

# From Gluttony to Grace

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Proverbs 23

**Sermon Series:**  
**Seven Greatest**  
**Virtues and Vices:**  
**Gluttony and**  
**Temperance**

*One of the realities of the sin of gluttony is we find it so easy to justify!*

For some time, we have been in a very interesting series covering the seven deadly sins and the seven lively virtues. So, there is the sin of pride and the virtue of humility. Lust and chastity. Envy and kindness, and so on. Today, we look at the sin of gluttony and the corresponding virtue of temperance or self-control. Of all of the seven deadly sins, I have the least problem with gluttony. I do hope you won't mind my eating these potato chips. I have just felt the need for a little more energy this morning. One of the realities of the sin of gluttony is we find it so easy to justify! And if you would like to share my chips, forget it. Gluttony is not about sharing!

Last Tuesday morning, I drove to Nottingham, Pennsylvania, which is a small, lovely town in the middle of absolutely beautiful rolling hills of forest and farmland. I arrived at the Nottingham Presbyterian Church, where I was to speak to a meeting of the Presbytery of Donegal. As I drove up, I saw behind the church some huge buildings of some corporation. As I parked in the church parking lot, I realized the corporation next door was the

Herr's Snack Factory. So after the presbytery meeting, I wandered into the Herr's visitor center and took the tour. First, I watched the pretzel-making machines turning out four thousand pounds of pretzels an hour. Then the popcorn machines, popping and bagging a thousand pounds of popcorn an hour.

Finally, the highlight of the tour arrived as far as I was concerned, the potato chip factory. We watched potatoes coming from the storage bin of the half-a-million pounds of potatoes they go through every week, as they rolled into the potato slicer and the slices were washed, run through an oven and then salted while traveling along a belt where light-beam technology spots imperfect chips and blows them off the belt. Finally, they poured off the belt and into moving bins—only twelve thousands pounds of potato chips an hour. I could feel the deadly sin of gluttony rising up as I felt the urge to just go and stand under that cascading waterfall of ten bazillion potato chips and just open my mouth.

Now, gluttony narrowly means the act or habit of eating and drinking to excess. More

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broadly, it means to indulge in any appetite to excess, to consume far beyond that which is needed. William Jennings Bryan was an American politician in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> Century who ran three times for the office of President of the United States. A man who travelled with him on one of his presidential campaigns described a breakfast he saw Bryan eat on a Virginia plantation in 1900: "First a large cantaloupe. Then two quail followed by Virginia ham and a half-dozen eggs. After that a full plate of battercakes swimming in butter and a second helping of the same. In addition, there were many cups of coffee and fried potatoes and side dishes of various kinds before he left the table, ready to begin a day of speech making...."<sup>1</sup> The word glutton comes from the Latin word meaning to gulp down or swallow.

Now last week, when Pete was talking about "affluenza" and the deadly sin of greed, I was reflecting on the similarities and the differences between greed and gluttony. Clearly they are both sins of excess. You might say that greed is the "desire to acquire" and gluttony is the "assumption of consumption." With greed, you desire to acquire and not only to acquire but to acquire and to keep for yourself, and you really don't

care what the needs of other people are. If you have a million dollars in a bank vault and hungry people ask you for help and you don't care, you just want more money, that's greed. If you take that million dollars and spend it only so you can consume everything you purchase just to serve yourself far beyond your needs, that's gluttony.

As you think about the seven deadly sins, it becomes apparent how interconnected they are. We know the deadly sin of lust happens when you yield yourself to passions that consume you. So you can have a lust for anger, lust for greed, lust for gluttony, because the root desire of lust and of greed and gluttony are all expressed by the word "more." I just want more. The deadly sins are called "deadly" because they always diminish and destroy. It's that image of a runaway, unbridled elephant, because when the elephant is unbridled, the rider has no control and something is going to get trampled.

So, it is no surprise that scripture has a lot to say about gluttony. People who opposed Jesus said of him, "Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax-collectors and sinners" (Matthew 11:18). While Jesus was neither a glutton nor a drunk, the fact they used that as a criticism tells you the people

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<sup>1</sup> Irving Stone, *Clarence Darrow for the Defense*, page 508

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knew gluttony was a deadly sin. The Apostle Paul spoke of enemies of Jesus by saying, “I tell you even with tears. Their end is destruction; their god is the belly” (Philippians 3:18-19).

