

Seven Deadly Sins: Gluttony

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[0 : 00] As I said at the beginning of the service, welcome. We are beginning the season of Lent, and as this is a season to focus on repentance and our need for Jesus Christ and the grace that He offers, we thought it only appropriate to spend each Sunday in Lent looking at one of the seven deadly sins.

These are very popular, very well known. They've influenced and been a part of pop culture in lots of different ways, movies and songs, things like that. They're also called the capital vices.

This is a catalog of sins that came from the Middle Ages. Theologians cataloged capital vices. And by capital vices, I mean each deadly sin is like a category, a headwater sin, if you will, that is upstream from a whole array of more specific sins downstream.

So each is a category header, an umbrella that gives rise to all manner of sins within each category. And as we look at sin and as we look at each of these, we're going to come back again and again to the same idea.

And that is this. The more we study and understand sin, the more we are actually studying joy. Now I know that doesn't seem to fit. But here is the nature of sin.

[1 : 22] The nature of sin is this. That we take good, beautiful, wonderful things, gifts that God has given his people, and we misuse them in ways that were never intended.

They become twisted. And as a result of misuse, the very things that were meant to give us joy start to rob us of joy. And so the more we understand how that works, the more we are actually able to recover joy, the kind of joy that God meant his people to experience in relationship with him and one another.

And so that being said, this week we're turning our attention to the sin of gluttony. Gluttony. Now I want to make a couple of things clear as we dive into this text.

A lot of people equate gluttony with obesity. And in our secular culture, obesity is very much a secular sin.

We live in an era of Instagram and Photoshop where body image is highly emphasized and with all manner of images confronting us every day.

[2 : 35] Obesity is considered a secular sin by many. There is research that shows that people make all kinds of assumptions about people who are overweight in terms of their character and intelligence and so on and so forth.

So the first thing we need to make clear is this. While it may be a secular sin, there is nowhere in Scripture that considers obesity to be a sin at all. In fact, there are many reasons that have nothing to do with one's eating habits or character why somebody might be obese.

So it's not considered a sin at all. It has nothing to do with gluttony. There are, in fact, many, many, many skinny gluttons. And so as we look at gluttony, we have to separate those two in our mind.

But the fact remains that we live in a culture that is food-obsessed. I mean, we live in a culture that worships food. We live in a culture of locally grown, organic, non-GMO celebrity chefs and food network.

And there is even a website called foodporn.com where you can literally just go and spend time looking at very, I don't know, alluring pictures of food all day long if you want.

[3 : 44] And I suppose people do this kind of thing. But this is the kind of culture that we live in. And in the interest of having integrity and full disclosure, gluttony is absolutely something that I struggle with.

I'm a great lover of good food. And I love to cook good food. One of my favorite pastimes is to cook, spend hours in the kitchen. And I love to drink good drink.

I love good whiskey. I love good red wine. These are things that I enjoy. And I realize that they bring me perilously close to and sometimes into the territory that we're going to be talking about this evening.

So what is the difference? What is gluttony? And how do we set it aside or set it apart from simple enjoyment of God's good gifts? What makes it gluttony? That's what we're going to be looking at. And so we're going to be doing that by looking at a case study of a man named Esau in the Old Testament in Genesis chapter 25 verses 27 to 34. And this case study is going to show us three things about gluttony.

[4 : 43] What it is, where it comes from, and ultimately how to heal from it. Let's pray. Our Father, as we open your word, if we are relying merely on the words and the wisdom and the rhetoric of human beings, then we have very little hope.

It's our great hope that you would speak to us, that you would empower through your Holy Spirit your word to penetrate the layers of denial that may be there, to penetrate that part of us that wants to roll our eyes and wink and nod and laugh at a topic like gluttony, that you would bring your word so deeply into our hearts that we would begin to see the reality of the battle that is waged over these issues, that you would open our hearts thereby to your grace and your love, and we would rediscover it anew.

We pray this in your Son's holy name. Amen. So what is gluttony? Let's look at this story of Esau. If you know anything about Esau, he is one of two brothers.

They are twins, Esau and his brother Jacob. But even though they're twins, Esau is considered the firstborn because he came out mere moments before Jacob. And you can imagine Jacob has a little bit of resentment over this fact because in the ancient Near East, being a firstborn was a big deal. If you were the firstborn, that was a position of privilege. It meant that you stood to inherit double what any of your other siblings would inherit. And this is a very wealthy family we're talking about, so his inheritance was going to be substantial.

[6 : 15] In addition to that, God had come to his grandfather, Abraham, and he had told Abraham, I'm going to bless you. And I want you to pass this blessing to your children and their children and their children.

