

The Seven Deadly Sins: Gluttony

Proverbs 23:19-21

The popular idea of gluttony is going back for thirds and slipping into a food coma. However bad (and gluttonous) that may be, the sin of gluttony concerns compulsive or inordinate desire for food or drink in quantity or particularity. We are eating and drinking creatures, and Scripture has a lot to say about how and why.

Summary of the Text

Solomon tells his son to hear and be wise, to guide his heart (v. 19). God requires morality, but never moralism—rules without reason. It's much easier to say, "Don't ever drink alcohol or go to a party" than to cultivate a heart and mind that hates drunkenness and gluttony for the right reasons. To do the latter, you must fear God, forsake sin, and learn wisdom. He says not to mix with winebibbers or gluttonous eaters of meat (v. 20). The drunk and glutton will eventually be poor, and drowsiness brings a man to rags (v. 21). Proverbs are riddles (*mashalim*) for rulers that require wisdom to see the connections between the beginning of foolishness and its destination.

The Belly God

Mankind fell into sin by eating, but the issue wasn't how much or little—it was what God said and therefore what it meant. Whether our hearts are with God or not governs how we eat and drink, and so Paul can include something so mundane within the means of glorifying God: "Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God" (1 Cor. 10:31). You will eat and drink to glorify Him or not, thus the sin of gluttony is so deadly: "For many walk, of whom I have told you often, and now tell you even weeping, that they are the enemies of the cross of Christ: whose end is destruction, whose god is their belly, and whose glory is in their shame—who set their mind on earthly things. For our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body that it may be conformed to His glorious body, according to the working by which He is able even to subdue all things to Himself" (Phil. 3:18-21). The apostle Paul knew people who left Christ to worship their bellies. He's talking about appetites and not this or that snack. The prodigal son ditched his father and blew his inheritance on "prodigal living" (Lk. 15:13). Esau sold his birthright for some good soup (Gen. 25:29-34; Heb. 12:14-17). Think of the husband and father who checks out from his familial duties or blunts his ambition at the bar many nights, or the high school or college student who gives in to pressure to go to stupid parties. Peter says we spent time like this doing the will of the Gentiles, "when we walked in lewdness, lusts, drunkenness, revelries, drinking parties, and abominable idolatries. In regard to these, they think it strange that you do not run with them in the same flood of dissipation, speaking evil of you" (1 Pet. 3:3-4). The slaves of appetite can't imagine why someone would not come have "fun" with them. This is because people are devoted to their gods, even though their worship might be evident for a time. Esau didn't wake up one day and decide to throw his birthright away. The contempt and unholiness he nursed for years eventually came to light.

The Other Gluttony

In his penetrating treatment of sin and sinners from a tempter's perspective in *The Screwtape Letters*, C.S. Lewis describes a woman whose gluttony is concealed from her because it doesn't involve a great quantity of food:

But what do quantities matter, provided we can use a human belly and palate to produce querulousness, impatience, uncharitableness, and self-concern? 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

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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."

Like all sin, gluttony leads to misery. Does anyone think the woman Screwtape describes enjoys her meal? Or that she will have anyone to eat with before long? The issue is not the food. God gave you 8,000 taste buds to use and enjoy. Gluttony destroys the pleasure of eating and drinking one way or the other. It's idolizing the pleasure or experience rather than receiving and enjoying it as a gift from God, and this can be done by the foodie as well as the junk food binger.

Not Under the Power of Any

The gospel frees us to enjoy God and all His gifts. Sin promises freedom but never delivers. We want to be careful to distinguish between sinful actions and sinful substances: "All things are lawful for me, but all things are not helpful. All things are lawful for me, but I will not be brought under the power of any. Foods for the stomach and the stomach for foods, but God will destroy both it and them" (1 Cor. 6:12-13). God made wine to gladden man's heart, oil to make his face shine, and bread to strengthen him (Ps. 104:15). You could use these things to get drunk, become vain, and eat until you're sick and weak. This does not make the wine, oil, and food sinful. Jesus contradicted the teaching and ceremonial customs of the Pharisees to wash their hands, saying they substituted the commandment of God for the doctrine of men. No food can defile you: "Do you not yet understand that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and is eliminated? But those things which proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and they defile a man" (Matt. 15:17-18). You can eat processed foods, McDonald's hamburgers, and Easy Cheese out of a can with no moral defilement whatsoever, and to think these would defile you is a spiritual weakness (Rom. 14:2). The issue is control. Paul won't be controlled by anything, and this would include coffee and cigarettes if he had access to them.

Food that Satisfies

Scripture describes the salvation of the world in terms of a feast. Christ died to reconcile us to Himself, and to celebrate that we don't go sit in the library and drink tea: "And in this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all people a feast of choice pieces, a feast of wines on the lees, of fat things full of marrow, of well-refined wines on the lees. and He will destroy on this mountain the surface of the covering cast over all people, and the veil that is spread over all nations" (Is. 25:6-7). *Choice* pieces, fat things full of marrow, rich wine. The prodigal son came home and immediately his father called for the fatted calf to be killed and served. Fat has a twofold connotation in Scripture. One is proud, insolent, and oppressive like Eglon king of Moab (Judg. 3:17; cf. Ps. 73:7). The other is happy, blessed, and abundant like Israel would find in the Promised Land (Dt. 31:20). There is nothing wrong with wanting to lose weight for practical purposes but be careful not to equate it with godliness (Col. 2:23). Say grace at meals whether they come out of a can or your favorite restaurant, thanking God for His provision: "Nothing is better for a man than that he should eat and drink, and that his soul should enjoy good in his labor. This also, I saw, was from the hand of God" (Eccl. 2:24).