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The Scope of Temperance

2 Peter 1: 5-7; Titus 1: 15

One of the great benefits of marriage, particularly as you get older, is the fact you gain an extra memory. So it was, when I mentioned to Melissa a few weeks ago that I was going to be preaching on temperance, she immediately said, “Don’t forget to mention the Kentucky guy.” What a memory! I haven’t thought about “the Kentucky guy” in twenty years but I knew exactly of whom she spoke. One of my former parishioners had a father who worked for the Kentucky Temperance League, a Baptist organization (naturally) that promoted abstention from alcohol. One day my friend’s father came to visit and brought his boss, the head of the Kentucky Temperance League. Melissa and I took one look at him and gave each other one of those sidelong glances that told the other we were both thinking the same thing. This fellow may have abstained from alcohol, but he obviously never abstained from ingesting anything else. He weighed at least 400 pounds! He made the Michelin Man look like a body-builder. Here was a man who went around his state preaching on the virtue of temperance when his very physique screamed, “I know nothing about the subject.” Oh, he wouldn’t have touched a beer or glass of wine. But he must have really wanted one. For his rejection of one form of potentially immoderate behavior had sublimated into a disfiguring passion for another form of avowedly immoderate behavior. For every beer he hadn’t drunk, he had eaten at least two fried chickens.

Yet, if I must tell a tale about someone else’s failures at temperance, I must also reveal my own. I think back some weeks ago to a lovely Friday evening, when I had finally made it home from work late. That was unusual, really, for Fridays are my off-days, and I try not to work late on them. In fact, I try to sneak away for a few hours on most Fridays to visit “the Greens family,” all eighteen of them. But on this day my workload was simply too great. But finally I was home and soon found myself in my backyard, sitting in my camping chair, sipping a glass of chardonnay, grilling marinated salmon and shrimp, looking out to see what animals might be traipsing through the woods or coming to visit my bird feeder – and reading an article on temperance. Suddenly, I had to laugh. The confluence of events was too ironic to ignore. Here I was sipping wine and preparing a big meal – and reading an article on temperance. But then I thought, no, I’m okay: I’m just going to have this one glass of chardonnay, (okay, maybe two) which means I won’t violate the virtue of temperance by drunkenness. I don’t plan to eat too much of this fish and shrimp, so I won’t have violated the virtue of temperance by gluttony. So though I’m drinking wine and cooking a big meal, I’m living in accordance with the virtue of temperance. Then, in a moment of piercing realization I laughed at myself and prayed, only half in jest, “Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner.” For it wasn’t the fish on the grill or the wine in the glass that served as evidence I had betrayed the virtue of temperance. It was the book in my hand! I generally work seven days a week, and usually six nights a week – but never on Friday night! Friday night is meant to be a night for family, for relaxation, for rest. A night of rest is supposed to be a night of rest! The inability to arrange my schedule to where I wouldn’t be working every day and every night is a clear indication that my mastery of the virtue of temperance is far from perfect.

I'm as intemperate as that Kentucky Temperance fellow – just in another way.

I find it interesting and incisive that one of the ancient Latin words for “intemperance” was “*curiositas*,” from which, of course, we derive the word, “curiosity.”

Of course, we have the old saying, “Curiosity killed the cat,” but perhaps, more pertinent is the observation made by the Southern humorist who noted that there is no telling how many accidents have begun with the phrase, “Hey, Bubba, hold my beer while I try to do this . . .”

The ancient world sensed that destructive behavior often began with a similar phrase, rooted in a similar curiosity.

They wondered what would happen if they cast aside good sense and gorged themselves; they wondered what would happen if they cast aside the bounds of decorum and drank without inhibition; they wondered what would happen if they disregarded all societal strictures regarding sexual behavior; they wondered what would happen if they gave themselves over to greed or the pursuit of pleasure.

The ancient world learned what would happen.

Curiosity about life beyond sensible boundaries gave rise to intemperate behavior that threatened the stability and health of individuals and society.

That is why, when Christian theologians and classical ethicists listed the virtues that would serve as key ingredients of a mature and positive life, the quality of temperance was included among them.

Yet, as my stories about the Kentucky Temperance League official and about myself indicate, the virtue of temperance is greater in scope than we imagine. The scope of temperance is far more encompassing and penetrating than merely the practice of moderation in one's eating and drinking.

Indeed, temperance is not primarily concerned with the quantity of a product consumed.

Temperance is not primarily about restricting our appetites, curbing our passions or repressing our urges – though in fact temperance accomplishes all of these tasks.

Rather, the classic virtue of “*temperantia*,” has to do with performing two great and interlocking functions.

First, temperance has to do with developing the discipline and reasoning power to organize one's life in such a way as to balance one's appetites and unify one's ambitions.

Temperance's primary function is to create structure in our lives so that our ambitions, appetites and activities are in perfect balance, held together by a sense of unity.

When temperance accomplishes that function it promotes a second function:

when temperance creates a unified will capable of balancing all one's activities, appetites and ambitions, then from one's personality flows a sense of serenity from which peace emanates.

As Christians we are supposed to be people who spread peace, yet we cannot give the gift of peace to others, until we have first cultivated a spirit of peace within ourselves.

Indeed, the evidence of this serenity is one sure sign that the virtue of temperance has begun to gain some mastery over the center of our being.

Thus, temperance emanates an organizing power that bring our lives into balance and unity, and as it does so, temperance engenders within us a sense of serenity that is evinced in the power of peace.

These are the virtue of temperance's two fundamental functions.

