

“Heavenly Virtues - Temperance”

Genesis 1:1–5, 27-28a; 2 Peter 1:5–7; Matthew 6:16–18; Matthew 9:14–17

How well do you enjoy God’s many and varied gifts?



Temperance? Who uses that word anymore? Doesn’t it have something to do with prohibition? Of what value

could it be to us now? ...A heck of a lot more than we might think. Temperance is the virtue of enjoying life’s many pleasures well, neither to excess nor abstention. Temperance is about moderation. In 2 Peter 1:5-7 from the New Revised Standard Version—a modern translation—“Self-control” is not a fully adequate synonym for the King James “temperance,” but it is a start. William Matteson writes:

Temperance, in particular, is the virtue that inclines us to desire and enjoy pleasures well. It enables us to regulate our actions, and even our desires, concerning pleasurable activities so that they are reasonable, or in accord with the way things really are. ¹

But how do we know what is reasonable or unreasonable in our enjoyment of things that please us? Matteson again:

Our desires for pleasurable activities can be called immoderate or unreasonable either when they displace goals or purposes we claim to hold more important, or when they displace goals or purposes we should hold more important. To use an obvious example, if someone is playing ten hours of computer games per day, he is clearly allowing that pleasure to displace other purposes in life—there are only so many hours in a day! Perhaps studying falls by the wayside, or leisurely time with friends, or exercise, or healthy eating. Whichever the case may be, this is unreasonable since the person chooses to elevate something fun but ultimately not that important above other more worthy goals in life.²

So, every day we are offered choices as to how we will spend our time, our money, our energies, and passions. The virtue of temperance is all about learning how to find and embrace balance in our desires and appetites.

Karen Swallow Prior on temperance:

Temperance is unique among the virtues. Unlike other virtues that are revealed under pressure, temperance is “an ordinary, humble virtue, to be practiced on a regular rather than an exceptional basis.” It “is a virtue for all times but is all the more necessary when times are good.” It is also unlike the other virtues in centering not on actions but on desires. Since we desire what is pleasurable, temperance is “the virtue that inclines us to desire and enjoy pleasures well.” It helps us to desire pleasures in a reasonable manner, desiring them neither too much nor too little, the virtuous mean between the vices of self-indulgence and insensibility.

For Aristotle, temperance concerned the physical appetites we share with animals: the desires for food, drink, and sex. For both humans and animals, these appetites are necessary to perpetuate life (whether individually or as a species), but they are also the source of pleasure. The Catholic Church, following Aristotle’s understanding, teaches that temperance “ensures the will’s mastery over instincts

¹ Mattison III, William C. *Introducing Moral Theology* (p. 76). Baker Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

² Ibid.

and keeps desires within the limits of what is honorable,” but expands the role of temperance as governing “the use of created goods.”³

Because temperance is about our desires, not our actions, it is not simply exercising self-control. It is about reshaping our appetites, not merely learning how to control or ignore them. Karen Prior again:

Temperance is not simply resisting temptation. It is more than merely restraint. Aquinas uses the example of a miser who eschews extravagance because of its expense: such a man is not temperate, for the temperate man would not desire extravagance. One attains the virtue of temperance when one’s appetites have been shaped such that one’s very desires are in proper order and proportion. [emphasis added]

We can learn so much about God’s economy, his nature, and the way to human flourishing by observing the marvelous ways in which God has built balance, a form of temperance, into the natural order. Night tempers day. Water relieves earth. The four seasons comprise two pairs that offset each other in the stages of life: birth, fertility, decay, death. Even creating as male and female those who bear forth his image (instead of making humans capable of reproducing from one rather than two, like bacteria) reveals something about how we are to live. Yet, so often in human affairs, balance seems unnatural, prone as we are to careen from one extreme to another, both as individuals and collectively within culture. The ancients showed wisdom in understanding how foundational temperance is to human excellence.

Temperance is the virtue that helps us rise above our animal nature, making the image of God in us shine more brilliantly. For humans, unlike animals, pleasure is tempered by understanding. Developing desires for the good requires understanding. Human beings are creatures who are rational as well as spiritual and who, as such, do not approach pleasurable activities purely physically. The temperate person is one who “understands these connections between bodily pleasures and the larger human good, and whose understanding actually tempers the desires and pleasures.” Temperance is liberating because it “allows us to be masters of our pleasure instead of becoming its slaves.”

