

I. Video (MJW on scale) / Introduction¹

A. The Bible talks about food... a lot. In fact, it begins and ends with it. From forbidden fruit in a garden to a banquet table in heaven, food is big theme.²

B. This isn't all that surprising. Given how much of our life revolves around food – from planting, growing, harvesting, transporting, storing, marketing, shopping, preparing, eating, cleaning up, to say nothing of how much pleasure and pain it causes – we would expect God to weigh in. And He does. However, I suspect this is the first sermon you've ever heard on gluttony. It's the first I've ever preached. As it turns out, we do not pay that much attention to what God has said about food, and as a result, it causes a lot of problems.³ But let's not go there just yet. There are a lot of positive things we can say about food.

II. Let's start with three

A. First: Food is a source of great joy.

¹ Quotes: 1) "Their kitchen is their shrine, the cook their priest, the table their altar, and their belly their god." Charles Buck; 2) A very large part of mankind's ills and the world's misery is due to the rampant practice of trying to feed the soul with the body's food. Frank Ferrell; 3) For I have often told you, and now say again with tears, that many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their end is destruction; their god is their stomach; their glory is in their shame. They are focused on earthly things, but our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. The Apostle Paul; 4) Twas the month after Christmas, And all through the house, Nothing would fit me, Not even a blouse. (Anonymous); 5) If our societies are founded on Avarice, the state to which they are reduced is Gluttony. Henry Fairlie; 6) We Christians have so tamed our enjoyment in God that we cannot fathom what such thrill-seeking would even look like. Feasting on God is as foreign to most Americans as an empty stomach. Why can't we fix our souls on the only goodness who can handle our cravings? Why do we chase the more mild flavors of money, food and sex? Jason Todd; 7) "Taste and see that the Lord is good." Psalm 34:8; 8) As with all forms of gluttony, the end is solitude. For none of the activity needs a companion. The driving motive of the dieter is again an inordinate self-love. Henry Fairlie; 9) It takes more than food to make a human feel right in the pit of their stomach. It takes a life pleasing to God. Dan Boone; 10) It is a sin that most of us commit, but few of us mention. It is one of the prevalent sins among Christians. Billy Graham writing about gluttony; 11) The god of thinness is our new national obsession. Its bible is the newest diet book. Its altar the bathroom scale. Its prayer, counting calories. Its goal, to be noticed. Its motivation, shame. Its idol, the perfect body. Its temptation, carbs, calories and chocolate. Dan Boone

² Food comes up a lot. Here are just a few examples: Esau's trading his birthright for a bowl of soup (Gen. 25:29-34); Elijah and the widow making cakes (I Kings 17:8-16); Jesus feeding the 5,000 (Luke 9:10-17); the Last Supper (Luke 22:14-23), and more: manna in the wilderness, the raven feeding Elijah, Jesus turning water into wine, etc. ;

³ A quick survey of the landscape shows our obsession with food: 1) incessant advertising; 2) the debates about what to eat(GMO, vegan); 3) the focus on diets; 4) related health problems (obesity, bulimia, diabetes, etc.)

1. We were designed by God to eat. That is not the reason we were created. Our highest calling is to glorify God. We are not supposed to “live to eat” but “eat to live.” But, per God’s design, we need to eat and it’s fun to do. He gave us taste buds so that we can enjoy food and he gave us ten thousand different things that we can eat.⁴

2. It could have been done other ways. If all we were after was energy He could have designed us with some kind of batteries. God made eating something that is often a source of pleasure.

B. Second: Food is a catalyst for time with family and friends.

1. Think about how many important things to place around food. Think about how many important things happen because people sit down to eat together. Think about how many important things are discussed at the table. Think about how much kids learn by sitting with their parents at the table every day.

2. Some of you – if you didn’t have to eat – would spend even more time working. Lacking a requirement (or at least an excuse) to sit down with others and socialize, you wouldn’t do it. Eating with others is a catalyst of lots of good things.

3. Just think about all the big moments in life where food is not just present but prominent: weddings, reunions, banquets, graduations, birthday parties. In almost all of them, food – even it is not central – it’s not far away.

4. This past week I called a friend. Paul and I were more acquaintances than close friends, but he was a college pastor with InterVarsity back when I was leading a college ministry network, and because he was an interesting guy - a good writer and thinker – I occasionally asked him to speak at various events. Well, about fifteen years ago he called me the day before he was to lead a workshop at a conference to say he had the worst case of mono his doctor had ever seen and he couldn’t show up. A few days after the conference I called to see how he was doing and he told me it wasn’t mono it was cancer. Over the next year Paul was locked into a very ugly fight - surgeries, chemo, radiation. He was not expected to survive, but he did. However, he was left without the ability to swallow.

