



**COUNSELLING DISORDERLY EATING:
Anorexia, Bulimia, Overeating**
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(student notes)

The challenge:

Some idols hook our bodily passions and desires. This group of addictions includes ... food. These idolatries can provide physical pleasure, relieve physical tension, and soothe physical desires. Such payoffs can be difficult to resist. (Edward Welch, Addictions: A Banquet in the Grave, 51)

This makes counselling those who struggle, for example, with over eating very challenging.

An encouraging success story:

For the first time in my life, I think that I'm finally free from the tyranny of food. I don't spend my day thinking about what I've eaten, what I will eat, or how much I weigh. I'm learning to replace these thoughts with thoughts of pleasing God and using my eating habits and my body to glorify Him. I've learned that although my weight does reflect, in some ways, what's going on in my heart, it's not the most important thing in my life. Loving God is. I'm so thankful that the Lord has changed me. I feel like I've been released from a sunless prison of hopelessness, fear, and bondage. (in Elyse Fitzpatrick, Love to Eat, Hate to Eat, 7)

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.*¹

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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. Therefore, we want to help them with the spiritual and emotional aspects of their eating problems (and to whatever degree is appropriate, with the nutritional aspect as well).

A warning—Don't abandon your hermeneutics:

While the Bible has a lot to say about eating, with the exception of the verses against gluttony, the Bible does not directly address eating problems such as anorexia or bulimia (being thin is a modern mania).

The Bible *does* address the wrong thinking and sinful desires behind anorexia and bulimia; however, this is an area in which a biblical counsellor must be careful not to twist verses in hopes of making them apply to subjects they don't.

Point:

Most of the NT verses on eating have to do with not giving offense to Jewish Christians regarding Mosaic dietary laws or with eating (or not eating) meat offered to idols.

Not offending Jewish Christians is a relatively uncommon issue today compared to the NT era. On the other hand, eating food offered to idols is still a major concern for believers who are saved out religions such as African traditional religions, Hinduism, Buddhism, Shintoism, and so on.

Point:

We can address destructive eating practices and the sinful thinking behind them without using verses out of context.

Six General Biblical Principles Regarding Eating

1) God is the Creator and Provider of food.

Psalm 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.*

Psalm 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.*

Elyse Fitzpatrick:

Everything we do—whether we're eating, drinking, reading a newspaper, driving our car, whatever we're doing—is to be done with the attitude and in such a way as to cause others around us to say, "Isn't God great! (Love to Eat, Hate to Eat, 19)

Three basic questions for counselling disorderly eating:

1. What is your problem?
2. What does *God* say about your problem?
3. What does God say *to do* about your problem?

Question 1: What is your problem?

Some eating or weight problems have a purely *physical* source. Others are primarily driven by *spiritual* and *emotional* factors such as unbiblical self-preoccupation and emotion-dominated living. Biblical counsellors, having the Holy Spirit and the Word of God, are uniquely prepared to address the second category: disorderly eating.

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.

Fitzpatrick:

It is important to understand that bulimia, anorexia, and obesity do have certain physiological results. The question that we are considering here, however, is one of motivation. Do women who practice these behaviors have an illness that causes them to eat in these harmful ways? Should they look for a pill or injection to cure them, or do they simply need to learn to make different choices? (Love to Eat, Hate to Eat, 65)

I don't know of any scientific or medical proof that there are chemical agents, genes, viruses, or bacteria that cause these behaviours. Granted, I might have a genetic propensity ... toward obesity, but I do not compulsively overeat because of it. (263)

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 counselee'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.

Comment:

If you worship your appearance or the approval of others, God might give you an abhorrence of food as discipline or judgement.

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:

1. Anorexia nervosa

Habitual, self-induced starvation resulting in extreme weight loss. (Fitzpatrick, Love to Eat, Hate to Eat, 170)

2. 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. (170)

3. 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)

Question 2: What does *God* say about your problem?

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.

What God says about the *actions* of disorderly eating:

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.*

Fitzpatrick:

Gluttony is a sin, just as surely as drunkenness or adultery. (Love to Eat, Hate to Eat, 99)

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.