But while understanding is necessary for the virtue of temperance, it is not sufficient. Even Paul acknowledges the limits our understanding holds over our desires when he writes, “I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do” (Rom. 7:15).⁴

Learning and practicing temperance

So how do we reshape our desires? Christians and others have long practiced fasting and other means of denying our natural appetites, though much of this has been more about denial than genuinely reshaping our desires.

I included above two passages from the gospel of Matthew about fasting. The first is in the section of the Sermon on the Mount devoted to prayer and emphasizes the need to utterly avoid any hint of hypocrisy, such as putting on a pained expression so that everyone can see how your piety has made you miserably hungry. In the second passage, Jesus tells the Pharisees that even though his disciples are not fasting while with Jesus (interesting and probably hyperbolic, since the Law of Moses required occasional fasting), they will fast after he is gone.

In modern society fasting is seen primarily as a means of protest or threat of self-destruction to put the pressure on higher authorities in order to attain the benefits or claims of the people involved. In the biblical context, however, fasting carries a different meaning. It is not a way of asserting one’s will but a means of opening oneself to the work of God, expressing profound grief over sin and pointing to one’s ultimate dependence on God for all forms of sustenance. Fasting is the act of abstaining from food for spiritual reasons and primarily connotes an openness to divinity and a posture of humility. It

³ Swallow Prior, Karen. *On Reading Well: Finding the Good Life through Great Books*. Baker Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

⁴ Ibid.

involves prayer, grief, penance, seeking guidance and piety. But fasting was widely abused, so it can also carry the imagery of hypocrisy and religious display (Is 58; Mt 6).⁵

In the above summary of the biblical meaning of fasting, nothing is said about reshaping our desires. This is my own experience. In my early twenties, I attempted to go without food and water for two consecutive meals one Sunday every month—it seemed longer to me at the time. I do not recall this reshaping my desires in any way, other than heightening my desire to eat!

Here is a suggestion: look over your life and try to find desires that seem out of balance, that displace more important purposes or goals. For me, some of that revolves around food. Several months ago, I decided to overcome my unhealthy appetite for too many potato chips and French fries (I am a chip guy, not a sweets guy) by substituting grapes. I found that after a few weeks, I craved the grapes, not the chips. Perhaps that is how it works for mundane problems like an unhealthy chip habit and for more significant problems in our lives, such as addictions to pornography or spending money or computer games, which will take much more effort and, perhaps, help from others.

So, where to begin? Matteson again:

We have to realize that our desires and actions are disordered and feel some desire to be relieved of them...This is why the crucial first step in the famous Alcoholics Anonymous Twelve Step Program is admitting that there is a problem. Without such recognition, change is not possible. How does it happen? It may come from a friend, parent, or mentor who points out our behavior to us. We may see the problems in some behavior exhibited in others, and realize we too are guilty of such acts and desires. The negative consequences of our own acts may finally catch up to us, so that we realize the error of our ways. We may hear a powerful sermon, read a probing book, or come to a realization in times of prayer. Whatever the source, the key features in [beginning to move] from intemperance . . . are our realizing that our acts and desires are indeed disordered and then wanting to change.⁶

And through it all, we must remember that the Holy Spirit is with us, encouraging and strengthening us in our prayers and efforts to reshape our desires. God has given us a marvelous creation and wishes us to enjoy his good work. So, we must find the balance between enjoying these pleasures to excess and turning away from the gifts God has given us. The Spirit lives in each of us, helping us at every turn as we strive to reshape our desires.

Daily Bible Readings *Biblical stories of intemperance!*

Monday	Genesis 9	Noah gets off the ark and passes out drunk.
Tuesday	Genesis 19:30-38	Lot's daughters get him drunk so they can lie with him
Wednesday	Exodus 32:1-20	While Moses is on the mountaintop getting the Ten Commandments, the Israelites throw a wild, out-of-control party
Thursday	Daniel 5:1-12	The party-goers have become so drunk that they decide to drink from the holy vessels taken from the temple in Jerusalem – they soon discover the depth of their depravity!
Friday	Isaiah 5:11-13	Apparently, there are some in Israel who start drinking in the morning
Saturday	1 Corinthians 11:17-22	People are getting drunk at the Lord's Supper!

⁵ Leland Ryken, Jim Wilhoit, Tremper Longman, Colin Duriez, Douglas Penney, and Daniel G. Reid, *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, 2000, 273.

⁶ Mattison III, William C. *Introducing Moral Theology* (p. 87). Baker Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.