5. The last conversation we had took place when the therapists who were supposed to teach him how to swallow again were losing hope.

⁴ It is a declaration of our dependence upon God. In some ways it’s as sensual and mysterious as sex, involving taste buds, smells, flavors and colors.

6. We lost touch. I thought about him off and on over the years. Wondered if he made it and wondered if he had ever regained his ability to eat and drink. This week I tracked him down. He said it's been over 13 years since he last ate or drank anything. I told him I was preaching on gluttony and asked if he would – from his very unique perspective – reflect on food. He said several things.

a) He said, “I take the descriptions about the wedding feast of the Lamb in Heaven very literally. I am looking forward to that party. I am going to eat more than anyone else. I will be at that table longer than anyone else.”

b) I asked him if there was any food in particular that he missed. He said, the first thing I will reach for is a glass of cold water. “That’s what I miss most.”

c) He went on to say that food is sacramental. So many important things happen around food. So many events place food in the very center that it’s awkward when you cannot eat.

d) I asked if he sat down to not eat with his family. He said, “Every day. And we go out to eat as a family and I go. I don’t want to miss it.”

7. Food brings us together.

C. Third: Food is an ongoing reminder of the goodness of God.

1. We do not get this. Not very often. We may say grace and thank God for his provision, but we seldom realize how dependent we are upon his favor. We largely feel like we take care of ourselves. But just stop and think this through.

2. Think about how the system is designed. Do you remember when you first learned that if you put this (an apple seed) into the ground it would eventually turn into ten thousand of these?

a) When we're little we don't understand how the world works. The world is full of mysteries. We are surprised to learn all kinds of things. I remember being shocked to discover that my kindergarten teacher didn't live at school, and realize that she had a regular life. I also remember the first time someone told me that if you bury an apple seed it will turn into a tree that produces apples. I thought it was a joke. Why would anyone think it would work that way? That's magic. Amazing! Unthinkable! How does that work?

- b) Can you recapture some sense of awe with this system? We know it happens, but we hardly understand how that small seed contains the DNA it needs to turn the dirt around it into a tree that will grow in the sun, be pollinated by bees and produce apples that we can eat!
 - c) Be amazed. Stop and be amazed that a brown cow can eat green grass and turn it into white milk.
3. Let's think about water. We need it. Every few hours. How do we get it?
- a) Well, today we go to a faucet. But back up one step. How is water disbursed around the planet? How do people who do not live close to an ocean or lake get water? How do farmers in Kansas get enough water to water their crops so when they put a seed in the ground it turns into food?
 - b) It falls from the sky!
 - c) Imagine that you are given the task of getting water to Kansas farmers. They need hundreds of billions of gallons per year. They need it to come every few days. They need it evenly distributed and delivered in really small doses. Can you imagine the cost – the materials cost, fuel costs, purification costs, to say nothing of the man hours, required to truck water in or build the pipeline from the oceans to Kansas?
 - d) Can you imagine what you'd say to the person who suggests, "Let's design a system whereby the water from the ocean rises into the sky, floats along in the air until it gets over Kansas and then, every few days, sprinkles down. And let's have all of this be free."
4. We have no idea or appreciation how unbelievable the ecosystem God designed actually is. We take it for granted. We act like we can get by on our own because we have enough money to stop at Taco Bell on the way home.
5. We have no idea. Hey, I have no idea how a brown cow eats green grass and makes white milk.
6. We read the account of God providing manna from heaven for the Jews when they were wandering around in the Egyptian desert and think, "If only God did something like that I'd believe." Men and women, God does something like that every day. The system is amazing and the only reason we are not amazed is because we've seen it in action and we've stopped paying attention.⁵

⁵ The disruptions we've seen in weather patterns in the last few years and the explanations and debates that surround what is going on – the amazing complexity of the global ecosystem – give some of us pause to realize: this could all

D. Food has some great upsides. It's fun to eat. It brings us together and it reminds us (or should) of God's ongoing care for us. However...there is a downside.

III. The problem with good gifts is that they have powerful downsides.

A. When really good things – like fire, or sex or food – are misused, they can do great harm. Their ability to do good is matched by their ability to wreak havoc. We see this at a variety of levels.

