

Jesus' Temptations—and Ours

Matthew 4:1-11

Sermon by Dan Schrock

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Lent 1

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. ²He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. ³The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." ⁴But he answered, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" ⁵Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, ⁶saying 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.'" ⁷Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" ⁸Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; ⁹and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." ¹⁰Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'" ¹¹Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

For many of us this story is extremely familiar. We hear it nearly every year in our Lenten worship services because Matthew, Mark, and Luke each tell a version of this story. We call it “the temptations of Jesus,” though I’m not sure how tempting Jesus actually found Satan’s three offers.

I don’t know about you, but when I get tempted, it’s a real struggle to not give in to the temptation. Sometimes I give in and fail to resist the allure of things that aren’t good for me. When I read Matthew’s story I get the impression that Jesus found it supremely easy to reject Satan’s three offers. The story says nothing about Jesus struggling mightily against the temptations, sweating it out with Satan, and just barely managing to resist after a heroic struggle. That’s what serious temptation is like for me, but there’s none of that here. Satan makes his offers and Jesus turns them down easily, with wit and wisdom, barely breaking a sweat. So in some ways, this story seems a bit remote from our experience—or at least remote from my experience.

Moreover, the three temptations Satan dangles in front of Jesus’ face aren’t temptations you and I typically encounter. How many times have you been

tempted to turn stones into bread, or bow down before Satan so you can rule the world? These are not the temptations from which our lives are made.

Instead of talking about Jesus' temptations, what if we talked honestly about a temptation closer to our experience? In our complex, fast world, temptations abound, so we have lots of choices when it comes to honest conversation about the many things that divert us from the way of God. We Christians have classically said there are seven core temptations, seven basic sins, which siphon us away from God's living water. They are gluttony, lust, pride, envy, anger, sloth, and greed. These certainly aren't the only sins that tempt us, yet they do appear regularly in the human condition.

What if today we focus on the temptation to gluttony? When Christians of the past listed these seven basic sins, they often named gluttony first. It seems like as good a place to begin as any. Maybe in future sermons I'll focus on some of the other cardinal sins.

We can define gluttony as an inordinate appetite for food and drink.¹ That word "inordinate" is crucial, because we all need to eat and drink if we want to keep on living. It's the way God designed us and oodles of other living creatures. Our animal bodies require food and drink to grow, to stay healthy, and to work. We've discovered through thousands of years of practice that it works well to eat at least two or three times a day. Eating in moderation is no sin at all.

¹ This definition comes from Lawrence Cunningham, retired professor of theology at the University of Notre Dame in his book *Seven Deadly Sins: A Visitor's Guide* (Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, 2012), p. 12. For some material in this sermon I'm indebted to Cunningham and to Francine Prose, *Gluttony: The Seven Deadly Sins* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

Gluttony is the *inordinate* appetite for food and drink. Inordinate means we eat or drink more than we need to maintain healthy bodies. We become gluttons, if you will, by consuming more than the right amount. Gluttony is a sin of degree, of amounts, of excess. It's too much of what is otherwise a very good thing. There's a paradox here: we must eat to live, yet too much eating has been classically considered sinful. So how do we untangle the paradox? Where lays the happy medium of temperance?

Let's begin with examples of outrageous gluttony. Have you heard of Nathan's Famous Hot Dog Eating Contest, held every year on July 4 in Coney Island, New York? It's gluttony gone amuck. The current record holder for women is Sonya Thomas, who ate 36 $\frac{3}{4}$ hot dogs and hot dog buns in 10 minutes; and for men, Joey Chestnut, who consumed 69 hot dogs and hot dog buns in 10 minutes. This same Joey Chestnut fancies himself a competitive eater. Last year he won the Hooters World Wing-Eating Championship by eating 179 wings in 10 minutes; and at the Hillshire Farm Bratwurst Eating World Championship, he set a world record by eating 70 bratwursts.

I dare say none of us in this room have consumed so much in so little time. Our sins of gluttony, if we commit them, pale in comparison. Our overeating is more likely to occur at church potluck meals, at family holiday dinners, or on birthdays. These are sporadic indulgences. The deeper challenge, perhaps, is chronic overeating. Food in our society is widely available at all hours of the day and night, and assuming we have the money, we can snack continuously throughout the day, consuming far more than necessary. In a context of plenty, the temptation to gluttony always lurks at the door of the refrigerator.

