



The Seven Deadly Sins (and Their Corresponding Virtues)

SESSION 2—GLUTTONY AND TEMPERANCE

| *How can temperance defeat gluttony in our kind of culture?*

Introduction

All of us know about gluttony as a fact of life, by personal experience or observation, but we've almost forgotten the word itself. *Glutton* sounds like a word from the world of Charles Dickens or perhaps a sermon from the early twentieth century. We're familiar with overeating (the current, preferred synonym for gluttony) and the associated health dangers, but we hardly think of such as sin, and we wonder how gluttony found a place in the classic list of the seven deadly sins.

As for *temperance*, we've lost this word in its broader usage because in recent generations it became associated primarily with the antialcohol movement, in which it came to mean abstinence. If we were asked to list the great and enduring virtues, not many of us would put temperance on the list.

All of which is to say that when we set out to discuss the sin of gluttony and the virtue of temperance, we face serious problems of common perception.

Is Gluttony a Sin?

The dictionary is quite direct and brief about gluttony: it defines it as overeating or overdrinking. But the word itself is out of favor. When our culture finds a word unappealing, we do a good job of finding substitutes. So we don't speak of gluttony even though it may be more pervasive in our Western world than at any time in human history.

We call it "overeating," which is a much less offensive word. I submit that if you've heard some reference to



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gluttony recently it has been in the familiar phrase that describes someone as "a glutton for punishment"—a term that is generally an expression of sympathy and perhaps even of admiration. In other words, as currently used, "glutton" has become, if anything, a rather endearing term.

The Bible says, directly or indirectly, that gluttony is a sin.

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.
(Prov. 23:20–21)

As for gluttonous conduct in social settings, the wise one is vivid and emphatic:

When you sit down to eat with a ruler,
observe carefully what is before you,
and put a knife to your throat
if you have a big appetite.
(Prov. 23:1–2)

Gluttony receives an interesting place in the apostle Paul's Letter to the Philippians. When he warns about those persons who "live as enemies of the cross of Christ," one anticipates any number of ways the apostle might describe such individuals, but he sums up the matter in this way: "Their end is destruction; their god is their belly; and their glory is in their shame; their minds are set on earthly things" (Phil. 3:19).

If gluttony is the primary descriptive for those who "live as enemies of the cross," and if the end of gluttony is "destruction," then surely the apostle is telling us that such conduct is sin. And when he says of such persons that "their god is their belly," he makes his theological point in terms so graphic that the easily disgusted person will consider it bad taste. But it *is* a theological statement. If, as the joking phrase puts it, some persons "live to eat rather than eating to live," their god is their stomach. Our god is not necessarily the one to whom we address our prayers, but that for which we live. Clearly some people live for money or sex or success or cultural gratification, and if this thing were taken from them, their lives would be barren. By this measure there's no doubt but that for some their god is their belly.

I confess that I would hesitate to preach from Paul's words, not only because his language is so vivid but also because the point can be easily misused. Such a sermon would make any obviously overweight person feel singled out. Every listener would apply a mental tape measure to fellow congregants, and some would no doubt note that most preachers are not exactly slender. But hear me: 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.

For instance, consider how often social conversation is about food—identifying favorite restaurants, recalling a meal, or describing a dessert. Speaking of desserts, it's interesting to see how often a restaurant describes a featured dessert as "sinfully chocolate" or "the devil made us do it." If you were wondering whether gluttony is a sin, the server's pitch uses that possibility as its selling point. And the television food channels, for all their seeming wholesomeness, have made gluttonous voyeurs of many. One way or another, whether in sophisticated conversation or in primitive stuffing, food is a first love for many.

Mind you, food is meant to be enjoyed. The Bible says as much. Thus one of the favorite declarations of gratitude: "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies" (Ps. 23:5). And again, "The eyes of all look to you, and you give them their food in due season" (Ps. 145:15). When angelic visitors came to Abraham and Sarah, their first act was to prepare a substantial meal for their guests (Gen. 18:1–9). The creation story concludes the sixth day with God's announcement, "I have given every green plant for food" (Gen. 1:30).

