

Sermon: Gluttony

Galatians 5:16-26

As we start, let me ask you a quick question: who here has ever been on a diet? Put your hand up!

OK, great. Now, this is perhaps a more relevant question: who here has ever *given up* on a diet?

So ... that's pretty much all the people who put up their hands the first time! And, to be honest, it's not really surprising, is it? I read a statistic recently which said that 95% of diets fail. In other words, 95% of the time, dieting doesn't actually work permanently: whoever it is just puts weight straight back on, you might as well not bother.

I have a bit of experience with this as well. Periodically, my wife says to me, "I think we should start to eat healthily". So, we do. We make sure all the food we eat for the week is low-fat. I start to lose a bit of weight. And then... something happens, life moves on, and we drift back into normal eating patterns. All the good work that we did is undone, and the cycle continues.

Now I'm not here tonight to be down on diets and dieting, for many people they have been very good and beneficial things. But isn't it true that what we eat and drink is actually pretty hard to control? Isn't it true that it's so easy to give in to our cravings, but it's so hard to overcome them?

Well, what does God say to us tonight?

First things first, in order for us to talk about gluttony, we need to understand what gluttony is. Now when you think of the word gluttony, you might think of the character 'Mr Creosote' from Monty Python's film "The Meaning of Life."

[SLIDE – MR. CREOSOTE]

If you've not seen the film – and, to be honest, I'm not sure I'd recommend it! – There's a character called Mr Creosote who comes in to a restaurant and orders literally everything on the menu. He just stuffs his face full of everything. Surely, that's gluttony – nothing to do with us!

Well, yes. But that's not the whole truth. If you've got your Bibles open, keep a finger in that passage from Galatians but turn back to Matthew 11:19.

The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and "sinners."'

That's interesting, isn't it? Jesus himself was called a glutton and a drunkard, presumably because he ate and drank more than bread and water. You know, he actually lived life a little.

And this is the first thing we need to understand: gluttony has actually got nothing to do with what you eat or drink, or even how much you eat or drink. It's nothing to do with your size or body shape. It's all to do with your attitude.

You see, with gluttony, what happens is that our desires get all out of proportion. What I want, what I need, becomes the most important thing in my life.

If you flip back to that passage in Galatians 5, verses 16-17, Paul says “So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature.” What are the desires of the sinful nature? In verses 19-21 Paul gives us a list. He doesn’t actually mention gluttony, but if you look at verse 21 he does mention “drunkenness” which is a pretty similar thing. In fact, the two things are often paralleled in Scripture, as in that passage we just read from Matthew.

Paul says there is a contrast between what *we* naturally want and desire, and what the Holy Spirit desires for us. Obviously there is nothing wrong with our natural desires as they are – God intends us to eat and drink, and enjoy these gifts that he has given us! But the point is they can become corrupt and take centre stage in our lives.

Imagine Gollum from Lord of the Rings: the one ring and the feeling it gave him drove him mad, and he had to have it. His life wasn’t complete without the ring. Now imagine what that would be like with food and drink instead of the ring: life wouldn’t be complete without that perfect meal. We would start to find satisfaction in that rather than in God. Our earthly desires would supplant our desire for God.

At its root, gluttony is a sin of idolatry: our own selves become idols; we worship our own desires rather than worshipping God.

So what do we do about this? Well, in our passage from Galatians, Paul outlines a couple of different paths that people take, both of them wrong. Interestingly, I think these are both reflected in our culture.

The first message I think we get is, as we talked about at the beginning, dieting. Or, to put it another way, an obsession about body image and weight.

[SLIDE – WEIGHTWATCHERS, MEN’S HEALTH]

We live in a culture which is constantly bombarding us with the message that, in order to be attractive, we need to be slim, we need to watch what we eat, we need to look a certain way – and if you don’t look that way, it’s all your fault. Given that, it’s hardly surprising that about 1 in every 100 women between 15 and 30 suffer from anorexia: I don’t want to over-simplify, but in a culture where we are valued according to how we look, can we really expect anything else?

Our culture and the media say ‘look this way, and you’ll be fine’. Don’t do this, do that, and you’ll be fine.

Do you know what’s interesting about that? It’s actually not a million miles away from the situation the church in Galatia were facing. There were a group of Jewish Christians in the church who wanted everybody to be circumcised. They wanted people to go back to the old law which God had given to the Israelites long ago.

But Paul says to them, in verse 13, “You, my brothers were called to be free”. And then in verse 18, “if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under law.” Paul says that Christians are *free*. It’s not a

matter of law anymore! You can't work your way to salvation. You are saved by God's grace, through faith.

So what does that have to do with body image and dieting? It's because it's easy to impose a law on ourselves when it comes to body image. We say "if only I'm able to keep to this diet – if only I'm able to keep these rules, this law – then will I be acceptable." In other words, it's easy to take our idea of a perfect body image and put it where God should be in our hearts. We take being acceptable to other people and make that pride of place in our hearts.

