

Food

Living to eat or eating to live?

We have a complicated relationship with food. It's something we either think about too much, or not enough.

Almost two-thirds of Britons are overweight or obese, with an estimated annual cost to the UK of around £47 billion. Globally, some 2.1 billion people – about 30 percent of the world's population – are overweight, costing an estimated £1.3 trillion a year or 2.8 percent of global economic activity. This is roughly the same as smoking or armed conflict, and more than alcoholism.

Almost half the world's population are expected to be overweight by 2030. Meanwhile, around a billion people are chronically undernourished. One way or another, food is a moral issue.

Does the Bible offer any helpful insights around our eating habits?



Thinking Biblically About...

What's the problem?

The messages we receive about food are mixed, to say the least. There is a lack of clarity in government guidelines and the information we receive from the food industry.

Price wars and confectionary strategically placed close to the checkout maximise temptation and pester power. Treating ourselves with one or other delicacy is, the advertisers tell us, one of the ways we show we care about ourselves. In a society where loneliness and marginalisation are at epidemic proportions, it's not surprising that we're piling on the pounds.

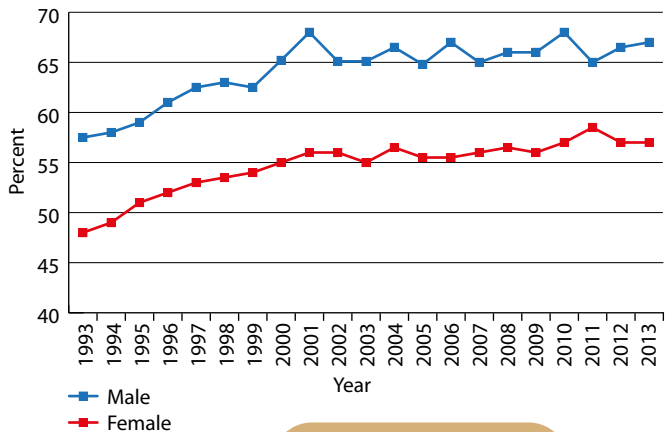
At the same time, consumer culture ensures that we're always dissatisfied with something, and that goes for our love-hate relationship with food and body image too.

Popular culture worships the size zero model and there are plenty of celebrity-endorsed diets to help you look like them. Of course, comfort eating offers a temporary solution to our unhappiness about not meeting these physical ideals.

The proportion of people who are overweight or obese¹ in the UK has risen by *five times* in the last 50 years. All of this has a personal impact, but it also has relational ones – whether it's the escalating cost to the NHS of weight-related conditions such as diabetes and heart disease, the economic productivity lost due to illness, or simply the fact that our friends, families and communities are all affected by our shorter lifespans and reduced ability to engage with them.

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Proportion of population overweight or obese



Q: What do you prioritise above all else in the food you buy and eat? Price? Taste? Nutritional content? Ethical production?

¹ McKinsey (2014). Defined as having a BMI of over 25 (overweight) and over 30 (obese).

What price cheap food?

Obesity and malnutrition are both serious problems the world faces, but in the UK health and weight are more complicated issues than we might first think. In the comparatively wealthy West, obesity is a condition that disproportionately affects poorer people. The proportion of household income we spend on food has fallen by half since 1971. We live in the age of the 99p burger and the £1 pizza: the reality is that it's often more expensive, in both money and time, to eat healthily.

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Beyond this, we lead lives that aren't conducive to exercise. Part of the reason might be laziness, but for many people it's increasingly difficult to find the time for a workout in a busy week, juggling the commitments of long office hours, commutes and family. The same squeeze at the hands of our 24/7 society leads us to make poor food choices; a microwaveable ready meal holds a big attraction over a healthy one made from scratch when we're already exhausted and overstretched. Cheap and processed food often has huge amounts of sugar added to it, which can be hard to avoid without starting with raw ingredients.

Different types of sugar/corn syrup are routinely added to:

- Cereal
- Bread
- Pasta sauces
- Salad dressing
- Fruit juice
- Low-fat yoghurt
- Almost all processed foods



LOOK INSIDE Our average daily sugar intake is roughly twice the recommended amount of 30g

What does the Bible say?

There are numerous references in the Bible to food and gluttony – one of the Seven Deadly Sins of early Christian teaching. Food can become an idol, or at least a dangerous distraction from more important things.



'Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is set on earthly things.'
(Philippians 3:19)



'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.'
(Proverbs 23:20-21)

'Where excess weight is mentioned, it is often a side-effect of inequality and the injustice it brings with it.'

The Bible doesn't say a lot about obesity directly. There is the story about Eglon, king of Moab, who is described as a 'very fat man' in Judges 3. He is killed by an Israelite spy named Ehud – an episode considered so disgusting that some translations simply

omit half of verse 22 altogether. But we can take few direct lessons away from this story. Where excess weight is mentioned, it is often a side-effect of inequality and the injustice it brings with it (Psalm 73:7-9).

Jesus was wrongly accused of drunkenness and gluttony; he enjoyed the blessings of food and drink, but also had the discipline to fast regularly. Unsurprisingly, the Bible considers adequate and abundant food a gift from God, but one that nevertheless requires self-control.



'Everything is permissible for me – but I will not be mastered by anything. Food for the stomach and the stomach for food – but God will destroy them both.'
(1 Corinthians 6:12-13)

Whilst this provides a starting point, we need a broader framework. Back in biblical times there were no ready meals, added sugar or manipulative advertisers, and the long working days were filled with physical labour. Our attitudes to food are partly personal, but they are also collective, and span many different spheres of life.

Q: What are some of effects on other people that your choices around food have?

