

“Real Restraint”

Matthew 4:1–4; Galatians 5:22–26; 2 Peter 1:3–7

Holy Habits are grounded upon self-restraint

Nearly 200 years before the birth of Jesus of Nazareth, another man named Jesus (Yeshua (Jesus) ben Sira (son of Sira)) lived and taught in Jerusalem. He compiled and wrote a scroll of Jewish wisdom literature, similar to Proverbs. His work, usually known as Sirach, was not taken by the Jews as Scripture, though it was part of the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures and other Jewish writings. Thus, Sirach was known and read in Christian circles from the beginning and is part of the Apocrypha.

I selected a few verses from Sirach for this week because ben Sira spoke so clearly about our need to control our desires, to learn self-control.

Sirach 1:23–24, 18:30–32 (CEB)

²³ Patient people will hold themselves back until the right moment, and afterward they will be paid back with joy. ²⁴ They will hide their words until the right moment, and many will talk about their good judgment.

Self-control

³⁰ Don’t go after your desires, and restrain yourself from your appetites. ³¹ If you cater to your desires, you will become a laughingstock to your enemies. ³² Don’t be glad for great luxury, and don’t be made needy by an encounter with it.

He obviously knew that faithlessness toward God and others can be undone if we are overcome by our appetites and passions.

“Self-control” has gone by many names over time: temperance, sobriety, discretion, and more. All speak to the truth that we can be destroyed if we let our disordered desires run away with us. For Plato, Aristotle, Cicero and others, temperance was one of the four cardinal virtues that characterized a well-ordered mind and heart, the other three being courage/fortitude, wisdom/prudence, and justice. They viewed temperance (i.e., self-control or restraint) as foundational, on which the other three depend.

This seems about right to me. I don’t know that anything has wrecked as many lives as the inability to control one’s desires and emotions. How many relationships have been damaged by a hastily spoken word that couldn’t be taken back . . . or a hastily written text? Those who have allowed disordered eating habits to ruin their health are beyond counting. The same with drinking and sex and money and work and just about everything that consumes our lives.

So back to the basics: Our sinful hearts are disordered. We desire—or love—the wrong things and we desire—or love—the right things the wrong way. Take food for example. Is it a good thing? Certainly! We need it to live. Food brings us pleasure, both in its taste and the sense we get from being full. Should we desire food? Of course. But do we often desire food in the wrong way? Of course. We eat when we feel lonely or upset. We eat when we are bored. We eat when we simply want a “pleasure fix.” Do we let eating consume too much of our time and attention? Sure, especially when we are trying to lose weight. The vice of gluttony is really the inordinate attention we pay to food or anything else. Gluttony is feeding our stomachs (insert whatever excess you like here) rather than our hearts.

In C. S. Lewis’ *Screwtape Letters*, one devil describes to another his work in tempting people into the “gluttony of delicacy,” not just the “gluttony of excess.” Here’s his example:



She is a positive terror to hostesses and servants. She is always turning from what has been offered to her to say with a demure little sigh and a smile “Oh please, please . . . all I want is a cup of tea, weak but not too weak, and the teeniest weeniest bit of really crisp toast.” You see? Because what she wants is smaller and less costly than what has been set before her, she never recognizes as gluttony her determination to get what she wants, however troublesome it may be to others . . . The real value of the quiet, unobtrusive work which [the devil] has been doing for years on this old woman can be gauged by the way in which her belly now dominates her whole life. The woman is in what may be called the “All-I-want” state of mind.¹

The old woman in Lewis’ story hasn’t restrained her desire to get exactly what she wants. And she has failed at this so long, we can be sure she doesn’t even realize that she is habitually a “glutton of delicacy.” The vices are habits we fall into. When I’m stressed out, do I first, habitually, reach for the cake or for a bottle? Do I even “treat” myself in anticipation of the stress? Those are the kinds of questions we have to ask ourselves.

Rebecca DeYoung writes:

The main question we should be asking is not, “How much is too much?” but rather, “How dominated by the desire for this pleasure am I? How difficult would it be to have to give it up or do without it?” The trouble with gluttony is that it reduces eating to an exercise in gratifying my own desires for physical pleasures, consuming whatever I think will make me full and satisfied. Rather than simply enjoying food, we are using it to give ourselves a needed “pleasure fix.” Food and pleasure are goods, not gods. As Aquinas puts it, “Gluttony primarily and intrinsically signifies the intemperate desire to consume food, not the intemperate consumption of food.” “It is a case of gluttony,” he says, “only when we knowingly exceed the measure in eating from a desire for the pleasures of the palate.”

