

## **A Study of Gluttony (*gula*)**

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*St. Augustine – “Virtuous people avail themselves of the things of this life with the moderation of a user, not the attachment of a lover.”<sup>1</sup>*

*Jesus – “Give us this day our daily bread.”*

### **Isn't gluttony simply overeating?**

It's very tempting to laugh about *gluttony*. After all, it's not high on *our* list of serious sins. You might even wonder how gluttony ever made a list of the top seven. Furthermore, America seems to be addressing gluttony quite well with our multitude of diets, dieticians, nutritionists, fitness programs, Fitbits, and fitness centers. So why would we ever expect our pastor of all people to address gluttony?

All of that is to say that we don't actually understand gluttony. Gluttony is something much more than overeating and the size of our waist line. Gluttony is a sin not simply because of what it does to our bodies, but more importantly its effect on our souls. Gluttony really isn't about *how much* we eat, but rather how our eating habits disrupt our love of God and love of our neighbor. If gluttony isn't forgiven in Christ and kept in check, then we quickly become as those of whom Paul says, “their god is their belly.” (Philippians 3:19)

### **Why do we take gluttony so lightly?**

Put simply—because food is good. Because we all *need* food to live, this sin seems to us much less important than the others. Add to this the fact that the Bible hardly ever addresses gluttony and the fact that Jesus is always eating with people and you end up with a bunch of Christians that laugh whenever we hear the word *gluttony*.<sup>2</sup>

### **Why shouldn't we take it lightly?**

The early monks put gluttony in the front of the lists of vices and there's a reason. It's certainly not the deadliest, yet if you can't control your appetite for food you don't stand a chance against any of the others. Conquering gluttony is a kind of gateway to conquering the other sins.<sup>3</sup> For instance, just take a little note of how gluttony and lust are connected (i.e. food and sex). How many food commercials have featured loud sexual overtones (e.g. Hardee's or Yoplait)? To say it again, moderation in food will lead to moderation in lust and other vices.

### **What is gluttony?**

Quotes from a few authors:

“As we said, gluttony is more than simply overeating and it is not merely fatness. Nor does gluttony merely consist of our desire for food, the consumption of it, or the pleasure we derive from eating it. The sin of gluttony has to do with the *manner* in which we consume food, involving *inordinate* desire and *immoderate* pleasure.”<sup>4</sup>

“Gluttony is really not about how much we're eating, but about how our eating reflects how much pleasure we take in eating food and why. Eating is meant to be pleasurable, and so is feeling filled after being hungry. These pleasures, the food itself, and the act of eating are all good, God-given

gifts...Gluttony creeps in and corrupts these pleasures when our desire for them run out of control...What's vicious about gluttony is that these pleasures dominate everything else that's important. This vice degrades us into being mere pleasure seekers. This is what gluttony is all about."<sup>5</sup>

"In Gluttony, it is the excessiveness that is the sin, excessive consumption as well as excessive attentiveness to food."<sup>6</sup>

Here are some helpful lists of gluttonous behaviors. These first come from the early monks Evagrius and Cassian, Gregory the Great, and Thomas Aquinas. They are delineated by modern author Dennis Okholm:

1. Gorging ourselves and not savoring a reasonable amount
2. Eating at any other time than the appointed hour
3. Anticipating eating with preoccupied, eager longing (e.g., constantly checking clock)
4. Eating expensively (consuming costly foods and being proud of it)
5. Discontent with common food and wanting delicacies (e.g., ten different kinds of cereal)
6. Paying too much attention to food (caring far too much about what we're eating)

In the Middle Ages, this was the common list:

1. Too daintily (eating fussily and far too particular)
2. Too sumptuously (eating rich and full foods)
3. Too hastily (gulping down your food)
4. Too greedily (unwilling to give up any of what you want)
5. Too much (excessive eating)

### **Are you still not convinced?**

If America's obsession with diets and physique aren't enough to convince you we have a problem, along with the sheer number of restaurants in Bloomington/Normal alone, then I offer these little questions:

1. Have you noticed how many channels and shows on your TV are dedicated to food?
2. Have you considered that we invented gum, a "food" that we don't even eat but only taste in our saliva?
3. Have you noticed our fascination with pop like Diet Coke or Sprite Zero which is literally a *zero* in pretty much everything except taste?<sup>7</sup>

### **A Case of Gluttony from C.S. Lewis's *The Screwtape Letters***

This is one demon talking to another about how Glucose, a fellow demon, has successfully enslaved an old woman in the vice of gluttony:

