

Lesson Seven: Temperance Or: Avoiding Ruin

Throughout our lives, we will all have struggles against temptations for what we know to be detrimental to ourselves and others. Temperance is the virtue which counteracts these temptations. *Temperance enables us to keep from doing what is wrong, even when we have strong feelings for it.* In other words, temperance is what keeps us from sinning, even when we want to.

Notice that temperance is the last of the cardinal virtues. That's because temperance is about *maintaining* the good, but you can only maintain the good if you already have some idea of what the good is and how to acquire it. That's why we needed to discuss prudence (which is how we know the good) and justice and fortitude (which is how we do the good), before we discuss temperance, which is how we avoid doing evil, or losing the good.

The problem is that most people see the major goal of the Christian life as the avoidance of sin. If someone were to ask the question "What's a good Christian?" most people would answer in purely negative terms: "A good Christian is someone who doesn't fornicate, or masturbate, or get drunk, or do drugs, or be mean to people, or tell dirty jokes, or steal." This is hardly an accurate answer. People in comas don't do any of these things, neither does my neutered dog (named Max), neither do some terribly evil people, neither do the demons – but when we think of ideal Christians, hopefully we don't think of comatose persons, or Max, or evil persons, or fallen angels.

Someone isn't a good Christian, or even a good person, because he *doesn't* do certain things, but because he *does* certain things, because he pursues the goods of life, because he strives to promote beauty, health, holiness, friendship, truth, etc... We have to make sure that our focus is more on doing good than on avoiding evil. In the moral life, the best defense is a good offense. That's why prudence is the last in the order of virtues, though it's just as indispensable as the others.

At this point, it may be helpful to sum up the four cardinal virtues with the analogy of learning to drive a car. If you want to learn to drive, the first thing you need to learn is how to steer the car; this corresponds to the virtue of prudence. Next, you will have to learn to be aware of surrounding traffic, to be able to relate to other cars on the road; this skill corresponds to the virtue of justice. Thirdly, you'll have to learn how to use the accelerator, how to depress the pedal with sufficient (but not excessive) force for propelling you to your destination. Lastly, you have to learn how to avoid crashes and mechanical failures; this ability corresponds to the virtue of temperance.

Clearly, the main purpose of a car isn't just avoiding crashes, but rather arriving at a destination. So too, the main purpose of life isn't just avoiding sin, but rather attaining perfect happiness. Nonetheless, if the car crashes or breaks down, it's not going to get you very far, and if we don't avoid sin, we're not going to become very happy. So even though temperance is not to be confused with the Christian's ultimate goal, it is still an essential prerequisite for happiness.

Overcoming Concupiscence

Concupiscence is a fancy theological word that describes the human desire for things we know aren't good for us. Diabetics sometimes have sugar cravings, alcoholics

sometimes desire whisky, and we all sometimes just long for something sinful. We want something good in a disordered way. Recall the first lesson, where we saw that all evil comes from an inappropriate mode of pursuing a good. It is a constant human temptation to go after one good by doing damage to another good. When we do that, we hurt ourselves and others.

Temperance prevents us from acting on these dangerous urges. It allows us to govern our desires, instead allowing our desires to govern us. For an intemperate person – that is, someone who permits their impulses to run rampant – it is much harder to see the truth, and much harder to do what is right. One's life is run by emotional drives, instead of by prudence, justice, and fortitude. But temperance takes the reins from the urges and gives it back to the first three virtues. In a way, one could say that temperance allows the other virtues to get their job done.

Also, temperance safeguards whatever good it is that we are pursuing. If a person pursues a good in a disordered way, he is sure to end up hating that good. For example, alcohol is a good thing, but nobody hates alcohol more than an alcoholic; he hates it because it's separated him from everything else: his family, his job, his self-respect, etc... Sexuality, too, is a good thing, but no one hates it more than a nymphomaniac, because through her slavery to desire she has degraded herself and let herself be degraded by others in terrible ways. The point is that *addiction ruins appreciation*; an uncontrolled over-focus on just one good at the expense of all others will not only cause a person to lose all the other goods, it'll also make him cry out in remorse, "I gave my life for *that*?! Temperance, therefore, by directing our desires and overcoming concupiscence, protects the human goods and happiness as a whole.

Temperance lies between Extremes

As is the case with fortitude, certain excesses must be avoided to achieve genuine temperance. The first of these extremes is a lack of self-control, that is, *intemperance*. We have already talked a bit about this vice; this is when a person can't control any of their impulses, and so he follows wherever they lead at any given moment. Such indulgence inevitably leads to disaster; to continue the above analogy, intemperance results in a car wreck.

But the second extreme is also to be discouraged, namely *insensibility*. This is the undesirable condition in which the person is not even attracted to the goods of life. One should be attracted to sex, to food, to achievement, to social life, etc... Temperance is only admirable if it is accompanied by a healthy appreciation for the goods of life.

Forms of Intemperance

As a practical aid to advancing in temperance, it's good to do a basic review of certain temptations against which many of us struggle.

Intemperance in the areas of food and drink is called *gluttony*. Regarding food, the question isn't just how much does a person eat (although that's part of it); there can also be sins which arise from being extremely picky, or attached to a certain kind of food. Many people make those around them miserable by refusing to eat anything other than exactly what they want. As C.S. Lewis points out, every time a person is grumpy,

impatient, uncharitable, or self-concerned because of their stomach, it's a case of gluttony.