B. Perhaps the most obvious are the problems caused by a lack of food.

1. Sometimes this is the result of natural disasters. One of the leaders we (Christ Church) supported through ScholarLeaders International, is Abdella Usman from Ethiopia. Back in the 80s, when Abdella was in his early 30s and Ethiopia was going through a horrific famine (you may remember the pictures), he was put in charge of a World Vision food distribution center. For the first six months he was in charge of the camp someone died of famine (or a famine related problem) every hour of every day.

2. Culturally, Ethiopians do not look for help until they have exhausted every resource they have. So, before they showed up for a free meal at a camp they had eaten the seed for the next year's crop, and dismantled and sold their home, board by board. They did not show up until they were down to nothing. So it's not just a meal for today that they need. They have nothing and will not have anything for a long time.

3. Abdella told me that the situation he faced was further complicated by American generosity. "You saw pictures of the situation – the living skeletons – and sent food. Thank you. But tragically the free food meant that those farmers who had kept their farms working now had no markets to sell their crop. So they too fell into poverty.

4. Helping is complicated. We supported Abdella in his studies to try to figure out the best way to prevent these kinds of massive tragedies from happening again in Ethiopia.

5. Of course there are other types of national food tragedies. It's not always a natural disaster or the unintended consequences of those who are trying to help who mess things up. Sometimes it's inept or evil governments. Stalin and Mao each presided over the deaths of tens – if not hundreds – of millions of their own people in order to force a particular political agenda. Today the citizens of North Korea and Zimbabwe are starving because of massively inept and corrupt governments.

C. Closer to home – and on a much smaller scale – we see problems in North Chicago, where there is not a single grocery store. It is referred to as a Food Desert.

1. That means that if you lack a car – as many do – and you walk to the local food mart, you cannot buy fresh fruits and vegetables. What you can buy is not the food your body needs most.

2. There are people working on this. People from this congregation have been among those trying to fix this problem. Jennifer Grumhaus and NCCP has a new food pantry at North Chicago High School in which they are trying to feature fresh fruits and vegetables. Ike Hong is several years into a Community Garden Project. At the last “dig day” they had people out demonstrating all kinds of healthy recipes.

D. Suffice it to say, there are a lot of food problems on a macroscopic level, and they need our attention. But I want to focus on more of a personal level.

IV. There are two ways the sin of Gluttony can express itself in your life or mine: we eat too much, or we allow food to have too much power over us. Both are forms of idolatry.

A. I am not going to say much about eating too much for a couple reasons:

1. First: there are others far more qualified to do so than me. Second: that advice is everywhere. There are books, diets, doctors and TV shows glad to help you learn how to eat well.

2. Yes, it's a big issue. According to a study done in 2011, over the last 100 years our sugar intake has climbed drastically - up from five pounds per year to two to three pounds per week!⁶

3. Correspondingly, according to statistics recently released:

⁶ Teresa Aubele, “Why Sugar High Leads to a Brain Low,” *Psychology Today*, Oct. 18, 2011, first cited in Kyle Idleman, *Gods at War*, Zondervan, 2013, p. 84.

a) Whereas only five percent of the population had high blood pressure in 1900, one-third does now. Whereas only 153 million people had diabetes in 1980, 347 million people do now. And 68 percent of Americans are overweight and 35.7 percent are technically obese. We are the most overweight industrialized nation on earth.⁷

4. There are medical reasons to pay attention to your diet – to eat less and exercise more; to eat less processed foods and eat more fruits and vegetables; to watch your cholesterol levels and on and on it goes.⁸

5. God cares about this. Your health is not simply a medical issue, it's a spiritual one. Our body is described as a temple because God comes to live in it.⁹ We need to give our health (in general) and what we eat (in particular) the attention it deserves.

B. But I want to focus a bit on the spiritual dynamics around food. I don't think we are aware of how bizarre our culture is on this front.

1. I knew we were a bit food obsessed before I started preparing for this sermon on gluttony, but I didn't appreciate just how obsessed. This was actually the first thing Paul Litten commented on. (He's my friend unable to eat.) When I first told him about this sermon and asked for his perspective he said, "When you can't eat – when you become a food voyeur and by-stander – you realize just how odd our culture is."

a) Every quarter mile there are signs advertising food

b) Every store you walk into is overflowing with food

c) People waste food at just about every meal.

d) Food is a cultural obsession.