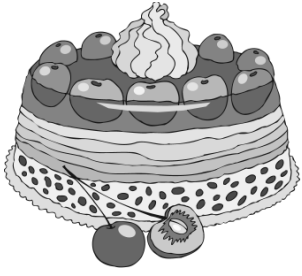
Consider, too, that food is a key element in many of our celebrations—and this association is endorsed, it seems, by the Scriptures. All but one of Israel's holy days were feast days. Consider also how many of the most significant occasions in Jesus' earthly ministry happened at times of eating. And of course the primary sacrament of Christianity is a symbolic meal, the Last Supper.

So the Bible is by no means a killjoy when it comes to food. It isn't surprising that churches are known almost as much for their church suppers, their covered dishes, and their bake sales as for their worship services. Food is one of God's loveliest gifts to human creatures, and it is wonderfully kind of the Creator to provide us with nostrils that can savor food before it enters our bodies and with taste buds that not only distinguish between flavors but also can be trained to high degrees of discrimination. We seem to have some special place in our memories that can recall particular taste experiences so that we say, though not always correctly, "This is the best casserole I've ever eaten" or "This tastes like home." It seems especially wonderful that this element of life which is so essential for survival also can give pleasure to our bodies, our memories, and our imaginations. How remarkable that something so special should also be both so essential and so commonplace!

Is It a *Deadly Sin*?

So how is it that gluttony is a sin? And especially, why would the saints and theologians of long past include it in the mystical count of the seven *deadly sins*?

Of course if "deadly" is to be measured by issues of physical health, the case is being made daily by medical studies. The harsh numbers now tell us how much more susceptible we are to heart attacks, strokes, and diabetes when we weigh too much—and thus, to death



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itself. A hundred and thirty years ago the English writer Samuel Smiles said that “we each day dig our graves with our teeth.”¹

At this point almost surely someone will say that what we do with our health is our own business. It’s a clever answer but not true. In a world of insurance and of rising medical costs, John Donne’s beautiful line, “every man’s death diminishes me,” has a different ring. One way or another, any person’s illness is likely to cost money to other people—those living under the same insurer or belonging to the same employer’s pool. To say nothing, of course, of what a person’s untimely death means to those who love that person.

Paul believed our bodies were to be treated as temples. How we treat them is not just a personal matter but part of our relationship with God. “Do you not know that you are God’s temple,” Paul writes, “and that God’s Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy that person. For God’s temple is holy, and you are that temple” (1 Cor. 3:16). If we take this teaching seriously—as we should!—we will see our bodies as something more than a unit to be fed, clothed, and insured: this body is the temple of God. If that be so, it is sacred and should be treated accordingly.

Because the body is sacred, it is susceptible to eternal issues. Thus when Jesus warned about being ready for his return—and of course ready for the true living of every day—he warned, “Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day does not catch you unexpectedly, like a trap” (Luke 21:34–35). It is at the level of our bodies that we are most in peril, because our lives are lived out in issues of these physical bodies. It is in the use and care of our bodies that our souls are particularly in danger.

So What Good Is Temperance?

The Christian virtue that counters gluttony is *temperance*. Just as gluttony has almost dropped out of our

vocabulary to be replaced by less offensive words, so too “temperance” has lost its edge. If temperance is a virtue, as the Christian classics have taught, our current perception hardly makes it attractive. The word seems bland and without challenge.

As a result, other words have taken its place in more recent translations of the Bible. The words “temperance” or “temperate” appear seven times in the King James Version, but in six of those seven the New Revised Standard Version uses “self-control.” The other instance is in Paul’s counsel to Titus, in which he tells his young colleague that “the aged men [should] be temperate” (Titus 2:2). The more recent Common English Bible that older men should be “sensible.” Apparently the translators feel that as we get older, even “self-control” is too strong; “prudent” and “sensible” will do.

