



Gluttony: Overcoming Our Attitude

Kris Shermer for November 21, 2010

My favorite day of the year is Thanksgiving, and there are several reasons for this.

First of all, I really like to cook. I think working all day on a meal and seeing the end result is extremely satisfying. I feel a great sense of accomplishment when I start with a bunch of ingredients and end up with a meal.

Another reason I enjoy Thanksgiving is because it's time with my family. My dad and I, who don't have a whole lot in common, spend the day cooking together, so that's an added bonus. We argue over who gets to make what and sometimes even try to wake up before the other one to begin cooking first and call "dibs" on our favorite sides. My mom, on the other hand, enjoys the fact that it's one day that she doesn't have to cook and other people are happy to make dinner for her for a change.

Another wonderful part of Thanksgiving is that the house smells amazing. (Enough said.)

Despite the fact that decorations and candy canes have been at Target for over a month now, Thanksgiving is actually what marks the beginning of the Christmas season. And let me tell you, I LOVE Christmas season. I love finding perfect gifts for people, making fudge, decorating the tree, and driving around seeing Christmas lights. And I know that as soon as Thanksgiving, my favorite DAY of the year is over, my favorite SEASON, the Christmas season, begins. It's awesome.

And the final reason I heart Thanksgiving is that the food, of course, is delicious. There is nothing quite like that first bite of turkey after a whole day of preparation. All of the delicious ingredients and wonderful smells culminate in a feast, which is followed by days and days of leftovers.

The only thing I do not like about Thanksgiving is that I can't ever seem to eat as much as I plan on eating. As I'm cooking, I imagine the platefuls of food I'll eat before the day is over, but when we finally sit down for dinner, I realize that I've made one of two critical errors. Either (A) I haven't eaten anything all day and my stomach has shrunk to the point that all the mashed potatoes I plan on eating simply won't fit, or (B) having done (A) the previous year, I have snacked throughout the day to that point that, despite the fact that my mouth is watering, I am not really very hungry. No matter what, I never eat as much as I say I am going to. Poor me.

My disappointment is, admittedly, pretty ridiculous. Who cares if I can't eat until I burst? Why does it matter that I eat a ton on that day? Well, Thanksgiving is one of the few days in the year where our society not only allows, but justifies, expects, even embraces extreme indulgence with food. On Thanksgiving, a ton of money is spent on all the necessary ingredients to create the most mouth-watering feast possible. On Thanksgiving we gorge ourselves until we cannot eat anymore, and then fall slowly into a deep tryptophan slumber.

Our attitudes towards food and consumption on Thanksgiving are characteristic of gluttony, not because we eat a lot or because we like the food we're eating, but because the real celebration of what we're thankful for is often lost in the midst of an attitude that demands more, more, more. Feasting on Thanksgiving would be great if it were truly a celebration, but it has been morphed over the years into a day of overindulgence, of stuffing ourselves, of eating for the sake of eating, until we can't eat anymore, just because we choose not to control ourselves.

And we absolutely love it.

I think when most people hear the term "gluttony", they imagine someone who does nothing but eat crazy amounts of food. We see in our minds a news story about a person who has eaten so much and become so overweight that they no longer fit through their front door. The news anchor reports live as we watch the team of workers widen the doorway so at last the captive can be free.

We think of things like this and compare ourselves to this image of what we think constitutes a 'glutton'. And we say, "Nah. Not me. I'm not that bad."

But maybe we are and we just aren't seeing it.

Gluttony, as it turns out, isn't as straightforward as we would have it. It isn't simply about food – sometimes it isn't about food at all. In our image of a glutton as someone who consumes lots of

food, we focus on the wrong part. We focus on the food, but what we should be looking at is the person's attitude as they consume that food.

Gluttony is an attitude thing. Holidays and celebrations typically involve food, and that isn't gluttony, despite what Jim Gaffigan says. During the holidays, we can see gluttony in our uninhibited consumption of sweets, treats, and huge portion sizes. But the issue isn't that we eat – the issue is our approach to what we eat. Overindulgence with food is the most recognizable indicator of a gluttonous attitude. And though, again, you may be thinking, "I don't eat nearly enough to be called a 'glutton'", consider this:

When Gregory the Great was first outlining the seven deadly sins and he came across gluttony, he wrote that it manifested itself in multiple ways. Certainly one of those ways was eating too much too quickly. Another way was too greedily – wanting the food for yourself. He also said gluttony reveals itself in how much money we spend on food and in the quality of the food we eat. If you are going out to a five star restaurant and spending \$60 on a half serving of pasta, his definition argues that that is still gluttony, even though you're still hungry when all is said and done.