Let us clear up one misconception right away: there is no necessary link between gluttony and great girth. Our culture tends to assume that people of girth eat gluttonously, while slender people eat parsimoniously. This is a logical fallacy

since people of slender size can and do crossover into gluttony, while those of plus size may actually be consuming a right-sized amount of food and drink.

It's not easy to figure out what the right amount of food and drink is. Last summer Nicholas and I installed bamboo flooring in our living room. My part of the job was to nail down the bamboo planks with a manual flooring nailer, using a special heavy hammer. Normally I don't get much exercise, sloth being one of my more familiar cardinal sins. But suddenly I was getting a huge amount of very sweaty exercise. On the first day I was fine eating the same amount of food I usually eat. However, that changed on the second day, when I found myself ravenously hungry after eating the usual amount of food. My body wanted more food precisely because it was working unusually hard. I obliged. By the third day I was easily eating twice as much food as usual. Was I succumbing to the sin of gluttony? No, I don't think so. To keep pace with the output of manual labor, I needed to eat more for those few days while we were working hard. Now if I had continued eating twice the food the following week after we finished the job, that would have become gluttonous, because once we were done, I slipped back into my usual slothful habits of not getting much physical exercise. I simply didn't need eat twice the amount of food anymore.

So sometimes we do need to eat more food and drink more liquids than at other times. A corollary of this is that people in some occupations need more food than people in other occupations. A lumberjack probably needs to eat more than a CEO; a roofer probably needs more than a teacher. What is one person's need is another person's gluttonous portion.

Another variable is body type and size. Taller and larger boned persons will likely need more food and drink than shorter and smaller boned persons. In his prime, my father was a large-boned man who measured 6' 2". By contrast, I am neither so large-boned nor so tall. Apparently my body size was affected by my

mother's family, which tends to be smaller-boned and shorter than my father's family. Consequently I don't need to eat as much as my father did at my age. Ralph Sampson, the retired basketball player who measured 7' 4", surely needs to eat more food every day than Calvin Murphy, also a retired basketball player, who measured only 5' 9".

A further complication in understanding gluttony is that the Bible itself upholds the virtue of occasional feasting. The Passover meal is a kind of celebratory feast to commemorate the deliverance from slavery in Egypt. Isaiah 25:6 imagines a time in the future when God will prepare a rich feast of choice meats and fine wines. Jesus spent so much time eating and drinking that in Matthew 11:9 he was accused of being a glutton and a drunkard. Note he was *accused*, which doesn't automatically mean he was actually guilty. And in Luke 14:15-24, Jesus likens the kingdom of God to a great banquet where the poor and maimed, the blind and lame, can sit down and enjoy a sumptuous feast.

All of this stirs up a crucial question: What exactly is the problem with gluttony? What precisely is sinful about it? Jesus' parable of Lazarus and the rich man in Luke 16:19-31 gives us a clue. You will recall the rich man in the parable "feasted sumptuously every day" (v. 19) while at the gate to his property lay Lazarus, a poor and hungry man. Right there is the problem with gluttony: eating and drinking vastly more than we need while hungry people pine nearby for their minimum daily requirement of food. If gluttony is the inordinate appetite for food and drink, the problem is therefore twofold: first, we eat more than our particular body needs for daily sustenance; and second, we eat lavishly while locking out people like Lazarus. What makes feasting in the kingdom of God so unique and countercultural is that the Lazaruses of the world are invited to sit at the table and join in the fun.

For most of us, the temptation to gluttony is more immediate and alluring than the temptation to jump off the Sears tower and see if an angel catches us. Jumping off the pinnacle of the temple might have been tempting for Jesus, but not for us. Temptations are like this: they are close at hand and finger our particular life, our particular situation. Gluttony involves very personal decisions about what and how much we put into our own mouths, while also taking steps to supply the dietary needs of others. The church cannot legislate these things. But what each of us can do, in consultation with friends, is to ask good questions. How much food does my particular body need? And what am I doing to contribute to the dietary needs of others?