Now, when we speak of gluttony, it’s worth noting we are not simply talking about issues such as American’s fascination with various diets or the issue of increasing obesity in our country as they may or may not be related to gluttony. Actually, a very thin person can be a glutton, and a person who is not thin may be someone who is in full self-control of his or her appetite for food or anything else. You cannot assume from the outside looking in on another person if he is gluttonous, but you know from the inside looking out whether you over-indulge your appetite for consuming whatever it is you want.

The Book of Proverbs is rather blunt when it comes to matters of gluttony. “Put a knife to your throat if you are given to gluttony. Do not join those who drink too much wine or gorge themselves on meat, for drunkards and gluttons become poor and drowsiness clothes them in rags.” I remember when I began my current work which involves a lot of travel, I was speaking with a friend who had traveled extensively for years. He looked me in the eye and, without any

glimmer of humor, said, “Stan, when I traveled I got drunk and I got fat and you’d better watch it.” Does all this mean that eating until you are well-satisfied is a sin? Not at all! In fact, Psalm 34:10 says, “The young lions suffer want and hunger but those who seek the Lord lack no good thing,” and Proverbs 13:25 says, “The righteous eat to their hearts’ content.” I remember as a child once saying to my gracious southern Louisiana grandmother after a wonderful dinner, “I’m full.” She replied, “No dear, please say, ‘I’ve had a sufficiency.’” Our Lord who loves you wants you to have a sufficiency!

Now, with the deadly sin of gluttony, we discover the corresponding lively virtue of temperance. Temperance means moderation in the indulgence of the appetite. The word translated “temperance” in the King James Version of the Bible as the last of the nine fruits of the Spirit is actually a word that today is translated, “self-control,” and the root of the word translated “self-control” is the word for strength. The idea is that it is the strength of your character, of the God-shaped, God-strengthened will inside you that decides how much you consume.

If you cannot control your appetite for something, food, drink, or whatever else, that is called an addiction. To conquer

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addiction takes more than simple self-control by definition. It requires you to have the humility to admit you have lost control and to seek help. As they say in the first of the Twelve Steps of AA, "We admitted we were powerless over alcohol [or whatever your affliction] and that our lives had become unmanageable."

When our self-control is that which moderates our appetites, we can never say that our gluttony is the fault of others. My grandfather told me of a time when a traveling preacher visited my great-grandparents and stayed the night. I guess my great-grandmother (we called her Big Ma) must have really put out a spread, because after everyone had gone to their own rooms, my grandfather, walking by the guest bedroom, heard the preacher groaning and moaning and saying, "Oh, Lord, when will I learn to do my own eating and drinking!" Self-control is the ability simply to say, "enough" and mean it.

Now, when we studied the deadly sin of greed, we learned that its corresponding lively virtue is generosity, which is interesting, because while the classic opposite of gluttony is self-control, so is the practice of generosity, because when we don't consume everything, we have something to offer to those who are in need. In fact,

gluttony is classically viewed as a sin with two paired actions, the self-indulgence of ourselves and the ignoring of the poor. If we consume it, we can't give it.

I remember my friend Jim Mead once talking about three steps a person or a family may take in determining what to give to the work of our Lord through the work of our church. Jim said, first don't begin with what you are giving now but determine what you would like to give, what target percent of your income would you like to offer to the Lord, an amount you may not be giving at the present time but would like to give some day. This may be the percent tithe or whatever percent of income you would truly like to give with a cheerful heart. Second, do the math. Figure out what percent you give now, the gap between it and your target percent of income. Third, determine to increase your giving by at least one percent a year until you reach your target gift level. Jim then went on to say something that has stuck with me: "Most American Christians can prayerfully set any percentage of their incomes they want, but they are not capable of actually giving it because they are too much in debt and are living beyond their means."

It turns out greed and gluttony definitely effect generosity and that moving from

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gluttony to the grace of giving is very much the work of God in our very personal lives. As the Apostle Paul said, “You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion” (II Corinthians 9:11). We are also aware that Paul said to Timothy that if we do not care for our relatives and our immediate family, we deny our faith. While we are called to a lively generosity, if that generosity comes at the expense of the well-being of those we bear responsibility for, then something is wrong with that picture.

