Is it a Sin to be Overweight?
by Gary Thomas

The value of a single M & M is less than a penny. The approximate value of a three-year-old Honda CRV is about $20,000. I came this close to one of the most foolish misplaced priorities in my life.

In order to set the stage, I have to confess that I have the taste buds of a 7-year-old boy. Few things put a smile on my face like a box of Hot Tamales or a bag of M & Ms.

On one occasion I was driving on the freeway, popping some M & Ms in my mouth, when one slipped away and fell onto the floorboard. In my frantic determination to get that penny piece of candy back into my hand, I all but forgot I was driving.

Have you ever swerved while driving only to realize just how stupidly you’re acting? I was literally risking not just $20,000 worth of machinery, but also my own life (and perhaps someone else’s), all for a tiny dot of sugar coated chocolate. I had half a bag left in my other hand, but for some pathetic reason, I just had to get the one M & M that got away.

Was this episode a “sin,” or was I simply being an idiot? Some of you no doubt think it was both. Fair enough. Whether or not this episode constituted a “sin,” it was extremely foolish and even reckless. It certainly wasn’t wise.

In the same vein, when we’re talking about body care and discipline—often neglected issues in the contemporary church—and the question of being overweight, I believe it’s most helpful to use the language of “wisdom” and “stewardship” rather than sin. However, in the wake of several studies showing that Christians tend to be heavier than most, many Boundless readers are understandably asking, “Is it a sin to be overweight?”

Not a Heavy Witness
I’ve cut my spiritual teeth on the Christian classics—ancient books written throughout the 2000 plus years of Christian history—and their witness is so strong against gluttony that I assumed, when I considered this question, that I could pick from among two or three dozen biblical passages that scathingly denounce indulgent eating. After all, classical Christian spirituality calls gluttony of the “seven deadly sins.” In fact, the Bible does not say a lot about gluttony. There are a few direct references and several indirect ones, but not as many as I expected to find.

One of the seemingly clearest verses denouncing gluttony is Philippians 3:19: “Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame.” The challenge with this verse (for our purposes) is that “stomach” is a somewhat generic term in the Greek; it can refer to the actual stomach, but it can also refer to bodily desires in general. So while it clearly could apply to food, it doesn’t necessarily do that, at least not exclusively.
Proverbs 23:19-21 provides the clearest warning:

“Listen, my son, and be wise, and keep your heart on the right path. Do not join those who drink too much wine or gorge themselves on meat, for drunkards and gluttons become poor, and drowsiness clothes them in rags.”

This is a clear and direct denunciation of overindulgence in eating and drinking, but even here, the implication is not necessarily that they’re unhealthy in themselves, but rather that they might lead to poverty.

Keep in mind, all of the Old Testament teaching on gluttony derives from the Wisdom literature, which any first year seminarian could tell you can’t be treated in the same manner as, for instance, the Ten Commandments or the direct teachings of Jesus. While the wisdom literature is every bit as inspired as the other Scriptures, its intent is to offer general principles, not laws, and it needs to be read accordingly.

In the New Testament, Paul indirectly addresses gluttony and overeating in his letter to the Corinthians: “So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.” (1 Cor. 10:31) I say “indirectly,” because Paul is primarily talking about whether it is lawful to eat food offered to idols rather than addressing self-discipline. Earlier in this same letter, he writes, “‘Food for the stomach and the stomach for food’—but God will destroy them both.” (6:13) However, this is in the middle of an argument against sexual immorality, and is likely responding to one of the Corinthians’ own quotes. Paul is emphatic in this verse, however, that our bodies are for the Lord, not our own abuse.

In another indirect example, Paul describes the Cretans as “lazy gluttons” and correspondingly says they should be “rebuked sharply.” (Titus 1:12) At the very least, we can safely say that Paul was not a fan of those who overindulged with food.

I can’t cover all the passages with the space allotted here, but none are more direct than what we’ve already looked at. While the Bible looks with disfavor on gluttony, it doesn’t denounce it as consistently or as directly as it denounces sexual sin, laziness, idolatry, materialism, or many other personal and social ills.

Given the biblical record, I don’t believe it’s appropriate to say that being overweight is a sin. For starters, what constitutes being overweight? Are we comparing ourselves to people in Asia or people who eat at The Country Buffet? The Body Mass Index (BMI) isn’t found in Scripture and shouldn’t be treated as such.

Secondly, even being an alcoholic, isn’t, in the truest sense, a “sin.” Getting drunk is, but having a body now predisposed to weakness toward alcohol is a result of past choices, one often repented of, and doesn’t remain a sin.