Gluttony is about more than just the amount that we consume. **Gluttony has to do with our attitude towards the things we are consuming.** And my best guess is that if we really checked our attitudes about food and the things we consume, we would be hard pressed to find areas of our lives that we aren't at least a little bit gluttonous.

In the Middle Ages, gluttony was considered idolatry. We begin to worship our sense of taste, our stomachs, lifting our hunger up as that which is most important, instead of worshipping God. Our focus, it was said, shifted from adoration of God to adoration of food. People became so fixated on their own eating that their relationship with God took a back seat.

Paul described these kinds of gluttons to the Philippians this way (3:19):

Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is set on earthly things.

Gluttony was literally idolatry of the stomach. Morphing your life around your eating habits because your stomach was the most important thing in your life. Paul warns that devastation awaits these people who eliminate God from their life in favor of eating well.

Moving away from the Middle Ages, during the Renaissance and into the Industrial Revolution, things changed things a bit – suddenly having a thick waistline meant that you were wealthy and could afford to have only the finest foods at your table. Being overweight was a sign of affluence and status, something everyone aspired to. The laborers who had to work for their keep were unable to attain the higher status of those born into wealth who would never have to work a day in their life.

They sat around and ate the most exquisite delicacies day in and day out. Exercising to keep the weight off was unheard of in those days.

But now we find ourselves in a completely different situation. Being overweight is neither a sign of affluence nor of idolatry. As we have learned more about nutrition and our bodies, our culture has developed a new obsession with health and longevity, being as young as possible for as long as possible. These obsessions have led to an amplified presence of multiple diets, diet pills, issues with body image, and eating disorders. Food has become the enemy, and your relationship with food is not easy to hide.

Gluttony, as it relates to food, is the only of the seven deadly sins that you wear on your sleeve. Pride, envy, sloth, lust, wrath, greed... all of these can be, to some extent, hidden in the dark places of your heart, never to be seen by people you encounter.

But gluttony is different. The glutton is unable to mask their struggles. Overconsumption to the point of weight gain is impossible to hide – everyone knows. Food is the enemy because the result of eating that food is not hidden from the world.

And this is tricky, because food is necessary for survival. Gluttony is a difficult sin to work around, because the goal isn't to avoid eating. We need to eat. The problems begin when we examine how much we eat and what attitude we carry with us while we eat. Eating isn't the problem; that isn't what should be eliminated! But we are often too concerned with the visual aspects of eating and gluttony to examine the attitude behind it.

And as our culture has become more and more obsessed with the thin standard of beauty we see in magazines, movies, and television shows, we focus our energy on keeping that weight off. And not because it may be a 'sin' to overeat, but because as a whole, we have fixated our minds on living as long as possible and looking our best. Our issue, at this point in time, isn't with gluttony as a spiritual danger, but as a danger to our health.

So we turn to other forms of gluttony to satisfy our desire to consume. And often, this consumption comes in the form of bingeing. We live in a binge culture. Let me clarify what I mean by this: we are a society that tries to be good, tries to moderate our consumption, and fails repeatedly. And when we fail, we make it count.

Bingeing means gorging yourself on a lot of something (not necessarily food) in a short period of time. Bingeing isn't an "all the time" issue, it's an "all at once" issue. Bingeing means we can't wait; we have to have it right now.

We consume compulsively. Our urge to consume is irresistible, and oftentimes we indulge our desires without much forethought.

We binge on all kinds of things, including but not limited to food.

We binge on alcohol. Drinking until you're drunk out of your mind is still a problem, in terms of both your health and the situations that ensue, even if you only do it a few times a month.

We binge on media. Watching so much television that you fail to engage in relationships with other people is problematic, no matter what kind of awesome marathons you have.

We binge on shopping. Spending hundreds of dollars at the mall is probably going to make it difficult to pay your bills, and it certainly cuts into any kind of giving you would be doing with that money.

We even binge on things like studying, work, and exercise.

We binge on everything. Moderation is unheard of in a culture that prefers to "knock it all out at once".

When I was a student I knew that my reading would be much more effective (and I would actually remember the material) if I spread it out throughout the week. However, every Sunday night, I knew that I had several hours of social theory to learn before classes began on Monday morning. I wasn't getting any sleep that night, but at least the weekend had been homework free up to that point.

Now with my job, I put off documentation because I'd rather do other things, and then one night I find myself hours behind because I've let it pile up. Instead of spending time with people or getting any kind of decent sleep, I spend the night playing catch up on my computer.

