



## Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

### Focus Article:

📖 Heavenly Hunger  
(*Food and Hunger*,  
pp. 62-71)

### Suggested Article:

📖 We Are *How* We Eat  
(*Food and Hunger*,  
pp. 89-93)

### What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to:

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### Christian Reflection

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# Heavenly Hunger

A new Christian fitness culture is dramatically redirecting older concerns about gluttony and corpulence into schemes for getting “slim for Him.” Though participants in devotional fitness regimens are well-meaning and moral, the implications of this growing fixation on appearance are sobering.

### Prayer†

Gracious God of Word and Table, to You be thanks and praise!

**For the garden of the earth, filled with all manner of things that are pleasing to the eye and delightful to the tongue:**

For fruits in their seasons – apples and melons; figs, grapes, and pomegranates; plums and oranges and peaches dripping with nectar;

**For seasonings and spices – almond and vanilla; cinnamon, clove, and nutmeg; rosemary and marjoram; bay leaf and oregano and thyme;**

For fellow creatures with whom to share the fruitfulness of the garden and the responsibility for tending it with care;

**For our own bodies, born of the earth by Your hands and animated by Your breath;**

For the serenity to hush our anxiety over appearances, our fretfulness about “conforming” to the standards of this age;

**For the insight to be “transformed” into appreciation of a more richly variegated beauty;**

For the capacity to savor food with pleasure and gratitude, and to stop when we have eaten to our fill;

**For the wisdom to discern in our appetites a deeper hunger which opens us to others and to grace; Amen.**

Scripture Reading: Romans 12:1-2

### Reflection

The Apostle Paul, turning his attention in Romans 12:1-2 to the guidelines for Christian living, offers this warning: Don’t be conformed to the world’s way of thinking! Our bodies should be living sacrifices to God and our thoughts are to be transformed, so that we may discern God’s will through the church.

Of all our thoughts, none are more resistant to being transformed by God’s Spirit than how we judge our selves and our bodies. Marie Griffith confirms this in her review of the culture of Christian food restraint. She worries that it “has consequences not always clearly perceived even by its more careful supporters,” such as:

▶ *idealizing a particular type of feminine beauty.* “Christian literature about fitness, weight-loss, and beauty frequently instructs its readers to uphold a pleasing image in the world, as...prototypes of the redeemed life to which non-Christians hopefully would aspire,” Griffith notes. “Yet it embraces American ideals of slender beauty which stand in glaring contrast to attitudes in the developing world that have long associated fat with beauty, wealth, and merit or divine blessing.”

▶ *embracing the material rewards of slenderness offered by the secular world.* “Patricia Kreml’s *Slim for Him* exemplifies the common pattern of urging her readers against vanity even while assur-



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ing them that they will become more beautiful via her regimen." Though the primary goal of dieting is sacrificial obedience to God, several writers promise it also will make a person "more beautiful, sexy, desirable, and naturally more envied by those who fail where she succeeds."

▶ *teaching us to read one another's body for signs of sin and virtue.* In today's image-saturated media culture, our bodies "have become the very medium of self-improvement, the primary stuff upon which to practice purification, obedience, and discipline and to establish perfection.... Like the culture into which it's interwoven, American Christianity has aligned with the pseudo-religion of physical fitness in a new way, dramatically redirecting older anxieties about gluttony and corpulence into schemes for getting 'slim for Him.'"

"What we do with our bodies, how we work to make them ever appealing and desirable, the health care policies we obtain for ourselves and allow for others – all of these are religious matters," Griffith writes. "They speak louder than our words about what kinds of bodies we adore and what types we despise or at least are willing to abandon. If no critique emerges to challenge today's Christian fitness and beauty culture, we may soon be faced with a still narrower set of Christian exemplars: an army of born-again bodies and malnourished souls."

### Study Questions

1. Are the three consequences of "the culture of Christian food restraint" discussed by Griffith very harmful?
2. How can we distinguish a proper respect for fitness and health from an excessive interest in dieting and weight-loss?
3. "A recent resurgence of fasting in American Christian circles is closely connected to Christian weight loss and fitness concerns," Griffith writes. "Such disciplines today are unashamedly linked to aspirations for personal and political power." Do you agree?
4. Sara Covin Juengst's *Breaking Bread* and Holly Whitcomb's *Feasting with God* help us recapture the joy of food (pp. 90-92). What ideas do they spark for your family and congregation to enjoy eating as an act of stewardship, hospitality, bonding, compassion, celebration, and hope and restoration?

### Departing Hymn: "Jesus, Our Lord and King" (verses 1 & 4)

Jesus, our Lord and King,  
to You our praises rise;  
to You our bodies we present,  
a living sacrifice.

Baptized into Your death,  
with You again we rise,  
to newness of a life of faith,  
to new and endless joys.

Anonymous

Suggested Tunes: ST. THOMAS or FESTAL SONG

†Adapted from Mary Louise Bringle, *The God of Thinness: Gluttony and Other Weighty Matters* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1992), 153-154. Used by permission.