Applying the same principle to gluttony means that consistently gorging on food could, indeed, be considered sinful, but the state of carrying too much weight might not be due to that and it would be misleading and unkind to categorically declare it a sin to be
overweight. I’d summarize it this way: *sin can lead us to become overweight, but being overweight is not, in and of itself, a sin.*

However, in the history of Christian spirituality, gluttony and indulgence receives an abundance of attention, and I think we’d be foolish to ignore it. If Jack Nicklaus, Phil Mickelson and Arnold Palmer all gave me the same advice about how to improve my golf swing, it would be silly for me to persist in my bad form. When so many of the writers of the Christian classics tell us to “be careful” with gluttony, we would be wise to pay heed.

**The Ancient Witness**

The early church father Chrysostom set the stage for others who followed when he warned, “The god of the belly overwhelms the whole body. Set self-constraint as a bound to it as God sets the sand to the sea.” Jerome (a contemporary of Chrysostom) added, “[In] the eating of meat, and the drinking of wine, and the fullness of stomach, is the seed-bed of lust.”

The ancients believed gluttony and sloth weaken us and make us more vulnerable against other sins, particularly lust. John Climacus, who wrote the most widely used guidebook for ascetics in the seventh century, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent,* called gluttony “the prince of the passions,” and the belly “the cause of all human shipwreck.” One of the great dangers of gluttony, in John’s view, was that “To be unfaithful in the small things is to be unfaithful in the great, and this is very hard to bring under control.”

John Climacus joins Jerome in seeing a special connection between gluttony and lust: “The man who looks after his belly and at the same time hopes to control the spirit of fornication is like someone trying to put out a fire with oil.” Instead of attacking our anger or lust head on, Climacus suggests going to war with gluttony: “If, in your humility, you reduce the amount you eat, your passions will be correspondingly reduced. To have an insensitive heart is to be dulled in mind, and food in abundance dries up the well of tears.”

That’s a valuable lesson. Lust can be attacked “indirectly” by addressing other weaknesses that diminish our overall self-control.

This “connectedness” of vices is a lesson today’s church needs to recapture. Just as growing in one virtue helps us in all aspects of character, so one compromise endangers everything. It’s like this: a dike needs just one hole to make whatever it’s protecting vulnerable to the flood. It doesn’t matter if the “hole” is pride, gluttony, lust, ambition, bitterness, or jealousy—a pampered vice produces many offspring.

Fenelon warns: “But the most dangerous thing is that the soul, by the neglect of little things, becomes accustomed to unfaithfulness.”
There is no doubt that today’s church views gluttony as a relatively “little thing.” Our silence on the subject is more than enough evidence to suggest that. But “little things” can do great harm if they accustom us to unfaithfulness.

The real question is, are my eating habits slowly pulling me away from an intimate walk with God? Is food serving me by providing necessary nutrition, or is it holding me back by gradually making me increasingly insensitive to God’s voice and presence? Is food shaping me into a man who lives solely for his own gratification, rather than nourishing me to look after the needs of others?

Henry Drummond worked with students during the dawn of a new scholasticism and scientific discovery in the late nineteenth century. Accordingly, he found fame by applying his impeccable logic to spiritual matters. “If you would know God’s will in the higher [realm], you must begin with God’s will in the lower; which simply means this—that if you want to live the ideal life, you must begin with the ideal body. The law of moderation, the law of sleep, the law of regularity, the law of exercise, the law of cleanliness—this is the law or will of God for you. This is the first law, the beginning of His will for you.”

In other words, Drummond told young men and women that if they truly want to know God’s will for their lives, doing so begins with what they put in their bodies and the care they take to stay in shape. It’s no good asking God what country you should serve in, if the body you’d serve with is being abused by license, neglect, or a voracious, unchecked appetite.

Drummond goes on: “Whoever heard of gluttony doing God’s will, or laziness, or uncleanness, or the man who was careless and wanton of natural life? Let a man disobey God in these, and you have no certainty that he has any true principle for obeying God in anything else; for God’s will does not only run into the church and the prayer-meeting and the higher chambers of the soul, but into the common rooms at home down to the wardrobe and larder and cellar, and into the bodily frame down to blood and muscle and brain.”

As one who has spoken at numerous college chapels, I frequently hear the earnest, impassioned plea, “What is God’s will for my life?”

Drummond’s first response might be, “Get in shape.”

Granted, the classics are not Scripture. They must be tested, discussed, occasionally set aside. But when so many, throughout all ages of the church, testify so clearly, passionately, and exhaustively about the spiritual dangers of over-eating, we would be wise to pay heed.

So I go to war against gluttony and indulgence not because I want God to love me more, but because God, who already loves me perfectly, warns me that gluttony and excess are my enemies—regardless of how good they may sometimes feel. I go to war
against gluttony not to build a body that others admire, but to maintain a soul “prepared for every good work” that God can use to bless others. I go to war against gluttony because those who have walked closely with God—from the early fourth century all the way through the nineteenth—warn me that overeating dulls me to God’s accepting presence, makes me more vulnerable to other sins, negatively affects my relationships with other people, and robs me of the joy rightfully mine as an adopted, deeply loved, and accepted child of God.

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