I can eat like a pig without getting fat if I make myself throw up later ... starve myself for three days afterwards ... swallow a box of laxatives.

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.

Comment:

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. We need to help them.

What God says about 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 counselee 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.*

John 12:43. *... they loved the approval of men rather than the approval of God.*

- Worship of self: pleasure

The counselee 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.

Robert Smith:

Many times food is used as a response to problems in life. In data gathering, learn how food may be providing the pleasure that is not found in daily life (i.e., food is at least something pleasant in life when everything around is unpleasant and uncomfortable). One person said that she was getting no strokes from people, so she gave herself strokes through eating. (The Christian Counselor's Medical Desk Reference, 236)

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.

Question 3: What does God say *to do* about your problem?

Summarised by Shannon McCoy:

A real, powerful, and ongoing relationship with Jesus Christ is the only sure foundation for breaking the cycle of overeating. ("Help for Habitual Overeaters," in Women Counselling Women, Elyse Fitzpatrick ed., 261)

To produce long-term, biblical change for Christians who are struggling with eating problems, we need to help the person *put off* his or her sinful and destructive behaviours, *renew* his or her thinking with biblical truth about eating and its motivations, and help him or her *put on* new attitudes, desires, and biblical self-control (Eph 4:22-24).

Illustrated by Elyse Fitzpatrick:

Just tell me what I can and cannot eat, and I'll do it, you may be thinking. I'm going to resist the temptation to do that and instead I'm going to do something more difficult and yet I believe much more beneficial and rewarding for you. I'm going to attempt to share with you how I believe God wants you to think about food and your eating habits. (Love to Eat, Hate to Eat, 9)

Eight Solutions to Disorderly Eating

- 1) If necessary, help the counselee move from a *victim* mentality to an *I'm responsible* view of his or her eating problem.

The use of labels (such as bulimia or anorexia) promotes the idea that one is sick with a disease "I have bulimia" may be used by some people in the same way as "I have diabetes." Instead of saying, "I practice bulimic behaviours," which is more accurate, you are encouraged to speak about these habits as though they were something over which you have no control ... (Fitzpatrick, Love to Eat, Hate to Eat, 262)

Biblically, eating practices are a matter of choice and habit, sin and righteousness.

James 1:14. But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust.

Romans 6:12-13. Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its lusts, and do not go on presenting the members of your body to sin as instruments of unrighteousness; but present yourselves to God as those alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God.

Responsibility leads to hope:

If you're *responsible* for how you are eating, then by God's grace, you can also *change* how you're eating.

- 2) Help the counselee see that his or her behaviour is sin in God's eyes, and encourage repentance.

Again, this may be the first time the person has been told that his or her eating habits are *sin*. Therefore, be prepared for resistance.

Proverbs 28:13. *He who conceals his transgressions will not prosper, but he who confesses and forsakes them will find compassion.*

Thankfully, the grace of full forgiveness is available through Christ, no matter how extreme or destructive the person's eating habits have been.

- 3) Teach the counselee the principle of Christ's lordship over his or her physical body.

Fitzpatrick regarding the lordship of food:

Tyranny is just the right word to use when it comes to the way many of us think about food, dieting, and our weight. Tyranny is oppression. It is enslavement. It means that we're dominated by thoughts and habits that torment and overpower. "What will I eat next?" "How much do I weigh today?" The same questions fill our thoughts over and over ... (Love to Eat, Hate to Eat, 17)

Ed Welch:

The purpose of all idolatry is to manipulate the idol for our own benefit. This means that we don't want to be ruled by idols. Instead, we want to use them Idols, however, do not cooperate. Rather than mastering our idols, we become enslaved by them ... (Addictions: A Banquet in the Grave, 49-50)

Point:

Christians who struggle with eating disorders need to be encouraged to exchange the lordship of food for the lordship of Christ.

Two grounds of Christ's lordship over our physical bodies:

1. He is Creator of our bodies.

Christ is the Creator of our physical bodies (Col 1:16), and we have a steward's responsibility to care for them.

