

Gluttony

Seventh in a series on vices and virtues.

Sermon by Dr. Jim Gilchrist

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WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

2040 Washington Road
Pittsburgh, PA 15241
412-835-6630

www.westminster-church.org

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I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty (John 6:35).

Gluttony is about consuming things in ways that will hurt us. Eating too much, drinking too much, taking certain drugs or even too many prescription drugs – these are all forms of gluttony.

Gluttony is a huge problem in America. Eating too much, or eating the wrong things, leads to all kinds of illnesses, and contributes to our national health care crisis, which in turn fuels political conflict and the growing incivility of public life. It costs us a lot to eat badly, to say nothing of the way we drink. The results of alcoholism – brain damage, organ failure, job loss, domestic violence, drunk driving, and death – are so obvious that alcoholism is our very image of addiction.

Gluttony costs us a lot – physically, emotionally, economically, and socially. Like the other deadly sins, it can kill the body, but long before that happens, it destroys self-control, which is a kind of death in the soul.

Why do we consume things that hurt us? Probably because the rewards are immediate and the costs come later. Animals that we are, we seek pleasure and avoid pain. “Comfort food” brings a moment’s pleasure, like the high that comes from alcohol or drugs. But it’s a devil’s bargain, isn’t it? “Buy now, pay later” – that’s the devil’s motto. When you think about our national orgy of consumption, and the marketing schemes and consumer credit that feed it, you find much of what corrupts the moral and spiritual fabric of our country. We are a consumer society. In fact, we’re often called simply “consumers.” You see the image we have of ourselves? We’re all about consuming, taking things in. And some of the ways we consume are killing us.

The point is not just that we should go on a diet, drink less, and not do drugs. Everyone knows that already. The problem runs much deeper. Gluttony is a spiritual issue. Beneath our physical problems there is a deeper sickness in the soul. It has to do with where we seek comfort, and what we think will make us happy.

Have you ever noticed that the very first sin in the Bible is a kind of gluttony? It's about eating the wrong things. God puts Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, and tells them they can have any of the trees and plants they want for food. It's the ultimate salad bar. Only one thing is off limits. "Don't eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil," God says. "Everything else is yours for the taking. Enjoy."

But the forbidden fruit is the most attractive, isn't it? We always want what we can't have.

Clearly, this story is not meant to be taken quite literally. Look up "knowledge of good and evil" in your field guide to trees and you won't find it. That's not because the species is extinct, but because it's a metaphor. Most of the story is metaphorical – like the fact that Adam and Eve's eyes are not opened until after they eat the fruit of the tree. If that were literally true, they would have been bumping around blind in the garden; and how would Eve have seen that the tree was "a delight to the eyes," if her eyes were literally not opened until after she ate? Lots of silly arguments arise because some readers of the Bible today have less imagination than the people who wrote these stories thousands of years ago.

In any case, the thing that first gets Adam and Eve into trouble is that they eat what God told them not to eat. They're gluttons, in other words. And because the story is already symbolic, it doesn't take a big leap to see that the broader point is about whatever we consume – whatever we feed ourselves, spiritually as well as physically. If we feed on the word of God first, then everything else we feed our hearts and minds and bodies will serve us well. But if we don't feed on God first, the rest of what we consume goes all out of whack. God tells Adam that if he eats the knowledge of good and evil, he will die. From the very beginning, the story says, gluttony has been deadly. The serpent says it isn't so, but who turns out to be a liar in the end?

Another great biblical image of food comes from the story of the Exodus. God delivers Moses and the people from slavery in Egypt, and they're on their way to the Promised Land. But they have no MapQuest, and they take the long way, so the question arises how to feed this multitude in the wilderness. The people start grumbling to Moses: "Did you bring us out here to die? At least back in Egypt we had three square meals a day, and pots full of meat." Even slavery can seem nostalgic when you're hungry enough.

God hears the grumbling, and as usual God provides. Every evening a bunch of quail show up, just in time for supper, and every morning this fine white stuff appears on the ground. The Israelites say, "What is it?" which in Hebrew sounds a bit like "manna," so that's what they call it: "whatsit" or "manna." Now the thing about manna is that it appears every day but you only get enough for one day at a time – except on the sixth day, when you get an extra ration for the Sabbath, when you're not supposed to do any work. Again, if we get hung up on the literal meaning of all this, and wonder what exactly the manna is, we miss the point: which is that God will provide what we need, one day at a time, so we don't have to hoard God's gifts.

Jesus tells us to pray, "Give us this *day* our daily bread," not, "Fill our barns to overflowing, until we need bigger barns to hold it all." There's an echo of manna in the wilderness, teaching us to depend on God and cautioning against gluttony. Everyone on earth needs a day's worth of food. If we consume much more than we need, it won't be healthy for us, and it may keep us from seeing that all our neighbors get their daily bread as well.

And then the Lord's Prayer points to the Lord's Supper. Here is a third great biblical image about what we eat. It says that what we need to feed on most is Jesus himself. That sounds very strange, even repulsive, if we take the words literally. But if we have an ear for metaphor, it says what we need to feed on most is the word of God – and that's what Jesus is: the Word of God made flesh.

From Genesis to Jesus, the point is that what we feed our souls and bodies will only nourish and make us whole if we fill ourselves first with God. God alone can satisfy the hunger of our hearts. In the end, the Word of God is the only real comfort food. When Jesus is tempted in the wilderness, by the same voice that told Adam and Eve they could eat whatever they want and it would not matter, he says, "A man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God."

So gluttony is not only deadly, it's also silly. It seeks comfort in all the wrong places: in too much food, or the wrong kinds of food, or too much drink, or drugs. It trades lasting joy for a moment's pleasure. How foolish is that?

The way to give up junk food is to learn to love the real thing. The Word of God may be an acquired taste for most of us, but it's a taste that will satisfy forever.