Gluttony’s excessive pursuit of the pleasures of the table eventually dulls our appreciation for the food we eat, the pleasure we take in eating it, those with whom we eat, and the God who created what we eat and gave us the ability to take pleasure in it. As Augustine put it, “Virtuous people avail themselves of the things of this life with the moderation of a user, not the attachment of a lover.” Or, as Jesus Christ put it, we were not meant to live “by bread alone” (Luke 4: 4).²

Learning self-control restrains our excesses, when it comes to food or anything. To reiterate, gluttony, one the seven deadly sins, is a habit of unrestrained excess. Retired UMC Bishop Will Willimon writes:

Addiction, bulimia, alcoholism, and the life of the gourmand probably would be classified under the rubric of Gluttony. . . . To become obsessed with food, to make exaggerated claims for the salutary effects of a good diet, and to build one’s whole day around the consumption of food (or, more accurately, controlling and regulating that consumption of food) seems to me the sort of thing that [Pope] Gregory was after when he condemned eating “too daintily. . . . That person who carefully weighs the “carbs” in her diet—who relentlessly scans the fat content of her portions, who drives across town to buy exclusively “organic”—looks to me as much like the glutton whom Aquinas had in mind as the beer-gutted binger at the neighborhood bar. Refinement can produce its own excess in the priggish food expert. The fat guy in the tee shirt, swilling vast amounts of beer with buffalo wings, is surely no more disgusting than the priggish person, daintily observing, sniffing, and picking over his food. . . . When does concern about good food become too much concern?³

The apostle Paul knows well that our unrestrained and disordered desires can run away with us, even over us. In 1 Corinthians, Paul writes: “Everyone who competes practices self-discipline in everything. The runners do this to get a crown of leaves that shrivel up and die, but we do it to receive a crown that never dies. So now this is how I run—not without a clear goal in sight. I fight like a boxer in the ring, not like someone who is

¹ DeYoung, Rebecca Konyndyk (2009-06-01). *Glittering Vices: A New Look at the Seven Deadly Sins and Their Remedies* (p. 141). Baker Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

² Ibid., p. 141

³ Willimon, William H. *Sinning Like a Christian: A New Look at the 7 Deadly Sins* (pp. 124-126). Abingdon Press. Kindle Edition

shadowboxing. Rather, I'm landing punches on my own body and subduing it like a slave. I do this to be sure that I myself won't be disqualified after preaching to others."

Paul knew that self-control is a fundamental part of the Christian life and, as he wrote to the Galatians, the Holy Spirit strengthens us so that we can show the real fruit of self-control that comes from our rebirth in Christ. So how can we begin to develop better habits of self-control? If we have to stop and think about it every time, then we are likely to fail. With respect to a lack of restraint, fasting is a long-held spiritual discipline that has benefitted many Christians. DeYoung again:

Fasting as a spiritual discipline accomplishes at least two things. By giving up certain foods for a time, and by not eating to satiety, we learn anew to appreciate and be content with simple foods. Who will appreciate a simple piece of cheese more—one who eats several Big Macs every day, or one who has just undergone a Lenten fast, abstaining from meat and dairy for several weeks? It is easy to misunderstand fasting as a practice that devalues eating and food or regards it as evil. Nothing could be further from the truth. Only someone who has experienced the gnawing hunger from a grueling hike up a mountain can say, as a friend of mine once did, "There's nothing better than a peanut butter and jelly sandwich at ten thousand feet." . . .

Fasting, secondly, increases our appetite for spiritual goods, and makes us keenly aware of our dependence on God, as Kallistos Ware notes: "The primary aim of fasting is to make us conscious of our dependence on God. If practiced seriously, the Lenten abstinence from food . . . involves a considerable measure of real hunger, and also a feeling of tiredness and physical exhaustion. The purpose of this is to lead us in turn to a sense of inward brokenness and contrition; to bring us, that is, to the point where we appreciate the full force of Christ's statement, 'Without Me you can do nothing' (John 15:5)."⁴

Daily Bible Readings

More on gluttony and restraint

Monday	<i>Genesis 3:1–7</i>	Eve eats the forbidden fruit.
Tuesday	<i>Exodus 16:1–5</i>	The Israelites are convinced they will starve but God feeds them daily.
Wednesday	<i>Luke 16:19–31</i>	A rich man turns a blind eye to a starving man.
Thursday	<i>John 18:1–11</i>	Peter fails to restrain himself
Friday	<i>Romans 16:17–18</i>	Some people are serving their own appetites (for power and influence?) rather than Jesus Christ.
Saturday	<i>Philippians 3:17–21</i>	"Their god is their stomach."

⁴ DeYoung, Rebecca Konyndyk. *Glittering Vices: A New Look at the Seven Deadly Sins and Their Remedies* (pp. 155-156). Baker Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.