And this bloodline is going to be established of unique blessing. I'm setting your bloodline apart. And this bloodline is going to eventually lead to an offspring. Somebody will be born of this bloodline who will then become a blessing to all the nations.

This is a very important bloodline. And Esau was born into that bloodline. He was in that lineage. And so this is very high stakes that we're talking about here. Very high stakes.

And in this day in particular, Esau has been out hunting all day. And presumably he didn't get anything because he comes back home and he's starving. And he's exhausted.

And Jacob just happens to have a pot of lentil stews simmering on the stove, has a little bread in the oven. You can imagine it smelled quite delicious to Esau as he walks in the door.

[7 : 16] So Esau looks at the pot and he says, I've got to have some of that. And the Hebrew conveys the idea where he says, I want to swallow all of that. I want to gulp it down. I'm starving. I can inhale that whole pot.

And Jacob being kind of a smart aleck, a younger brother says, oh yeah, well, why don't you sell me your birthright and I'll give you some? And I can imagine that maybe he was half serious, half sarcastic.

But Esau's so tired and so famished that Esau says, well, what good would my birthright do me if I died of hunger? And Jacob, seizing the moment, jumps to his feet and he says, swear to me right now that if I give you some of this stew, give me your birthright.

Do you swear? And Esau says, fine, take it. And he swears the oath and he gets the bowl of stew. And thus, as scripture says, he showed contempt for, he disregarded his birthright.

Now we look at a story like this and we say, how in the world could he have made such a stupid mistake? He traded away his family's future. He traded away all this incredible financial inheritance that he stood to receive.

[8 : 26] And he traded away the blessing of God. And we say, who in their right mind would do such a thing? And that's in fact the point. Esau is not in his right mind. He's not seeing things clearly.

And we begin to see that Esau has a very dysfunctional relationship with food. He has this dysfunctional relationship that skews his outlook.

He's so over-focused on food that he's blind to the goodness and the blessing of God. He loses sight of the big picture. And that's essentially what gluttony is.

It's a dysfunctional relationship with food and drink where food becomes more important than anything else. Or drink, alcohol, becomes more important than anything else.

And we lose perspective. We lose sight of God and his blessing. That's what gluttony is. Now Thomas Aquinas wrote a lot about gluttony. And he actually says there are different kinds of gluttony.

[9 : 24] And, you know, we hear this and we say, well, yeah, but I would never do something like what Esau did. But think about how many of us continue to eat things that we know are bad for us, that we know will shorten our lifespan.

But we can't help it. How many of us drink enough that we would lie about it if anybody here asked? That we definitely lie about it when we go get a physical at the doctor.

And they say, how many drinks per week? And we lie about it. Right? I think so many people, why now, why would we do that? Why even after growing up years and years and years of anti-drinking and driving campaigns and all of the money that has gone into that, why will we go out not planning to have a drink?

And when somebody sets the drinks down, we say, oh, what the heck? And we have a couple and then we get in the car and drive. Why would we do that and put people at risk? Right? Esau isn't as foolish as we might think at first glance.

So Thomas Aquinas says that there are different kinds of gluttony. The first kind of gluttony is compulsive gluttony. People who are compulsive eaters and drinkers. You see food, you weren't even planning on eating, but before you know it, it's in your mouth.

[10 : 32] Or somebody puts a drink on the table and you said you weren't going to drink and next thing you know you've had two or three. Right? This is being compulsive. That's the first kind of gluttony. There's another kind of gluttony, excessive eating.

So people who binge eat or binge drink, once you start, you just can't stop and you way overdo it. Now being a compulsive eater or an excessive binge eater, these are the categories that most people think of when they think of gluttony.

Right? It turns out there are more kinds of gluttony. I had a roommate back in grad school years ago. And this roommate only had two criteria for food.

It had to be hot and there had to be a lot of it. That's all he cared about. And that was very hard for me to take because I'm somebody who loves to cook and I love good food. And so I could spend six hours gently simmering bolognese made of beef and pork and lamb and get it just so, just the right consistency.

And then I could make a homemade tagliatelle and serve it with the bolognese with a little parmigiano-reggiano cheese. So maybe fresh basil or parsley on top. And I could serve that. And he would literally not be able to tell the difference between that and Chef Boyardee.

[11 : 44] And it used to infuriate me. And I would look at him and he would just inhale it. And I would be like, did you taste it? Or did it just go straight into your stomach? And I used to think that this has to be sinful.

