

TEMPERATE IN ALL THINGS

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In our time, no one wants anything in moderation. No one wants anything ordinary, common, or normal. Everything must be extreme. A merchant, in order to compete in the market, must set his product apart from the product of his competitors. So, advertisers describe products as ‘extreme.’ Even the most mundane products are labeled as such. Merchants advertise extreme deodorant, extreme frozen yogurt, and even extreme t-shirts. One company that caters to law enforcement and fire agencies is called ‘Extreme Products.’ But there is a company called ‘Extreme Products Group’ that sells exercise equipment. There is yet another company called ‘Extreme Products’ that sells high fidelity hearing enhancement technology. When everything is extreme, nothing is. Now people desire the ‘most extreme.’ So, there are the most extreme marathons, the most extreme roller coasters, and the most extreme nachos. However, most will agree that human behavior must not be extreme. No one wishes to have mood swings, and no one likes to be round someone who experiences them. Everyone approves of the quality of an even temper, and in Christian theology temperance is one of four Cardinal Virtues.

In modern times *temperance* has come to be associated with the temperance movement, that is, with the belief that people ought to entirely abstain from consuming alcohol. Traditionally, however, the word had a much broader meaning. According to Noah Webster, *temperance* is “Moderation; particularly, habitual moderation in regard to the indulgence of the natural appetites and passions.” (Noah Webster, *American Dictionary of the English Language*, 1828) To be temperate is to be “Moderate in the indulgence of the appetites and passions.” (Webster) So, for example, when a man becomes out of control with anger, he is said to have ‘lost his temper.’

The Scriptures extol temperance, and they do so because God is temperate. God is not like a man in having passions. When Saint Paul and Saint Barnabas visited the city of Lystra, and Saint Paul performed a miracle there, the pagans believed the apostles were gods. They said, “The gods are come down to us in the likeness of men.” The apostles replied, “And saying, Sirs, why do ye these things? We also are men of like passions with you, and preach unto you that ye should turn from these vanities unto the living God ...” (Acts: 14:11, 15) God has emotions, of a sort. God becomes angry. He was so angry with the ancient world that He destroyed all of mankind except for Noah and His family. God was right to be angry, but what would it have been like if God had lost His temper? He would have destroyed all of mankind, including Noah and His family. God becomes jealous. He is jealous when His people are unfaithful to Him. He is right to be jealous, but what would it be like if God indulged in His jealousy? He would fly into a jealous rage, and destroy that which He loves. He is sympathetic to the poor and downcast. He is right to be, but He does not take from innocent people to give to those who have need. God has emotions, but He is self-controlled. He never loses His temper. He can never commit a *crime of passion*. The immature and impious man is driven by passion, even dominated by it, and beyond all reason.

God is slow to anger. King David wrote in the Psalms, “The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and plenteous in mercy.” (Psalm 103:8) God is slow to anger, and so should the Christian be. It is all too easy to indulge in anger. A man needs great strength to control his anger. The Proverbs say, “He that is slow to anger is better than the mighty; and he that ruleth his spirit than he that taketh a city.” (Proverbs 16:32)

God has made man’s body, and he has made that body to need food. God has made man to enjoy food, and men have created many delicious dishes. Men have a tendency, however, to indulge in eating, and to eat much more than they need. They lack self-control.

Even worse than a glutton is a drunkard. He is worse because, in drinking too much, he takes leave of his senses. When drunk, he not only lacks self-control, he is unable to control himself. He is given over to his

baser instincts. Drinking alcohol is not a sin in itself, and God has created the world such that man can make wine, to make his heart glad. (Psalm 104:15) It is a sin to prohibit men from drink. Nevertheless, it is a sin to drink to drunkenness. As Saint Paul wrote to the Ephesians, “And be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess; but be filled with the Spirit.” (Ephesians 5:18)

