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Study guide

Made good by God's love

By Robert C. Blezard

For many people, the point of dieting is to achieve self-esteem and self-satisfaction by living up to our culture's arbitrary standards of health and beauty. In this way, it's not much different from works righteousness, where we try to be good in order to live up to what we think are God's standards for loving us. But the truth is, God loves us, sinners that we are, and our bodies are perfect creations of God.

EXERCISE 1: DIET MADNESS

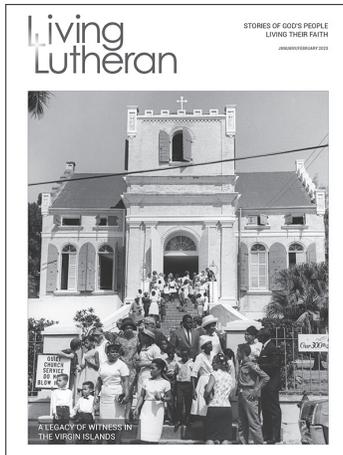
Dieting is big business, accounting for more than \$72 billion a year, and tens of millions of people get on the diet treadmill every year, especially after New Year's Day. After all, following our culture's calorie fest from Thanksgiving to Christmas to New Year's, those extra pounds provide incentive to make a resolution to diet and lose weight. Yet, statistics show that most people fail in their dieting. Discuss:

- What forces in our culture make it easy to indulge in high-calorie treats?
- What forces in our culture pressure us into looking fit and slim?
- Why do people decide to diet?
- What has been your experience with dieting? What have you tried? How well did it work? Have you ever made a New Year's resolution to diet and lose weight? Did you succeed?
- If you were unable to continue dieting and keep weight off, how did that make you feel?
- Why is it so hard to lose weight and keep it off?
- If dieting is so hard, why do people nonetheless try?

EXERCISE 2: BODY SHAMING

We live in a culture of unrealistic expectations and deep contradictions. While more than 73% of the U.S. population is overweight or obese, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), our media projects primarily images of fit, slim and attractive people in print, television, internet and film. This may lead some people to think that it's wrong, abnormal or a personal fault to not meet those standards. Discuss:

- Think of your favorite movie or TV show. How many of the characters are overweight? Does the overall cast represent the mix of body styles and weights you might find at your church potluck?



Study guide: **Made good** *continued*

- The CDC says 73% of people in the United States are overweight or obese. If the media represented the population, shouldn't 73% of actors, newscasters, commentators and models be overweight or obese? Why aren't they?
- In what ways does the media's preoccupation with slim people reflect our culture's value on looks over character?
- When mostly fit and slim people are portrayed in the media, what unspoken message is sent about what is normal, ideal and most desirable in our culture?
- If someone doesn't fit the ideal—and 73% of Americans do not—how might that make people feel? How and why can that take a toll on a person's self-esteem?
- In what ways are people who are overweight and obese judged and shamed in our culture?
- Discuss how the drive to conform to artificial social norms of body weight leads many people to futile and unhealthy dieting.
- What is a better way? How can we as people of God help change things?

EXERCISE 3: WORKS RIGHTEOUSNESS

In his early life, Martin Luther believed the prevailing theology of his day that we had to earn God's love through good works and holy living. His theological breakthrough came after he discovered a theme running through the letters of Paul: We are saved not by our good works but by our faith in God. God doesn't expect us to be perfect, and we are worthy of God's love just as we are. Are there parallels with obsessive dieting?

- Before his breakthrough, Luther felt oppressed by the pressure to conform to an unrealistic ideal of holiness and perfection in order to be worthy of God's love. Are there similarities to today's pressure to be fit and slim in order to be acceptable to others and, especially, to ourselves?
- We are loved by God as we are, but we still must be conscientious about living "a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called" (Ephesians 4:1). What's the distinction between being conscientious about our life and being obsessed with achieving perfection? How do we thread that needle?
- Similarly, in what way is it helpful to be conscientious about living healthfully but not obsessed with unrealistic and arbitrary expectations about body weight and shape?
- Why is it spiritually unhealthy to be obsessed with whether we are good enough to merit God's love? Why is it emotionally and physically unhealthy to be obsessed with being slim enough to conform to cultural ideals?

