

The Seven Deadly Sins: Gluttony

In the name of him who for us fasted and prayed forty days, dear friends in Christ: Today we begin the penitential season of Lent: forty days set aside by the church for us to humble ourselves under the mighty hand of God and reflect upon the depth and gravity of our sin as we prepare our hearts and minds to experience again the sorrowful and yet wondrous story of our Lord's passion, death, and resurrection. And as we undertake our Lenten journey, we understand that we are to a certain degree following in our Lord's footsteps. The idea is to follow his own example of humbling himself as he passed through a forty-day period of bodily self-denial in order that he might concentrate more on spiritual matters as he prepared himself to launch his public ministry and complete the work of our salvation.

This year, to aid in our own spiritual preparations, I thought it would be good for us to meditate on what have been traditionally identified as the *Seven Deadly Sins*. That probably requires a bit of explanation. All sins, of course, are deadly. They all equally separate us from the holy God and place us under his curse. Still, while that's true, I think it's safe to say that there are some sins that seem to bind themselves more intractably to the human heart. Their roots run deep within us. And they are sins that are for the most part common to us all – and for that reason, they're perhaps easy to overlook or fail to consider and repent of despite the terrible the damage they do to our walk of faith and to our relationships with others. It's because of this that from the earliest days of Christianity, various theologians have proposed lists of the sins they thought to be the most likely to lead to spiritual ruin. These lists were shared, discussed, and modified over the years with the result that sometime in about the seventh century AD the list we now know as the Seven Deadly Sins was codified.

And let me say this: the list of the Seven Deadly Sins is not biblical per se; though each of the seven sins is explicitly named and condemned by Scripture. And the idea of a having a list of particularly troublesome sins *can* be found in the Bible. It's in Proverbs chapter six, where we read: "*There are six things that the Lord hates, seven that are detestable to him: haughty eyes, a lying tongue, hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked schemes, feet that are quick to rush into evil, a false witness who pours out lies, and a man who stirs up dissension among his brothers.*" I thought about tackling *that* group of seven; but decided against it in the end. I'll save it for another time. This year we'll tap into the wisdom – and the warnings – of those who lived in the first few centuries of the Christian Church. And a big reason I decided to go that way is that there appears on the list of the deadly seven a sin not mentioned on the Proverbs list to which I think we Americans – and in particular we *Lutheran* Americans – are especially susceptible. I speak of the sin of gluttony.

We all know what that is: the essence of gluttony is overconsumption. It's consuming more than is necessary, and very often more than is healthy, to maintain the human body, mind, and spirit in proper condition. And notice that I included the mind and spirit in that definition. Usually when we think of overdoing it, it's with respect to food and drink – and that is indeed a good place to start; but a broader definition of gluttony involves consuming too much of any good thing. One could be gluttonous, for example, with regard to time spent viewing television, or playing computer games, or

playing golf, or surfing the internet, or over consuming such things as over the counter drugs, or alcohol, or even using more than one's reasonably fair share of electricity or fuel. Gluttony involves over consuming just about anything.

And one of the reasons we Americans are especially prone to this sin is that we live in a market driven consumer society in which we are constantly being encouraged to overindulge. We hear it all the time. Spend more. Buy bigger. Buy better. Upgrade. Super size it. We're told we deserve it. And we like hearing that because it means we're special and that someone else recognizes it. And if that weren't enough, these days we're being told that it's our patriotic duty to consume more because it's the best way to stimulate the economy and create jobs.

That's one contributing factor. Another has to do with the individual liberty that we guard so zealously. As American citizens we feel that no one has the right to say anything to us that might limit our freedom in making consumer choices. The only thing that matters is what makes me happy. And if what makes me happy is continuously stuffing my face with delicious, cheap, polyunsaturated fats and empty calories, or if I get my jollies smoking eight packs of cigarettes a day, or if the only way I can feel like a real man is to drive a car that's built like a tank – and that like a tank goes only a half a mile per gallon of gas, well, then no one has the right to tell me that I shouldn't be doing it. And if anyone does, I'll go at it even more wantonly just to prove to them that I have the right to do what I want.