The appetite for food and drink is natural, but subject to misuse. Those who are given to food and drink are the kind of people that live for pleasure, and who lack self-control; they lack the virtue of temperance. Such people, if not kept in check, not only come to ruin, but bring to ruin those around them. The Proverbs warn against associating with such people: “Be not among winebibbers; among riotous eaters of flesh: For the drunkard and the glutton shall come to poverty: and drowsiness shall clothe *a man* with rags.” (Proverbs 23:20, 21) For this reason, in Scripture, the phrase, “a glutton and a drunkard” refers, not simply to one who eats and drinks to much, but to one who is a notorious sinner, one who who has forsaken God and indulges in sin generally. (Deuteronomy 21:18-21; Luke 7:34; 1 Corinthians 10:7)

The appetite for sex, like the appetite for food and drink, is natural, and subject to misuse. God made the first man, and for him he made a woman, and said, “Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh.” (Genesis 2:24) Like all things, sinners corrupt what is good. They cannot be content with the spouse God gave them, and they seek to be with another. They think that sex is a mere physical act, like eating, or drinking. “Meats for the belly, and the belly for meats,” they say. Saint Paul answers, But God shall destroy both it and them. Now the body *is* not for fornication, but for the Lord; and the Lord for the body.” (1 Corinthians 6:13) A man who goes after wicked woman foolish and weak. he lacks both wisdom and self-control. The Proverbs warn of going after such a woman. “For the commandment *is* a lamp; and the law *is* light; and reproofs of instruction *are* the way of life: To keep thee from the evil woman, from the flattery of the tongue of a strange woman. Lust not after her beauty in thine heart; neither let her take thee with her eyelids. For by means of a whorish woman *a man is brought* to a piece of bread: and the adulteress will hunt for the precious life. Can a man take fire in his bosom, and his clothes not be burned? Can one go upon hot coals, and his feet not be burned?” (Proverbs 6:23-28)

the patriarch, Joseph, provides us with a good example of temperance. His brother, out of envy, sold him into slavery. By God’s providence, he became Pharaoh’s lieutenant. Because of famine in the land, his brothers came to him for aid, not knowing he was their brother. When he saw them, he was deeply moved, and went to his chamber to weep. Then, Moses tells us, “He washed his face, and went out, and refrained himself, and said, Set on bread.” (Genesis 43:31) It took great self-control not to be angry with his brother, nor to reveal to them his identity.

Temperance is so important a virtue that a man is not fit to be a ruler in Christ’s Church if he does not possess that virtue. Saint Paul wrote to Saint Titus, “For a bishop must be blameless, as the steward of God; not selfwilled, not soon angry, not given to wine, no striker, not given to filthy lucre; But a lover of hospitality, a lover of good men, sober, just, holy, temperate.” (Titus 1:7, 8)

Anger. Food. Drink. Sex. Whatever it may be, the Christian must be temperate; he must be moderate; he must exercise self-control. He must master the things of the world; they must not master him. Saint Paul wrote to the Corinthians, “All things are lawful unto me, but all things are not expedient: all things are lawful for me, but I will not be brought under the power of any.” (1 Corinthians 6:12)

One of the issues in the Corinthian Church that Saint Paul addressed was the issue of Christians eating meat sacrificed to idols. Saint Paul told the Corinthians that in idol is nothing, and so meat offered to an idol is not tainted. A Christian may eat it without any harm. Not every christian knew this, however, and if a Christian ate such meat, then he would be doing something he thought was wrong. In his case, then, it would be wrong. So, Saint Paul counseled the Corinthians not to lead such Christians into temptation. They should rather abstain, then to cause their brother to stumble. Saint Paul taught an essential Christian principle: to give up one’s rights for the well being of another. He offered himself as an example. As an apostle, he had a right to financial

