

Is Lack of Self-Control Driving You to Eat?

Most of us don't want to admit it, but we've grown accustomed to overeating. It's time to repent and develop some self-control.

The Bible tells us that “the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control” (Gal. 5:22, NIV). All these virtues should be displayed by those in whom the Spirit of God resides. But I've observed that self-control, the last in the list, is often overlooked—much like young David was when the prophet Samuel told Jesse to assemble his sons so he could anoint one of them as the new king of Israel (see 1 Sam. 16:1-13).

We're diligent in our quest to become living examples of unconditional love, unspeakable joy and peace that passes understanding. We commit ourselves to serving in our local churches so that they grow to reflect the goodness and faithfulness of the Lord. We strive to show patience when we minister to a hurting and sin-sick world. Even past President George Bush publicly expressed his hope that America become a kinder and gentler nation.

But what has happened to self-control? Where is the zealous pursuit, the burning desire, to restrain our flesh and govern our impulses? How is it that this last-listed fruit is so often neglected?

The problem is not just a “worldly” one. We see a disturbing lack of self-control within the body of Christ. It's manifested in the sexual sins that plague both the laity and the leadership of our churches. It's manifested in the gambling that causes Christians to spend their time and money (including their tithes) in local riverboat casinos. It's mani

fested in the smoking, alcoholism and drug addiction that are ever-present problems within our congregations.

But the one area in which a lack of self-control has become most apparent is the area of food. Overeating—the sin of gluttony—has as its foundation a lack of self-control.

The consequences of gluttony have reached epidemic proportions in this country among both Christians and non-Christians. From the 1960s to the 1990s, the cases of obesity nearly doubled. Current statistics show that 55 percent of adults are overweight.

Some groups, such as African American women, are more prone to obesity than others. Sixty-six percent of us are overweight and 37 percent are obese. Along with the rapid rise in these conditions comes an increasing prevalence of weight-related diseases such as diabetes, hypertension, heart disease and arthritis, according to a survey published by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Don't misunderstand me—I am not suggesting that every person who has a weight problem is a glutton. Obesity is a complicated disorder with multiple, often interrelated, contributing factors.

Eating is influenced by conditions such as stress, boredom and depression. For some of us, the problem is simply one of ignorance—not knowing how to interpret a food label, not knowing how to prepare foods and not knowing which foods should be eaten in moderation.

For others, a lack of exercise is the major problem. This is especially true for overweight children who, in this era, tend to entertain themselves with television, video games and computers rather than bicycles, jump ropes and relay races.

What I am suggesting is that the sin of gluttony plays a major role in the obesity epidemic, and it's time for us to confront

it. We have grown much too comfortable with self-indulgence.

We regularly eat more than our bodies require. We're guilty of eating for taste rather than for hunger. And we've conveniently ignored the call for temperance in the supermarket, in the kitchen and on our plates. As disturbing as it might be, this acceptance of gluttony shouldn't come as a surprise in a world that's overflowing with super sizes, jumbo servings and all-you-can-eat buffets.

To make matters worse, we are constantly bombarded with conflicting messages regarding food. This is especially true for women.

Take Cooking Light magazine, for example, which has a mostly female readership. Cooking Light is devoted to promoting all aspects of healthy living. It contains dozens of low-calorie recipes, and each issue has articles devoted to diet, exercise and nutrition.

But as you leaf through the pages of this health-conscious magazine, you'll come across numerous ads that promote unhealthy eating. Baker's Chocolate encourages you to "Indulge in the chocolate cookie recipe that's more chocolate than cookie." The American Dairy Association tries to convince you that cheese is a food with authority in its slogan: "Ahh, the power of cheese."

And Nabisco tempts you to submit to SnackWell's cookies: "Go ahead. Worship the Devil's Food." Rather than promoting self-control, these ads entice us to yield to the cravings of the flesh.

We find ourselves inundated with these mixed messages. On the one hand, we're told to watch our diets, cut the fat and eat in moderation; on the other hand, we're encouraged to abandon our constraints and surrender to the sensuous pleasure of eating.

The outcome of this dichotomy is predictable. Because we are often ruled by our “sinful nature,” which “desires what is contrary to the Spirit” (see Gal. 5:17), the messages that encourage us to indulge our flesh take precedence over those that advise restraint, and we find ourselves doing things we know we shouldn’t. We see the proof of this in the ever-escalating prevalence of obesity.