The vice connected with alcohol is called *drunkenness*. In drunkenness (and also illegal drug use), we take our beautiful nature, a masterpiece of creation, and we contort and twist it into something ugly. We take the noble, dignified child of God and turn him into a creature that is low, unintelligent, and out-of-control. It is a direct self-debasement, and hinders our capacity for the basic human goods.

The form of intemperance which is generally of most interest to people is intemperance with regard to sexuality. Of course sexuality, like all the other human goods, is appropriate to and fulfilling of the human condition. It is fitting to desire physical union with the beloved, and to experience an accompanying pleasure when that desire is fulfilled.

Lust, however, is the vice which simply uses the other person for sexual gratification. Lust disregards the true good of the other (and oneself) in order to get what one wants. In fact, a good tactic for trying to tell if you're lusting is the following: ask yourself, "Am I *really* thinking about the happiness of the other person, or simply trying to enjoy myself?"

Lust can take place in either of two ways. The first possibility lies in lust before marriage. *Fornication*, for example, is sexual activity with a person to whom one is not married (note that this includes behaviors besides just intercourse). *Pornography*, or any visual sexual objectification of a person is another widespread form of lust (note that making use of someone sexually doesn't require the sense of touch; the eyes are equally capable). Finally, *masturbation* is a form of intemperance that completely dispenses with the good of interpersonal love, and so goes contrary to human happiness.

Nor does the potential for lust disappear with marriage. Obviously, opportunities to fail in temperance through adultery, pornography and masturbation remain, and so the married man must stay on his guard. There can even be a selfish, pleasure-seeking use of one's own spouse, where the focus is more on getting gratification than on loving. Prayers to St. Joseph, the model of married chastity, are especially powerful in overcoming such temptations.

Immodesty is the vice that encourages lust, and is particularly common in our society in the way people dress. Women must ask themselves, as they look at their clothes (or lack thereof!), "What response are these clothes designed to elicit?" If the answer is "sexual stimulation," then it is best not to wear the outfit in public. Of course, everyone wants to be desired, but the real question is: desired how, and by whom? By God, as a beautiful, infinitely valued child? By a loving, respectful man? Or by anyone who wants to manipulate your body as a tool for his own physical satisfaction? Never seek the attention of anyone other than those first two options.

As we have seen, anger is sometimes perfectly fitting for a given situation. It can be used to correct an evil, can motivate us to end some injustice. However, *anger* becomes intemperate when it is, a) inappropriate for the circumstances, that is, the anger is too long or too intense, or b) seeks to hurt others, get revenge, protect our egos, or show our importance and power. Such anger is not constructive, not directed towards a good. It is destructive, and hence temperance demands that it be carefully restrained.

The vice of *pride* is a sin against temperance, as it exaggerates one's own importance; pride is when a person acts as though he is more significant than he really is. Temperance with regards to self-image is called *humility*. Everyone is guilty of at least some degree of pride, and the following list (compiled by St. Josemaria Escriva) is a good criteria for locating your dominant form of pride:

“Always wanting to get your own way; Thinking that what you do or say is better than what others do or say; arguing when you are not right; arguing when you are right but with bad manners or insisting stubbornly; giving your opinion without being asked, when charity does not demand you to do so; despising the point of view of others; not being aware that all the gifts and qualities you have are on loan (from God) feeling anxiety and fear (a lack of trust); Speaking badly about yourself, so that they may form a good opinion of you; making excuses when rebuked; being hurt that others are held in greater esteem than you; refusing to carry out menial tasks; seeking or wanting to be singled out; dropping words of self-praise in conversation, or words that might show your wit or skill, or your professional prestige; being ashamed of not having certain possessions.”

These characteristics are all symptoms of exulting one's own identity to the detriment of the other goods. It is very humbling to reflect on one's own pride, but hopefully that reflection can lead to the amendment of excessive self-assertion and even excessive self-consciousness.

One final point about intemperance deals with the phenomenon of modern entertainment. In a culture of ipods, portable dvd players, home televisions, car radios, cell-phones, and video games, we are perpetually bombarded with services designed for our personal amusement. And not surprisingly, for we all normally have some daily free time, and we seek to fill that time with enjoyable forms of recreation.

The question, then, is: Do we seek out entertainment that is destructive instead of edifying? Do we look at pornography, or get involved in celebrity gossip? Assuredly, these degenerative amusements will not refresh or renew us, but will leave us more depleted and less capable of pursuing happiness. Other areas of entertainment, while not being in themselves evil, are nonetheless very susceptible of taking too much of our focus, and can become distractions from that which has a greater demand on our time. For example, there's may be nothing wrong with watching a football game every now and then. However, often sports viewing becomes an obsession, or detracts from religious and family obligations. The same is true of concern with news, and staying up to date on international affairs (the majority of which cannot be influenced by us in any way). Or do we become addicted to low-grade entertainment: mediocre movies, inane sitcoms, soap operas, poor quality songs we've heard a hundred times? Do we use these things to just kill time, to waste the precious moments we've been given to acquire virtue and gain happiness?

This is not to deny the absolute necessity of genuine recreation. We all need to be able to take a break, relax, and engage in some stress-relieving activity. But that activity should be *worthwhile*, not morally offensive or a simple frittering away of time. Further, whatever leisure we pursue, temperance demands that we not become addicted to it to the point of failing to meet the other obligations of life.

So in what area are you intemperate? What desire, what urge dominates you to the point of harming your capacity for virtue and goodness? Pray to God to reveal to you your weaknesses in the areas of self-control, and to give you the strength to free you from all addictions through the virtue of temperance.