2. The light went on for me a few years back when I started to hear people talk about cooking shows. We've opted not to have cable or satellite TV, so there are a lot of things on TV I don't see. This one didn't make sense. Julia Childs reruns? Was the Galloping Gourmet out in syndication? Then I heard a guy talking about how much time he spent watching various cooking shows.

⁷ Rich Cohen, Sugar Love, National Geographic, Aug. 2013.

⁸ The advice I was given not long ago was: eat food, not so much, mostly plants, and if your grandmother wouldn't recognize it as food, don't eat it.

⁹ I Cor. 16:9

- a) Me: You watch cooking shows?
- b) Him: Yeah, a few.
- c) Me: You watch people cook?
- d) Him: Yes.
- e) Me: Why?
- f) Him: We love it. We watch them all the time.
- g) Me: We?
- h) Him: Yeah, the whole family.
- i) Me: The kids?
- j) Him: Yeah. They love it.
- k) Me: You watch cooking shows every day! The whole family.
- l) Him: Yep.
- m) Me: The kids love it. The kids are not outside playing, they are inside watching people cook? I don't understand. You can't eat the food. You can't even smell the food.

3. After rehearsing this conversation in my mind I was reminded of a C.S. Lewis quote about lust in which he used a display of food as illustration. He wrote:

- a) "You can get a large audience together for a strip-tease act—that is, to watch a girl undress on the stage. Now suppose you came to a country where you could fill a theatre by simply bringing a covered plate on to the stage and then slowly lifting the cover so as to let everyone see, just before the lights went out, that it contained a mutton chop or a bit of bacon. Would you not think that in that country something had gone wrong with the appetite for food?"

4. Lewis used a food peep show to make a point about sex because a peep show about food is crazy. But today we have them. Print ads, TV commercials, TV shows – there is even an entire network devoted to food. What would Lewis make of this? Food porn.

5. As I was thinking about that I thought about how hard the Food Network would be to explain to someone from a primitive culture or another planet. They would surely think that it must be some kind of religious experience.

6. And then I realized... maybe it is. A flawed religious experience to be sure, but a religious event all the same.

7. Some people get spiritual when they talk about food. They call it “heavenly” or say, “this pie is to die for.” We talk about “angel food” cake and “soul food”, “nectar of the gods,” “death by chocolate.”

8. Some of this is OK. It’s not idolatry to have a great meal with friends. Nothing I am saying should cause you to skimp at Thanksgiving.

a) Jesus feasted. As I’ve noted before, He showed up at so many parties that the Pharisees accused Him of being a drunkard and a glutton.

b) There is nothing wrong with celebrations and parties with lots of food. We just cannot eat that way all the time.

9. But God gave us many good things. And we are free to celebrate them as long as we do not elevate them. In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul goes so far as to say we can eat food that was sacrificed to idols.¹⁰ He says, “don’t cause others to stumble, but as far as the food goes, have at it.

10. But sometimes we get sideways with food. It becomes too powerful. Sometimes the Holy Spirit - the Comforter – is pushed aside by comfort food. Many of us would profit by learning to control our appetites.

C. And sometimes we get messed up in what can seem like the other direction. We obsess over food, but because of cultural pressures, this leads us to not eat.

1. In my prep for this sermon I ran across this quote: The god of thinness is our new national obsession. Its bible is the newest diet book; its altar the bathroom scale; its prayer, counting calories; its goal, to be noticed; its motivation, shame; its idol, the perfect body; its temptation, carbs, calories and chocolate.¹¹

¹⁰ I Cor. 10:23-33

¹¹ Dan Boone.

2. In many zip codes – on many college campuses – people (especially woman) are just as likely to obsess over food by not eating it as those who do. They can't walk past a scale without stepping on it. There are a growing number who suffer from eating disorders that reflect some confused thinking about who they are and the role of food.

3. Let's watch this video (Allison Brewster)

4. Now, I want to be very careful here. I am not suggesting that eating disorders should be labeled a sin. All sin is ultimately self-destructive, but I would not call all self-destructive behavior sin. This is complicated. Eating disorders are complicated. If you or someone you know is struggling here you need to talk with someone far more informed than I am. Thankfully, Allisoun would welcome a chance to talk with them. She brings a lot of insight in addition to a lot of experience.

5. It was a real God moment when she showed up in my office about six months ago and said, "I have had an eating disorder. I have enjoyed victory over it for two years. I am ready to go public. Put me in the game."

