

## Gluttony and the Christian



### ***What is gluttony, and what does Scripture say about it?***

The dictionary defines a glutton as “A person who eats or consumes immoderate amounts of food and drink.”<sup>2</sup>

The Bible calls us to modesty and moderation in the consumption of food and drink.

To be temperate is to exercise moderation and self-restraint.

The glutton and drunkard have a lack of self-control and exhibit intemperance. The end result is obesity and drunkenness.

Holy Scripture speaks frequently about the deadly sins of gluttony and drunkenness. In this study, we are focusing our attention on gluttony, in regard to food. Gluttony is a deadly sin, for it leads to being overweight and eventually obese. Obesity is tied to many health problems, chief of which are heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes, heart attacks, strokes, and cancer.

In the song of Moses, recorded in Deuteronomy, chapter 32, verses 9-20, we read of the spiritual declension of God’s covenant people Israel:

9 For the LORD's portion *is* His people; Jacob *is* the place of His inheritance. 10 "He found him in a desert land And in the wasteland, a howling wilderness; He encircled him, He instructed him, He kept him as the apple of His eye. 11 As an eagle stirs up its nest, Hovers over its young, Spreading out its wings, taking them up, Carrying them on its wings, 12 So the LORD alone led him, And *there was* no foreign god with him. 13 "He made him ride in the heights of the earth, That he might eat the produce of the fields; He made him draw honey from the rock, And oil from the flinty rock; 14 Curds from the cattle, and milk of the flock, With fat of lambs; And rams of the breed of Bashan, and

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<sup>1</sup> The Glutton, by Georg Emanuel Opiz, a Bohemian German painter (1775-1841). (Public domain image)

<sup>2</sup> Excerpted from *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, Third Edition* (1992), Houghton Mifflin Company.

goats, With the choicest wheat; And you drank wine, the blood of the grapes. 15 **"But Jeshurun grew fat and kicked; You grew fat, you grew thick, You are obese!** Then he forsook God *who* made him, And scornfully esteemed the Rock of his salvation. 16 They provoked Him to jealousy with foreign *gods*; With abominations they provoked Him to anger. 17 They sacrificed to demons, not to God, *To gods* they did not know, To new *gods*, new arrivals That your fathers did not fear. 18 Of the Rock *who* begot you, you are unmindful, And have forgotten the God who fathered you. 19 " And when the LORD saw *it*, He spurned *them*, Because of the provocation of His sons and His daughters. 20 And He said: 'I will hide My face from them, I will see what their end *will be*, For they *are* a perverse generation, Children in whom *is* no faith. (NKJ, emphasis added)

This faithless, perverse generation of Israelites are condemned for their idolatry and unbelief, which included their sin of growing "fat," "thick," and "obese." God blessed them with abundant food, but they became overly self-indulgent and self-loving, as evidenced by their weight gain.

Under the civil laws of Israel, Moses wrote in Deuteronomy 21:18-20:

18 If a man has a stubborn and rebellious son who will not obey the voice of his father or the voice of his mother, and *who*, when they have chastened him, will not heed them, 19 "then his father and his mother shall take hold of him and bring him out to the elders of his city, to the gate of his city. 20 "And they shall say to the elders of his city, 'This son of ours is stubborn and rebellious; he will not obey our voice; he is a glutton and a drunkard.' 21 "Then all the men of his city shall stone him to death with stones; so you shall put away the evil from among you, and all Israel shall hear and fear.

We see here the severe punishment prescribed for the "stubborn and rebellious son" who would neither respect the rule of his parents nor the elders. God adds that this rebel "is a glutton and a drunkard"—two sins that were publicly known and scandalous in Israel but rather tolerated and ignored by modern society and all too many churches.

In the Proverbs, Solomon gives this wise advice:

19 Hear, my son, and be wise; And guide your heart in the way.  
20 Do not mix with winebibbers, *Or* with gluttonous eaters of meat;  
21 For the drunkard and the glutton will come to poverty, And drowsiness will clothe a *man* with rags. (23:19-21).

Here we note that God's people are warned not to have fellowship with drunkards and gluttons. Both drunkenness and gluttony have a tendency to lead to poverty. Why? It is expensive to purchase a lot of alcohol and a lot of food to feed the never-ceasing lust of a drunkard and a glutton for more and more drink and food. This lack of self-control has a serious impact on one's health, decreasing a person's productivity, and increasing their potential healthcare expenses. Productive work requires a sober mind, and obesity inhibits the ability of a person to work a physically demanding job and to think clearly.

