

GLUTTONY
(THE SEVEN DEADLY SINS)

PRIDE

ENVY

ANGER

SLOTH

GREED

GLUTTONY

LUST – LOVE

“The boa constrictor, when he has had an adequate meal, goes to sleep, and does not wake until he needs another meal. Human beings, for the most part, are not like this.” Thus does Bertrand Russell adroitly set the scene for our second of the Seven Deadly Sins.

Gluttony is a surprise for many of us. While we can understand that it is an indiscretion or lack of wisdom to be gluttonous, it seems rather extreme to list it among the Seven Deadly Sins. So from time to time we take a bite too many, enjoy a Thanksgiving Dinner, or weigh a few pounds more than we would like – but really, one of the top and most dangerous sins? Come on! Only two days ago, a person asked me if any of the Seven Deadly Sins had to do with eating or drinking habits. They did not imagine so and were surprised to learn that it *was* so. Many of us start off surprised that gluttony has such stature among the sins. But often, after more careful consideration, we wonder that it is not closer to the top of the list.

Likewise, I am startled, at first glance, to find gluttony one step above lust. Having meditated on the lust for power, having gained a little insight on the incredible damage it does in the world, and having reidentified some of the ways lust still operates in my own life, it is staggering to think that gluttony could be a graver problem than lust. Surely going off our diets cannot create the havoc that our power plays do. Even if eating too much is bad for me, surely it does not do damage like trying to control things and people or using others for my own self-centered ends.

What is this “gluttony” that it should be so feared by the saints of old and considered so potentially satanic? Let’s try for some perspective before continuing.

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As many have pointed out, none of the Seven Deadly Sins is an act. Some of you have already grown frustrated trying to correlate the Seven Deadly Sins with the Ten Commandments. There is a correlation, but they speak from different levels. The two lists do not match up. The Ten Commandments turn quickly to listing specific deeds that are forbidden: you shall not lie, you shall not steal, you shall not murder, etc. The list of the Seven Deadly Sins mentions no specific deed. Some of you have already wondered about this. Why is rape or kidnapping not on it, or war or torture, or whatever we most fear or dread? But the Seven Deadly Sins list only the *sources* of evil deeds. They speak of the life patterns – the attitudes – that will make us the sort of people who do evil things.

You remember the story of the conscientious jury? They were sitting on a complicated case. The man had been accused of crimes both despicable and loathsome, which we will not go into. The trial dragged on for more than a week. The jury was out for only a few hours. At the judge's question, the foreman rose and said, "Your honor, we find the defendant not guilty. The defense has proven to our satisfaction that the defendant could not have committed these crimes because he was not on or anywhere near the premises at the time of the crimes. But this jury would like to add that, because of the evidence brought forth in this court, we are all convinced that had the defendant been there, he would have done it."

Somehow that brings up the more important question: What kind of people are we? If we are not just afraid of being caught – if we are "there" and the opportunity presents itself – what would we do? If we can come to awareness and learn to handle the Seven Deadly Sins, then there is no way that we will commit any of the evil deeds. That is one of the main reasons why the list of the Seven has gained such prominence and spoken with such power to so many generations. There is the realization that if a society can learn to manage these seven sources of evil, all the evil deeds that plague mankind will cease.

So the Seven Deadly Sins remind us that our real problem is within: that whatever we do on the outside – and however we strive to improve the quality of life through law, politics, education, economics, farming, and science – the quality of life will not truly improve unless we also walk a spiritual path within. Unless virtue replaces sin at the core of the soul – at the source – evil will continue to undo all our outer

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achievements and improvements. The change at the source is called “conversion.” The presence of God and the power and love of the Christ – allowed within – make that change. That is the real subject of Lent and of Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Easter. We are only trying to comprehend the Seven Deadly Sins – the sources of all evil – in the hope that such meditations will enable us to cooperate a little more with what God in Christ is doing for us.

Back to gluttony, with our new perspective. We are not looking at a deed – one bite too many, overeating, or any other specific deed. Like the other seven, gluttony can take many, even endless, forms. We are looking at one of the sources of great evil. What is gluttony?

Glut = to fill beyond capacity (especially with food). Gluttony is the principle of excess. Thomas Aquinas taught that at the center of gluttony is the word “too” – too soon; too expensive; too much; too eager. Enough is not enough. There must always be more than enough.