*Glucose has this old woman well in hand. She is a positive terror to hostesses and servants. She is always turning from what has been offered her to say with a demure little sigh and a smile 'Oh please, please ... all I want is a cup of tea, weak but not too weak, and the teeniest weeniest bit of really crisp toast'. You see? Because what she wants is smaller and less costly than what has been set before her, she never recognises as gluttony her determination to get what she wants, however troublesome it may be to others. At the very moment of indulging her appetite she believes that she is practising temperance. In a crowded restaurant she gives a little scream at the plate which some*

*overworked waitress has set before her and says, 'Oh, that's far, far too much! Take it away and bring me about a quarter of it'. If challenged, she would say she was doing this to avoid waste; in reality she does it because the particular shade of delicacy to which we have enslaved her is offended by the sight of more food than she happens to want.*

*The real value of the quiet, unobtrusive work which Glubose has been doing for years on this old woman can be gauged by the way in which her belly now dominates her whole life. The woman is in what may be called the "All-I-want" state of mind. All she wants is a cup of tea properly made, or an egg properly boiled, or a slice of bread properly toasted. But she never finds any servant or any friend who can do these simple things "properly" – because her "properly" conceals an insatiable demand for the exact, and almost impossible, palatal pleasures which she imagines she remembers from the past."<sup>8</sup>*

### **Does gluttony have anything to do with modern eating disorders?**

Notice how gluttony is a disordered relationship with God and with others. A love of food and its pleasures disrupts a love of God and neighbor. It's not surprising then that modern eating disorders often correlate with disordered relationships in one's life. Eating disorders aren't simply a matter of being *sick* or having a *disease*, but the roots are deeper.

### **Is there any hope?**

Certainly! Our hope is in the One who fasted for 40 days and then said *no* to Satan's temptation to turn stones into bread. Jesus puts us in our proper place before God and our neighbor and, hence, puts us in our proper place before food. Food doesn't make us—Jesus makes us! Through our Baptism into Jesus, we put away our gluttonous desires and pray that God would give us today our daily bread.

St. Augustine offered some very helpful words on gluttony. "He says that what or how much food we eat makes no difference whatsoever when it comes to virtue, as long as we are eating in a way that is appropriate to our health, the people we live with, and our vocation."<sup>9</sup>

So first—our health. There aren't any set rules for what or how much to eat. We don't serve ourselves well by the constant statistics and comparing. We should eat what is good for our health. An NFL running back is going to eat much more than a pastor. At the men's retreat a few weeks ago at Camp Cilca, the ladies could hardly prepare enough food for a group of more than thirty men who had been cutting and chopping wood all day long. We should eat to get the nutrients that we each need.

Second—the people we live with. If your eating is depriving others of necessary food, then you're a glutton. Eating is a social act. Notice that most sins of eating happen privately. The word *companion* literally means "with bread". Monks were told to break their fast and eat with guests who were visiting. My mother was famously known for declaring that she "wasn't hungry anyway" when one of her children asked for a second portion.

Third—our vocation. The callings that God has given to you will also determine your eating habits. For example, parents will set an example for their children in what and how they eat. Athletes will certainly consume more than others due to their calling.

### **What about fasting and prayer?**

Fasting is the prescription for curbing gluttony. Fasting, quite simply, helps us to appreciate food and the One who gives it. For example, fasting from all food between meals might give you time to focus on more important tasks and give you greater appreciation for the food served at the proper time.

Secondly, prayer before meals is one of the most important helps for Christians. Prayer puts food in its proper place before God and neighbor and teaches us the virtues of contentment, gratitude, and trust.

### **The Last Word**

There is much talk today about food substitutes and searching for just the right foods to be healthy and happy. However, ***food itself is no substitute for Jesus!*** Jesus is the bread of life and the only true food that gives eternal joy. He gives Himself to us in bread and wine (pretty small amounts of both, mind you) and there gives us His own life-giving body and blood. He satisfies us with the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation.

I couldn't help but note the humor in that I took a break from writing this study on gluttony to eat an immoderately sized piece of ice cream cake given to us by a generous family of our Preschool. But I'd like to think I ate it thankfully. And it was with the company of my family, so...

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in DeYoung, *Glittering Vices: A New Look at the Seven Deadly Sins and Their Remedies*. Brazos, 2009, p. 141.

<sup>2</sup> See Okholm, Dennis. *Dangerous Passions, Deadly Sins: Learning from the Psychology of Ancient Monks*. Brazos, 2014. p. 15.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>5</sup> DeYoung, *Glittering Vices*, p. 140-141.

<sup>6</sup> Willimon, William H. *Sinning Like a Christian: A New Look at the Seven Deadly Sins*. Abingdon, 2005, p. 121.

<sup>7</sup> These last two come from DeYoung, *Glittering Vices*, p. 147.

<sup>8</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*, chapter 17.

<sup>9</sup> DeYoung, p. 150.