“Self-control” is a pretty good word to convey to our generation the virtue that our ancestors saw as temperance. The late William Barclay used that word in his translation of the New Testament. The Greek word is *egkrateia*. Plato used this word to convey the idea of self-mastery. Dr. Barclay gives several insights into the use of the word as the Greeks of the first century knew it: for instance, for athletes who disciplined their bodies in seeking to achieve their goals. Paul used it in this way in his appeal to the early Christians: “Athletes exercise self-control in all things; they do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable one” (1 Cor. 9:25). But its meaning is broader than just physical appetite. “Secular Greek uses it of the virtue of an Emperor who never lets his private interests influence the government of his people.”²

In other words, those who possess temperance have mastered that most difficult of all kingdoms, their own person. “One who is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and one whose temper is controlled than one who captures a city” (Prov. 16:32). The pages of history are crammed with stories of towering political and military figures who were defeated at the battle of self-control, and in our contemporary world hardly a day goes by when the sports section of the newspaper or television’s sports channels are without a sad story of the athlete who has mastered playing skills but has failed at the level of personal conduct. Perhaps Spinoza was right in classifying temperance as one of the species of courage. Classical temperance—or self-control, if you prefer—is not for the faint of heart.

The relationship between temperance and self-control is seen in the root from which the word “temperance” comes. “Temper” as a verb means “to control,” as when we speak of tempering justice with mercy. Thus we temper a metal to develop its best quality. So with temperance: it has to do with the tempered quality of life, conduct, or thought.

The Relationship of Gluttony and Temperance

But back to the issue of our study. Why do we relate the virtue of temperance, which has such wide-ranging concerns, to gluttony, which seems restricted almost entirely to food and drink?

I suspect it is because self-control gets its most persistent and elusive test in matters of food and drink. Some temptations can be put at a distance, so that we make it hard for ourselves to get hold of that which tempts us. This is true of almost all of our temptations. Not so with gluttony. It solicits us at least three times a day—and for those who snack, at almost any hour. For the comic strip character Dagwood, food pursues even during the hours of sleep.

But the ordinary, routine solicitations of food are legitimate. After all, we have to eat or we will die. Our human culture has established, for most of us, eating at regular times, usually at least three times a day. We think we’re hungry at those hours, and if we don’t feel hunger we wonder what’s wrong with us. So we do what custom and nature, habit and necessity, compel us to do: we eat. Then sometimes something in us desires to eat more than is needed. It’s at this point that we become intemperate and enter the road to gluttony.

At first our bodies object to this overeating, in what our grandmothers called a stomachache. Before long, how-

ever, the boundaries at which we reach the stomachache are extended, so that the discomfort doesn’t appear as early. This makes it possible for us to eat more before we are checked by discomfort. This is of course a deceptive release; it simply means that since the stomach no longer warns us, we will get no discomfort until a physician tells us about our blood pressure or signs of diabetes or some other equally distressing danger.

I won’t suggest that if we open the door to overeating, all the other sins will follow. But I suspect that there is something character-weakening about allowing phantom hunger to overpower the virtue of self-control. And worse, we make peace with this weakness. We joke about what ought to embarrass us. We need to remind ourselves that when the apostle talks about those whose “god is the belly” he concludes the warning, “their minds are set on earthly things” (Phil. 3:19). Perhaps overeating (gluttony!) is the subtle beginning of a way of life that ultimately lives and dies for “earthly things.”

So there’s our problem. What our bodies need to survive also provides satisfaction. Thus on each occasion when we seek to satisfy this physical need and to gratify this aesthetic hunger, we need help. We need the virtue called temperance. If not, we will chew and sip our way into gluttony.

About the Writer

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Endnotes

1. Samuel Smiles, *Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, 6th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 740.
2. William Barclay, *The Letters to the Galatians and Ephesians* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1958), 57.