

Seven Sins, Seven Virtues: Gluttony & Temperance

Ecclesiastes 6:1-9; Luke 16:19-25

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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Part One: Gluttony

After a one-week hiatus, we are returning to our summer worship series on the seven deadly sins and the seven holy virtues.

Just to recap, here's where we've been.

Week 1	Pride	Humility
Week 2	Envy	Contentment
Week 3	Greed	Generosity
Week 4	Lust	Chastity

We have three more Sundays to go. Today we're looking at gluttony/temperance.

I want to begin in the rooftop dining room of the Bethlehem Star hotel, where Naomi and I found ourselves just over a year ago, as part of a MCC Learning Tour.

A man named Joseph greeted us with a smile and warm handshake before serving us breakfast on that first morning and every morning we were in Bethlehem. I had met Joseph three years earlier during my first trip to Israel and Palestine and it was a delight to reconnect with him again.

Joseph is a Palestinian Christian and was always willing to share about his life and story. One memory of him that stood out in 2016 was of him telling me about the hotel being shut down and commandeered by the Israeli army during one of the uprisings of the early 2000's. For forty

days, the top floor was used for army surveillance and sniper locations. Joseph was conscripted to prepare food for the army and not permitted to leave for the entire time they were there.

Last year, thanks mostly to Naomi's curiosity, we learned a bit more of Joseph's story. His family comes from the area around what is now Tel Aviv. In 1948, when the state of Israel came into being, they were forced from to flee as refugees and found their way to Bethlehem.

He and his family were given a tent and much later a one room structure in a UN refugee camp. They assumed that it would be a temporary move—that they would be allowed to return home once the conflicts settled down.

Seventy years later, Joseph and his family still live in that same UN refugee camp in Bethlehem. The camp has grown over the years as many more refugees have had to leave their home and is now a congested urban jungle numbering over fifteen thousand souls squeezed into one square kilometer.

I asked Joseph about his family. He has four children, two sons and two daughters. The oldest two have recently completed university, one becoming a lawyer, the other an x-ray technician. I wondered how on earth Joseph managed to put two kids through university given what I knew of his situation.

So, I asked. He smiled and paused before saying, "Well, I managed." He told us that he would go to England once a year loaded down with olive wood products from Bethlehem. For thirty days he would set up outside churches selling woodcarvings, cooking food, and collecting donations outside churches.

He did this every year for the years when his kids were studying. Joseph would sell and cook and sell and cook and work, all the while doing without himself.

Additionally, Joseph would take time each year during the Muslim holiday of Ramadan to collect beans, rice, noodles, and other things for forty-five of the neediest families in the UN refugee camp where he lived. He still does this. I did not detect even a hint of pride in Joseph as he told this story. He did not think he was special. Others were doing the same as him. It is what must be done.

But perhaps surprisingly, given all the remarkable things that Joseph had shared about his life, one memory stands out from last year. Toward the end of our meal, Joseph moved to clear a plate at a table beside us.

He looked at the food remaining on it, shook his head, and said, “I don’t like to see food wasted. We never waste food here. If there is any left, I bring it home and give it to someone who needs it. Food is a gift from God and it is a sin to waste it.”

The question I had then, and the question that I still have today is a simple one.

Do I actually believe Joseph? That food is a gift from God and that it is a sin to waste food? And, by extension, that it’s a sin to consume too much?

Do I *actually* believe this, or was this moment with Joseph just a thought-provoking snapshot of what life looks like from a less privileged position than the one I occupy?

From Bethlehem, I want to travel all the way to Costco on the south side of Lethbridge. Last Saturday morning, I found myself wandering the aisles of the well-known American multinational warehouse with Claire and her friend from Belgium who is also working at Camp Valaqua this summer and who had come home with her for the week.

For Claire’s friend, shopping at Costco was a bit of an exhilarating and bewildering experience. She had never seen a store so large. She had never approached grocery shopping on such a large scale.

A stone’s throw from Costco is Wal-Mart and Superstore. The existence of these stores are, in many ways, a reflection of our approach to food and consumption more broadly.

As Canadians, we tend to buy in massive quantities. It’s cheaper to buy in bulk, of course. And so, we buy, we freeze, we store up.

Claire’s Belgian friend was far more accustomed to what, in my limited experience, is a more typical approach for people outside of North America. You buy food more frequently and in smaller quantities. You go to the bakery down the street for the needs of the day. You buy your fruit and vegetables for the next few days. You buy everything in smaller quantities. You don’t really freeze much, if anything. Shopping for and consuming food tends to happen at a much smaller scale.

Now, part of this has to do with geography, population density, transportation, and even climate. Canadians are more spread out and many people have to buy in large quantities because they’re in town much more infrequently.

You can't exactly walk down the street for your daily bread if you live 40 km from the nearest bakery! It's one thing for someone in Belgium to pick up their vegetables on their walk home from work, it's quite another to do so in a January blizzard on the prairies of Canada!

But it's undeniably true that as Canadians we also consume and waste an incredible amount of food. One article said that the average Canadian throws away 170 kg of food per year. "Canada wastes so much food that a researcher likens it to tossing a quarter of your groceries away when you leave the supermarket."¹

Another article I came across in *Canadian Geographic* displayed a world map based on calorie consumption. Not surprisingly, Canada was near the top.² We consume anywhere between 800-1000 calories more than we need, on average, each day.

My question, again, is simple. Do we think of this as sinful?

Over the last decade or so, I have regularly heard from people who are weary of the church's preoccupation with sexual sin. *Why don't we ever talk about other sins?* they say. *Sins like materialism or neglect of the poor... or gluttony.*

Well, today, we're talking about gluttony. Do we have the courage to use the word "sin" for what it is? And do we have the desire to consume in more sane and healthy ways—ways that are better for our planet and for our neighbour?