support from the churches to which he ministered. If a church did not agree, and believed that he ought to support himself by other means, Saint Paul did not insist. He would waive his right, in order to serve them. He would do anything to further his ministry, even give up his rights. More than that, he let nothing whatsoever impede his journey to the heavenly Zion. He wrote to the Corinthians, "Know ye not that they which run in a race run all, but one receiveth the prize? So run, that ye may obtain. And every man that striveth for the mastery is temperate in all things. Now they *do it* to obtain a corruptible crown; but we an incorruptible. I therefore so run, not as uncertainly; so fight I, not as one that beateth the air: But I keep under my body, and bring *it* into subjection: lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway." (1 Corinthians 9:23-27) Saint Paul compared the Christian life to a foot race. In preparing for a footrace, the runner exercises discipline and trains diligently. He strives to master his event. The Greek philosopher, Epictetus, describes the regimen of the Olympic athlete: "Do you wish to gain the prize at the Olympic games? consider the requisite preparations and the consequence. You must observe a strict regimen; must live on food which is unpleasant; must abstain from all delicacies; must exercise yourself at the prescribed times in heat and in cold; you must drink nothing cool, (*qucron*;) must take no wine as usual; you must put yourself under a pugilist, as you would under a physician, and afterwards enter the lists." (Epictetus, XXXV) Why does he train? So that he may win the prize. And what is this treasured prize? A garland, which soon perishes. Christians run a race, of sorts, but the prize is imperishable. It is eternal life itself. Saint Paul also compares the Christian life to fighting. He knew what he was training for, and he did not train aimlessly; he disciplined his body so that he might win. He preached the Gospel to others, but this was no guarantee of eternal life. He had to exercise self-control, temperance, so that he might not be disqualified from the contest, and so lose the prize. He exhorted the Hebrews, "Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset *us*, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us." (Hebrews 12:1)

Sanya Richards-Ross is one of the world's great runners. She has won many world championship races, and holds one bronze, and three gold medals from the Olympic games. She recently published a book with the title, *Chasing Grace: What the Quarter Mile Has Taught Me about God and Life*. In the book she reveals that, shortly before competing in the Olympic games in Beijing, she found that she was pregnant. Not wishing for her pregnancy to hinder her from achieving her goals, she had an abortion. She wrote about her state of mind: "No one is guaranteed even one Olympics, and I was finally the favorite, primed to stand in top of the podium. It had been my only consistent dream since I was a girl, and the unknown of another four years was enough to keep me from taking the chance... I made a decision that broke me, and one from which I would not immediately heal. Abortion would now forever be a part of my life. A scarlet letter I never thought I'd wear. I was a champion—and not just an ordinary one, but a world class-class, record-breaking champion. From the heights of that reality I fell into the depths of despair." Sanya was sorry for her sin, and threw herself upon the mercy of God. Her story is a tragic one, and, sadly, not unusual. She says that most of the women in her sport have had at least one abortion. What lengths people go to in order to excel in a sport! What they will not do in order to receive a medal! If only Christians would so dedicate themselves to God.

So important is temperance, it will be a consideration in the Final Judgment. To the Galatians, Saint Paul wrote of the stark difference between what a man produces when led by his sinful desires, and what the Holy Spirit produces, and he warned them of the consequences of living a life that indulges fleshly desires: "Now the works of the flesh are manifest, which are *these*; Adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness, Idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, variance, emulations, wrath, strife, seditions, heresies, Envyings, murders, drunkenness, revellings, and such like: of the which I tell you before, as I have also told *you* in time past, that they which do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, Meekness, temperance: against such there is no law. And they that are Christ's have crucified the flesh with the affections and lusts." (Galatians 5:19-24) Saint Paul was once a prisoner of Felix,

the governor of Judea. Felix was married to Drusilla, the daughter of King Herod Agrippa, although she was still married to her first husband. On one occasion, the governor sent for Saint Paul so that he might hear the apostle's message. Saint Paul obliged, and Saint Luke has relates what happened: "And as he reasoned of righteousness, temperance, and judgment to come, Felix trembled, and answered, Go thy way for this time; when I have a convenient season, I will call for thee." (Acts 24:24, 25) Saint Paul, knowing that Felix had lusted after another man's wife, and had stolen her away from him. He warned the governor that his lack of self-control led him to commit an unrighteous act, an act for which God would call him to account in the Final Judgment.

Let us reflect on God's temperance. Let us seek to be like God in temper. Let us, by the power of God's Spirit, be temperate in all things.

Unto Him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in His own blood, and hath made us kings and priests unto His God and Father; top Him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. *Amen.*