Gluttony is the principle of “more than is necessary.” I do not really need it, but I take it because I can. More is better. If one mouthful tastes good, never just eat it and be thankful; two must be better, and four better than that. We come eventually to the image of the insatiable, suckling child. Only, a nursing baby is adorable. A grownup or a business or a nation that is like that is not so adorable. Once we go into the mode of intake without restraint or balance, the appetites become voracious, then deadly.

Gluttony has always been associated specifically with too much food and drink. What today we call “alcoholism” was categorized by the ancients under gluttony. That alone begins to change the seriousness of the concept. And amount is not the only issue. Excess is the real issue. One puff of marijuana or one sniff of cocaine is excess – too much!

Gluttony is about wanting pleasure – sensual gratification – especially food or drink. So we come to the semantics problem. The bottom three sins are easily confused. In a way, they seem to be three expressions of something very similar. And yet they each deserve a place of their own, for there is a different principle working. So let’s play word games and then see if they can also stand apart.

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The last, or lesser, three sins of the Seven are lust, gluttony, and greed. Gluttony, we could say, is simply lust applied to food. Or gluttony is greed for food or drink. Or lust is only a form of greed – greed for power. In fact, that is exactly how one dictionary defines it: lust is greed for power. So the three seem interchangeable. A lusty person is a glutton for power, and so forth.

Only, lust is about power, not really about sex. And gluttony is about pleasure – personal gratification. And greed is about fear, which we will come to next week. So the three really need and deserve separate categories. Fear, power, and pleasure have lots of connections. But on the inside, we must learn to recognize, know, and deal with each one in its own right. I do not really lust for food – unless I want to use it as a political tool or a military weapon. Or maybe I try to use good food to get my way with a person. Then that is lust. If I want the food for myself, for my own pleasure, then I am a glutton.

Today, I suspect, we can see the problems of gluttony more clearly than ever before in history. We have graphic and terrible knowledge of what happens when people who can “afford it” live to excess, and when some nations gut the world’s resources to satisfy their own pleasures. I do not claim to be a world economist, but I hear rumors that pure luxuries – like coffee, chocolate, sugar, tobacco – are taking up enough land and human resources to be depriving increasing thousands of the necessities of life. More and more, “colonialism” shows itself as a terrible crossfire between lust and gluttony: the need to have power and control over undeveloped nations in order to keep supplying the home nation with the luxuries it is willing to buy. A little greed mixed in there also, no doubt.

Suddenly gluttony does not seem like such a harmless or simple little sin. Maybe there is more to the Lord’s Prayer – the part about “daily bread” (instead of five days’ bread or six months’ bread) – than we have realized. What are a few more bites, a love of chocolate or coffee, or a diet filled with sugar? Well, it is increasingly clear that it means sickness for me and starvation for the world. Clearly if a thing brings destruction all around, it is a source of evil, and this one is looking deadlier and deadlier with each passing year.

I am no world economist, and neither am I a dietitian. But what I hear from those who are is that it is increasingly clear that simple, indigenous, peasant-type diets are conducive to health, stamina, long life, and good emotions – happiness, a positive attitude, a sense of

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well-being. And concurrently, rich, refined, expensive luxury foods make us more prone to disease, depression, anxiety, stress, and anger. They decrease our pleasure and shorten our lives.

Why would a whole nation go on with its eating habits and support a food industry that is sending it to the hospitals at ever-increasing rates? For the same reason I keep returning to that dish of ice cream even though I know better. I am a glutton. I want my gratification, my pleasure. I can always rationalize that I am only one person and that one more time will not matter. I can remember saying the same thing about one more drink – that it would not matter. And that it was nobody’s business but my own, anyway.

But the saints down through the ages have thought it *was* somebody else’s business. It was *God’s* business. And gluttony was one of the greatest foes to peace with God. So they fought it, and by grace a lot of them found a way out of it. It is interesting that Paul the Apostle already knew that appetite could be such a problem: “*their god is their belly*” (Philippians 3:19) Who would have thought that people would have been aware of our problem so long ago? But that is not really what’s strange. What’s strange is that we are still having so much trouble realizing that we should be taking it seriously.

