

Eating to the Glory of God **How Incurable God-Lovers Should Think About Eating**

By Steve Lehrer

If you are reading this and you happen to be a human being, then you are in the same predicament that I am in. Eating is something you simply have to do. If God has given you the resources, you probably eat three times a day or more. There is nothing wrong with that. In fact I am very thankful that God has freed me up so that the question “How am I going to come up with the resources to feed myself and my family?” does not consume me and I can devote my energies to serving Him. Unfortunately that is not something I always do with my extra time and energy. Instead I often fall into the same trap as the rest of my culture in the United States. With my spare time I become obsessed about eating: the kind of food I desire, how my eating habits will affect my health, etc. We live in a culture that is obsessed with food. It is not an exaggeration to say that most people are obsessed with food. Some are obsessed by lust for food and cannot stop thinking about that next cookie, snack, or meal they get to enjoy. Others are obsessed with health and dieting. They cannot stop from hunting down every organic vegetable stand, counting every gram of fat and wringing their hands over eating a piece of cheesecake. So how does a Christian (a Christian is one who claims to love God and is concerned about His Kingdom more than anything else in this world) who lives in a culture obsessed with food eat to the glory of God?

This question is easily answered for poor Christians who have very little food that is acquired with much difficulty. As long as their bellies are full, food is a non-issue for them. It is simply the first of many necessities that they need to provide for themselves or their families. They do not have a plethora of options concerning the kind of food that they can eat. The vast majority of people living in the world today struggle to scrape together the staple of rice or potatoes and occasionally some meat, vegetable or fruit that is in season. They often eat the same bland meal three times a day. They certainly have other issues that they must concern themselves with, like the temptation to steal, but the sins that we rich people struggle with in regards to food is foreign to most of the world. But for those of us who are wealthy by global standards and eat three times a day in societies that have an abundance of food and a great concern for appearance, this issue seems complex and almost impossible to sort through. In order to make things simpler, I would like to first have you consider the issue of “spending to the glory of God” and show you that once you can think about “spending” biblically, the issue of eating to the glory of God actually seems much simpler.

What Scripture Does Not Tell Us About Money

You can scour the Scriptures for 1000 years and you will find no command limiting how much money you can have. There is nothing holy about being poor and nothing sinful about having a million or even a billion dollars.

You may have had no trouble swallowing the last statement, but how about this one: There is no biblical command limiting how much you can spend on stuff, even if that stuff is purely for leisure. In and of itself, there is nothing wrong or sinful with a Christian spending 7 million dollars on a luxury yacht or \$250,000 on a sports car. You may wonder how anyone can spend that kind of money on those kinds of things without being in love with the world: “Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For everything in the world—the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does—comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever” (1 John 2:15-17). It may be a good question, but the simple fact that someone spends what seems to you like a lot of money on something that seems to you like an unnecessary item does not make that person’s use of money sinful, and it tells you nothing certain about his love for God or his love for the world.

Similarly, nowhere in the pages of God’s Word does it say that God gives us a particular feeling that lets us know that we should not spend anymore or that we have spent too much. Several years ago, when I purchased my house I broke into a cold sweat. There were so many papers to sign and it was the largest purchase I had ever made. I signed on the dotted line to a thirty-year commitment! If ever there was a

feeling that screamed “Don’t do it!” I had it in the pit of my stomach. But I am not supposed to live by my feelings but rather by the Word of God. God’s Word said nothing about that feeling in the pit of my stomach and so I went ahead and bought the house disregarding the “feeling.”

What Scripture Does Tell Us About Money

Please don’t get the idea that I am somehow saying that God has said nothing about the believer’s relationship to money. He has spoken very clearly about these matters. He tells us that we are not supposed to worry about money and we are not supposed to seek after it. If you have very little money and you think that you won’t be able to eat or clothe yourself, you are not allowed to worry about it: “But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own” (Matthew 6:33-34). God also tells us that money must not be something we seek after. We must not live our lives with the goal of accumulating wealth:

¹All who are under the yoke of slavery should consider their masters worthy of full respect, so that God's name and our teaching may not be slandered. ²Those who have believing masters are not to show less respect for them because they are brothers. Instead, they are to serve them even better, because those who benefit from their service are believers, and dear to them. These are the things you are to teach and urge on them. ³If anyone teaches false doctrines and does not agree to the sound instruction of our Lord Jesus Christ and to godly teaching, ⁴he is conceited and understands nothing. He has an unhealthy interest in controversies and quarrels about words that result in envy, strife, malicious talk, evil suspicions ⁵and constant friction between men of corrupt mind, who have been robbed of the truth and who think that godliness is a means to financial gain. ⁶But godliness with contentment is great gain. ⁷For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. ⁸But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that. ⁹People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. ¹⁰For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs (Timothy 6:1-10).