Having cash absolutely burns a hole through my pocket. I'll take a \$20 out of the ATM, telling myself it has to last me the two weeks until my next paycheck, and by the end of the day it's gone because I decided I, with my excellent work habits, had earned a DVD and some ice cream.

Though I try not to buy sweets or junk food, when I do, I buy things I'm craving, things I will really enjoy, and I eat it all at once. The bag of chips I was going to have with lunch for the week is three quarters of the way gone the first time I sit down with a sandwich.

I am completely unable to monitor myself and moderate what I am consuming. And I don't think I'm the only one. If the opposite of bingeing is moderating, I don't think any of us are experts on moderation. And a lot of this is the society we live in, the one that tells us to go for it, to live for today. And if we're good "most of the time", what's it going to hurt to indulge a little here and there? Is a family sized bag of barbecue chips with lunch really going to hurt me?

One of the main problems with overindulgence and our binge culture is that it is not limited to one area of our life. It paves the way for multiple areas of bingeing, because what actually happens is that **we become unable to control our impulses**. Has anyone ever tried to eat an entire family sized bag of chips in one sitting? It's really hard to think of a light lunch that includes a fruit salad or a celery stick as a filling meal after that. One small binge here leads to a little more bingeing later. And before you know it, you've started a trend.

This is true in multiple areas of our lives. The bag of chips or the impulsive purchase are indicative of a larger problem. They demonstrate an underlying inability to control ourselves. The gluttonous attitude extends far beyond our food. We become obsessed with consumption and we succumb to our compulsive desires.

Proverbs 25:28 says a person who lacks self-control is like a city whose walls are broken down. (28 Like a city whose walls are broken through is a person who lacks self-control.)

Let's consider what exactly this meant back in the day when cities had walls. Walls were huge. Walls were the only way to keep out invading people groups. Without a wall, a city had no hope of surviving. It was left vulnerable to every outside force that stumbled upon it. There was no defense. The city would be looted, burned, and its citizens attacked. And without self-control, this is the scene that is painted for us with our gluttonous attitudes. It isn't just one part of the city that is left vulnerable, and it isn't just one part of our lives.

Eating disorders, so prevalent in our weight-obsessed society, are generally perceived as being a problem opposite to gluttony. However, they often begin in search of control. "I can't control much of what is going on, so I control my food."

Personally, I began having trouble with eating when I was in high school. I was overwhelmed with life and the drama that accompanies those four years, and things just felt out of control. I began eating as little as possible and exercising excessively so I could lose weight. I was already pretty thin, and it quickly became an unhealthy thin. But I felt great about how I looked. I was holding myself to society's standard of beauty.

But it was difficult to maintain that lifestyle, partially because I was tired all the time and partially because I had to lie to keep it going. Add onto that the guilt I felt every time I "messed up" and ate a real meal, and eventually I lost control. I became obsessed with my weight, with how much I was eating and exercising. The mindset that I had created (in order to be able to control something) was now controlling me, dictating my every move.

But before my habits could change, my attitude needed to. Though it was glaringly obvious that I had developed a problem, I wasn't able to solve it until I sat back and assessed where I was at and what I needed to be working towards. My goal had to be healthy, not thin.

Though it has been years since I first started having these issues, I still have phases where I fall back into the trap and the mindset that was so destructive. It's as if the residue from those struggles that began all those years ago is me not being able to find a balance between starving myself and eating everything in sight. I stop eating, realize I need to knock it off, and compensate by compulsively eating everything available.

No matter what phase of this cycle I find myself in, I feel that guilt again. It's frustrating and, honestly, I'm ashamed of the fact that I still, after all this time, struggle. But I do. Sometimes it is still difficult to make a conscious effort to be healthy. Sometimes it is still difficult for me to take care of myself. The overwhelming cultural infatuation is with looking your best, and it is a constant battle for me to instead concern myself with being healthy.

Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 6:19-20:

Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your bodies.

If we are told to honor God with our bodies, then that entails taking care of ourselves. Why do I bring this up in light of gluttony? Because eating disorders, though they appear to have nothing to do with overconsumption on the surface, take root in our binge culture. The cycle that waivers between eating nothing and eating everything, of fighting our every impulse and then indulging them, stems from our binge culture. And it is our binge culture and the mindset that we enter into, the one that tells us to consume compulsively, that overpowers our will to take care of ourselves, to moderate, and to be healthy.