Psalm 139:13-14. *For You formed my inward parts; You wove me in my mother's womb. I will give thanks to You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made; wonderful are Your works, and my soul knows it very well.*

2. He is Redeemer of our bodies.

Jesus Christ purchased you—body and soul—on the cross and joined you to Himself; therefore, you are to honour Him in your physical body.

1 Corinthians 6:15a. *Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? ...*

Christians should serve one Master, not two.

1 Corinthians 6:12. *... All things are lawful for me, but I will not be mastered by anything.*

Applied to food:

I might be able to eat a brownie every day at least as far as God's moral law is concerned, but I know my heart—if I were to do that, I could very well place myself into slavery again. (Fitzpatrick, Love to Eat, Hate to Eat, 101)

"I had to squarely face the fact that my eating problem was the result of a choice of mine—refusing to make Christ first in my life, and failing to let Him control my thoughts and actions. I had to be reminded again, after being saved for 24 years, to whom I belong." (quoted in Love to Eat, Hate to Eat, 146-7)

Point:

When a person consistently allows food to master him, he has given the lordship of his life over to another master besides Christ, and no Christian can serve two masters.

4) Establish the goal of eating for God's glory, rather than for self-focused goals.

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

Shannon McCoy:

*When our life is only about achieving short-term goals like simply making it through another day, it becomes easier to justify overeating We need a higher calling ... ("Help for Habitual Overeaters," in *Women Counselling Women*, ed., Elyse Fitzpatrick, 259)*

One of the primary problems with habitual overeating is that it isn't focused on God's glory. It is self-focused. When we run to food instead of the Lord for our rescue, we show that we do not love Him, trust Him, [nor] believe Him ... as fully as we could. (260)

Point:

Increasing the person's general spiritual maturity will help motivate a counselee to change his or her diet and exercise. In other words, the goal for an anorexic or obese person is not to look good outwardly; it is to be more like Christ.

Character is the key:

*Isn't there something inherently attractive in thinking that our problems are only skin deep? "No," I reassure my accusing heart, "I don't have a sin problem ... I'm not a rebel or an idolater. I just have this little appearance problem once I lose 50 pounds ... then my life will really be just fine, thank you." This focus on outward appearance is a nifty distraction from my real character defects. (Fitzpatrick, *Love to Eat, Hate to Eat*, 38-39)*

Character is the key; therefore, a change in diet is not enough. There must also be a change in desires, motivations, and attitudes.

Illustrated:

*Even if you are following a preplanned diet perfectly, that doesn't mean that your eating is pleasing to the Lord. (Fitzpatrick, *Love to Eat, Hate to Eat*, 120)*

- You might be losing weight, but your weight loss is not glorifying to God because you are following a foolish, destructive fad diet.
- You might be losing weight by following a strict diet; however, it's not glorifying God because you have merely traded the self-focused preoccupation of overeating for an equally self-focused preoccupation with appearance.

5) Expose and correct the lies the person has believed that has led him to eat sinfully.

Examples:

- *If I look like the girls in the magazines, then I will be happy.*

We are deceived into thinking that being beautiful is the answer to all of our problems. (Fitzpatrick, Love to Eat, Hate to Eat, 38)

In fact, the Bible always focuses on the inner beauty of the heart.

1 Peter 3:3-4. *Your adornment must not be merely external—braiding the hair, and wearing gold jewelry, or putting on dresses; but let it be the hidden person of the heart, with the imperishable quality of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is precious in the sight of God.*

Proverbs 11:22. *As a ring of gold in a swine's snout so is a beautiful woman who lacks discretion.*

Summarised by Martha Peace:

Outward beauty without inner beauty is a monstrosity. (Damsels in Distress, 99)

- *I'm more acceptable to God if I'm thin.*

An example:

In Susan's case, this cycle would begin when she would go on a bulimic binge and then feel utterly condemned. To cleanse herself, she would vomit and then fast for the next few days, hoping that at some point she would be clean enough to please God and appease his anger. (Welch, Addictions: A Banquet in the Grave, 236)

Comment:

This is a wrong view of justification. While Susan's lapse into uncontrolled overeating was sin, she needs to find her forgiveness in Christ, not the penance of vomiting and fasting.