Thank God for the Holy Spirit! Though yielding to the flesh may be the norm for the world, it doesn’t have to be for Christians. Titus 2:12 tells us that God’s grace “teaches us to say ‘No’ to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age.” The world may indulge its appetite and suffer the consequences of obesity, but the Holy Spirit gives us the power to say “No” to the tendency toward gluttony.

ARE YOU DIGGING YOUR OWN GRAVE?

Since there are so many variables influencing our body weight, how do we distinguish whether our problem is rooted in a lack of self-control or one of the many other factors that play a role in obesity? In my experience with both my clinical practice and my church-based weight-loss group, the Ex-Gravediggers, I’ve found that most women are willing to acknowledge anything but a lack of self-control when it comes to their weight.

I named the group the Ex-Gravediggers because many of the participants had serious weight-related medical problems such as diabetes and hypertension. Instead of losing weight, these women were digging their own graves, one forkful at a time.

The Ex-Gravedigger weight-loss series includes a session on self-control. Invariably, most of the women in the group are quick to dismiss the idea that their problems stem from a lack of temperance.

“But I don’t eat a lot of food,” is the typical response I

receive. In response, I came up with what I call the “Six-S Test,” which is helpful in determining whether a lack of self-control is part of the problem.

The Six-S Test asks the following:

- 1. Do you eat in response to the sight of food?** Are you drawn like a magnet to a beautifully laid buffet or a work-of-art dessert?
- 2. Do you eat in response to the smell of food?** Does a whiff from the neighbor’s grill on a hot summer day compel you to grab your plate and ring their bell?
- 3. Do you pay attention to your serving sizes?** Has the fast-food trend of “super-sizing” everything extended into your own kitchen?
- 4. Are you prone to go for seconds?** Is the first plate (no matter how much food you managed to pile onto it) never quite enough?
- 5. Do you eat on the spur of the moment?** Are you able to drive by the local donut shop without pulling in?
- 6. Are you prone to snack?** Is your grocery cart filled with more chips, pretzels, nachos and popcorn than broccoli, carrots, tomatoes and zucchini?

Every now and then, most of us are guilty of one, two or even all six of these items. But what distinguishes the woman who has a real problem with self-control from the one who occasionally desires a second piece of pie is that for the former, yielding to the flesh becomes a regular and consistent behavior, and she has a difficult time resisting temptation.

Proverbs 25:28 says that when we lack self-control, we’re “like a city whose walls are broken down.” The walls of ancient cities served to protect the inhabitants from the onslaught of their enemies.

When we lack self-control, our enemy the devil has easy access to tempt us. He slips through the cracks of our broken-down walls and entices us to yield to the flesh and indulge ourselves with food. Once we've given in, our walls crumble even more.

Eventually, we cease trying to resist, deceiving ourselves that in our already broken-down state, continuing to indulge can do no further harm: "As fat as I am, what difference will one more scoop of ice cream make?"

STEPS TO SUCCESS

If you fit into the pattern of a woman who lacks self-control, the first step in correcting the problem is to acknowledge it. As simple as this sounds, I have found that it usually represents the greatest obstacle. It seems that no one—absolutely no one—thinks she eats too much. ("The problem is in my genes, not that extra slice of cheesecake.")

Acknowledgment of the problems the step before confession, and confession eventually leads to repentance. Repentance simply means that we agree with God that our behavior is not pleasing to Him—and then we change.

But keep in mind that in and of ourselves, we are weak. We must learn to rely totally on the power of the Holy Spirit if we want to achieve long-term success. And one of the Spirit's attributes is self-control.

Self-control, like David, comes last in the list. But David didn't stay in the background forever. He came out of the field, was anointed by Samuel and went down in history as the greatest king of Israel, a man dear to God's heart.

It's time for Christian women to bring the "last" fruit of the Spirit—self-control—out of the background. It's time for us to line up every aspect of our lives (including our plates) with the will of God and subject ourselves to His precepts.

Then we'll be equipped to take control of our weight and reap the benefits of better health.

Read a companion devotional.

Kara Davis, M.D., *is a writer and physician who specializes in internal medicine. She combines medical knowledge with biblical wisdom in her approach to patient care.*