

a futile pursuit of perfection?

Sarah Fitch on dealing with the obesity epidemic

Our nation is facing an obesity epidemic. Current statistics show that approximately a quarter of UK adults are obese¹ with only 30-40% of men and women having a healthy BMI.² Nearly a third of boys and one in five girls between the ages of two and fifteen were categorised as being obese or overweight.³ But while our newspapers are scattered with these statistics, we are constantly bombarded with advertisements and promotions of what can give us the 'perfect body'. These figures have an obvious impact on our professional work as we see a growing number of patients suffering the consequences of such a high BMI. It is clear that we cannot afford to ignore this issue. Additionally, doctors have a duty to maintain good health, to be able to care for other people. We should also be protecting ourselves from the issues that obesity can bring. Whilst these points are relevant, the problems with obesity should have an impact on us as Christians as well. There seem to be three factors that are particularly relevant to Christians in this age of the 'obesity epidemic'. These are:

- How we should love and care for our own bodies
- How it is important to not be judgmental
- How we should not strive to fit into society's view of a 'perfect body'

To begin with, as Christians and as healthcare professionals it is important to respect and care for our bodies. Unfortunately, obesity is commonly put across as the nation's problem, not an



individual's problem. This is true, but it doesn't necessarily help people understand the statistics in relation to their own lives. Yet, with the remnants of Christmas dinner still sitting happily around many of our waistlines, these statistics quickly become personal. It is important that people start to understand the dangers of obesity in their own lives. Obesity brings with it an increased risk of a number of serious health issues such as cardiovascular disease and type 2 diabetes. Whilst these facts are serious in themselves, the Bible can also shine light

on this issue. For example, Paul writes to the Corinthian church about the importance of our bodies and how we treat them:

'Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honour God with your body.' (1 Corinthians 6:19-20)

Whilst these verses predominately relate to the issue of sexual immorality, the principle is relevant to this topic. The Holy Spirit resides in us, making our bodies his temple. With this in mind, not treating our bodies with respect is not honouring God. There are also a number of passages that deal with the issue of greed and the danger of self-indulgence. Arguably, overeating and spending money on food or drink that we do not need could be perceived as greedy and gluttonous. This is particularly true in a world where people are still suffering without sufficient food. The Bible teaches us to open our eyes to



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how greed can consume our hearts in a world where earthly luxury is so temporary. James 5:5 states '*you have lived your days on earth in luxury and self-indulgence. You have fattened yourselves in the day of slaughter*'. Here he shows the overwhelming destruction that greed can have. Not only could you argue it becomes an idol but it can make a person increasingly self-centred. Through this you can turn your back on your neighbours and more importantly on God.

The second point relates to the issue to judgment. As Christians we are taught that God is the ultimate judge and we are not. This is highlighted in Matthew 7:1 '*Do not judge, or you too will be judged*'. Whilst in practice being non-judgmental is difficult, it is an important factor in dealing with obesity. It is true that not maintaining a healthy lifestyle is a huge causative factor in obesity, but it is not the only cause. There are a handful of diseases such as hypothyroidism that can impact a person's weight. Additionally, mental health issues and many medications have the potential to contribute to weight gain. With this in mind it is important not to view each person who is obese as greedy and self-indulgent. Even for those people who cannot maintain a healthy lifestyle, we should look to encourage them lovingly, without judgement.

The final point is around the danger of striving to seek a societal-view of a perfect body. We should be tackling this obesity issue; however, we should protect ourselves from the pressure put on the population to look a certain way. Many people have a limited view of what is beautiful and that does not always account for individuality. Yet many people will unfortunately think they have to fall into this small category. This can encourage people to seek a bodily perfection that is only

really found through airbrushing and changes made on a computer. If a person focuses too much on seeking this perfection it can become self-destructive and dangerous. This may be more obvious in extreme cases of anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa. Indeed extreme dieting and exercise is similar to obesity as it is another way of not treating our health and our bodies with respect. As Christians we should instead be focusing on what a Christian picture of beauty is. Peter shines a light on this by saying:

'Your beauty should not come from outward adornment, such as braided hair and the wearing of fine clothes. Instead, it should be that your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God's sight.' (1 Peter 3:3-5)

Whilst this passage is particularly directed at women within a marriage, it is relevant to everyone feeling the pressure to look and dress a certain way.

The obesity crisis seems to be a growing issue that we cannot ignore, however, we should think carefully about how we deal with the issue. This is particularly relevant as healthcare professionals and we should aim to be non-judgmental and loving when dealing with patients suffering with obesity. Finally, there is a lot of pressure to fit into a societal picture of beauty and we should be comforted that Christianity teaches us that true beauty is very different from this. Dealing with this issue of obesity should be more a practice of moderation. Essentially it is enjoying that extra slice of cake but not every day. ■

REFERENCES

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