In Ezekiel, God warns us that gluttony was a rampant sin in Sodom, the infamous city that God destroyed with fire and brimstone on account of its great wickedness:

49 "Look, this was the iniquity of your sister Sodom: She and her daughter had pride, **fullness of food**, and abundance of idleness; neither did she strengthen the hand of the

poor and needy. 50 "And they were haughty and committed abomination before Me; therefore I took them away as I saw *fit*. (16:49-50, emphasis added)

Oftentimes, fullness of food or gluttony is associated with pride and self-love. It also is associated with an "abundance of idleness." Idleness often leads to depression and gives opportunity to eat more often and in more abundance than would be the case if someone were extremely busy in work, exercise, and study. Furthermore, obesity leads to health problems that can cause someone to be more idle than the man who is physically fit.

In the book of Daniel, chapter 1, God also instructs us to beware of the allure of decadent eating, unrestrained gratification, and self-indulgence. We read that Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon

5 . . . appointed for them a daily provision of the king's delicacies and of the wine which he drank, and three years of training for them, so that at the end of *that time* they might serve before the king. . . .

8 But Daniel purposed in his heart that he would not defile himself with the portion of the king's delicacies, nor with the wine which he drank; therefore he requested of the chief of the eunuchs that he might not defile himself.

9 Now God had brought Daniel into the favor and goodwill of the chief of the eunuchs.

10 And the chief of the eunuchs said to Daniel, "I fear my lord the king, who has appointed your food and drink. For why should he see your faces looking worse than the young men who *are* your age? Then you would endanger my head before the king."

11 So Daniel said to the steward whom the chief of the eunuchs had set over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah,

12 "Please test your servants for ten days, and let them give us vegetables to eat and water to drink.

13 "Then let our appearance be examined before you, and the appearance of the young men who eat the portion of the king's delicacies; and as you see fit, so deal with your servants."

14 So he consented with them in this matter, and tested them ten days.

15 And at the end of ten days their features appeared better and fatter in flesh than all the young men who ate the portion of the king's delicacies.

16 Thus the steward took away their portion of delicacies and the wine that they were to drink, and gave them vegetables. (1:5, 8-16)

### ***Is food bad?***

In the Old Testament we read of the abundance of foods with which God blessed His people.

They ate meats, including lamb, cattle, fowl (e.g., birds, quail, chickens, turkeys), and fish.

They ate vegetables and an abundance of fruits, including fresh grapes and raisins, figs, pomegranates, and olives. They used olive oil and herbs. They ate beans and lentils. And the Promised Land is frequently referred to as “a land flowing with milk and honey.”

They ate a lot of bread. We often read of the flax, barley, the choicest wheat, and the various grains.

They drank the fruit of the vine, which included wine and presumably fresh grape juice. (Clearly, wine is not prohibited in Scripture. And yet there are numerous warnings against “intoxicating drink” (e.g., Prov. 31:4).)

The passage from Daniel shows us that Christians must beware of overindulgence in food and drink. For some, it may be necessary to eat a very bland, vegetarian diet and to abstain from all alcohol. For others, they can enjoy a wide variety of tasty foods and drink a moderate amount of beer or wine without falling into sin. If God’s people were able to eat figs and pomegranates, there surely is nothing sinful about eating chocolate or watermelon.

In the New Testament, we see the contrast between the ascetic lifestyle of John the Baptist who lived off “locusts and wild honey” (Matt. 3:4; Mark 1:6) and Jesus Christ, who was repeatedly slandered by the Pharisees. In Matthew 11:19, Jesus said, “The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Look, a glutton and a winebibber, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’ But wisdom is justified by her children” (cf. Luke 7:34). Jesus also turned water into wine (John 2).

It is clear from Scripture that the Bible does not prohibit eating meat or drinking wine. However, since our body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, we should make ourselves aware of the health benefits and risks of various foods and drinks. We should ask questions like—how much sugar is healthy? How much alcohol can I consume without becoming intoxicated and without causing harm to my brain and body? How much caffeine can I consume without ill effects? How much pork or lobster is healthy to consume? How much cheese or chocolate can I eat without harmful effects? How much of my diet should consist of fruits and vegetables, beans, fiber, grains, etc.? We should avoid overindulgence and avoid foods (e.g., steaks, ice cream) or drinks (e.g., soda, alcohol) entirely if we cannot be temperate and self-controlled in our consumption of them.

While the Old Testament ceremonial laws that declared food to be spiritually “clean” and “unclean” have been abolished by the coming of Christ, the Old Testament laws may help us to discern what foods are healthy for our bodies and which may not be healthy.

When it comes to the foods and drinks we consume, Christians should always use discernment and the investigative tools and research of food science to make healthy choices that will strengthen and not harm their bodies.

The apostle Paul taught in the New Testament book of 1 Corinthians,

19 Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit *who is* in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? 20 For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God's. (6:19-20)

Since our body is the temple of the Holy Spirit we must flee from immorality, and we must also avoid consuming any food, drink, or drug that is harmful to our bodies.