Money must not be that which drives or motivates us. If it does, then it becomes our god and ultimately we will rebel against the true God of heaven and earth.

Another way to approach the commands “Don’t worry about money” and “Don’t seek after money” is to consider them from the point of view of some positive commands in Scripture:

¹⁶Be joyful always; ¹⁷pray continually; ¹⁸give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18).

¹⁰I rejoice greatly in the Lord that at last you have renewed your concern for me. Indeed, you have been concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it. ¹¹I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. ¹²I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. ¹³I can do everything through him who gives me strength (Philippians 4:10-13).

When you cannot afford a scrap to eat and you are literally starving to death, thank God for your poverty. Since God is sovereign over all things and He has stated that if you are a God-lover then absolutely everything that happens to you is for your good. That is, everything that happens to you is part of God’s perfectly designed plan to make you more like Jesus Christ: “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers” (Romans 8:28-29). It is perhaps even more difficult when you are rich. When you

are flush with cash and you are shopping for that brand new Hummer, don't be consumed with greed but give thanks to God for providing you this opportunity (this will necessarily make you—if you are a believer—consider your purchase and how it will make you more or less effective in serving this God who is your life). Be content with riches rather than be consumed by greed. Be content in poverty rather than being driven to steal.

Finally, we are told to be generous rather than miserly with money:

⁶Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. ⁷Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. ⁸And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work. ⁹As it is written: "He has scattered abroad his gifts to the poor; his righteousness endures forever." ¹⁰Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness. ¹¹You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God. ¹²This service that you perform is not only supplying the needs of God's people but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God. ¹³Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, men will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ, and for your generosity in sharing with them and with everyone else. ¹⁴And in their prayers for you their hearts will go out to you, because of the surpassing grace God has given you. ¹⁵Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift (2 Corinthians 9:6-15).

This fits like hand and glove with the previous commands. If money is not what drives your life and you are content with whatever God gives you because you love God and others, when you see other people who are created in God's image and even part of His family who are in need, you will be generous—even when you have very little.

What Scripture Does Not Tell Us About Eating

You can scour the Scriptures for 1000 years and you will find no command limiting how much food you can eat. There is nothing holy about being thin and eating like a bird and there is nothing inherently sinful about having a spare tire and eating a big plate of buffalo wings, a large pizza, and a big bowl of ice cream for dessert.

You may have had no trouble "swallowing" the last statement (pardon the pun), but if we are going to arrive at biblical answers to our question "How can I eat to the glory of God?" then we have to be honest about what Scripture does not say. There is no biblical command limiting how much you can eat or what kinds of foods you should eat. There is no biblical command telling us that we cannot eat simply because we love the taste God gave to a piece of fried chicken or a brownie. In and of itself, there is nothing wrong or sinful with a Christian weighing 95 pounds or 350 pounds.¹ You may wonder how anyone can starve himself or gorge himself to such extremes without food or physical appearance being an idol in his life (1 John 2:15). This may be a good question, but the simple fact that someone weighs *what seems to you* like a lot or a little, or someone's diet that seems to you luxurious or excessive does not make that person's use of food sinful. And it tells you nothing certain about his love for God or his love for the world.

As with the issue of spending money, it is true with the issue of eating food that nowhere in the pages of God's Word does it say that God gives us a particular feeling that lets us know that we should not eat anymore or that we have eaten too much. There are times when I eat more than I want to—like at Thanksgiving dinner! I often feel a bit uncomfortable and even a bit queasy after that wonderfully decadent meal. I flop onto the couch in a triptophanic stupor and mutter, "perhaps that second piece of

¹ The correct question to ask is "Does weighing 95 pounds or 350 pounds in any way hinder you from serving Christ effectively?"

pie was not such a good idea.” Scripture does not tell me that my *feeling* of overeating is a gauge to tell me that I have sinned.