The things we binge on take the place of other things in our lives that should be top priorities. It is really difficult to know where your money goes if you are impulsively spending every spare cent you have. Budgeting becomes near impossible. Jesus taught multiple times about the importance of being a good steward of the things we are given, and that isn't possible if we don't have at least a little bit of foresight about where our resources are being used. And the sad thing is, we aren't being bad stewards because of poor planning, or because something changed at the last second. We're bad stewards because we honestly cannot control ourselves.

Take a look at media: overindulgence in media, so easy with the plethora of season DVDs available nowadays, cuts into our time that could otherwise be spent building relationships with people or serving. Spending hours a day in front of the television isolates you. You become lost in the stories and lives of those you watch, never engaging with the people around you. These people, the ones on television, don't challenge you or argue. They won't fight you or say mean things to you or point out your flaws. They are much, much easier to spend the afternoon with than any kind of real life person. But these people can't meet our relational needs. Because God made us to be in community. And we can't be a part of a community if we are unwilling to expend our energy there.

Our binge culture exists because we have stopped trying to control our impulses. We have, in large part, accepted the fact that we are impulsive. We try to be good, sure, but when push comes to shove, we realize we can't hack it.

When Paul writes that the Holy Spirit has been given to us by God, that statement implies help. That statement gives us an ally—someone who will aid us in trying to leave some kind of balanced life. Bingeing is the natural result of trying to make it on your own instead of asking God for help. We try to be good and can't do it alone, so we fail and we fail big.

And let's note here, that as we "try" to be good, that's because we know what it means to be good. We know what it means to moderate. We know that moderation is the best way to have and maintain a healthy lifestyle. We know that watching twelve hours of television straight is bad for us. We know that letting our work pile up to the point where we can't do other things we're supposed to is bad for us. We know that eating an entire bag of family-sized chips is unhealthy and will make us feel sick. We aren't stupid – we know what's good for us and what isn't!

So why? Why is it that we insist on stuffing ourselves to the point of bursting every so often? Why are we gluttonous if we know better?

Gluttony is about the attitude we have when we consume things. Consider this: I find most of the time when I binge, be it on food or something else, that I'm really just trying to distract myself. I think most of the time when people binge, the binge is an outlet, a way to try and fill ourselves up with things we don't need to avoid addressing the things that we do need. The problem is that it gets worse over time, and then we find ourselves in a chaotic state where we cannot regulate. It isn't that we decide to do nothing but binge, it's that our bingeing becomes so hectic, we can't control our impulses at all anymore. And as we discover that the things we are bingeing on don't make us feel as good as we'd hoped, we want more.

That's the disconnect, really. We fill ourselves up with things we don't need, and when we find they are unfulfilling, we subconsciously think we need more of those things, instead of considering that perhaps what we need is something different.

The reality is, the issues we're trying to address with the food, the media, and the stuff, the void that we're trying to fill, is only made worse by the things we are filling ourselves up with. These things are addictive. Food is addictive. Media is addictive. Stuff is addictive. And addictions get worse over time, when our last "high" seemed effective at distracting us from our problems, the new "high" requires more. Gluttony is revealed by the attitude we carry as we consume. The more, more more. And this attitude interrupts our lives.

Instead of addressing real issues we may be having with people, with God, or with ourselves, we consume. We look for a Band Aid. Isn't it easier to sit down with some ice cream, drowning yourself in a pint of Ben & Jerry's, than to have a difficult conversation? Isn't it easier to watch hours and hours of television than to sit down and pray about situations you're struggling with? Well, it seems easier. Of course it's easier!... for a little while.

But living an impulsive, overindulgent life creates a situation where we are always looking for the Band Aid to solve our problems. Bingeing to cover up the real mess doesn't just happen once – it happens repeatedly, and then it takes over. And the sad part is, after we binge, the problem is still there, and it's probably been exacerbated by the fact that we now feel even more sick, stressed out, depressed, ashamed, and guilty.

Trying to solve our problems ourselves does not usually work out the way we think it will. And the thing is, we aren't expected to solve our problems alone. Working on things alone is a standard we created for ourselves. God never expected us to be alone. He never expected us to fight life's battles without any help.

(1) He told us in Matthew that he is with us – always. (28:20)

(2) He gave us his Holy spirit to live in us, counsel us, and help us live the best lives possible. That includes our health, our finances, our work, our minds, and our hearts. Galatians 5:22-23 lists the fruits of the spirit, or, the things that we will develop as the result of letting the spirit live in us. Among these things is self-control. Imagine that – God not only gives us this Spirit to live in us and guide us, he gives us a Spirit that will help us develop our character in ways that will have positive, tangible results.

