

03/24/19

Gluttony Feeding Your Face and Starving Your Heart *Matthew 4:1-11*

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Matthew 4:1-11 (NRSV), “Then **Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil**. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, ‘**If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.**’ But he answered, ‘**It is written, “One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.”**’ Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, ‘**If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, “He will command his angels concerning you,”** and “On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.”’ Jesus said to him, ‘**Again it is written, “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.”**’ Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; and he said to him, ‘All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Away with you, Satan! **for it is written, “Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.”**’ Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.”

Today we’re discussing the vice of glutton, and the first thing to do is to share what gluttony is and is not. Gluttony is not being over—even egregiously over— one’s ideal or healthy weight. Gluttony is not defined as overeating either. Food tastes good, and when we eat it, we get both the pleasure of tasting it and the pleasure of feeling full. **Gluttony is the vice of letting our desires for those pleasures get out of control.** There’s nothing wrong with eating in and of itself. It’s good to eat, and food is good. What’s bad is when the pleasure of eating “dominates” us. Paul writes in *1 Corinthians 6:12* (NRSV), in response to the Corinthians statement that “**‘All things are lawful for me,’ but not all things are beneficial. ‘All things are lawful for me,’ but I will not be dominated by anything.**” If we struggle with gluttony it means we are allowing ourselves to be “dominated” by our desire for pleasure especially associated with food. How captive are we to this pleasure? That’s the first and fundamental question for scouting out gluttony. The main issue is not our weight, but how much this craving weighs on our heart. The true danger of gluttony is not that it will lead to less than healthy waistlines but that it will lead to unhealthy souls. Too often we separate the physical from the spiritual, forgetting that the habits of our body can have profound effects on our spirit.

Gluttony is probably one of the most tolerated sins in American Christianity. Gluttony is the habit of using food for a “pleasure fix.” It makes eating about getting pleasure for myself and my life, about satisfying my physical desires and consuming whatever I want whenever I need it to feel better. It’s about self-gratification. As George Bernard Shaw wrote in *Man and Superman*, “There is no love sincerer than the love of food.” When you eat, why are you eating? What are you eating for? For health and energy or for other reasons? Eating food is pleasurable which is nice. But pleasure can also become a god that masters us and eventually ruins our ability to appreciate the food we eat, where it came from, how it got to us, the people we eat it with, and the God who provides it. When pleasure becomes a god, gluttony becomes

a problem. Ask yourself, how hard would it be to give up all sweets (or coffee, soda or snacking) for a week (or a month, a year)? How difficult do you think that would be? What would be the hardest thing for you to give up and why? What emotions surface as you even imagine trying it? If you do try it, you may want to journal what you feel and experience.

Jesus tried this himself. We heard about it in *Matthew 4:1-11*. He not only gave up sweets, coffee, soda, and snacking, he fasted for 40 days – no food for more than a month. Obviously, this is extreme. It's important to note that Jesus **“was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.”** Jesus is being tested by God to give him clarity about his identity and purpose, and to prepare him for the next step of his life. Throughout the Gospels we read that the wilderness, the mountains and shore along the Sea of Galilee were spiritual strongholds for Jesus; that's where he went to pray and commune with God. He fasts and prays for forty days and forty nights as Moses did (*Exodus 34:28*). I've always thought the end of that verse was unnecessary, “He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished.” No kidding. Even though he was desperately hungry, Jesus was as spiritually empty of himself and as full of the Spirit as he had been to that point in his earthly life.

The tempter comes and questions what Jesus heard at his baptism about being the Son of God. *Matthew 4:3*, “The tempter came and said to him, **‘If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.’** But he answered, **‘It is written, “One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.”**’” Jesus was tempted first in the area of his legitimate needs. We all need to eat to live. This is a legitimate need, especially after a forty-day fast. Jesus was hungry and the temptation is to use his God given power to serve himself. Jesus resisted temptation in this area by doing three things: **he was focused on the Father, filled with the Spirit, and fixed on His Word.** He was focused on the Father. His love for God was his greatest desire; even greater than the desire to eat. He was filled with the Spirit—the same Spirit that is given to us in our baptism when we confess our sin and our need for Christ. He was fixed on God's Word. In response to all three temptations he faced, Jesus responds each time by quoting from the *Book of Deuteronomy*, the last book of the five books that compose the *Torah* or Law of the Jewish people. Jesus was able to resist temptation in the wilderness because God's Word was hidden in his heart, impressed on his mind, and ready on his lips. How about us? How much of God's Word is hidden in our heart? God's Word is the sword of the Spirit, which helps us defeat temptation and keep our priorities clear. If we don't know the Word, we leave ourselves vulnerable to attack—whether in an area of our legitimate needs such as our need for food, and many other areas as well. All of us have memorized lots of information, we can learn scriptures too, if we choose to, and they will help us in the temptations and battles of life. **“One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.”**

Speaking of battles, are you familiar with the term M.R.E.? M.R.E. is a military acronym for “Meal Ready to Eat.” A Marine might eat one of them almost every day for months in a row when he or she was on active duty. An MRE is an individual meal encased in a brown vinyl-looking package. A helicopter can drop them 100 feet with no parachute to troops on the

ground, and the meal will sustain no damage. MRE's can be dropped by parachute from about 1,200 feet and can survive temperature extremes from -60 to 120 degrees Fahrenheit. They have a minimum shelf life of three years, and some have lasted for decades. After meeting those requirements, you'd expect them to be pretty tasty, wouldn't you?