What Scripture Does Tell Us About Eating

Please don't get the idea that I am somehow saying that God has said nothing about the believer's relationship to food and eating. He has spoken very clearly about these matters. He tells us that we are not supposed to worry about what we eat and we are not supposed to seek after it. If you have very little food and you think that you won't be able to eat, you are not allowed to worry about it (Matthew 6:33-34). God also tells us that food must not be something we seek after. We must not live our lives with the goal of filling our bellies and titillating our taste buds. Food must not be that which drives or motivates us. If it becomes that, then it becomes our god and ultimately we will rebel against the true God of heaven and earth.

Another way to approach the commands “Don't worry about food” and “Don't seek after food” is to consider them from the point of view of some positive commands in Scripture. We will look at the very same Scriptures we looked at above when we were considering “spending.” It is worthwhile to quote them in full once again:

¹⁶Be joyful always; ¹⁷pray continually; ¹⁸give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18).

¹⁰I rejoice greatly in the Lord that at last you have renewed your concern for me. Indeed, you have been concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it. ¹¹I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. ¹²I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. ¹³I can do everything through him who gives me strength (Philippians 4:10-13).

The same commands that applied to the issue of “spending money to the glory of God” apply to “eating to the glory of God.” Whether you are literally starving to death, thank God for your lack of food. Since God is sovereign over all things and He has stated that if you are a God-lover then absolutely everything that happens to you is for your good. That is, everything that happens to you is part of God's perfectly designed plan to make you more like Jesus Christ: “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers” (Romans 8:28-29). It is perhaps even more difficult when you have more food than you need. Don't be consumed with the bounty on your table but simply give thanks to God for providing you plenty (this will necessarily make you—if you are a believer—consider what you eat and how it will make you more or less effective in serving this God who is your life). Be content with having plenty to eat rather than be consumed with the food you have. Be content when you don't have food rather than being driven to steal.

You've Got the Emphasis on the Wrong Syllable

It is so very difficult to have a discussion about how to eat to the glory of God with Christians in America because, in general, our focus in life is so out of sync with Scripture. The questions we desire answers for are so far from the concerns of God that we cannot hear what God actually says to us in His Word about food. We want to know “How much does God want us to eat?” “What types of foods are more pleasing to Him?” and “What weight pleases God most for our ‘body type’?” I want to know whether or not God is secretly displeased with the fact that I ate an extra bowl of ice cream after dinner last night. But, if I may paraphrase God, He says, “I don't care about such things and you shouldn't either!” Scripture says that our focus in life should be on serving Christ, *not* on weight, cookies, thinness, your favorite meal, health or anything else. Notice, I did not say that dieting or not dieting, exercising or not exercising was evil in and of itself. But the issue is that we want to call our dieting “Christian” and

we are so focused on ourselves that we believe eating less so that my rear shrinks actually has something to do with serving Christ and His Kingdom!

In order for us to understand what Scripture says about eating we need to grasp the fact that God wants us to be a people who are consumed with loving and serving Christ who also just happen to eat food, rather than a people who are consumed with food, our bodies, and stimulating our taste-buds who also just happen to be Christians. In light of this, we need to develop eating habits (or ways of thinking about eating) that make us more effective servants of Christ and we need to discontinue any eating habits (or ways of thinking about eating) that hinder us from being effective servants of Christ. Consider the following Scriptures:

²⁰I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. ²¹For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain (Philippians 1:20-21).

⁷But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. ⁸What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ ⁹and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith. ¹⁰I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, ¹¹and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead. ¹²Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. ¹³Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, ¹⁴I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus (Philippians 3:7-14).

¹Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. ²Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. ³Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart (Hebrews 12:1-3).

These Scriptures exhort us, push us, and sometimes even kick us to focus like a laser on why we are here and to live for that purpose in absolutely everything we do. Paul tells us that the Christian life is a race in which we need to be alert and “straining” to live for Christ. The author of Hebrews tells us that we must “throw off everything that hinders” so that we might “run the race marked out for us.” Does your diet hinder you? Does your decadent way of eating consume you? Does your devotion to your body keep you from being diligent to live for Christ? Let’s consider together how we might run the race of living for Christ in the realm of eating.

