

A Christian Response to Obesity

"As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?' Jesus answered, 'Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him. We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.' When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man's eyes, saying to him, 'Go, wash in the pool of Siloam' (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see."

John 9: 1-7



Shame and blame as a response to health problems is a primitive reaction that remains with us today. Americans venerate health and vitality. Employers and insurance companies urge us to take responsibility for our own health. And caring for our body like a temple is an admonition from Corinthians that we all know.

Blame was certainly on the minds of the disciples when Jesus encountered the blind man in John 9. Christ's response was compassion and healing. We have much to learn.

Obesity is a health issue. Period.

One in three of us have it.

A wise doctor will tell you, if you want to live a long and healthy life, the most important thing is to choose your parents carefully. Everything else pales by comparison.

Everyone has health risks and most are invisible. Our bodies, large and small, are beautiful gifts from God, but we are all frail children of God. The trouble with obesity is that for those of us who are susceptible, our frailty is on display for the world to judge, every day.

Before the obesity epidemic, a large body was an asset. A large body and a strong drive to eat when food is plentiful has been a great gift for survival over many centuries, but it is no more.

In our present culture, those same biological traits put a person at risk for chronic diseases, premature death, and social isolation.

Social isolation for people with obesity comes from a deep bias in our culture against these people. Research shows that people with obesity are judged harshly based on their size, regardless of their personal merit and accomplishments. People with obesity encounter discrimination and hateful treatment from an early age at school, at work, in healthcare, in social situations, and even in their own families. And the impact on their lives is profound harm.

Research also shows that increasing bias and discrimination against people with obesity comes, at least in part, from a mistaken assumption that stigma and shame will motivate people to lose weight. But in fact, the opposite is true. Stigma and shame lead to social isolation and unhealthy eating behaviors that make the problem worse. And it leads people to avoid necessary medical care.

Bias and discrimination stems, as well, from a false assumption that increasing obesity is the result of bad choices by individuals for themselves. But the fact is, we have more obesity today than we did 50 years ago because of profound changes in the quality of food available to us and in the communities where we study, work, and live.

Our food supply has gradually changed to fulfill the Lays potato chip promise: "No one can eat just one." Schools keep students in their seats, occupied with academic work that leaves less time for physical activity. Workplaces are more sedentary than ever. And our communities have gradually been built to rule out peddling or walking where we want to go.

To make a long and very complex story short, we have an obesity epidemic because of many powerful forces that push the weight of susceptible people up to an unhealthy level. While everyone with a health problem can find choices they regret, people seldom choose poor health. Obesity is no different in this respect.

So what is a Christian response to obesity? It is grace, love, and healing, rather than shame and blame. For someone with obesity, it means loving the body that God gave you and keeping it at the healthiest weight you can, without chasing impossible weight goals.

And for every one of us, a Christian response to obesity means responding to God's grace for us with love and respect for every precious child of God, large and small.

— Ted Kyle