

O for a Closer Walk with God

William Cowper (1731–1800)

O for a closer walk with God,
a calm and heav'nly frame,
a light to shine upon the road
that leads me to the Lamb!

Where is the blessedness I knew
when first I sought the Lord?
Where is the soul-refreshing view
of Jesus and His Word?

What peaceful hours I once enjoyed!
How sweet their mem'ry still!
But they have left an aching void
the world can never fill.

Return, O holy Dove, return,
sweet messenger of rest;
I hate the sins that made Thee mourn,
and drove Thee from my breast.

The dearest idol I have known,
whate'er that idol be,
help me to tear it from Thy throne
and worship only Thee.

So shall my walk be close with God,
calm and serene my frame;
so purer light shall mark the road
that leads me to the Lamb.

ΤΩ ΚΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

In the Nick of Time

Food Pharisees?

Kevin T. Bauder

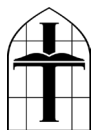
There's a lot of talk about gluttony out there. I mean a *lot*. Billy Graham wrote a Q&A about it. Joe McKeever rebukes it. John Piper tells people how to conquer it. Rachel Held Evans has compared it to homosexuality, and Kevin DeYoung has weighed in for the Gospel Coalition. Besides articles and blog posts like these, it seems that every evangelical who defends the use of alcohol feels called upon to take a swipe at gluttony (e.g., Joel McDurmon, *What Would Jesus Drink?* Tolle Lege Press, kinloc 1,201-1,238). These references are only the tip of the ice cream cone. People who are willing to extend Christian fellowship to apostates, people who reject biblical teachings about sexuality, and people who want to get more Christians to drink booze all try to gain credibility by pontificating against gluttony. It's the popular sin to oppose. Gluttony has no defenders.

Simultaneously, there's a lot of talk about how Christians don't talk about gluttony. Rachel Held Evans complains about Christians who ignore "clobber verses" related to gluttony. McKeever names five reasons that pastors don't preach on gluttony. In what could be a case of the pot calling the kettle black, McDurmon comments,

Considering the rotundity of some of the preachers I remember railing against raising a glass, perhaps preaching on alcohol helped distract them from the topic of their own addictive sin. There's nothing like diverting attention from your sin by bellowing about someone else's. For some of the guys I've seen in pulpits, "pass the plate" has meaning beyond just tithes and offerings. But unfortunately, both drunkenness and gluttony are equally bad and revolting sins.

Everybody complains that nobody talks about gluttony, while just about everybody talks about. The irony is so rich that you could cover it in whipped cream and swallow it for dessert.

But isn't it true that gluttony is rarely addressed from the pulpit? Perhaps. But then, what specific sins do contemporary pastors preach against? Hardly any at all. When is the last time you heard a sermon against, say, tax evasion, child molestation, or voter fraud? Isn't it true that on those few



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occasions when American Christians do preach against particular sins, those sins are the ones that the culture in general is somehow trying to defend?

This is not to suggest that we should hear more preaching against gluttony. There is actually good reason to preach about other sins before we start harping about this one. For one thing, it is one of the least-mentioned sins in the Bible. It doesn't even occur in the vice lists. For another, it is far less immediately devastating in its effects than other sins. Nobody ever crashed a car and killed innocent people because they were over the legal limit of Big Macs. Nobody ever contracted AIDS because they indulged in a sordid, one-night taco stand. Nobody ever aborted a baby that was conceived in an illicit binge of prime rib and potatoes.

Then there is the accusation that Americans don't preach against gluttony because they're guilty of it. The problem with that accusation is that the contemporary Christian understanding of gluttony appears to be shaped far more by current American visions of body image and diet consciousness than by careful biblical understanding. Contemporary Christians equate gluttony with one of two categories: either overeating or being overweight. Both of these categories are completely foreign to Scripture.

The Bible certainly does condemn gluttony. It is a sin, but it is not the sin that many seem to think. What, then, is the biblical meaning of gluttony?

First, some passages that are often cited in connection with gluttony need to be ruled out of bounds. Proverbs 23:2 is not about gluttony; it is a warning against ambition in the presence of manipulative hosts. Philippians 3:19 is not about gluttony; it is a warning about those who pursue inordinate affection, probably sexual but possibly legalistic. Either of these passages could imply principles for gluttons, as could many others, but neither of them is particularly definitive.

Second, the Hebrew terms translated *glutton* and *gluttony* have the idea of making light of something, and by implication squandering it. These words are not first and foremost about eating. For the Old Testament writers, gluttony was associated with bad companions, dissipation, rebellion, and especially drunkenness. The danger for the glutton was not growing too fat, but being left in poverty when all resources had been squandered.

The New Testament also associates gluttony with bad companions and drunkenness. This is the point of the charge that the Pharisees leveled against Jesus (Matt. 11:19). Their evidence was not that Jesus had been observed overeating, but that he kept company with publicans and sinners. Interestingly, the New Testament term for a glutton, *phagos*, simply means an *eater*, not necessarily an excessive one. Not the quantity, but the conditions of the eating are determinative. Other than Jesus, the only New Testament individuals to be accused of gluttony were the Cretans who, according to one of their own poets, were habitually "liars, vicious animals, lazy eaters"

(Titus 1:12). The notion of an *eater* does not stand on its own, but in connection with a complex of behaviors.

In short, the biblical vision of gluttony is not one that revolves around overeating or being overweight. A biblical glutton is a wastrel, a spendthrift, and a sluggard whose friends are of the worst sort and who pits riotous, wanton living against God's righteousness. In short, a biblical glutton is a lawless person whose life revolves around sensual pleasures, who substance is spent on those pleasures, who lacks the self-control to deny himself those pleasures, and who does not care what they cost.

Perhaps the clearest biblical example of this kind of person is provided by Eli's sons, Hophni and Phineas. They refused the provision that God had made for them. They insisted—even to the extent of force—upon satisfying their appetites in forbidden ways. Their appetites included not only foods but other sensual pleasures. They rejected their father's counsel and warnings. They were sons of Belial (1 Sam. 2:11-25). That is what gluttony looks like.

The culture of the New Testament era understood indulgence. The Greek symposium and the Roman convivium would feature gorging and drinking to the point of distention. Seneca commented that at such events, participants would "vomit so they may eat." While his words may not have been meant literally, they certainly convey the debauchery and excess of these events. Varieties of entertainments would be provided, including dancers, musicians, and prostitutes. Sometimes boys were available for those who preferred them.

Given this background, the concern of the New Testament was not whether someone ate more food than was necessary. Biblical gluttony is riot and revolt. It is lawless indulgence. It is slavery to passions and inordinate appetites. If you have to wonder whether the Bible views you as a glutton, you almost certainly are not. If you are, you almost certainly do not care.



This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, Research Professor of Historical and Systematic Theology at Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.