Right? There has to be something wrong here. Right? There has to be a name for this. Well, it turns out I was being sinful. It turns out I was being a glutton. I wasn't necessarily being a compulsive eater or an excessive eater.

I was being a snob. And being a food snob is a form of gluttony, according to Thomas Aquinas. Being the kind of person who says, I will only eat the best food. I will only eat the...

When I go out to lunch, I can't just go out to lunch anywhere. I want to look on Yelp and what gets the best reviews within a mile of here. That's where I want to go. You know, the kind of people who look down on people who eat at Applebee's.

Right? Food snob. Right? That's a form of gluttony. Along with that, there's a form of gluttony, not necessarily being a snob, but being a picky eater. Being a very picky eater.

[12 : 41] Having lots of unnecessary, sort of faddish dietary restrictions. It has to be this, not that, this, not that. Now, some dietary restrictions and some diets are very legitimate. Absolutely.

But when it becomes gluttony is when we begin to take pride in. We become very legalistic about these restrictions. Right? So you go over to somebody's house. They fix this amazing dinner. And you have a very unnecessary food restriction. But you assert that strongly. I'm sorry. I can't eat that. Right? That's when you're crossing the line into gluttony. So these are all forms of gluttony. But they all stem from the same core issue. Which is an over-focus on food. An over-focus on food. Either by being too indulgent. Or by being too restrictive. Both are forms of gluttony. So gluttony is a broad umbrella. But they both entail, all of this entails, focusing more on created things than the creator. [13:36] So that's what gluttony is. Now where does it come from? Where does this stem from in our hearts? Well, we get three clues in scripture with regards to Esau.

The first clue is this. We look at the comparison between the brothers in our passage. Hebrew is a very laconic language. Which means they don't waste words. If they put details in there, it's because they want you to focus on those details. And so they tell us a characteristic about each brother and they contrast with one another. So it tells us about Jacob in verse 27 that Jacob is a, quote, quiet man. Now the word quiet actually means an inner wholeness, an inner completeness, an inner sense of peace. So it's telling us that Jacob was still. He had an inner stillness that came from a sense of wholeness and completeness. He was a quiet, still-hearted man. Now by contrast, it says that Esau was a hunter. And the word hunter conveys the idea of striving, of seeking, of yearning, of craving. [14:42] He was always on the prowl, always hunting for provisions, hunting for food, hunting for something out there. He was always on the move. And so you can see the contrast that's being established here.

Jacob has this inner stillness, but Esau is restless and yearning. And see, that is what drives gluttonous behavior. It's essentially comfort-seeking. It's being driven by this restlessness. You know, alcoholics describe not feeling comfortable in their own skin, not knowing what to do with their hands or with their body. And so there's this restlessness to try to find something, some escape, some little comfort boost, some little dopamine hit, some little moment of pleasure or escape that will help you deal with that discomfort. It's that restless, comfort-seeking behavior. This is why some of us stress eat. You know, I call my most stressful days, I call them Five Guys days. [15:41] Because this weird thing happens, if you live in D.C., you know that Five Guys is a burger chain around here. And on my most stressful days, even if I've eaten a good lunch and I'm totally full, I will begin to crave that burger and Cajun fries from Five Guys.

And the craving has nothing to do with my body's need for nutrition. It's entirely a result of me trying to comfort myself and deal with the stress, stress eating. This is why some of us get, we realize that we get into a ritual of having cocktails literally every night of the week. You know, cocktail hour extends two, three, four hours and we do it seven days a week. It's this restlessness, comfort-seeking. So we see that in Esau, very much a contrast with Jacob. And then the second thing we see is we look at Esau's relationship with his dad. Look at what it says about that. Again, it only gives us one detail, but it's a very important detail. Verse 28. Isaac favored Esau. He loved both of his boys, but he favored Esau. He was clearly his favorite, and everybody knew it. Why? Because he loved Esau's cooking. [16:49] A couple of chapters later, Isaac says, Esau, bring me some of that delicious food that you make. The word is not just the Hebrew word for food. It's sumptuous food, fine food, delicious food.

Bring me some of that delicious food you know I love. So what does that tell us about Esau? Can you imagine growing up with that? Well, it tells us a number of things. First and foremost, for Esau, food is not just about food. For Esau, food is about love. Food is about dad's love. Food is about dad's approval. Food is about dad's favoritism. Food is a way to gain and secure dad's approval. And so food is very tied to emotions for Esau. It's very tied to relationship. Food represents love. And so I think underneath that restlessness and craving, what you will often find is that food for people, especially people with eating disorders, people who struggle with a variety of eating

disorders, food has become a way to deal with emotions.