- *If I'm thin as a rake handle, then I'm healthy.*

Excessive thinness actually leads to a multitude of health problems. And regarding the anorexic's pathological aversion to being fat: when undernourished, the body eats muscle long before it eats fat; therefore, in spite of her grotesque thinness, an anorexic's body fat percentage is usually far higher than a normal, relatively fit woman's.

- *A small failure means I might as well throw away all restraint.*

Sinner's logic:

I've already broken my commitment not to eat chocolate by eating the first three squares of this chocolate bar; therefore, I might as well eat the whole slab—and maybe a second and third slab as well.

- *Only I am qualified to decide whether I am fat.*

Anorexics are often stubbornly proud, rejecting all input regarding their diet and weight as they relentlessly pursue their destructive eating habits. This proud refusal to receive outside counsel is sin and needs to be repented of.

Proverbs 12:15. *The way of a fool is right in his own eyes, but a wise man is he who listens to counsel.*

Proverbs 14:12. *There is a way which seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death.*

6) Expose and correct the the person's wrong motives for eating.

Key questions:

- What is the counselee trying to obtain by means of his destructive eating habits?
- Is the counselee using her eating habits as a *weapon* to punish herself or others?
- Are the counselee's eating habits an act of *worship*—bowing to the idol of the pleasure, emotional comfort, or attention and approval?

Illustration:

Every facet of the anorectic's life—her thoughts, words, actions, and desires—is influenced and controlled by her desire to be thin.
(Fitzpatrick, *Love to Eat, Hate to Eat*, 171)

In other words, the anorexic is *worshipping* thinness and what she thinks thinness will get her. In the end, her false god is gradually killing her.

A sample list of wrong motives:

❖ *Weapon* motives:

- Punishment of self

Doing dietary penance for sin or for violating some self-created eating rule: *I had seconds at the pastor's house last night; therefore, I'm not going to eat for two days to make up for it.*

Self-punishment for feeling unloved: *Since nobody loves me, I deserve to be fat and ugly; therefore, I'm going to eat even more so I'll be even more obese.*

- Punishment of others

Since my husband spends all his time at work, I'll eat till I burst, and we'll see how much he enjoys being married to a whale.

I'll gradually starve myself to death, and then my parents and friends will regret that they never paid attention to me.

- Protection or shield from others

Some women who have been sexually abused in the past intentionally overeat in order to gain weight because experience has taught them to fear being attractive to men.

❖ *Worship* motives:

- Greed

The counselee worships the pleasurable sensations of eating, and therefore, vainly tries to recreate the experience of the first piece of cake by greedily consuming a second and a third piece of cake.

Ephesians 4:19. ... *they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, with a continual lust for more.*
(NIV)

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

Welch:

Too many of us ... have accepted the lie of "just one more, and then I will be satisfied." (Addictions: A Banquet in the Grave, 205)

- Comfort

Consolation by chocolate. I'm worried or depressed—I'm sure that spooning down a litre of chocolate ice cream will cheer me up.

Observation:

Food has replaced God as the primary source of this person's sense of comfort and well-being.

- Emotions

If you live to serve your feelings, you'll be tempted to under eat or overeat in the service of that false god.

- Boredom

Does it really require three bags of biltong, two packets of potato chips, one packet of Smarties™, and a two-litre Coke to fuel your body to sit in a car for ten hours when you drive across the Karoo? No, you're eating just because you're bored.

- Reward

I deserve a second piece of cake as a reward for the hard work I did in the house this morning.

- Avoidance

I'll get to the vacuuming once I do some damage to this tray of leftover Melva pudding. It's easier to sink your teeth into a dessert than to sink your teeth into the housework.

- Attention

If you have a strong desire to have people tell you that you look good, you may be tempted to force yourself to vomit when you have eaten more than you should. (Fitzpatrick, Love to Eat, Hate to Eat, 73)

A further observation on *attention* or *self-preoccupation*:

It is clear from the testimonials of those who have struggled with anorexia,

bulimia, and gluttony that a common thread running through all three is a high level of *self-preoccupation*.