God’s Word is Sufficient

Our all-wise God caused the words of Scripture to be written just the way that they are. Nothing was left out that He wanted us to know. The Scriptures are sufficient to tell us how God wants us to live before Him and serve Him: “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:16-17). There are lots of commands in Scripture that tell us how to please God. *But there is no command to be thin or healthy anywhere in Scripture.* Upon first reading of the last statement it may not have caught your attention the way it should so I will write it again and I want you to read it slowly: *There is no command to be thin or healthy anywhere in Scripture.* Do you realize what

this means? It means that physical health and staying “thin” is of such little importance in living for God that He decided not to spill even one drop of ink about the matter.

Let me give you another shock: *There is nothing in Scripture about diet and food in the context we normally think about it.* There is not even one Scripture for believers in the New Covenant era about which foods that we should eat, how often we should eat, and how much we should weigh. God thinks that these matters are on the same level of importance as what color of socks you should wear on Tuesday mornings. God has nothing to say about the matter! We need to transform our minds from thinking the way the world does to thinking biblical thoughts (God’s thoughts). What God thinks is important, we should think is important. What He thinks is unimportant, we should also think is unimportant. I don’t know about you but this means I need to start de-emphasizing the issue of diet, food, and fitness in my life so that it becomes a non-issue: “Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will” (Romans 12:2).

But I’m a Glutton!

I have heard the term gluttony used to equate eating a second helping of food or a tasty dessert with “sinful behavior.” This is not a biblical use of the term “gluttony” and such misuse of the term leads to legalism. The following is what I believe to be a biblical definition of the term “gluttony”:

Gluttony: Habitually given to greedy and voracious eating. Gluttony was associated with stubbornness, rebellion, disobedience, drunkenness, and wastefulness (Deut. 21:20). A more general meaning for the Hebrew term as a "good-for-nothing" (Prov. 28:7 TEV) is reflected in some translations: wastrel (Deut. 21:20 REB); profligate (Deut. 21:20 NIV; Prov. 28:7 REB); riotous (Prov. 28:7 KJV). When Jesus was accused of being a "glutton and wine-drinker" (Matt. 11:19; Luke 7:34), it was in this expanded sense of being one given to loose and excessive living. The Bible knows gluttony makes one sleepy and leads to not working and poverty (Prov. 23:21).²

Gluttony is not about eating a second piece of pie or even really wanting to eat that second piece of pie. Gluttony is a way of life in which you live for pleasure. Scripture says, “to live is Christ” while gluttony says, “to live is pleasure.” Gluttony is God-hating and rebellious living wherein someone shakes his fist at God while eating, drinking, and satisfying his desires to the glory of himself.

Now, imagine that you are in a local coffee shop enjoying a warm cup of coffee and a cinnamon bun as you pray and read the Scriptures. You finish your tasty treat and have the desire and means to eat another. To say that eating that second cinnamon bun is gluttony is to completely twist the meaning of that word. It opens the door to disguising the idolatry of health and appearance in biblical terms. It is far better on one’s pride to fool yourself into believing that you are fighting sin with godly self-control and denying yourself a cinnamon bun for Jesus than to admit to yourself that you don’t want that second cinnamon bun because it will make your behind bigger and your tummy less taut and you are scared of what your diet-and-appearance-crazy friends will think! But I will even go one step further and say that if you call eating that second cinnamon bun the sin of gluttony, you have become a legalist.

What is Legalism?

There are two distinct definitions of legalism. It is very important that we keep them separate and recognize which kind of legalism that we are talking about.

- Definition #1: Legalism is basing your salvation on the performance of good works or on the strict observance of rules.

Paul addresses this kind of legalism in Galatians 3:10-13:

² *Holman’s Bible Dictionary*, Ed. Trent C. Butler, Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1991.

¹⁰All who rely on observing the law are under a curse, for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law." ¹¹Clearly no one is justified before God by the law, because, "The righteous will live by faith." ¹²The law is not based on faith; on the contrary, "The man who does these things will live by them." ¹³Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree."

If you are a legalist of this sort you do not yet know Jesus Christ and you are still under the wrath of God. That is, legalism as defined above is heresy and cannot be embraced by genuine believers.

Although the second type of legalism can cause much needless pain in the lives of believers, you can be a true Christian and still embrace this error. It is not heresy. The definition of the second type of legalism is as follows:

- Definition #2: Legalism is calling some behavior sinful that God does not call sinful.