Of all the Seven Deadly Sins, gluttony most clearly illustrates the fact that the sins are a necessary part of life. I have mentioned several times already that none of us would be alive here if we did not have a propensity for each of the Seven. We must eat to live. And since that is true, every day we are exposed to the possibility of eating too much, liking something too much, wanting more than is good for us. There is no escaping the possibility and potential for gluttony in this life. Every single day will be a day of renewed temptation. Coming to terms with that is part of what we must do to become aware of the way gluttony works in our lives.

In my own case, I am having a very revealing time of it as I realize afresh how I have always loved excess. The “golden mean” has always seemed boring to me. I do most things with passion and intensity. I rarely buy one of anything. It is a strange shock, after thinking of myself as more disciplined than most, to suddenly realize that gluttony (some call it “compulsiveness”) is a huge theme in my life. I hope you are faring better with this one than I am. On the other hand, it is quite fascinating, and I am looking forward to some exciting

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changes. In my old age, I am learning to wait at least six months before I call changes “improvements.”

Before we go to the corresponding virtue, please note that gluttony kills the pleasure it seeks. Lust kills relationship, which is what it thinks it wants. It is the real truth of all the Seven Deadly Sins: They are deadly! And more than that, they specifically kill what they seem to promise. (And some of you still think there is no Satan?) There is no pleasure in overeating or overdrinking. The gratification of the moment leads to an ever-increasing nightmare. In the case of gluttony, the nightmare threatens to engulf the whole world.

Today’s virtue is obvious. In modern times, we think of temperance more in connection with drink and we think of gluttony more in connection with food, but that is a recent aberration. The two clearly go together. I quote: “[W]e must take infinite pains not to do anything from mere impulse or at random, without due consideration and care. For nature has not brought us into the world to act as if we were created for play or jest, but rather for earnestness and for some more serious and important pursuits.”

That is a father writing to his son. Do fathers still speak that way to their sons? I have known some who do, and one whom I hope smiles when he reads this sermon. But this sounds more like the 1930s and ’40s than it does like today. This particular father, whose name is Cicero, lived from 106 to 43 B.C. He reveals a classic concept of temperance: Consideration, self-control, moderation, seeing the larger picture, keeping one’s own pleasure in proper perspective (meaning, not very important) – that is the aim. Elimination of the impulses and appetites is not the aim, but keeping them in due bounds, keeping them subordinate to higher purposes, keeping them under discipline so that they do not rule one’s life – that is the goal.

In Plato’s *The Republic*, temperance is the rational ordering of the animal vitalities that leaves the soul free. Temperance has often been told and interpreted in Christendom as a joyless abstinence. And it often *has* been such, at the hands of those who have grown desperate to avoid some temptation that has beaten them again and again until they dare not compromise with it any longer. But classical Greek thought wanted to be temperate because it led to a better life. And classical Christendom wanted to be temperate because it left room for Christ (God) to be the reason and focus for living.

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Clement, one of the greatest of the early Church Fathers, wrote: “Our mode of life is not to accustom us to voluptuousness and licentiousness, nor to the opposite extreme, but to the medium between these, that which is harmonious and temperate, and free of either evil – luxury and parsimony.” It is the harmony with God – the being in tune with the Spirit – that is sought.

Of Christ, Paul wrote: “... *who for the joy that was set before him, endured the cross.*” If Jesus had gone for it out of any other attitude, would it have worked? Early Christians, and many since, have limited their appetites because of a quality of life they wanted – out of gratitude to Christ for gifts greater than what the appetites could offer – and because they came to see that appetites run riot would destroy the very peace and serenity they sought, including their closeness with the Holy Spirit.

Karl Olsson wrote: “To love Christ is to be shy toward other loves. To love Christ is to be content with what life gives, to sit loose in the saddle, to be ready to depart. To love Christ is to be, in the best sense, playful.”

Temperance kills gluttony and creates room for better things. We do not have to have more, have things our own way, or always have the same things and everything in excess. “*Man shall not live by bread alone.*” If each day we require only “daily bread” – that which is necessary and not to excess – then there is time and room left over for other things: time for God, for the belly is no longer god; time for play; time for gratitude. Gluttony never leads to gratitude – have you noticed? And temperance is about freedom, not about deprivation.