

Practicing Shalom: Developing Healthy Attitudes Toward Food and Body

*"I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly."
—John 10:10*

The following article is adapted from Christian Dieting: Weighing the Alternatives, by Mary Louise Bringle [brochure] (Louisville: Office of Health Ministries U.S.A., PC(USA), 2000). Used by permission.

Abundant life means life in shalom: health, prosperity, peace; harmony with God and neighbor, with our bodies, and with the earth. Anything that disrupts shalom is both a spiritual and a physical problem, and requires both spiritual and physical solutions.

For many of us, attitudes toward food and body are disruptive of shalom: we eat and diet compulsively, hate our bodies, and despair of our weight—and our attitudes in these areas spill over into our relationships with friends, families, co-workers—and our Creator! Learning to turn to God rather than to food to fill the empty places inside us is a positive and important step in our journeys of discipleship.

As long as we are intent on losing weight or getting thinner, we remain “conformed to this world” (Romans 12:2), and we are contributing to the perpetuation rather than the elimination of prejudices about body size and shape that are hurtful to ourselves and to other people. Many of our practices in pursuit of thinness have ill-considered spiritual consequences.

In a fallen world, public weigh-ins invite unhealthy competition with our neighbors. Even private weigh-ins keep focusing us on the wrong thing—a number on a scale rather than our overall fitness for God’s service.

Keeping a food log may be a valuable act of discipline, but if it means that we are thinking constantly about what we can or cannot eat, have or have not eaten, then we are still “making a god of the belly” (Philippians 3:19, adapted).

Any program that suggests we do not need to exercise leads us astray from an important dimension of our shalom—maintaining a fit, vigorous, and healthy body as a temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19).

The “fast that [God] chooses” is that we “break every yoke” (including the yoke of oppressive images of beauty) and that we “share . . . bread with the hungry” (Isaiah 58:7). Fasting means giving up food for a time to cleanse our bodies and spirits, focus on God, and give any excess to our neighbors in need. Practices in shalom turn us outward—toward neighbor, nature, and God—rather than inward, toward our need to be seen as attractive by the norms of our culture. Instead of our old habits of weighing and dieting, we should learn new habits: exercising heartily, practicing stewardship of our bodies; and eating prayerfully, savoring the goodness of God’s gifts and sensing when we have had our fill. Then we will have life and have it abundantly.