Paul taught elsewhere in Ephesians 5:18, “And do not be drunk with wine, in which is dissipation; but be filled with the Spirit.”

And in 1 Corinthians 10:31, he concludes, “Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.”

Can I be filled with the Holy Spirit if I am intoxicated by alcohol or any mind-altering drug? No.

In light of the tremendous evidence that tobacco and nicotine use are highly addictive and cause numerous forms of cancer, heart disease, and other diseases, it is clearly a sinful vice. If I smoke or vape, will the lungs, brain, and organs that God gave me remain free from impurity, healthy, and unlikely to develop cancer? Science and medicine say, “No.”

Will I be a productive, healthy Christian and honor God with my body, if I overindulge in food (the sin of gluttony) and make bad choices that cause me to become overweight and obese? Scripture and reason say, “No.”

Interestingly, many advertisers boast of their “decadent” desserts. What does the word *decadent* mean? Decadence is “a process, condition, or period of deterioration or decline.”<sup>3</sup> If a food is decadent, it is “marked by or providing unrestrained gratification; self-indulgent.”<sup>4</sup>

Gluttony is indeed a respectable and accepted sin in our society and even in many evangelical churches. Yet, God calls Christians to self-denial. Self-denial does not lead to obesity. Self-denial and self-discipline call for hard work, sober decision-making in food choices, regular exercise, and a lifestyle of making healthy choices—to the best of one’s ability with the knowledge, abilities, and financial resources God provides.

While Holy Scripture calls us to work, it is relatively silent in regard to the modern concept of “exercise” and “fitness.” Yet, there are some principles to glean here as well.

### ***What about exercise?***

Why is Scripture relatively silent about exercise? In Biblical times (and throughout human history up until the invention of the automobile and television), nearly everyone stood and walked, often miles a day. Most men and women did physical labor and/or lived on farms; they didn’t sit at desks, in automobiles, or on public transportation. It is only in the past few decades that “couch potatoes” began watching TV and movies and playing video games. Prior to the twentieth century, it would have been difficult to imagine the sedentary lifestyle that is so common in our day. So the Bible presupposes that cardiovascular exercise is a regular part of life for most people. Living in modern times, if we want to have healthy physical bodies, we must be self-disciplined to get the proper exercise (e.g., stretching, walking, jogging, weight training, physical labor) that the body requires for optimal strength and health.

Employing the imagery of a competitive runner, the apostle Paul teaches in 1 Corinthians 9:24-27:

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<sup>3</sup> Excerpted from *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, Third Edition* (1992), Houghton Mifflin Company.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may obtain *it*. And everyone who competes *for the prize* is **temperate in all things**. Now they *do it* to obtain a perishable crown, but we *for an imperishable crown*. Therefore I run thus: not with uncertainty. Thus I fight: not as *one who* beats the air. But **I discipline my body** and bring *it* into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified. (emphasis added)

Here we see that Paul calls us to a modest and temperate life marked by self-discipline. In the context of our study, God calls us to modesty in our consumption of food and drink. God calls us to physical and spiritual discipline. And arguably a well-disciplined body requires exercise and hard work, as exercise and diet work together to prevent weight gain and obesity.

In 1 Timothy 4:7-8, Paul exhorts Timothy:

But reject profane and old wives' fables, and exercise yourself toward godliness. **For bodily exercise profits a little**, but godliness is profitable for all things, having promise of the life that now is and of that which is to come. (emphasis added)

Likewise here, Paul acknowledges that bodily exercise and physical training is profitable for our health. And yet, by comparison, spiritual discipline that leads to an increase in godliness is even far more profitable, as it not only benefits us in this life but for all eternity!

### **Conclusion**

Overindulgence and intemperance are grave sins, as they inhibit the pursuit of godliness. They destroy the Protestant work ethic. Intemperance can even extend to excess in other areas—too much entertainment, too much exercise or athletics, too much travel for pleasure, too much unprofitable talk or unnecessary work. Many things can become idolatrous if taken to the extreme, as they can crowd out all time for what God requires (e.g., Sunday worship, family and private worship, Bible study, prayer, work, relationships, and sleep). However, Scripture singles out excessive consumption of food and drink in particular, and thus the Church should acknowledge these sins as public sins. And the Church should acknowledge that gluttony and drunkenness are disqualifying sins for its ordained leadership, as the Lord requires that a man be “temperate,” “sober-minded,” “not given to wine,” and “self-controlled.” (1 Tim. 3:3, 8; Tit. 1:7-8).

So, in summary, gluttony is a deadly sin that leads to deadly physical and spiritual consequences.

Let us make healthy choices that are honoring to God.

Let us work diligently to strengthen and purify the temple of God, which is the body of Christ.

Let us flee the evil sin of gluttony.