

Overeating: When Enough Isn't Enough



by MICHAEL R. EMLET

“Enough is as good as a feast.”

—*Mary Poppins*¹

The Struggle with Overeating

Here’s a confession: I like to eat. Too much. You can’t tell that just by looking at me. But it’s a fact. I have a pattern of going well beyond what my grandmother used to call “delightfully full.” Throughout my life, I’ve always had a massive appetite. To complicate matters, my father owned the local corner grocery store when I was growing up. I remember coming home from school many days, grabbing a bag of potato chips and a candy bar, sitting down to consume them along with a quart of milk. And then I would eat a full dinner two hours later. And a bedtime snack. (And my father wondered why he struggled to make a profit on the business!) I never met a second portion I didn’t like. “All you can eat” buffets? Well, of course I get my money’s worth! Does any of this sound familiar to you?

Now, for better *and* for worse, my body’s metabolism was such that I simply didn’t gain much weight despite these disordered eating habits.

¹ *Mary Poppins*. Directed by Robert Stevenson. Burbank, CA: Walt Disney Studios, 1964.

This article is adapted from my forthcoming minibook: *Overeating: When Enough Isn’t Enough* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2019).

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Regular exercise helped too. So, while it was good that I was not experiencing obvious health consequences of my overeating, it was not good that I could hide it from myself, if not from others. Until I reached my late 40s. Exercise became more sporadic. The pounds started to accumulate, slowly but surely. There were seasons of greater self-control to be sure. But now in my late 50s this is a struggle that continues to manifest itself. Many times, if I don't self-consciously and prayerfully approach my meals, I will overeat. Period.

If you're reading this, I'm assuming you struggle with overeating too. Or maybe you care about someone who does. My plan is to help overeaters answer the following questions: Why do I overeat? What does the Bible have to say about this struggle? What practical steps can I take to battle against overeating? My ultimate goal is to point strugglers to Jesus Christ, who provides hope and help for this battle.

Because disordered eating can manifest itself so differently in our lives, it's important to highlight what we will not directly address:

- Bulimia Nervosa or Binge-Eating Disorder (as described by the DSM-5).² Both of these problems involve episodes of "binge eating," but this kind of overeating generally requires regular counseling and a medical evaluation, especially if purging is present. Nevertheless, much of what I say should be helpful for you if you struggle in these particular ways.
- Obesity. Overeating may or may not correlate with obesity. A person can have a significant problem with overeating and not be overweight. Or vice versa. Total caloric intake is only one of a host of genetic and environmental factors that contribute to obesity.³
- The science of overeating. There is research on overeating and obesity that contributes to this discussion but it will remain, for the most part, implicit in my remarks. My goal is not a scientific treatise, but a practical, biblically focused guide.

² *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th edition (DSM-5)*, (Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Association, 2013), 345-353.

³ For a concise overview, see Harvard Health Publishing, "Why People Become Overweight," Harvard University, updated April 11, 2017, <http://www.health.harvard.edu/staying-healthy/why-people-become-overweight>.

- A discussion of healthy vs. unhealthy foods. The struggle with overeating goes beyond the nutritional quality of the food consumed. You can overeat donuts. Or chicken and rice soup made from scratch. I want to move away from the idea of “good” and “bad” foods *per se*. My focus is particularly on the amount of food consumed, not on the type of food, although it is wise to minimize the intake of highly processed foods.

First and foremost, I intend this to be a helpful resource for those who continue to eat at mealtimes when they know they've had enough and who find this to be a consistent pattern in their lives.

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Why Do We Overeat?

This is often a complex question. Because we are physically-embodied image bearers of God who live in particular relationships and in a specific cultural context, the answer to this question may have several components. Perhaps we've skipped a meal and are feeling really hungry. Or we are with a group of friends who generally overindulge during social meals. Or our parents consistently praised us for being members of the “clean plate club” and we remain happy to oblige. Or there is an ever-ready supply of highly processed foods in our pantry.

But let me simplify a bit. While there may be many factors involved, I want to focus on what happens within us when we sit down to a meal and come away from it knowing that we've had too much. What's most important to see here is that overeating is not simply a behavioral or body issue but a “heart” issue. Scripture describes the heart as our moral center. Moment by moment, our hearts are directed toward God or to someone/something else (Rom 1:18–23).

Jesus, in explaining sin, points to the inside as the source: “But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person...” (Matt 15:18–20). Jesus could just have easily said, “For out of the heart comes overeating.” The

reasons why we overeat ultimately connect to our relationship with the living God. Put another way, food is a litmus test of our worship, showing what we most love, want, or fear in the moment. Appetites are not just physical; they have a spiritual character as well.

So, it's not enough to decide we have a problem with overeating. We need to ask why. We need to get to the spiritual heart of the matter. There are many heart-oriented reasons why we overeat:

1. *Pleasure*. Sometimes we overeat because we just don't want a wonderful multisensory experience of sight, smell, and taste to end. We enjoy a good thing too much. Enough is *not* enough. We continue eating beyond the hunger's satisfaction. Want trumps need. Sometimes a member of my family will ask me as I reach for another helping, "Do you really need that?" In other words, "Is your desire for more motivated by inordinate pleasure or by actual physical need?"

But shouldn't we enjoy our food? Absolutely! After all, God gives "wine to gladden the heart of man, oil to make his face shine and bread to strengthen man's heart" (Ps 104:15). Eating is more than a dutiful transaction involving the ingestion of raw calories!

But when pleasure becomes an end in itself, the internal cry for "more" trumps the sober realization that I've had enough. No doubt the drive for more is influenced by our western culture's preoccupation with "super-sizing" happiness at all costs. "Why should you deny yourself this pleasure?" the world whispers. Faced with a tasty and artfully prepared meal (or even a large order of McDonald's fries) it's hard to resist overdoing it! But we don't want the pleasure of the gift to turn us away from the Giver.

2. *Pain*. Sometimes we overeat in response to negative emotions such as anxiety, sadness, guilt, or shame. Here, for a brief moment, we escape the negative emotions by virtue of the comfort, pleasure, and self-soothing afforded by food. The saying "drown your sorrows" should have a culinary equivalent! Sometimes we use food as a way to "fidget," to deal with fears and anxieties (although we might not be aware that we're using food this way).

There's a reason why we use the term "comfort food." We can associate food with other things, including stress relief, peace, and happiness. "Hyperpalatable" foods (generally those high in sugar, salt, or fat) are especially

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