Martha Peace:

*Where is your heart? What is really important to you? How much time do you spend thinking about what you look like and what others think of you? How much time do you spend comparing yourself to others or bemoaning your weight? The pagans (unbelievers) love and cherish themselves. We are to love and cherish the Lord Jesus and be glad for Him to use us however He chooses—no matter what we look like. (Martha Peace, *Damsels in Distress*, 100-101)*

Signs of vanity (adapted from *Damsels in Distress*, 92):

- You are constantly preoccupied with your weight and figure.
- You are unable to receive compliments graciously.
- You regularly feel depressed or anxious because you are "fat."
- You are on an unhealthy quest for thinness, including dangerous eating habits or excessive devotion to exercise.
- You overspend on clothes, hair, and makeup.
- You refuse to have sex with your spouse because you feel "ugly" or "fat."
- You continually apologise for how you look.
- You regularly say things to elicit compliments from others.
- You continually compare yourself to others and how they look.

Dave Powlison on comparing:

*Perhaps on walking into the fellowship hall after church, a woman is instantly aware of what every other woman is wearing, and has sized up how she compares. Her gaze at other people is conditioned to a status hierarchy defined by images of beauty, and thus to the attendant jealousy, self-loathing, competitiveness, inferiority/superiority comparisons, and the like All such preoccupations rob her of the joy and freedom of faith in Christ the Lord, and sap energies that might be spent in loving concern for others. (quoted in Fitzpatrick, *Love to Eat, Hate to Eat*, 40-41)*

Ecclesiastes 4:4. *And I saw that all labor and all achievement spring from man's envy of his neighbor. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind.*

Point:

The sin of comparing leads to frustration, meaninglessness, and depression. Rather than compare, God wants us to wisely manage and to be content with the gifts, skills, and body that He has given us.

Paul's example of being content:

1 Corinthians 15:9-10. *For I am the least of the apostles, and not fit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am ...*

Point:

Rather than focus on comparing his pre-conversion life unfavourably with the other apostles, Paul expressed contentment and embraced a thankful attitude toward God's grace.

Self-preoccupation is not appropriate for those who follow Christ.

2 Corinthians 5:15. [Christ] *died for all, so that they who live might no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died and rose again on their behalf.*
(underline added)

7) Teach the person to guide his or her eating with thankfulness.

Thankfulness for overeaters and bulimics:

If you can't thank God for the food you are about to eat without feeling like a hypocrite, then you probably shouldn't eat it, because *thankfulness* is the attitude of eating (1 Tim 4:3-5).

Point:

Can you really thank God for that third piece of cake or the eighth piece of pizza?

Thankfulness for anorexics:

Food is not evil; it is a gift from God both for nourishment and pleasure, and should be shared in *thankfully*, not treated as an enemy (Ecc 3:13; 5:18-20; 9:7-9).

Transition: The *thankfulness* principle must be complemented with *self-control*, and that's our eighth solution.

8) Teach biblical self-control.

Self-control defined:

Self-control is the skill of saying "no" to sinful desires, even when it hurts. (Ed Welch, Addictions: A Banquet in the Grave, 215)

Note:

For the anorexic, self-control might mean saying yes when it "hurts."

Self-control is a joint divine-human endeavour.

Philippians 2:12-13a. ... *work out your salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you ...*

The *God is at work* part:

Galatians 5:22-23. *But the fruit of the Spirit is ... self-control.*

The *work out your salvation* part:

2 Peter 1:5-6. ... *applying all diligence, in your faith supply moral excellence, and in your moral excellence, knowledge, and in your knowledge, self-control, and in your self-control, perseverance ...*

Restated:

Self-control is a God-assisted choice to do what is right every time you have an opportunity to do what is wrong.

Welch:

There is a mean streak to authentic self-control. Underneath what seems to be the placid demeanor of those who are not ruled by their desires is the heart of a warrior. Self-control is not for the timid. (Addictions: A Banquet in the Grave, 225)

Observation:

Self-control helps break the bad habit of acting on impulse.