Sin is breaking God's law: "Everyone who sins breaks the law; in fact, sin is lawlessness" (1 John 3:4). Is dancing sinful? Is smoking sinful? If you cannot find a text that tells you clearly that such activities are defying a command of God, then you cannot call it sinful behavior. This second definition of legalism is what many are guilty of by calling certain perfectly permissible eating habits "gluttony". This kind of legalism is terribly destructive. You become stricter than God and you often begin to pay far more attention to your own made-up laws (that you attribute to God) than God's laws. For example, you become so focused on your new diet that you begin to believe you are truly living a holy life because you don't eat chocolate ice cream (your own law) while you completely ignore God's Word that tells you to live to serve others and not worry about what you eat or drink. Jesus condemns such behavior in Matthew 15:1-9:

¹Then some Pharisees and teachers of the law came to Jesus from Jerusalem and asked, ²"Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? They don't wash their hands before they eat!"

³Jesus replied, "And why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition? ⁴For God said, 'Honor your father and mother' and 'Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death.' ⁵But you say that if a man says to his father or mother, 'Whatever help you might otherwise have received from me is a gift devoted to God,' ⁶he is not to 'honor his father' with it. Thus you nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition. ⁷You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you: ⁸" 'These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. ⁹They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men.'"

Let's look at some examples of legalistic statements about food and exercise and then consider a biblical way to transform the statement:

Examples of Legalistic Thinking

"I did not exercise today therefore I am not glorifying God with my body. I have sinned."

"Scripture says in 1 Corinthians 6:12-20 that my body is a temple of the Holy Spirit and I defiled the temple with ice cream and a brownie. I have sinned."

"I ate after I felt full or I ate when I was not hungry. I did not listen to my body therefore I sinned against God."

“I consumed more than 1500 calories today. I promised my accountability partner I would not do that, therefore I sinned.”

Examples of Biblical Thinking

“I did not exercise today and I wanted to do that. Although it is not wrong to go without exercise, I desire to exercise each day so I will strive to get up earlier to do that. But I thank God for the extra rest He gave me today and the freedom not to exercise.”

“I honored God today by eating ice cream and a brownie with thanksgiving. Knowing that I am a temple of the Holy Spirit, I also honored God today by refraining from immorality (which is the context of 1 Corinthians 6:12-20).”

“I ate after I felt full or when I was not hungry. I don’t want to eat after I feel full or when I am not hungry even though God can be glorified when I eat at those times. I am free not to listen to my body. I thank God for the food He gave me today and the freedom to eat when full or not hungry.”

“I consumed more than 1500 calories today. I don’t want to do that because I would like to lose weight. I will try to consume less tomorrow so that I can lose weight...but it is not sinful for me to eat more than 1500 calories a day and God does not say in His Word that He is displeased with my current weight or that He even wants me to be thinner.”

Would You Grow Up Already!

Christian maturity as it pertains to eating can be summed up as enjoying the freedom that God has given us to eat all kinds of food, but living out that freedom in a way that puts your brother’s needs above your own. Consider what the Apostle Paul writes in Romans 14 about this very issue. I will quote it in full because of its importance to the issues of maturity and legalism:

¹Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters. ²One man's faith allows him to eat everything, but another man, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables. ³The man who eats everything must not look down on him who does not, and the man who does not eat everything must not condemn the man who does, for God has accepted him. ⁴Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To his own master he stands or falls. And he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand.

⁵One man considers one day more sacred than another; another man considers every day alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. ⁶He who regards one day as special, does so to the Lord. He who eats meat, eats to the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who abstains, does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God. ⁷For none of us lives to himself alone and none of us dies to himself alone. ⁸If we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord.

⁹For this very reason, Christ died and returned to life so that he might be the Lord of both the dead and the living. ¹⁰You, then, why do you judge your brother? Or why do you look down on your brother? For we will all stand before God's judgment seat. ¹¹It is written: " 'As surely as I live,' says the Lord, 'every knee will bow before me; every tongue will confess to God.' " ¹²So then, each of us will give an account of himself to God. ¹³Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother's way. ¹⁴As one who is in the Lord Jesus, I am fully convinced that no food is unclean in itself. But if anyone regards something as unclean, then for him it is unclean. ¹⁵If your brother is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. Do not by your eating destroy your brother for whom Christ died. ¹⁶Do not allow what you consider good to be spoken of as evil. ¹⁷For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness,

peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, ¹⁸because anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and approved by men.