Debt, sex and food

At least two other areas of life provide ready comparisons for our treatment of food: debt and sex. Both receive plenty of attention in the Bible (sex

is the context of 1 Corinthians 6, which also alludes to food). In both cases, our current cultural approach is a complex network of factors that establishes and normalises certain harmful behaviours and lifestyles.

Debt is often, though by no means always, a result of poor personal choices. But these personal choices take place within an environment that makes it easy to go into debt and hard to

escape. Companies aggressively market products that few of us really need. Banks and credit card companies make credit available, even when they know

it will adversely affect borrowers. The government not only has an unhealthy amount of debt itself but idolises GDP to the point where short-term economic growth fuelled by borrowing and consumption is more important than the environment, our wellbeing or almost anything else.

A similar dynamic exists for sex. Individuals are responsible for the choices they make. However, the commodification of sexual relationship and the damage that goes with it is part of a much wider picture. Public policy enables and even incentivises relationship breakdown through the welfare system. Advertisers, again, use sex to sell anything and everything (including food and credit). The mainstream media both trivialises sex in the sense of 'casual' sex and holds it up as the highest form of relationship, the only way that it is possible to find true intimacy – not so different to the ambivalence we have around eating.

So it is with our diets. We make harmful choices as individuals, but those choices are shaped by a number of factors.

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Personal choice vs external influence

Our approach to food (as well as debt, sex and much else) is individualistic. We are encouraged to think of our diet and wider lifestyle choices as decisions that are ours alone. The lesson that the Bible almost takes for granted is this: there are no personal decisions, in that every so-called personal decision we take has impacts on other people. Everyone exists in relationship with others. Everything we do has relational consequences. As John Donne wrote, 'No man is an island, entire of itself.'

The irony is that – just as with debt and sex – the supposedly free 'choices' we have in what we eat are slanted towards food that is bad for us. We are heavily influenced through advertising, pricing and simply the options that are available.

In the Bible, gluttony and lack of self-control are criticised – but so are those who exploit buyers with poor-quality food.



'Hear this, you who trample the needy and do away with the poor of the land, saying, "When will the New Moon be over that we may sell grain, and the Sabbath be ended that we may market wheat?" – skimping on the measure, boosting the price and cheating with dishonest scales, buying the poor with silver and the needy for a pair of sandals, selling even the sweepings with the wheat.'
(Amos 8:4-6)

Food manufacturers maximise their own profit margins with cheap, sugar-filled products. These are most attractive and most harmful to those who cannot afford higher-quality food – representing another form of inequality and the exploitation of people who are already disadvantaged. This can be considered an injustice akin to payday lenders or loan sharks preying on the poor, or the moral hazard of the banking system that profits from risky lending but is protected from the losses by taxpayer bailouts.

Thus our attitudes towards food are a complex picture. 1 Corinthians 10 shows that no food should be considered wrong in itself, but that our eating habits – just like everything else – should honour God.



'So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.'
(1 Corinthians 10:31)

Where do we go from here?

Our attitude to food is a symptom of an even healthier issue in our society.

Sex, debt and food all represent a kind of consumerisation of the sensual. Like debt and sex, there is a pervasive myth that is allowed to go largely unchallenged: a kind of cultural collusion that food is a personal matter that is no one else's business. As the individual and collective costs become more apparent, we are starting to understand that a lack of restraint – whether sexual, financial or gastronomical – borrows from the present at the expense of the future, and at the expense of those around us.

Fasting. Prayer and fasting come as a two-for-one deal in the Bible. In our food-obsessed culture, is it any surprise which of these is regularly omitted? If you're concerned about the influence of food in our culture or your life, what better way to put a line in the sand than intentionally missing a meal or two and make fasting part of your prayerful response?

Feasting. In the Bible, good food is associated with celebration. Take time regularly to cook a special meal and eat it, slowly, with friends and family.

Exercise as worship. Fitting exercise into a busy day is even less attractive if you don't enjoy it. But exercise is part of the way that we honour God with our bodies (1 Corinthians 6:20, albeit in a different context). Make a point of praying, listening to worship music or a sermon if you're out on your own. Alternatively, aim to build and maintain relationships by finding ways to exercise with other people.

Replace eating with giving. Small amounts of money can make a big difference to people in low-income countries. Foregoing an alcoholic drink, a snack or a dessert on a regular basis and putting the money aside to go to a good cause is a powerful way of reminding ourselves that we are blessed with abundance that others lack.

Q: What are some of the ways that you could personally honour God through the food you eat and your exercise habits?



Is it time we started thinking differently about food?



- We often view food as a personal matter, but our habits around eating have far-reaching consequences for ourselves and for other people.
- We bear some responsibility for these habits but, like sex and debt, the choices we make about food are conditioned by the signals we receive from the world around us.
- Our attitudes to food have a spiritual dimension that is easy to overlook.

Thinking Biblically About... is a series of 2,000-word guides that unpack modern-day issues from a biblical perspective. The **TBA** series aims to give Christians a firm foundation for engaging with some of the most difficult questions of our times: money and debt, sex and marriage, how we spend our time, how we treat the environment and what the role of government ought to be.

You can also read our **Long Distance Christian** series, a collection of 10,000-word booklets looking at key issues in more depth.

The Jubilee Centre is a Christian social reform charity based in Cambridge, UK. We believe that the Bible's teaching applies to every area of modern life and has enduring relevance for Britain and the world in the 21st century. At the heart of this social vision is a concern for right relationships, expressed by Jesus in his summary of the Old Testament, *'Love the Lord with all your heart... and love your neighbour as yourself.'* (Matthew 22:37-40)

Find out more at www.jubilee-centre.org/food