The Old Testament prophet Amos helps us get a deeper understanding of how gluttony is a sin with two paired actions, the self-indulgence of ourselves and the ignoring of the poor that comes at the expense of their misery. Amos 4:1: “Hear this word, you...who oppress the poor, who crush the needy, who say...‘Bring something to drink!’” You can see the paired action, the oppressed poor and gluttonous person. Amos 5:11: “Because you trample on the poor and take from them levies of grain...you have built houses of hewn stone.” Amos 6:4-5: “Alas for those who lie on beds of ivory and lounge on their couches...and eat lambs from the flock...and calves from the stall...who sing idle songs to the sound of the harp...but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph!” Amos 8:4: “Hear this,

you that trample on the needy saying, ‘When will the new moon be over, so that we may sell grain.’” In every case we see gluttony is at the expense of someone else’s misery.

A few years ago, I visited the country of Malawi in east Africa. I had never been to a third world country before, although Ann Marie had, and she warned me that looking at pictures and reading before the visit about the conditions there would not prepare me for what I saw. She was so right. There was a terrible famine in Malawi at that time. A year of floods and a year of drought left vast regions without any maize [corn] harvest, their staple food. We visited a remote area by the name of Chingale, where some six or seven hundred adults had gathered, mostly women, nearly all accompanied by very young children. You could see the extended tummies of the children, indicating their extreme lack of nutrition. Each family was given a three-kilogram bag of enriched flour to eat and a two-kilogram bag of maize seed to plant. It was a smart move. If they had only been given the maize seed, those starving people would simply have eaten the seed. When I came home, I was embarrassed to go into a Wal-Mart. There was more stuff in one store than in vast areas of Malawi. I found myself moti-

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vated to go into our attic which was filled with all of the stuff we had accumulated, and to sort, pitch, toss it away or call AmVets or the Salvation Army and give it away.

One of the startling moments in Malawi came as we were visiting the congregation know as St. Michael's and All Angels. It is built right next to the site where the famous missionary David Livingston founded the church in Malawi. After touring the ornate sanctuary of St. Michael's and All Angels, we began to walk out the front door, where I noticed a message thumb-tacked to a message board inside a display case. It said, "If you eat your tithe, you eat your destiny." I felt like someone punched me in the stomach. I had never heard such a thing put in such a blunt fashion. "If you eat your tithe, you eat your destiny."

What do you suppose that means? If you eat your tithe... that's easy to figure out...the consuming of the part our resources meant by our Lord to be set apart for the work of our Lord as we live an indulgent lifestyle. So what did it mean to say, "you eat your destiny?" Jesus said, "Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you." Clearly, Jesus connects our destiny with our generosity.

I finally realized when thinking about that sign, "if you eat your tithe you are eating your destiny," that it was not really complete. The point of the sin of gluttony, the assumption of consumption, is that we consume more than we need to the detriment of those who are poor; we consume that which our Lord has destined for the needs of others. It would be just as true to say, if you eat your tithe you eat someone *else's* destiny. In the country of Malawi, people starve and the major organization that helps is the church, which gets its money the same way our congregations do, from the sacrificial gifts of our people.

We live in a day in which many people in our own land and in our own community are literally hungry for food, a day in which vast numbers are starving for hope, hungry to experience the reality of the God who loves them, desperate for any connection with the Lord who will lead them out of the emptiness, the desolation, the hollowness of the seven deadly sins.

As a matter of fact, as you have listened to us talking about the seven deadly sins this summer, you may have become well aware of your own practices of some or all of them and the resulting desolation and hollowness that has resulted in your own life and of other people in your life. That is why I appreciate the words of

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Franciscan Priest Brennan Manning, who said, “Jesus comes right to your seat and says, ‘I have a word for you. I know your whole life story. I know every skeleton in your closet. I know every moment of sin, shame, dishonesty and degraded love that has darkened your past. Right now I know your shallow faith, your feeble prayer life, your inconsistent discipleship and my word is this, I dare you to trust that I love you just as you are and not as you should be because you’re never going to be as you should be.’”<sup>2</sup>

May you open yourself to the Lord who loves you just as you are. Open yourself to the God who forgives your deadly sin and invites you to experience the power of the lively virtues that he has for you.