Soldiers eat MRE's when they're in the field on an operation that prevents them from returning to a base with food service facilities. The meals—while not exactly gourmet fare—are designed to supply enough energy and nourishment for the soldiers while on their mission. They typically contain a main entrée, crackers and cheese, or peanut butter and jelly spread, a dessert or snack, a beverage packet, and accessories (plastic silverware, napkin, salt and pepper, a tiny bottle of Tabasco sauce—which Marines report they put on almost every entrée). They're also equipped with a “flameless ration heater,” a packet that, when combined with water, will chemically heat the MRE's main entrée without any fire or cooking tools, which might give away their position or be too cumbersome to haul with them.

Life serving as a Marine involves daily discipline, practices that subordinate one's individual pleasure-seeking to a larger mission. To perform their duty, Marines need food, but if their eating turns gluttonous, it will impact their whole unit and its effectiveness in carrying out its mission. The MRE's are designed to nourish and the inclusion of dessert and spices indicates that eating, even in the direst of circumstances, is not reduced to a mere necessary evil. Food is meant to be enjoyed. And yet, eating, sleeping, and other daily activities are all shaped by their mission and what it requires. Marines are responsible for disciplining themselves to stay fit to carry out their assigned duties. Their own pleasure is subordinate to that goal.

Contrast the life of a Marine in the field with a glutton's way of life. Gluttons eat for their own pleasure first. Personal gratification is their goal. They structure the rest of their lives and priorities around it and subordinate the good of others (or even their own good) to it. Like Marines, Christians also have a mission—a corporate mission that requires individual, daily discipline.

The mission—whether military or spiritual—is at times celebrated through a shared meal. Someone serving overseas sent back a picture of a group of Marines standing in front of a huge cake with gaudy pink icing which spelled out, “Happy Birthday, Marine Corps.” Given that temperatures regularly topped 100 degrees at their base, they probably had to eat it quickly before the frosting melted! But the point is, even the Marines stopped fighting long enough to eat food together that reminded them of their shared identity and mission. Their operations needed to be fed not only by basic nourishment, but also by a sense of who they were and why they were there. Their eating was something they did together, because who they are is a corporate identity and what they do is a corporate mission. Their eating confirmed and symbolized this.

Christians, too, need food for basic physical nourishment. But we also celebrate the Lord's Supper together—as the earliest members of the church did. We feast on a meal that tells us who we are, equips us spiritually, and confirms our corporate identity as members of Christ's

body. “You are what you eat” is not just a slogan, but a reminder of the importance of what and why we eat together as Christians.

Gluttony is about the pleasure of eating food, but because food is such a powerful symbol, getting our desires for food twisted also twists our relationships with God and others out of order. Food has to do with self-preservation, but it’s also a symbol of our social bonds with each other. When someone we love dies, friends and family bring food to those who mourn. When there is a celebration, we feast together. Jesus even did his first miracle at a wedding celebration in Cana. When guests arrive at our homes, we show hospitality by providing a meal. As the saying goes, “Food is love.” Eating nourishes our physical lives, but it also nourishes us socially and emotionally.

Two ways to counter the threat of gluttony are moderation in our eating and the practice of fasting, which done rightly, not only keeps our desire for pleasure within healthy bounds but reminds us through our physical experience of hunger that we are needy and dependent on God. It gives us a sense of solidarity with others in need who are fasting not by choice but because they have no access to food or can’t afford it. Fasting is a practice in which we do without the food we normally eat. How and when it is done varies widely among Christians, but however it’s done, it should be restrictive enough to curb our desires for pleasure, while still providing for our physical needs. The number of times of day you eat, the quantities eaten, and the kinds of food eaten may all be limited. Whatever the practice, the point is this: food is like money for most people. We tend not to be content with things the way they are; we drift toward wanting more and better. Fasting is like tithing—a regular practice that runs counter to our ever-increasing desires, which “increase in force the more we yield to them.”

Practicing moderation or fasting requires a virtue called self-control. Perhaps you don’t think of self-control as a spiritual virtue, but alongside love and godliness, self-control is repeatedly said to be part of the life of mature disciples of Christ (see *2 Timothy 1:7*; *Titus 2:6, 12*; *1 Peter 4:7*; *2 Peter 1:6*). It’s the climactic “fruit of the Spirit” in *Galatians 5:22–23*, and one of the first things that must be characteristic of leaders in the church (*1 Timothy 3:2*; *Titus 1:8*). *Proverbs 25:28*, warns us, “Like a city breached, without walls, is one who lacks self-control.”