Some of us have deep wounds from childhood, deep places of emptiness and hurt and pain. And you discover along the way that food is a really great way to make yourself feel better. And so you begin to project all of your emotional needs onto food, either eating food or not eating food.

[18 : 06] And it becomes a way to deal with emotional issues. Right? This drives many different eating disorders. So food has become very much an emotional reality for Esau.

And then the third thing, as we continue to go deeper into this, is actually not in this passage. It's in the New Testament in the book of Hebrews. We actually see a reference to Esau in Hebrews chapter 12.

It says in verse 15, So it's calling Esau a root of bitterness.

Now, what is that? Now, often root of bitterness is misinterpreted as having something to do with bitter feelings or an unwillingness to forgive. And that's not actually what's going on here.

It's a reference back to a passage in Deuteronomy. And a root of bitterness in the context of Deuteronomy is talking about someone who assumes, they take for granted, that God is going to continue to bless them even while they are turning away from God and worshipping the idols of the nations.

[19 : 23] So it's somebody who is presumptuous and just assumes God will bless them, that they're entitled to God's blessing, and yet they go right on in the stubbornness of their heart worshipping the idols of the land.

And let's be honest, food is one of the great idols of our nation. Right? And so Esau's core issue, the core of Esau's gluttony, the core of the dysfunction that he has with regard to food, is idolatry. It's idolatry. That's the root of bitterness that we see in Esau. He's trying, in other words, to satisfy spiritual hunger with physical food.

That's it. He's trying to satisfy spiritual hunger with physical food. And it does tremendous damage, as it always does. So if we put all of this together, here's the anatomy of gluttony.

Gluttony manifests as overeating, or over-focusing, or overly restricting what we eat, thinking about food and drink way too much, more than anything else. Now, if you go underneath that, what you see is that it's driven by this restless comfort seeking.

[20 : 31] If you go under that, what you see is that oftentimes, that is because we tend to tie emotions and food together. Food becomes a substitute, a way to either cope with or escape painful emotions and stress.

And then if you go down below that, why is all that happening? Well, it's because in our hearts, we tend to make things that God has created into gods, like food.

And within gluttony, the core of that is an idolatry that looks to food and looks to drink to give us things that only God can give us. So that's what's going on.

That's the anatomy of gluttony. That's where it comes from. So then the question becomes, how do we heal from gluttony? How do we recover from this? And, you know, a lot of people think that Christianity is anti-pleasure, that it's anti-enjoyment.

You know, asceticism is the thing that people often think of, the kind of giving up of all of the earthly pleasures. And while that has been a movement within Christianity, that is not Christianity's answer to this problem.

[21 : 39] In fact, the answer in Christianity to gluttony as well as all sin is the gospel. And the gospel is not about the removal of pleasure. The gospel is about the restoration of our ability to enjoy God through his gifts.

So that we celebrate and enjoy the gift. And that is a way that we actually enjoy and celebrate the one who gave it, instead of forgetting him. And so the gospel points us in the direction, when it comes to gluttony, of beginning to ask, if there is indeed in me a spiritual hunger, then the way to root out gluttony is to figure out how to feed and satisfy that spiritual hunger.

And if it's not physical food, it has to be spiritual food. We need spiritual food to satisfy spiritual hunger. And in the New Testament, Jesus performs a miracle where he creates enough bread to feed 5,000 people.

And so the next day, as people today would do the same thing, all of those people come and they want to find Jesus again. And they all find him on the other side of the lake. And Jesus discerns their hearts.

He knows why they've come. And he says in John 6, 26, Truly, truly, truly, I say to you, you're seeking me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves.

[23 : 01] So he knows that they're doing the same thing that Esau did. They're more focused on the food than on the giver, than on the blessing of God himself. And so he calls that out.

And then he says this in verse 27, Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. So you hear what he's saying?

He's saying don't work for physical food, because you're going to eat it, it's going to go into your body, you'll feel temporarily full, and then it's going to leave your body, and you're going to feel hungry again. Don't work for that food.

That satisfaction won't last. The hunger that you're feeling below that physical hunger, that deep spiritual longing, spend your life looking for the food that will satisfy that.

Spiritual food. So of course, when they realize what he's saying, they ask, where is this food? And he says directly, I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me shall not hunger.

[23 : 59] Whoever believes in me shall never thirst. So you get what he's saying. Jesus is saying, I am the spiritual food that will nourish the spiritual hunger in you. Apart from me, you can find no satisfaction.

I'm the one who is able to meet that deepest need in your heart. And so the gospel tells us this. Here's the gospel. We're all like Esau.