But the bigger problem is, what we do – following rules – can't change our hearts. Going on a diet cannot change your heart. This is why they fail so much of the time. External things cannot bring transformation inside – but we'll come onto that a bit later on.

Now, I don't want any of you to get me wrong on this and think I'm being down on dieting! What I am saying is that if we impose a law on ourselves like that, it's easy to get into the habit of thinking "all I need to do is keep the rules". And if we do keep them, we might even get to thinking "Hey, I'm OK. I don't need God" – or if we break them, we end up despondent because we can't keep the rules. Paul says, "You were called to be free".

But, you might be thinking, if we are free, doesn't that mean that basically we can do whatever we like? Well this ties into one of the other messages that the culture and the media send us. This is the message: "Go on, indulge yourself. It's good to gratify your cravings and desires." Did anyone see that advertising campaign a little while ago from Magnum ice creams?

[SLIDE – MAGNUM '7 DEADLY SINS']

It's actually not a brilliant message, is it? It's acknowledging that there are things we do which are wrong, but they're actually *good* to indulge in. Next time you're in the supermarket, just take a note of the number of products which market themselves as 'indulgent' or something like that.

[SLIDE – GU ADVERTISEMENTS]

The point is, we have this kind of double message coming from our culture and the media. On the one hand they're saying "to be acceptable, you need to look a certain way." And on the other hand they're saying, "don't worry, throw off your inhibitions, and just give in to your desires: Indulge yourself!"

Well, Paul addresses a similar concern with the Galatians. Let's read verse 16 again: "So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature."

You see, Paul is saying that all those people who 'live by the Spirit', those people who have the Holy Spirit living inside them, will not gratify the cravings of the sinful nature. He is saying that having freedom as a Christian does not mean throwing off all our inhibitions and not worrying about doing the right thing at all! That would be an abuse of our freedom.

So how DO we do the right thing? If we are free, how do we go about obeying God and not gratifying our desires?

Paul's answer to the Galatians, and to us, is that there is a *third way*: look down at verses 24-25. "Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit."

Paul says that all those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature. Those things we naturally want to do which are sinful are crucified.

Now that might sound a bit strange to you. When immediately struck me as I read this was "Well... that's clearly not the case! I still do sin. I still do gratify those sinful desires. And what does it even mean to walk in step with the Spirit?"

[SLIDE – IN STEP WITH THE SPIRIT]

Well, this is something which is important to grasp. There is a tension in the Christian life. In the Bible, crucifying those sinful passions and desires is seen both as a past thing, as something which has already happened, and it's also seen as something which is ongoing, which we need to keep working at.

It might help to think of it like someone getting a qualification. I don't know if any of you are in medicine or are planning to go into medicine – so you might need to correct me! – but someone who's training to be a doctor, once they've done all their exams and placements and everything else – at some point they earn the right to be officially called 'doctor'. Now, at that point, do they know everything there is to know? No, they don't. It's a learning process, someone who's qualified as a doctor will keep learning throughout their professional life. The qualification may entitle you to be a doctor, but that's not the end of the story.

It's a little bit like that in the Christian life. Becoming a Christian means that we are considered right before God. The technical word for it is 'justified'. But the process of becoming more and more like Christ, of actually changing our behaviour and crucifying our sinful passions and desires – this happens over time, once we've become Christian, by the power of the Holy Spirit.

And this is Paul's point in Galatians 5. We now live "by the Spirit", we are alive in Christ, but we still need to walk in step with the Spirit.

Michael Green wrote a book "I Believe in the Holy Spirit", and he puts it this way:

We 'live in the Spirit' or 'walk in the Spirit' precisely in so far as we allow the Spirit to 'crucify the flesh with its affections and lusts' ...

Power over the inclinations of the fallen 'flesh' is possible only when the Spirit is given control by our act of deliberate choice. He has the power to overcome my fallen appetites, but he will not use it in me unless I ask him.

So what Michael Green says is that walking in step with the Spirit is allowing Him to work in us, is asking him to help us walk in a way which honours God.

This is neither living by the law, the "Don't-do-this-do-that" approach, or living a life without rules and the "indulge-yourself" approach. This is about *transformation*: the Holy Spirit transforming us to become more like Christ Jesus.

So let's take stock there and bring it back to what we were thinking about gluttony. Gluttony is about getting our desires out of proportion. It's about putting our own desires in place of where God should be in our hearts. We can't change that by following a set of rules, and we can't change that by indulgence.

The only way that we will change is by allowing the Holy Spirit into our lives and allowing Him to work in us, to change us, to transform us. Let's keep in step with the Spirit: what does He want to do in your life, and how can you keep in step with that?

What I'd like us to do now is just take a moment to think about our own lives. Let's just sit in quiet for a few moments, eyes closed if you find that helpful, and think about how in the past we have let our own sinful passion and desires take God's place. How we've got things out of proportion. And perhaps how we've tried to fix the problem, either by following a set of rules or by letting go and indulging in whatever we want to do.

So why don't we take a few moments to think through those things, and then I'll close off with a prayer.