But how does the virtue of temperance bring us closer to God? That is exactly the wrong question.

In truth, the power of temperance flows out of our relationship with God.

The more vibrant our relationship with God, the more powerful the spirit of temperance that emanates from our being. As Titus says, “All things are pure to the pure.”

Of course, the flip side is, all things are impure to the impure.

One's attitude toward temperance reflects one's basic regard of life and basic regard of God.

If we see food, drink, family, work, sports, sex, wealth and play as gifts from God,

if we see all of those gifts as expressions of God's grace, then we regard them with a sense of reverence. Whenever we reverence these experiences of life as expressions of divine blessing, then our approach to those experiences is profoundly altered.

But if our attitude is, "Hey, it's my life, I can do whatever I want to with it," that approach engenders within us an unbalanced personality that leads to disfiguring passions and distorting ambitions.

When what we eat, what we drink, whom we love, how we play, how we re-create, how we recreate, how we invest our talents in work, how we spend our spare time in leisure – when all of these are seen as rooted in God's beneficence, it transforms the way we live, and from that relationship with God an attitude of reverence flows forth that allows us to balance our lives. When that balance is not there, something as pure as loving our family can become a disfiguring passion. When your enjoyment in life is not rooted in your enjoyment of God, then any pursuit can throw your life profoundly out of sync.

Thomas Aquinas was a genius, and he made this shrewd observation centuries ago:

"The powers whose function is the ordering of temperance can most easily bring unrest to the spirit because they belong to the essence of humanity."

Let me say that again: "*The powers whose function is the ordering of temperance can most easily bring unrest to the spirit because they belong to the essence of humanity.*"

What he is saying is this:

what makes us human is our appetites, our ambitions, our exercise of the will, our capacity for passion. Indeed, it is precisely our capacity for passion that distinguishes us from every other creature on earth. But if those passions are not rooted in our relationship with God, if our sense of blessing does not flow forth from our sense of God's beneficence, then those passions can disquiet and disfigure us.

Yet all things are pure to the pure!

In my line of work I pick the brains of no small number of brilliant people capable of expressing profound insight; seldom do brilliant minds combine profound insight with common sense.

Thomas Aquinas is an exception. He had a very real sense of how goodness is achieved in human life.

He linked virtue to a word with which we are all familiar, *habitus*, habit.

How do we progress in the virtue of temperance? We do so slowly, by the formation of positive habits.

None of us can become temperate beings overnight.

We change slowly, often by subtle changes in the structure of our lives.

We mature in temperance by creating habits that so engrain healthy behavior into the structure of our lives that doing right ceases to be a struggle and becomes incorporated into our normal approach to living.

Let me offer a simple, concrete example.

Dieticians tell us that we should drink 64 ounces of water daily.

That's fine for those who like to drink water. But for those of us who prefer their water colored with tea and that tea sweetened with sugar, drinking 64 ounces of pure water daily is boring.

But I realized some years ago that given my advancing age and my intense running schedule and my increasingly creaking joints, I needed to heed the dieticians, because water is a natural internal lubricant.

So, several years ago, every day I started filling up a 64-ounce bottle of water, and every morning when I left for the office I would carry that bottle with me and made sure that I drank every drop of it daily.

At first it was a laborious discipline. I hated it.

But the more I did it, the more it became part of my routine.

Now drinking sixty-four ounces of water has become a part of my life as much as doing my prayer time.

At different times in my life prayer and water drinking were hard things to do daily,

but each has become so essential to the structure of my discipline that my day feels incomplete without doing both.

I grafted both experiences into the structure of my existence through the power of positive habit.

If we want to become more temperate people, if we want to live a more positive lifestyle, we begin through the simple process of incorporating positive habits into the structure of our day.

The virtue of temperance will ensue as a way of thanking God for the blessings that we enjoy on a daily basis.

I would add in passing that temperance is not just a private virtue for individuals.

It is a civic virtue to which our entire community, our entire country, our entire world must aspire. We cannot continue to destroy our environment to pursue immature yearnings to manipulate nature for our pleasure.

We cannot continue rapaciously to consume the world's resources.

Temperance is not simply an individual virtue; it must become a way of life for the human community, or we will render our own planet uninhabitable.

Temperance is not simply an individual virtue.

It is a virtue that describes a way of life absolutely vital to the survival of our planet.

Yet, even as I say these words, I cannot help but think back to July the Fourth and to one of the most-highly publicized celebrations of intemperance that now takes place on our Independence Day. Yes, I'm referring to the Nathan's Hot Dog eating contest that now draws a nationally-televised audience to watch how many hot dogs people can consume in twelve minutes.

This year the winner consumed an astounding 66 hotdogs (including buns!) in that amount of time, defeating the defending champion by three wieners.

I am told that the contest has a rule mandating that "whatever goes in, has to stay in." Why?

Because the human body, sensing that it is being subjected to some insanely intemperate behavior, instinctively tries to expel the threat.

That ought to tell us something.

But even as we gape and laugh at the behavior of a few hotdog-eating specialists, we know that they are an intense paradigm of our own behavior.

We, too, are tempted to go through life trying to see how far we can push the limits of consumption and enjoyment and get away with it.

But that's the wrong approach to take with our lives.

Our lives and everything in it, our food, our drink, our friends, our sports, our families, our work, our play, our romance, our every aspect of existence is rooted in the beneficence of God.

If this realization permeates every aspect of our existence, then every aspect of our lives becomes an act of worship and wonder.

This, in fact, is how God intends for us to live.

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Fourth in the Series