1 Corinthians 10:31. *Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.*

Two categories of eating problems:

- 1) Genuine medical problems.

At times physical disease or organ malfunction (such as cancer or thyroid problems) can lead to exceptional weight loss or gain. Certain medications can also alter a person's metabolism or appetite (such as cortisone and some anti-psychotic drugs).

Principle: If a person is struggling with exceptional weight gain or weight loss or physical discomfort during eating, encourage him or her to have a full medical check up by a competent physician.

Warning against the overuse of this category: As usual, the psychological community has tried to define *all* eating problems as medical problems. However most incidents of disorderly eating have spiritual and emotional sources—pride and greed, for example—not physical ones.

Point: Although you should always be aware of the possibility that someone's eating problem might have a physical source, in most cases the source of the problem will be spiritual and emotional, not medical.

Note: There are a handful of rare genetic conditions, such as Prader-Willi Syndrome that do affect eating and weight gain. However, such conditions are rare and usually have other clear-cut symptoms that make it easy for doctors to diagnose them.

2) Spiritually and emotionally driven problems.

Most often, disorderly eating is the manifestation of spiritual immaturity or emotional turmoil in some other area of the person's life.

Biblical examples: Psalm 102:3-5. *For my days have been consumed in smoke, and my bones have been scorched like a hearth. My heart has been smitten like grass and has withered away, indeed, I forget to eat my bread. Because of the loudness of my groaning my bones cling to my flesh.*

Psalm 42:3. *My tears have been my food day and night, while they say to me all day long, "Where is your God?"*

Comment: Sometimes when you are eating tears, you have no desire for other food.

Abhorring food as divine judgement for sin Psalm 107:17-19. *Fools, because of their rebellious way, and because of their iniquities, were afflicted. Their soul abhorred all kinds of food, and they drew near to the gates of death. Then they cried out to the LORD in their trouble; He saved them out of their distresses.*

Point: When someone is struggling with disorderly eating, always look for the underlying emotional and spiritual problem(s) driving their actions.

The three most common forms of disorderly eating:

Anorexia nervosa *Habitual, self-induced starvation resulting in extreme weight loss.* (

Bulimia *Characterized by the consumption of large quantities of food, which is usually followed by some type of purging behavior, such as self-induced vomiting, overuse of laxatives, overexercising, or self-imposed starvation.*

Gluttony *Compulsive overeating is the practice of habitually overeating when not hungry, feeling "out of control" around food, eating large amounts of food without really tasting or enjoying it, or habitually eating when emotionally upset ... (170-1)*

In the cases of anorexia, bulimia, and gluttony, in God's eyes both the *actions* and the *attitudes motivating them* are sin. This may be the first time the person has been told that his or her eating habits are *sin*. Therefore, be prepared for incredulity or antagonism.

Eating Disorders Through Biblical Lenses

1. Anorexia

In its extreme forms anorexia can be a form of self-murder—suicide on the instalment plan, which is a violation of the sixth commandment. Exodus 20:13. *You shall not murder.*

2. Gluttony

Overeating is a sin addressed directly in the Scripture.

Proverbs 23:20-21. *Do not be with heavy drinkers of wine, or with gluttonous eaters of meat; for the heavy drinker and the glutton will come to poverty ...*

Titus 1:12-13. *One of themselves, a prophet of their own, said, "Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons." This testimony is true. For this reason reprove them severely so that they may be sound in the faith ...*

Ecclesiastes 10:17. *Blessed are you, O land, whose king is of nobility and whose princes eat at the appropriate time—for strength and not for drunkenness.*

3. Bulimia

Greedy eating. The *binge* behaviour of bulimia falls under the same condemnation as gluttony. Proverbs 25:16. *Have you found honey? Eat only what you need, that you not have it in excess and vomit it.*

Deceit. Bulimia often requires high levels of deceit to cover the eating binges and the self-induced vomiting that follows.

Proverbs 11:3. *The integrity of the upright will guide them, but the crookedness of the treacherous will destroy them.*

Proverbs 11:6. *The righteousness of the upright will deliver them, but the treacherous will be caught by their own greed.*

Proverbs 13:5. *A righteous man hates falsehood, but a wicked man acts disgustingly and shamefully.*

Much of the guilt springing from bulimic practices is over the deceit required to sustain those practices.

Avoiding consequences. The *purge* behaviours of bulimia are a sinful and destructive effort to avoid the law of consequences.

Galatians 6:7. *Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap.*

Observation: When purging in order to avoid the consequences of uncontrolled eating (i.e., gaining weight) a bulimic is simply embracing another set of equally destructive consequences: shame, guilt, and the physically destructive effects of repeated vomiting, excessive fasting, or excessive use of laxatives.

The kingdom of heaven is not eating and drinking, but people who live like this are *not* enjoying the righteousness, peace, and joy of the Holy Spirit.

The attitudes of disorderly eating:

In most cases of disorderly eating, the person is using his eating habits either as a *weapon* or as *worship*.

Weapon:

- Against others: bitterness and revenge

Romans 12:19. *Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, "VENGEANCE IS MINE, I WILL REPAY," says the Lord.*

Hebrews 12:15. *See to it that no one comes short of the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springing up causes trouble, and by it many be defiled.*

Ephesians 4:32. *Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you.*

- Against self: self-condemnation

Eating too much or too little can be a form of self-punishment for violating some biblical or self-created standard. This is a wrong view of justification and undercuts the absolute sufficiency of Christ's suffering on the cross.

Romans 8:1. *Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.*

- Worship:

Worship of self: attention

The person adores the reputation of being skinny or the notoriety of being able to eat three large pizzas in one sitting, and therefore, under eats or overeats to gain attention, approval, and acceptance.

Proverbs 29:25. *The fear of man brings a snare, but he who trusts in the LORD will be exalted.*

Worship of self: pleasure

The person overeats because he or she idolises the pleasurable sensations associated with eating—taste, sense of well being, etc.

Colossians 3:5. *Therefore consider the members of your earthly body as dead to ... greed, which amounts to idolatry.*

Wrong trust

The person turns to food rather than God for comfort when feeling down or disappointed.

Proverbs 3:5. *Trust in the LORD with all your heart ...*

Note: When you view them from God's perspective, you see that eating disorders are primarily *spiritual* issues—a matter of sin and repentance. Therefore, the solution to disorderly eating is not merely nutritional nor imposing a list of eating rules.