I’ll close with a Biblical example from *Genesis 25:29–34* about two brothers named Esau and Jacob, “Once when Jacob was cooking a stew, Esau came in from the field, and he was famished. Esau said to Jacob, ‘Let me eat some of that red stuff, for I am famished!’ (Therefore he was called Edom.) Jacob said, ‘First sell me your birthright.’ Esau said, ‘I am about to die; of what use is a birthright to me?’ Jacob said, ‘Swear to me first.’ So he swore to him, and sold his birthright to Jacob. Then Jacob gave Esau bread and lentil stew, and he ate and drank, and rose and went his way. Thus Esau despised his birthright.”

Contrast Esau’s inability to delay gratification and his lack of self-control with the Apostle Paul who sounds like he’s training for a mission behind enemy lines or a championship fight when he tells the Corinthians (*1 Corinthians 9:24–27*), “Do you not know that in a race the runners all compete, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win it. Athletes

exercise self-control in all things; they do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable one. So I do not run aimlessly, nor do I box as though beating the air; **but I punish my body and enslave it**, so that after proclaiming to others I myself should not be disqualified.” If someone examined our life, would it reflect more the attitude of Esau, who sold his birthright as the oldest son for a bowl of lentil stew, or the spiritual discipline of Jesus and Paul who didn’t allow their stomachs to determine or master their destiny? What would you like the answer to be?

Prayer: Seventeenth-century prayer from Anglican Bishop Jeremy Taylor, “Give me the spirit of temperance and sobriety, ...as may best enable me to serve thee, but not to make provision for the flesh, to fulfill its [desires]: Let me not, as Esau, prefer meat before a blessing; but subdue my appetite, subjecting it to reason and the grace of God, being content with what is moderate, and useful, and easy to be obtained; taking it in due time, receiving it thankfully, making it to minister to my body, that my body may be a good instrument of the soul, and the soul a servant of thy Divine Majesty for ever and ever.”

Blessing: Blessed is anyone who endures temptation. Such a one has stood the test and will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him.
James 1:12

Questions for Discussion or Reflection:

1. How would you describe the three temptations that Jesus faces in *Matthew 4:1-11*?
2. Why do you think changing stones into bread was one of Jesus’ temptations, and why did he refuse it? How did he refuse it?
3. What clues does this episode in *Matthew 4:1-11* give us about how gluttony operates in our lives and how we might resist it?
4. What are your stereotypes of gluttony? Do they make you feel guiltier or do they serve to make gluttony a problem “other people” have? Have you ever felt the force of excessive pleasure-seeking in this area?
5. Historically, the liturgical rhythm of the Christian year has been one of fasting-then-feasting, not eating in moderation all the time (Advent fast–Christmas feast; Lenten fast–Easter feast). Why do you think this is? Fasting as a Christian discipline was typically joined to the disciplines of prayer and almsgiving. Why do you think these three disciplines go together?
6. Try this thought experiment. Ask yourself, how hard would it be to give up all sweets (or coffee, soda, or snacking)—for a week (or a month, a year)? How difficult do you think that would be? What would be the hardest thing to give up and why? What emotions surface as you even imagine or think about trying it? If you do try it, you may want to journal what you feel and experience.
7. Consider practicing some form of fasting this week, perhaps one of the following ways: omit desserts, omit one meal for three days of the week, eliminate meat and/or dairy from

your diet for a few days or a week, eliminate eating for a whole day (making sure you drink plenty of water and juice). Accompany your fasting with special time set aside for prayer, almsgiving or service.

Philippians 3:17-4:1, “Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us. For many live as enemies of the cross of Christ; I have often told you of them, and now I tell you even with tears. Their end is destruction; their god is the belly; and their glory is in their shame; their minds are set on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. He will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself. Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved.”

Congregational Prayer:

God of our parents and grandparents and of all those like Paul who have walked the way of Christ before us, we thank you for the women and men of every nation and language who by their loving and godly example have provided us with a pattern of life worthy of our admiration, appreciation and imitation.

Just as there are those who are positive role models to emulate, we recognize that there are also many who “live as enemies of the cross of Christ;” who reject the invitation to take up the cross of servanthood, sacrificial love, generous compassion, justice, hospitality, and peace. Instead they pursue self-indulgence, and many of the vices we’ve been reflecting upon in worship: envy, vain glory, sloth, greed, and gluttony. Help us not to set our minds on these things that are destructive of ourselves and others and which often lead to shame and embarrassment as we see in our world every week.

Help us instead to shake off any lethargy, awaken our slumbering spirits, give us a glimpse of the difference between the end of life focused only on physical pleasure, and a life where we understand that our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. Deliver us, however, from being so heavenly minded that we’re no earthly good.

We pray today for deliverance from evil in all its forms and manifestations. We intercede for all who are hurting—we pray for refugees fleeing war and for all those whose lives have been impacted by the destruction wrought by cyclones, floods, fires, storms, and acts of terrorism. We thank you for the helpers who step forward to love their neighbors and help to meet their needs on ordinary days as well as in times of disaster and heartache.

Continue to be with us as we worship and hear from your Word. May the example of how Jesus responded to temptation and testing inspire us and give us hope for standing firm in our faith in our own times of trial. In the strong name of Christ, we pray.