¹⁹Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification. ²⁰Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food. All food is clean, but it is wrong for a man to eat anything that causes someone else to stumble. ²¹It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother to fall.

²²So whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the man who does not condemn himself by what he approves. ²³But the man who has doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith; and everything that does not come from faith is sin (Romans 14:1-23).

This passage of Scripture turns the dominant view of diet and eating in our culture and in evangelicalism on its ear. The passage has several different points of which I will mention those that are most relevant to the topic at hand:

- 1) You are free to eat whatever you want (v. 2, 14).
- 2) The person who embraces this God-given freedom is more mature than the person who believes that it is sinful to eat certain kinds (or certain quantities) of food (v. 1, 2, 14).
- 3) Never exercise your freedom in such a way that will cause your brother to sin against God by doing something he believes is sinful (v. 15, 22, 23).
- 4) What you eat and drink are not important issues to God (v. 17).

You may be in the situation where you have been so steeped in legalistic thinking about eating that you cannot eat a second helping of food or you cannot eat a piece of cheesecake without thinking you are committing sin or you look down on others as weaker Christians because they partake of that second helping or the cheesecake. You may be so stuck in legalistic thinking that you believe you are more godly than your friends because you go to the gym every morning and eat only a bowl of carrots for lunch. Now if you fall into either of these categories (thinking that you can only eat a certain amount without sinning or thinking that someone else is weaker because they eat more than you or exercise less), then Paul says that God considers you to be the immature (weak in faith) one in this area and you must strive to grow up. Those folks you view as weaker or ungodly because they eat two pieces of cheesecake, or they are a “bit overweight”, or they don’t exercise, might actually be more mature than you in this area of eating to the glory of God!

Idolatry and Eating

Have you ever prayed to a bowl of ice cream? Do you believe that your diet can give you the “peace that surpasses all understanding”? Of course this is ludicrous. But many of us are in danger of worshiping food in a much more subtle way. What we eat, losing weight, and maintaining/developing our physique dominates our thoughts, behaviors, and affections. This is especially dangerous for those of us who have managed to order our lives so that we are eating “healthy” foods, small portions of food, or working out every day. If you are a believer, you must strive to let nothing in this world dominate your life but Christ and serving His Kingdom. In Scripture, money and illicit sex are the most frequently mentioned competitors for our affections. They tempt us to lust after them and they want to make us their slaves. God will not allow us to have two masters. We either serve Him alone or we become His enemy. You might be thinking, “This sounds kind of harsh. I mean after all, I just want to be healthy!” or “I just want to look good for my spouse!” It is fine to try to get healthy or to look good, but we must be very careful not to let those desires consume us. Idolatry or the worship of food and health can be so subtle that we may not even recognize it. We must ask ourselves some penetrating questions to get at the heart of why we do what we do:

- Are you consumed with food (your thoughts are dominated with either *wanting* to eat or with *not wanting* to eat)?

- Are you constantly worried about, working on, and spending your energies on improving your health?
- Is your reason for eating certain foods and abstaining from others primarily because you want to maintain a certain physical appearance?
- Does the attention that you pay to food, health, or your physical appearance hinder you from focusing on serving and loving others as Christ commands?
- Imagine that you are at a person's house for dinner and he or she serves you food that does not fit with your diet or food that you think will hinder you from "looking good." Are your priorities such that you cannot accept that person's kindness and hospitality for the sake of your diet³ or your physical appearance?

Food, health, and physical appearance must be put in their proper place on our list of spiritual priorities—right at the bottom!

Self-Control for Christ and Christ Alone

Unbelievers can have such self-control for their "gods" (their gods being weight loss, looking good, health, etc.) that they can starve themselves or exercise themselves to death. You and I often make the mistake of considering all "self-control" a fruit of the Spirit. That is a terrible mistake. I may pat myself on the back for being such a wonderfully self-controlled Christian for abstaining from eating a brownie with ice cream for dessert. But if what is really driving me to forsake ice cream is keeping my "six-pack abs" and "tight glutes," then my self-control is not the fruit of the Spirit that Scripture talks about. I am actually confusing my love for Christ with my desire to have a good-looking body. In fact, it may be that I am serving my idol rather than my God and I need to consider whether my so-called "self-control" is really out of control. If our eating is to honor God, then we must *not* be self-controlled for weight loss, looking good, or health, but rather for Christ in order to be more effective for Him. Being tired or sick the next day after eating too much or too little would hinder us from serving him. We are to use food and health for the same reason we use money. They are tools that allow us to serve Christ and His Kingdom more effectively. In his letter to the church at Colosse, Paul addresses the mistaken notion of some that abstaining from certain foods or other activities is somehow "spiritual":

²⁰Since you died with Christ to the basic principles of this world, why, as though you still belonged to it, do you submit to its rules: ²¹"Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!"?