Our first text this morning comes from the book of Ecclesiastes. This is the book of the bible that has always drawn philosophical types who wonder about the big questions of life.

It is unlike many other books of the bible in that it is something of a meditation on the limits of wisdom, the unfairness of life, the impossibility of finally being able to unlock the deepest questions of life's meaning.

It's a book that is seen by many to be long on questions but short on answers, heavy on cynicism but a bit short on hope. The book even begins ominously:

¹ <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/thecurrent/the-current-for-april-5-2018-1.4605392/how-bad-is-canada-s-food-waste-problem-among-the-world-s-worst-report-finds-1.4606012>

² <https://www.canadiangeographic.ca/article/mapping-calorie-consumption-country>

“Meaningless! Meaningless!”
says the Teacher.
“Utterly meaningless!
Everything is meaningless.”

But Ecclesiastes is an honest look at the human condition. Our passage this morning’s subtitle in my bible is “The Frustration of Desires.”

You can have all that you want, the Teacher says, whether it’s food or money or possessions, and still not be happy. You can’t take any of it with you when you die. Someone else will take over all that you have stored up for yourself and worked for.

The roving of the appetite is described as “meaningless,” a “chasing after the wind” (Ecc. 6:9).

Human beings toil and toil to satisfy their appetites (v. 7), yet the appetite is never satisfied. We always crave more. We fear scarcity.

We love the pleasure of food and other things and so we take as much as we can get before it’s gone. We build bigger barns and load up our freezers to achieve what we imagine is security.

We know that Jesus says we can’t live on bread alone, but we seem determined to prove him wrong.

Our appetites are very often much more alluring masters than Jesus.

This is who we are. These are the selves that we bring to confession this morning.

Part Two: Temperance

The virtue we wish to cultivate in the place of gluttony is “temperance.” Other words we might use would be “restraint” or “moderation.”

I want to start with three assumptions based on what I’ve talked about so far this morning.

First, all Christians at all times are influenced by our cultural contexts. Our “normal” is affected in profound ways simply by when and where we live.

Second, as inhabitants of North America in the twenty-first century, we seek to be followers of Jesus in the context of abundance and, at times reckless overconsumption.

Third, as inhabitants of North America in the twenty-first century, we seek to be followers of Jesus in the context of careless indifference and, at times reckless waste.

These are the waters we swim in.

So, in light of the cultural conditions in which we are seeking to be faithful to Jesus and to become people of wisdom and virtue, how will we cultivate the virtue of temperance?

How will we become responsible stewards of food and other things in a context where waste is assumed, and overconsumption is normal?

How will we adopt healthier attitudes toward food, whether it's physically, financially, emotionally, or spiritually?

How will we recognize (remember?) that the very same world where we often have more than enough is one where many people do not? How will we learn to live with open hands?

For starters, I think we need to adjust the "microclimate." In the world of meteorology and geography, a microclimate is the climate of a very small or restricted area that often differs from the climate of the surrounding area.

So, when the "weather" all around us seems to reinforce the normalcy of overconsumption and waste, we can try to think of ourselves as little regions of more moderate temperatures.

We can start by simply buying less, having less food on hand. If you struggle to exercise restraint when it comes to certain foods (as I do, e.g., chocolate almonds!), then don't keep them lying around the house.

In the microclimate of our home, we are trying to buy in smaller quantities and to have less unhealthy food lying around the place to be snacked on whenever boredom or restlessness set in.

We can take smaller portions which is both healthier for our bodies and leads to less waste.

We can make our homes and our habits places where our convictions about food, about moderation, gratitude, and contentment can be reinforced.

These are not revolutionary suggestions. I know that for some of you, this kind of an approach to consumption and distribution is kind of in your DNA. Some of you know, far better than I do, what it is like to do with little and have maintained these kinds of practices throughout your lives.

Perhaps a sermon on gluttony and temperance should more obviously be addressed to people my generation and younger—we who feel perhaps more entitled, more prone to taking abundance for granted.

But I think we can all use the reminder.

But beyond these practical suggestions, we need to allow Jesus to convict us that the manner in which we consume is a spiritual issue. It's not just about slimming down or lowering our carbon footprint or feeling better or not buying into the norms of society, important as all of these things are.

It's about compassion and justice.

We see this in the parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man—a parable which probably ought to terrify us if we're listening to it honestly.

The rich man lives in luxury every day and doesn't even notice the beggar Lazarus at his gate, hoping for a few crumbs from his table.

Both men die and the tables are turned. Lazarus is comforted at Abraham's side and the rich man is tormented in Hades (the Greek word for the underworld or the place of the dead).

And the rationale is quite plain in the last verse of our reading: "Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony" (Luke 16:25).

Good things are for sharing. Good things are not for hoarding and wasting and consuming recklessly, but for distributing to those more familiar with bad things.

The virtue of temperance/moderation is about voluntarily doing with less so that others can have more.

And it leads to a better world—a world that all of us want to see.

A world where we take what we need, where we live gently and responsibly on the earth.

A world where we are content to do without the *more* that is constantly being sold to us as the price of genuine contentment and happiness.

A world where we realize that it is healthier—physically, mentally, spiritually—to do with less.

A world where we have a deep conviction that “good things” are for sharing.

This, for me, is what the virtue of temperance holds before us.

May God help us to create, in our families, homes, churches and communities, microclimates of sanity, temperance, compassion and justice when it comes to how we consume.

May God help us to do with less, not just as a personal improvement strategy, but as an expression of love for God, for creation, and for our neighbour.

Amen.