Wisdom, however, is willing to count to ten—or a thousand—before acting on impulse. (Welch, 211)

Wrong thinking about self-control:

- It comes in pill form.
- It starts tomorrow.
- It is best in small, irregular doses.
- God must remove my cravings before I can exercise it.

Right thinking about self-control:

- It is a Christ-assisted, moment-by-moment choice.
- It gets easier with practice: habit becomes your friend.
- It must be accompanied by a practical plan.

Observation:

Impulsive overeaters often mistakenly confuse feelings of guilt and shame (*I'll never eat like that again!*) with a plan to change their wrong eating habits.

Welch:

[They] swear that they will never do it again, and they sincerely believe they won't. They feel miserable Such feelings should never be misinterpreted to mean that desires have died. (Addictions: A Banquet in the Grave, 205).

Point:

Change requires more than feelings; it requires self-control within a workable plan.

The desire for self-control must be accompanied by a plan. If self-control demands thoughtfulness, and if it is ultimately a declaration of war on both our own flesh and Satan's temptations, then there must be a strategy. If our battle were against an insignificant foe, there would be no need for planning. We could simply show up and win. But when the enemy is subtle and crafty, a strategy is essential. (Welch, 220)

A sensible plan summarised:

No diet or exercise plan fits everyone or every eating problem. The truth is, different things work for different people. However, two basic principles can summarise any sensible plan for those who overeat:

1. Eat a little less.
2. Move around a little more.

Some practical thoughts on eating plans:

- 1) Eat consistently. Your body prefers food in consistent quantities and at consistent times. Skipping meals is bad for your body and encourages gluttony later. To reduce your food intake, rather than skipping meals, get in the habit of eating smaller portions each meal.
- 2) Eat low GI foods. Foods that digest slowly make you feel full more quickly, reducing the temptation to overeat. They also make you feel full longer, reducing the temptation to snack.
- 3) Eat less fat. One of the basic rules of nutrition is that fat turns to fat, so reduce your intake of foods that have a high fat content.
- 4) Snack sensibly. Snacking isn't necessarily bad, just trade junk food for fruit or something low fat. Don't snack just because you're bored or just out of habit: the fact that you have a hunger pang doesn't mean that you have to eat.
- 5) Avoid crash diets. To lose weight, follow a diet plan that you can keep following with only small adjustments once you have reached your target weight. The primary goal of dieting is not to lose weight. It is to build wise, long-term habits in regard to nutritional content and portion size.

Dr. Robert Smith:

[A good plan] provides a nutritionally balanced diet, [in which] a person eats measured amounts of normal food. The amount is based on the calories needed to maintain the person's ideal weight. As the person achieves his ideal weight through this diet, there is no need to change to a new diet to maintain that weight. The goal is to retrain the body to become accustomed to the correct kind and amount of food needed to maintain the weight beyond the dieting period

[In contrast, fad diets] require total retraining when the diet is discontinued. Without this retraining the person returns to the diet used prior to the fad, which will increase the weight to the level present before the fad. Eating balanced meals of correct caloric value over a long time is the key to the discipline needed for the losing and maintaining of weight loss. (The Christian Counselor's Medical Desk Reference, 237-8)

- 6) Eat out less. Fast food is not your friend.
- 7) Watch what you drink. Some people unwittingly consume half their day's caloric needs in the form of sugar water and bubbles.

- 8) Make no provision for the flesh. You can't eat what you don't have in the house. Don't keep the enemies of self-control in the pantry. Instead, have nutritional alternatives at hand.
- 9) Stick it out for a month. Your taste buds replace themselves once every twenty-one days. If you stick out a low-fat diet for a month, your taste buds will adjust.

Summary: Eight solutions to disorderly eating

- 1) Move from victim thinking to *I'm responsible* thinking in regard to your disorderly eating.
- 2) Acknowledge that destructive eating actions and attitudes are sin to be repented from.
- 3) Embrace Christ's lordship over your physical body.
- 4) Establish God's glory as the governing principle of your eating.
- 5) Expose and correct the lies that have corrupted your thinking about eating.
- 6) Expose and correct the wrong motives that underlie your destructive eating habits.
- 7) Use thankfulness to curb over or under eating.
- 8) Embrace biblical self-control.