²²These are all destined to perish with use, because they are based on human commands and teachings. ²³Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence (Colossians 2:20-23).

Self-control, when it is not something that Christ has asked us to control, has nothing to do with biblical Christianity.

Don't Judge a Book by Its Cover

Most of us do it to one degree or another. Imagine that you are at the local mall getting something to eat in the food court. There are a wide variety of cuisine choices. You find a place with overpriced salads, buy a salad and bottled water and sit down to eat. You look over at the greasy burger store and see a man who is "overweight" order a double cheeseburger, a large order of French fries and a 32oz. milk shake. You may shake your head slightly, look down at your green and leafy meal and consider yourself spiritually superior. Not only is that guy overweight while you are in shape (or are desiring to be), but he has chosen food that will only perpetuate his "problem" while you have chosen "holy" food: salad. Oh how twisted this evaluation can be, which we can all fall into the trap of doing. Weight, size, or even what you eat are not factors that determine whether or not you are eating to the glory of God. That

³ This doesn't necessarily apply if you have a serious medical condition, such as diabetes, wherein you have to abstain from certain foods.

“overweight” man with the burger, fries, and milkshake might be an amazingly effective servant of Christ. He might have been preparing to eat his dinner to the glory of God. You cannot judge a book by its cover or a person’s spirituality by his weight or his choice of food. A person’s weight should not be used to measure whether sinful eating is in the picture. Losing weight is not the measure of success. Consider the following the statements:

- A person who is “overweight” *might* eat to the glory of God.
- A person who is “thin” *might* worship food or fitness.

Be Transformed by the Renewing of Your *Mind*

As mentioned earlier, I’m afraid that as Christians we have imbibed much of the idolatry of our day—food and fitness—and we are stumbling around without even realizing our drunken condition. We make up our own commandments about eating and we fool ourselves to thinking that they come from God. We manage to rationalize love of self and desire for others to affirm our looks as a fruit of the Spirit called “self-control.” The problem is that we give eating and physical appearance far too prominent a place in our lives. Food and upkeep of your body must fade into background importance in our lives like other daily responsibilities and pastimes—personal hygiene, grocery shopping, scrap booking, watching television, or any other hobby. Notice that I said “food and fitness” falls into the same category of importance as does a *hobby*.

The only way for food and diet to fade into the background is for Christ to come into the foreground. We need to read about who God is and what He has done in Christ. We need to busy ourselves with living for him and even taking ourselves out of our comfort zones as we seek to be ambassadors of Christ. We need to live as if we are in a war for people’s souls and we need to be jealous for saints to grow in their love for Christ and their holy hatred of sin. When our lives are filled with thoughts of God’s mercy on us that flow out into spreading news of God’s mercy to a dying world, there is no way that we will fall into having food, health or physical appearance as an idol.

Critical Thoughts Concerning “Christian” Diets

There are a plethora of diet books out on the market that claim to be the “Christian” way to diet. I chose one diet book in particular to interact with because its ideas have deeply permeated North American evangelicals and the way they approach eating as well as the many other “Christian” diet books that have been published subsequently. *The Weigh Down Diet* by Gwen Shamblin⁴ seems to be the most popular “Christian” diet program in the last 10 years. I would like to evaluate the central tenants of this diet in the light of Scripture. Although there are scores of serious scientific and theological problems in *The Weigh Down Diet*, here we are only going to evaluate those main theological ideas that under-gird the dieting practice this book commends.

***The Weigh Down Diet* Says, “We Must Trust Our Bodily Feelings.”**

One of the main tenants of this diet is that we are to rely on our bodies to tell us what, how much, and when to eat. Doing this, according to its author, will bring us in line with the way God *wants* us to eat. Consider the following quote from *The Weigh Down Diet*:

The body was made perfectly—you will be learning to listen to it and trust God’s programmed signals (32).