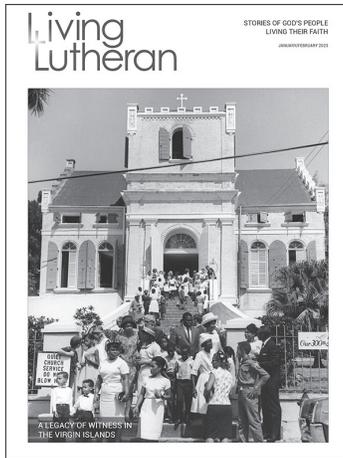
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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What's the difference between being healthy and being slim? How is it that one can carry a few pounds and still be healthy? How is it that one can be unhealthy yet slim? Should the purpose of dieting be to achieve health or to achieve a certain body shape? Explain.
- In his "I have a dream" speech, Martin Luther King Jr. envisioned a day when his children would be judged by the content of their character and not by their skin color. Can you imagine a day when people will be judged by their character and not by their body shape? What would that look like?
- God doesn't expect us to be perfect in order to love us. Why can it be hard for us to accept that God loves us just as we are? How can we work on that? Similarly, what factors can make it hard for us to love ourselves "just the way we are"?
- What is our culture's conception of an "ideal" weight and body shape? How are they used to convince us that "we're not good enough" if we don't match the ideal? What other ideas in our culture send us the message that "you're not good enough"? How can these things lead to low self-esteem, depression and unhappiness? What are better measures of our worth and self-esteem? If God loves us, shouldn't we love ourselves? Why is that so hard?



MADE GOOD BY GOD'S LOVE

By Robin Lovett-Owen

THERE IS GRACE FOR OUR BODIES TOO

When I dieted, I'd think about food all day. I tried many things, but for me the easiest was to divide every single food into strict categories: "good" and "bad," "clean" or "unclean."

Those days I did well under the good/bad system felt great. I identified myself as a healthy eater, someone who knew enough about nutrition and cared enough about herself to do the "right" thing and eat her veggies. On the good days, I was smug.

But the bad days were excruciating. If I succumbed and ate something bad, that

knowledge would sit heavily on my mind. I felt guilt, as if I had sinned. I would think about how I could atone for this sin: I could be good the next day or exercise, for repentance. I would skip social events to avoid bad foods. I would panic in the weeks leading up to travel or visiting family, knowing that bad food was unavoidable.

In pop culture this is called "dieting"—and about 45 million Americans diet every year. In psychology these habits are called "eating disorder behaviors." We have a name for it in theology too—one that is at the heart of the

Lutheran tradition. In theology we call this “works righteousness.”

Martin Luther was no stranger to the joy thief called works righteousness, though his experience with it came from religiosity instead of diet. His good days looked less like clean eating and more like pious living, with daily confession, endless prayer services, almsgiving and fasting. I’m not sure what his bad days looked like, but I know he held high standards for himself and felt great guilt and shame when he inevitably didn’t meet those standards.

EVERY PART OF OUR LIVES BECOMES GOOD BECAUSE GOD—WHO LOVES OUR WHOLE SELVES—DELIGHTS IN US, NOT BECAUSE WE ARE PERFECT IN WHAT WE DO.

Luther’s perfectionism and guilt resonated with me when I read about them in seminary—just not when it came to religious devotion. The religious scrupulosity he lived with still exists, but I think it’s less common, in part because of his bravery. He did his best to free himself and others from pious perfectionism, and we’re all better for it. But works righteousness still rages in our hearts; we still want to be our own saviors, and we are still furious when we fall short of the standards we set for ourselves.

However works righteousness shows up, the answer is grace. Luther came to know that our whole lives become an act of righteousness when lived in faith. In this he even included daily activities: “trade, walk, stand, eat, drink, sleep, and do all kinds of works for the nourishment of the body or for the common welfare” (“A Treatise on Good Works”). Every part of our lives becomes good because God—who loves our whole selves—delights in us, not because we are perfect in what we do.

There is grace for our bodies too. My preoccupation with dieting emerged because I wanted to be good enough that I would be loved, and I was sure I would be loved once I was healthy enough, thin enough. There is no grace in dieting.

The good news for our bodies is that God loves them all—thin and fat, healthy and sick, young and old, and everywhere in between. And because God loves our bodies as they are, we are freed to live without the works righteousness of dieting. Luther didn’t have to earn God’s love with his piousness, and we don’t have to earn love with our endless cycles of dieting, guilt and shame.

The new year is a hotbed for dieting, when many of us make resolutions. Six weeks later,

when we inevitably can’t change our lives on a whim, Lent comes, and many of us use it to re-up our resolutions. For many people, Lent becomes a Jesus-sanctioned diet. Since Jesus fasted for 40 days, we give up sugar, soda or bread, or whatever we think will help us shed a pound or two by Easter.

YOUR WHOLE BODY, WHATEVER ITS SHAPE, HAS ALREADY BEEN MADE GOOD BY GOD’S LOVE.

In doing so, many of us are falling for the old lies of works righteousness. Our Lenten disciplines then no longer bring us closer to our loving God, but drive us further away. We forget that God loves us already, and we try to earn that love with good works.

This Lent, give up dieting instead of food. When the joy thief begins to whisper, “If you eat clean, you’ll finally be loved, whole, worthy”—resist. Your whole body, whatever its shape, has already been made good by God’s love. †

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