# Heavenly Hunger

## Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 2	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

## Teaching Goals

1. To examine how the Christian diet and fitness industry distort the devotional significance of our bodies.
2. To reflect on the difference between a proper respect for bodily health and fitness, and an excessive interest in dieting and weight-loss.
3. To suggest resources for individuals, families, and congregations to recapture the joy of preparing and sharing food.

## Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 8-9 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Food and Hunger (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn, "Jesus, Our Lord and King," locate either of the familiar tunes ST. THOMAS or FESTAL SONG in your church hymnal or at [www.cyberhymnal.org](http://www.cyberhymnal.org).

## Begin with a Story

"*Fat People Don't Go To Heaven!* screams a headline in the *Globe*, a national weekly tabloid circulated to millions of American readers," notes Marie Griffith. "The story beneath this lurid caption recounts the rise of Gwen Shamblin, founder and CEO of the nation's leading Christian diet company...[with] stringent guidelines for proper Christian body size.... 'I am not a savvy businessperson,' Shamblin pronounced in a front page *Wall Street Journal* feature. 'I'm just a dumb blonde with a genuine heart for God, who found the golden product that everyone wanted.' That coveted discovery, a spiritual route to guaranteed weight loss, is marketed in the Weigh Down Workshop, whose Shamblin-packed videos, audiotapes, books, conferences, and twelve-week seminars teach restrained food eating as a divine command. The eternal costs of overeating are markedly severe: 'Grace,' in Shamblin's words, 'does not go down into the pigpen'" (*Food and Hunger*, p. 62).

How does beauty get so distorted in our culture, and how does the good news of God's grace become so twisted?

## Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently and then ask members to read responsively together the prayer in the study guide. The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

## Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Romans 12:1-2 from a modern translation.

## Reflection

This study presents three consequences of the Christian fitness programs described in Marie Griffith's "Heavenly Hunger." If members are not familiar with these programs, you might supplement her descriptions of them with information from their websites. Members who have read about or used these programs may want to share their experiences with the group.

Encourage a free discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of the programs. In her article, Griffith mentions that she participated in one regime and studied many others (p. 66). "From this ethnographic and per-

sonal experience,” she writes, “I can confirm that readers and participants in this Christian fitness culture hold a wide range of views as to the proper Christian way to think about slimness and the body in today’s world. They read selectively and think for themselves, in other words, and it would be a mistake not to highlight the multiplicity of perspectives that find sustenance in this culture.”

### **Study Questions**

1. The first consequence, “idealizing a particular type of feminine beauty,” does physical and emotional harm to women for whom it is an impossible ideal (see the comments of Neva Coyle on p. 69). For others, pursuing the ideal requires a lot of time and effort. To impoverished people in developing countries, the struggle for fashionable thinness appears to be not only vain, but also “deeply indifferent, if not contemptuous” of them.  
Embracing “material rewards of slenderness,” the second consequence, promotes vanity and envy, because the rewards are rooted in a deeply flawed, competitive view of beauty.  
The third, “teaching us to read one another’s body for signs of sin and virtue,” encourages an excessive interest in the appearance of the body. The superficial judgments it promotes are unfair to people who do not meet the cultural standards, and can be a spiritually dangerous self-deception for those who do.
2. A proper respect for fitness and health differs from an excessive interest in dieting and weight-loss in two ways: (1) the right *goal* is in view, and (2) proper care is taken in the *means* employed. The goal is to care for our health rather than to impress others, build our self-esteem on their approval, or gain power to manipulate others through our physical attractiveness. Furthermore, we are careful to treat our bodies with respect, avoid dangerous fads, and not waste excessive time, energy, or money on a quest for cultural approval.
3. In the Bible and through Christian history, the goals of religious fasting include (1) expressing individual (Joel 2:12-13) or communal (Jonah 3:5-9) repentance; and (2) seeking God’s direction for oneself (Acts 13:2-3) or others (Acts 14:23). Jesus expected his disciples to fast voluntarily, though he warned them about hypocritical fasting (Matthew 6:16-18).  
Griffith is concerned that some groups that call for fasting have other goals in view, such as supporting a political party, reestablishing a man’s leadership in the home, or quickly and magically removing “the base impurities from our true character in Christ.” Griffith writes, “Like the Christian diet industry’s promise that material gain accompanies fat loss, the purveyors of abstinence guarantee miracles, as bodily discipline once again acquires merit as a tool for getting precisely what the prayerful faster wants.”  
Does your congregation encourage fasting? If so, how is this discipline taught, and what goals are emphasized?
4. Divide into smaller groups to consider the six themes—stewardship, hospitality, bonding, compassion, celebration, and hope and restoration—described in Juengst’s *Breaking Bread* and summarized by Bate-man in “We Are *How* We Eat” (p. 91). (The theme of hospitality could be combined with bonding, and celebration with hope and restoration.) Each group might review their families’ and the congregation’s practices in light of their assigned theme(s). Whitcomb discusses not only entire meals, but also “culinary interludes” that use food in various aspects of devotional reflection. How could a family or congregation incorporate prayer, singing, and sharing during meals and interludes in regard to each theme(s)?

### **Departing Hymn**

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a prayer.