We live in a sin-cursed world, which affects everything including our physical bodies and the interaction between body and mind. God alone must be our authoritative guide in life.

⁴ Gwen Shamblin, *The Weigh Down Diet: Inspirational Way to Lose Weight, Stay Slim, and Find a New You*, (New York: Doubleday, 1997).

⁵ Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; ⁶ in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight (Proverbs 3:5-6).

The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it? (Jeremiah 17:9).

The author's belief in the trustworthiness of the body drives *The Weigh Down Diet*. Shamblin rails against man-made rules. Ironically she has invented her own rule, mistaking the sin-twisted feelings of the body with the voice of God.

The Weigh Down Diet Says, "The Desire To Be Thin Is Godly."

The tremendously popular diet actually proposes that the desire to lose weight in order to be thin is actually a good and godly desire. Consider the following quotes from the book:

The motivation to be thin is not vanity—it is natural. God has programmed us to want the best for our bodies (5).

I concluded that God made all people to desire to be at their right weight and that this is not greedy or vain, but rather, a healthy, innate drive programmed in us by God (21).

This legitimizes the idolatry so many of us are caught up in when we are consumed with our desire to be "thin." Nowhere in Scripture does it say that God wants you to be thin or "your right weight" and nowhere does it say that a desire to be thin is a proper motive for doing anything. It seems that this is cloaking self-centeredness in the guise of godliness. Instead, Christ tells his disciples the following:

²³Then he said to them all: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. ²⁴For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it" (Luke 9:23-24).

The Weigh Down Diet Says, "Self-Discipline In How Much And What You Eat Is Not Necessary."

Shamblin's diet basically says that you can eat whatever you want, whenever you want it. She has one simple principle: "eat until you are satisfied, not full." Consider the following quotations from her book:

You will not have to measure the food or count the grams – your stomach will guide you (7).

Eating only when your body calls for food is what you can depend on to moderate the amount you eat daily. Eating what your body asks for will ensure balance of food. When you have had too much of one category of food, you will naturally desire to eat from another category (82-83).

The audience of *The Weigh Down Diet* are "dieters" who are already somewhat obsessed with food and weight. Because the average reader of this book desperately wants to be thin, he can fool himself into thinking he is not hungry after only eating two bites. When he eats, after rationalizing that he was already "satisfied," he begins to feel guilty believing that he has sinned because he did not listen to his body which has God's "programmed signals." My experience with the *Weigh Down Diet* is that it has a tendency to promote legalistic thinking about how much food one can eat. Adherents of the diet often are concerned that they are guilty of the sin of gluttony if they eat more than what they determine is the "right" amount. Although gluttony is addressed in the book, Shamblin does not provide a biblical definition. She bases gluttony solely on the bodily feelings and eating after you are "satisfied." I'm afraid that *The Weigh Down Diet* has not hit the heart of the issue, which is worshiping physical appearance, and has only fueled the fire by affirming that it is godly to desire to lose weight and be thin.

In summary, the author tells us to eat whenever, whatever, and however much we feel like eating. God never tells us to simply do what feels right. We are to make sure that all of our decisions revolve around living for Christ and this takes self-discipline rather than living by our feelings. Consider what Paul has to say about the role of self-discipline in all aspects of life in order to be effective for Christ:

²⁴Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. ²⁵Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. ²⁶Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air. ²⁷No, I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize (1 Corinthians 9:24-27).

⁷Have nothing to do with godless myths and old wives' tales; rather, train yourself to be godly. ⁸For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come (1 Timothy 4:7, 8).

Emergency Instructions: What to Do if Eating Consumes You

- Repent of your idolatry of being consumed with food, health, or physical appearance.

“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9).

- Run to God rather than food for comfort as you actively remember God’s holiness and His mercy in the sacrifice of His Son for you.

“He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him graciously give us all things?” (Romans 8:32).

- Rejoice in the freedom God has given you regarding eating or abstaining from food.

“As one who is in the Lord Jesus, I am fully convinced that no food is unclean in itself” (Romans 14:14a).

- Remind yourself of your purpose in life and make any adjustment to your eating habits that are necessary to conform to your purpose of serving Christ.

“For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain” (Philippians 1:21).

- Moment by moment you need to work hard to renew your mind and give your worries and cares to Christ.

“Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will” (Romans 12:2).

“Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you” (1 Peter 5:7).