6. Let me say this: food can become too important to someone in more than one way. It can lead some of us to overeat and some of us to not eat, or to eat and purge. In other case it's too important. It's been elevated in our life to a position it cannot fill. A few weeks ago I said, "it's possible to be an very busy sloth. In fact, being busy is a classic symptom of sloth." Well, I think, in an odd way, it's possible to be a skinny glutton.¹²

V. So what, exactly, is gluttony?

A. Well, it's a physical sin – that is, it's more like lust than it is like envy or pride. It's typically understood to be wrapped up in our attitudes and practices around food, though it can be more about other things. At one level, gluttony is excess consumption – typically of food, perhaps also of experiences (shopping and watching football come to mind). If greed is a desire to have more stuff, gluttony is a desire to consume more.¹³ It's an inability to say no to certain appetites.

¹² It's not just that some people eat all day and do not gain weight, while others gain weigh driving past a Dunkin Donuts at 40 mph, it's that some people do not eat because their relationship with food is troubled.

¹³ Greed motivates us to acquire more stuff – money, land, possessions – than we need. Envy leads us to want some of the nonmaterial things others enjoy – their life, looks, personality, wife (or husband), job, etc. Gluttony is about consuming too much – too much food or drink to be sure, but also too many experiences or

B. At a slightly deeper level, gluttony is a decision to let the wrong things control us. It's deferring to our appetites instead of deferring to God. At its core, gluttony suggests that God is not enough – not big enough, strong enough or smart enough to defer to. We are going to head down a different path. We are going to find our joy – our purpose – in other directions. To that end, gluttony is not simply a lack will-power, it's idolatry.¹⁴ It is letting something else rival God for first place in our heart.

VI. So what is the way forward?

A. Well, as always, I think the place to start is by being a bit more reflective. We move way to fast to think things through in light of God and eternity and what really matters. If we reflect more I think we will be much more aware of how dependent we are upon God. We'll say grace a bit more like we mean it. It's not small thing that there is food on our plate.

B. A second thing I would recommend is fasting. Not dieting – not not eating in order to lose weight, but giving up food for a period in order to focus on God, to make ourselves vulnerable before him, to have the ongoing ache of hunger to remind us to pray.

C. Dieting is about my will power over food.¹⁵ Fasting is about my relinquishment of power to God. Dieting is about human control. Fasting is about human submission. Dieting is about who I am. Fasting is about whose I am. Dieting is about losing weight. Fasting is about becoming Christ-like. Dieting is about impressing people. Fasting is about serving people. Dieting is about shrinking my body. Fasting is about surrendering my anxiety over food and turning to God for life.

D. Of course, in the end, we come back to this table to remind ourselves of the life and death of our Savior and Lord. To declare, again, our need (our utter dependence) on Him and the death He died in our place.

1. Our resolutions are powerless to change our heart. We need more than principles and personal trainers to become who we want to be and were made to be. We need Christ.

¹⁴ Richard Baxter explains, "...Gluttony is a sin so exceedingly contrary to the love of God: it is Idolatry: it hath the heart which God should have... because that love, that care, that delight, that service and diligence which God should have, is given by the glutton to his belly and to his throat." Paul underscores the severity and end of trusting in food as a god. "Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things." Phil 3:19

¹⁵ Dan Boone.

2. The good news for the glutton is that acceptance and change aren't based on our resolutions and effort,¹⁶ but on God's gracious resolution and effort to make us his workmanship in Christ. The only resolution that matters is God's gracious resolution to give sinners himself through the blood-stained cross and empty tomb. The Gospel offers us all we need to satisfy the hungry soul, "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger."

VII. Wrap Up

A. It's a great thing to know that we don't earn our way to heaven by how well we eat. And it's a great, great thing to have the opportunity to lean into God's grace. Amen?

B. If you'd like to pray with someone...

C. R66. There is no RAMP study tomorrow morning. If you want to talk with Allisoun Brewster you can call the church office for contact information. If you'd like to get involved with either the Community Garden or the new North Chicago High School Food Bank, signs ups are in the lobby. After next Saturday's service Wayne Stewart will be putting on a concert. Next week's message is on Lust. It's rated PG 13.

D. "History begins with a couple of greedy gluttons grabbing forbidden fruit, but it ends with the people of God from every nation and tribe gathered around a table, eating with gratitude and thanksgiving at the wedding supper of the Lord and his bride (the church)."¹⁷ We look forward to that day. Between now and then let's look to become more like Christ our Savior every day – and lean into his rich grace, extended to us.

¹⁶ Gal. 2:15-21

¹⁷ Boone, p. 54.