Now, add to all this the facts that we are, as a group, the most affluent people who have ever lived on the face of the earth – and that we live at a time in history when food and most other consumer goods are mass produced and are therefore relatively cheaper than they have ever been, it's easy to see why we are very likely the most gluttonous people who have ever lived. We over consume like no one else because we can afford to like no one else. And don't think that there aren't consequences. No doubt you've seen the research that shows that for the first time in our nation's history, the children of today have a shorter life expectancy than their parents due to the explosion in the number of cases of juvenile obesity and the health complications that follow. We are literally eating ourselves to an early grave. But that's only a symptom of the problem. The problem is the sin of gluttony. And we are all guilty of it in one way or another.

And of course the real danger of gluttony – where it does the most damage – is to our souls. It's rightly called a deadly sin, because at the heart of it is nothing less than idolatry. The reason we over consume things is that we're looking to these things to satisfy the deeper longings and hungers of the heart that can only properly be filled with a right relationship with God. Things, no matter what they are, will always come up short, which is why we have to consume more and more of them in a futile attempt to get them to fill the void that can only be filled by Christ our Lord and his boundless love.

And this is why I chose to address the sin of gluttony first in this year's series of evening devotions. I think it's appropriate that as we enter the season of Lent – traditionally a time of fasting and self denial – that we confront head on the sin that is the exact opposite of these very helpful spiritual disciplines. And this is where our Lutheranism, if it's misguided, can get in the way. We are deathly afraid of legalism of any kind – and rightly so. It's an easy trap to fall into. And you probably know that in times past people were told that they must fast and place themselves under various kinds of self deprivation in order to please God. They were encouraged to do these

things as a means of earning brownie points with God. We know this is wrong. We know that the only thing that matters to the Lord is the righteousness that Christ earned for us by his perfect life and his innocent suffering and death. God does not look upon us any more favorably because of things we do or don't do, or because of what we consume or choose not to. Our trust in Christ is all that counts.

But unfortunately, we often use this as an excuse to avoid subjecting ourselves to any kind of spiritual discipline. It's to fall off the other side of the horse, as it were. And we are the poorer spiritually for it. You'll note that this evening's Gospel lesson, Jesus doesn't say, "*If* you fast"; he says, "*When* you fast". The assumption is that those who follow him as disciples will take it upon themselves to fast from time to time. What he gives are instructions regarding such fasting. Don't make a public display of it, he says. Don't announce to the world what you're doing and walk around looking wretched and gaunt in an effort to prove to everyone how you're suffering for the sake of the kingdom and how spiritual you are. That's not what fasting is for.

What is it for? It's a means of self mortification. It's a recognition that our souls and bodies are intimately connected, and that what happens to one affects the other. It's an acknowledgement that the sinful flesh is inherently weak and must be mastered through the exercise of godly self control. It's also a reminder of Christ's suffering for us. When you consciously deprive yourself of a meal or choose to go for a predetermined period of time without satisfying certain cravings, you do it remind yourself that Christ gave up *everything* for your sake to save you from you sin. You do it to appreciate all the more the full extent of his sacrifice and the seriousness of your sin. And too, it's done to allow more time to reflect upon spiritual matters. Time that you might of spent eating or watching television, say, could be redirected toward prayer or reading the Scriptures. Money saved by not indulging some appetite could be given to worthy charities or to missions. There is a much good to be gained through the proper application of fasting – be it of food or something else.

And so, as we begin another Lenten journey together, I encourage everyone here first to examine yourself with respect to the sin of gluttony. Ask in what ways are you personally guilty of consuming more than is necessary or good for you, and repent of it. Turn from it. And receiving Christ's assurance of forgiveness, resolve to exercise proper restraint in the future. And secondly, then, I encourage you to consider what kind of spiritual discipline you might choose to adopt for yourself in order to grow in your Christian faith and life throughout this penitential season. If it's done for the right reasons and in the right way, it can be very productive and beneficial for you. Of course, just attending Wednesday evening devotions is itself a form of spiritual discipline that we adopt for Lent – and that may be enough for you. But if you choose to do something else as well, and embark upon a fast of some kind, I have just one word of caution: don't over do it.

May our gracious God and Father grant you a blessed, introspective, and spiritually fruitful Lenten season, as you humble yourself under his hand, and as you follow in your Savior's steps to the cross, the grave, and ever more renewed life in him. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!