We have all traded our birthright as God's children, created to rule in his name over all of creation, created to bear his image in the world.

That we have traded that identity not for a pot of lentils, because that was real. We traded it for even less. We traded it for an illusion. The illusion that we can actually be in control of our own lives and be our own gods.

And the gospel says, we traded that birthright away. And so as a result, we have no hope. Hebrews says that Esau went and he tried to get his birthright back and he cried and he begged, but it was too late.

[25 : 03] The birthright was gone. But the gospel tells us, the good news is this. It's not too late for us. That Jesus Christ, who is God's firstborn son, was willing to trade his birthright.

He was willing to take on our sin, our rebellion, our rejection of God and his blessing. He took that onto himself, our idolatry, our gluttony. He died the death that we deserve to die in our place.

And while he was doing that, we received all of the privileges and the status and the blessing of God's firstborn son. We received an imperishable, unfading inheritance that is kept for us in the new creation, the down payment of which is the Holy Spirit, which is the seal and the guarantee that that inheritance is ours.

And we gain that status and we gain the place of honor at God's table. So this is the good news of the gospel. And so every time we feel that sense of restlessness, that craving, that desire, every time we are compelled to eat or we can't stop ourselves, every time we're haunted by thoughts of food in any form, we need to begin to be able to identify what's really going on.

That is not actually physical hunger. We need to be able to tell the difference between being really hungry where we need nutrients and being spiritually hungry where we need spiritual food.

[26 : 35] And we need to begin to realize that food and drink are not going to satisfy that spiritual hunger. They only leave us more empty and more depressed. And so those are times when it is crucial that we identify that longing and that we remember the love and the grace and the provision of Jesus that comes through the gospel.

And fortunately, Jesus gave us an amazing way to remember the gospel. And appropriately, it is a meal. And Jesus said, every time you come together and you share this meal, do it in remembrance of me, in remembrance of everything that we just talked about, in remembrance that I traded my birthright with you.

Do it in remembrance of that. And you know, I actually believe that the Eucharist is powerfully able to heal and restore specifically issues of gluttony, specifically issues of eating disorders.

I read an amazing piece just this past week of somebody, a woman who had struggled for years with eating disorders. And by the way, you know, as I said, anorexia, bulimia, all of it would fit within gluttony.

It's all an over-obsession with food. But this woman had tried different programs and treatments and books and nothing had really worked. And then she was a Christian, but then she came into a

liturgical sacramental church and she began to receive the Eucharist in a way that began to connect for her the dots to help understand what was actually happening at the table.

[28 : 04] And she writes this beautiful piece about how that over time began to heal her eating disorder. It began to actually transform her entire relationship with food, her relationship with her body, her relationship with matter.

She began to realize how much God loves matter. She began to see food not as an end unto itself but as a means a way of connecting with these greater, deeper, more brilliant realities. And I think that's what's on offer at the table.

It helps us remember who we are in Jesus Christ. Marcel Proust wrote a book. It has a couple of different translated titles. The most recent is *In Search of Lost Time*, his famous novel.

And in Proust's novel in the early part of the first volume, there is a moment where the narrator who is trying to recover his past. He's trying to recover a sense of his childhood, these things that he's lost that are fragmented.

And he takes a little Madeline cookie, a little French sort of cake, and he dips it into some tea and he puts it to his lips. And the moment this tea-soaked cake touches his mouth, the taste and the smell flood his senses and immediately he's transported back to his childhood.

[29 : 15] childhood. And all of a sudden he is plunged as though it is reality itself into this moment of sensory experience and memory and it all floods in and then he begins to try to make sense of this experience that he's had.

It's called a Proustian moment. And as beautiful as that illustration is, it pales in comparison to the Eucharist. Because the minute we take the bread that has been dipped in wine and we put it to our lips, that taste and that smell and that evocative power that food has to connect us to something beyond ourselves, that kicks in.

And all of a sudden we are immediately transported back to that moment just before his crucifixion when Jesus sat for one last time with his disciples huddled with his arms around them pledging his love to them, promising that he would never leave them, that he would come again.

And at the same moment we are transported into the future, to the moment when Jesus fulfills that promise, when he comes again. And do you know what scripture says about that day? It's a great feast.

The wedding supper of the Lamb in the New Jerusalem. And on that day, at that feast, all of that craving, that longing, that comfort seeking, that yearning, that incompleteness, that emptiness, all of that will finally be satisfied.

[30 : 34] And that will be the feast to end all feasts. And that is the feast to which all our feasts point. Let's pray. Let's pray. Thank you.