

WPC
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February 19, 2012

The Seven Deadly Sins: Gluttony
Proverbs 23:1-2. 19-21; 1 Corinthians 11:17-26

In the summer of 1988, the summer before I was to head off to seminary, my home church sent me on a summer mission trip. In my application form, I had indicated that I didn't care where they sent me, but that I preferred to go overseas if possible to experience cross-cultural ministry. I was pretty surprised and very excited when they told me I was being sent to work with Arab World Ministries in Marseilles, France and Morocco.

When they told me this news, I realized that I had a golden opportunity in front of me. I asked my church whether it would be alright to take some time after my ministry work was finished to travel around Europe (at my expense, of course). They agreed that this would be fine to do. So my parents purchased a Eurorail Pass for me, and I visited Italy, Germany, Switzerland, Amsterdam, and Paris. It was a truly memorable summer! I visited museums and famous landmarks, met many fellow travelers on the train and in hostels, and just had a marvelous time. When I got back to the States, I loved to share those memories with those around me.

It wasn't until my wife Deb said something later on that I noticed there was something unusual in the way I described my time in Europe. She said that I tended to give a culinary tour of my travels there: the pasta in Italy was superb and I indulged in gelato every day; the wienerschnitzel was tasty in Germany but the strudel was out of this world; the fondue in Switzerland was to die for; and the cuisine in Paris was extraordinary. I've always liked to eat (I'm a true buffet connoisseur), but it wasn't until this point that I realized how very much I care about good food. When we travel to see my family in California, I always have a list of the restaurants we need to visit. We always run out of time before we run out of restaurants. One of my chief considerations of having a good time is whether there's good food around.

So I approached my thinking about gluttony with a bit of trepidation, as if something precious were about to be taken away from me. But along the way I discovered that gluttony, like the other 7 Deadly Sins we're examining, has been both oversimplified and misunderstood. Our stereotypical picture of a glutton is the obese man in the cartoon, who looks at his belt after dinner and says, "One more notch. Room for dessert."¹ But

¹ Martin Copenhaver, *Seven Deadly Sins: Gluttony*, Wellesley Congregational Church, March 7, 2010.

being overweight is not a sin. And there are ways of being gluttonous that don't involve overeating.

We don't really talk much about gluttony nowadays. It's not really in our vocabulary anymore, except when it's used in the familiar phrase that describes someone as "a glutton for punishment" – and this term is generally an expression of sympathy or perhaps even of admiration. In other words, as currently used, "glutton" has become almost a term of endearment.

But the Bible says that gluttony is a sin. Proverbs 23: 20-21 says, "Do not be among winebibbers, or among gluttonous eaters of meat; for the drunkard and the glutton will come to poverty, and drowsiness will clothe them with rags." The danger that's being presented is that we "live to eat rather than eating to live." When we do that, then our god is our stomach.

I want to make one thing crystal clear: this by no means implies that overweight people are gluttons. In fact, many overweight people, to be honest, eat less than others do precisely because they are working so hard at controlling their weight. Please also hear these words from our small group study guide: "one can have the stomach as his or her god and yet not be

overweight. The issue is not simply how much we eat, but how much food means to us.”² You mean a skinny person can be a glutton? Sure.

Each of the seven deadly sins takes a good gift from God and corrupts it in some way. For instance, last week we saw that love and sexual desire gone wrong becomes lust. In a similar way, enjoyment of food gone wrong can become gluttony. Presbyterian minister and novelist, Frederick Buechner, writes: “A glutton is one who raids the icebox for a cure for spiritual malnutrition.”³ Gluttony takes eating out of its God-given context, which includes three things:

First, God gives us food for nourishment.

Second, God gives us food to bind us to one another.

Third, God gives us food for pleasure.

How is gluttony a sin, and not only a sin, but a *deadly* sin? The first aspect of the gift of food is the most obvious: it nourishes us. In our culture, however, food, which is meant to be a source of health and life, has increasingly become a cause of illness and death. Yes, sometimes gluttony comes in the form of simple overeating, which makes us more susceptible to heart attacks, strokes, and diabetes and thus, to death itself. And if that

² The Seven Deadly Sins: Glutton and Temperance.

³ Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking*, 31.

wasn't enough reason to call gluttony a sin, "then we only have to consider that this overindulgence occurs in a world where a significant portion of the world's population does not have enough to eat."⁴

Having said that, let's admit that it's not that simple. It used to be that the overweight were the rich because they could afford the food. Now it's just as likely that the overweight person is poor, because healthy food is more expensive.

But gluttony can take other forms besides simple overeating. Thomas Aquinas, a great Catholic theologian of the 13th century, understood gluttony to have 5 main branches: eating too soon (part of what upset Paul about the way the Corinthians were eating their communal meal), too much, too avidly, too richly (i.e. expensively), and too daintily. The key word here is "too," a word pointing to excess.

Methodist bishop and author William Willimon writes: "Note that gluttony was not merely wolfing down large quantities of food; Gluttony was also a matter of being overly concerned about food, fixated on food, rather than the amount of food." His definition reminds me of the tv show "Frasier." For those who watched the show, you know that Frasier Crane and his brother Niles were known for their preference for the richest, most

⁴ Copenhaver.

expensive, and most exotic food. Quite simply, they were food snobs. They were very picky about the type of wine and cheese they ate – if it wasn't imported from France, they didn't eat it. Niles especially was very skinny, but both were gluttons under Willimon's definition of the word. The point is that food should nourish us, not control us.

Secondly, God gives us food to bind us to one another. Eating a meal together is a sociable activity that binds people together in community. Think about how much of our lives together are shared around dining tables. That's why it's so important that families eat meals together as much as possible. That's why we often celebrate special occasions like anniversaries and graduations over a nice meal.

Recall that in the hour before being betrayed, Jesus said to his disciples, "I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer."

Gluttony distorts or eliminates the communal element of eating. Quite simply, the glutton is too focused on the food to fully appreciate the company. The late Henry Fairlie, a British journalist and essayist, writes, "As with all sins, gluttony makes us solitary." And that is part of what upset Paul so much about how the Corinthians were sharing communion – it was not communal. This meal, which is meant to gather people together, was

treated like a solitary activity. Paul writes, “When you come together, it is not really to eat the Lord’s supper. For when the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk.” In other words, they had ceased to act like brothers and sisters drawn together in communion. Instead, they had become a collection of gluttons.

And finally, God gives us food for pleasure. Jesus was accused of being a glutton and a drunkard by some people. He was neither, of course, but the accusation comes from the fact that he was not like other religious leaders they were familiar with. When Jesus wanted to give an image of the kingdom of God, he said it would be like a great feast.

So yes, food is a gift from God and is to be enjoyed. But a glutton, for all his focus on food, just doesn’t really enjoy food all that much. Have you ever noticed what they’re selling now at the concession stands at the movie theaters? People buy 64 ounce sodas and tubs of popcorn as big as waste baskets. Pastor and author Martin Copenhaver notes that at some point, when they’re part way through those tubs, they’ll stop enjoying the popcorn but will still keep eating.

Gluttons are so obsessed with food that they no longer take pleasure in it.

Food is a wonderful gift from God – given to nourish us, to bind us together, and to give us pleasure. But we so often distort or abuse that gift, or take that gift for granted. We need to eat to live, not live to eat, so that food doesn't control us and become our god. We can learn a great deal from the Apostle Paul, who wrote in his letter to the Philippians, "I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me." (Phil. 4:11-13)

"May God help us not to chew and sip our way into gluttony."⁵

Amen.

⁵ The Seven Deadly Sins: Gluttony and Temperance, The Thoughtful Christian.