(3) God also gave us a community of brothers and sisters to lean on when things get tough. To love us, support us, and keep us accountable when we need them to. I believe with my whole heart that people cannot thrive without some kind of community. We need people. God said about Adam that it wasn't good for man to be alone, and the same is true for us today.

During my sophomore year of college, I began struggling with eating again. It was one of my most difficult relapses, and I was scared that I had started to feel out of control and go down that road again. At that point, I had known Rachael for a year and a half. For some reason, in our many talks about life, I had neglected to tell her about my issues with food. Looking back, I know the reason. I know it is because I was ashamed that I still struggled with something that had been going on for five years. How was it possible that it was still a problem? But the thing is, it was. And as soon as food started becoming an issue again, I knew I needed help if there was going to be any kind of long term positive outcome. I didn't want the downward spiral. I didn't want the drama. I honestly wanted to feel good, and I knew from experience that beginning the hellish cycle between eating nothing and eating everything wasn't going to cut it.

So Rachael and I sat down to chat one day. I didn't know how the conversation would go, but I knew she was a safe person to talk to. I trusted her completely. And so I began to recount to her my struggles and history with food. I told her about the extremes of starving myself and about eating everything in sight. I told her I couldn't regulate. I told her I often lied about it. I told her I couldn't stop myself. I told her I couldn't control it anymore. Dinner was a nightmare time of day for me,

because I could skimp on breakfast and lunch since I had other places to be, but at night, I had nothing but time to agonize over food.

Rachael came up with a very practical solution. She asked me, “Would it help you if I made you food? I could divide up meals into appropriate portion sizes so you don’t have to worry about it. When you run out of food, I’ll make more. You won’t have to worry about dinner anymore.” I think I looked at her like she was a little crazy, because the suggestion certainly seemed that way to me. I started to say, “No, I couldn’t ask you to do that”, but she interrupted me and said, “Kris, this is a very easy, tangible way for me to serve you. And I would love to do this for you.”

I was scared that someone knew. That someone knew how bad I had become – because seriously, I thought, who can’t cook their own dinner? But something about the shared struggle, the shared experience, was comforting. Suddenly, I wasn’t fighting this battle alone. I had someone there to help me. God had given me a comrade. Someone to walk out of the darkness with me.

Rachael made me food for every day for a couple of months. It wasn’t a quick fix. It wasn’t that she did it one week and I thought, “Oh, that was so nice! I think I’m fine now!” It went on and on and on.

And I was given the time to work out my problems. To pray about what was happening and ask God to help me moderate, to help me believe that getting healthy and staying healthy was possible. And to not worry about what I was going to have for dinner, because someone else was taking care of that piece of the puzzle so I could engage in the larger battle. And I’ll never forget the day she started packing up another bag of Tupperware containers and I said, “No, that’s okay. I think I’m fine.” Because I was. I had gotten through the storm. And I could honestly say that I was able to move on and begin taking care of myself again. But I only got there because I was given some help.

God gives us all the tools we need to really work out our issues with food and consumption. He gives us himself, his Spirit, and his community. It is up to us, however, to choose to be better. We have to make the decision to moderate. We have to decide whether or not our bingeing and our compulsive consumption are worth the areas of our lives that are being compromised – namely our relationships, with God and with the people around us.

This Thursday is Thanksgiving. Following Thanksgiving is Black Friday. Both of these days are centered around overconsumption. But let me be clear that my intent is not to dissuade you from enjoying this weekend, my intent is to actually encourage you to do so, but to do so with the right heart.

Gluttony is about our attitude towards the things we consume. If Thanksgiving is about the celebration, about being thankful, then eating in celebration of the blessings in your life is not a sin. If Black Friday is about being a good steward of your money and buying things for people you love, then knocking out your shopping that day is not a sin. But if this week, and the holiday season, has

come to be about your insatiable desire to consume more and more and more, perhaps it's time to reevaluate how you feel about the things that you consume. Perhaps it's time to figure out how you can make this week, and this season, about the right things and about celebrating, instead of about the "stuff" on the table and in the stores.

Everything comes down to the attitude. And when we can really enjoy days of celebration, holidays, and events for what they stand for.... When we can truly celebrate what we are thankful for at a Thanksgiving feast, we're all right. Celebration is wonderful. Celebration is positive. Celebration is what it's really about.

And thank goodness, God gives us everything we need to overcome the compulsive mindset our culture has come to relish. He knows the things we indulge in aren't really what we're looking for. And when we are ready to seek him and his purpose for us, living in community with him and with those around us, he is waiting. Because he does want for us the best life possible.