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# The Humble Virtue TAKES ON GLUTTONY & Lust

## Reclaiming the pleasures of **temperance**

In a recent article entitled "Is Food the New Sex?" Mary Eberstadt describes the historical novelty of contemporary culture relative to the previous millennia. "[There is a] chasm in attitude that separates almost all of us living in the West today from almost all of our ancestors, over two things without which human beings cannot exist: food and sex."

Thanks to technological innovations ranging from factory farming, pesticides, and a global transportation system, to contraception devices, Viagra, and Internet pornography, along with changing religious attitudes toward consumption and sexuality, citizens in the countries of Europe and the United States now have an overabundance of relatively easily accessible food and sex. In response, Eberstadt asks an important question, "What happens when, *for the first time in history*, adult human beings are free to have all the sex and food they want?"

In this month's examination of the seven holy virtues and the seven deadly sins, we consider the virtue of temperance and the vices of gluttony and lust. In light of Eberstadt's observation about the unprecedented availability of two most basic necessities to human life, some reflection on the virtue of temperance is in order.

We are just as likely to hear these days about the wages of the sin of gluttony, evidenced in the rising cases of cardiac disease and diabetes, as we are of the sins of lust, evidenced in the increasing number of people addicted to Internet pornography. Paradoxically, our culture still reserves plenty of shame to pour out onto those for whom these vices have become publicly known. It is the ironic fate of these vices that while experientially they are perhaps the most private of the vices, when exposed they often receive the most public attention. As Simon Blackburn notes in his book *Lust*, "When something is both intensely desirable, and culturally identified as intensely shameful, we can expect psychic turmoil."


This cycle of shame and indulgence is common to both vices. It is a cycle that the virtue of temperance, properly understood, corrects.

Our approach in this series is not to probe all the psychological complexities of these vices, but to offer some insight into how to think about vices *ethically*. The promise of the Christian virtues ethics tradition lies not in pointing fingers at those easy to despise but in its ability to call us to more faithful living. We can recall that a moral virtue is a disposition to act in excellent or praiseworthy ways cultivated over time through habit. Each person is called to embody the whole of the virtuous life, and avoid the whole of the vicious life. Psychologically speaking, individuals typically have their burden in life, that one vice they may struggle with more than others. Each of us is called, nevertheless, through the grace of God to cultivate *all* the virtues within us.

As Christian disciples, we "are chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light" (1 Peter 2:9). To be disciples of Christ is to cultivate our whole selves to be disposed toward good and noble attitudes and actions so that we as *whole selves* may be light to the world. In


this sense, each of the virtues indicates a piece of the holistic Christian life, and temperance distinctly reminds us of this holistic perspective.

Thanks to the ever-changing character of our language, temperance has acquired a host of meanings, many of which come to mind when we hear the word: self-control, prudish restraint, limitation, moderation, abstinence, prohibition. Temperance is often associated with a kind of negativity, for it seems by definition to limit something or, in the extreme, to stifle or suppress something altogether.

While many of these connotations arose from the original meaning of the term itself, they often misguide how temperance has been understood throughout much of Christian tradition. Temperance is precisely not a matter of refusing enjoyment, or keeping enjoyment to a minimum. Rather, temperance is about enjoying ourselves freely in keeping with our ordained humanity by not allowing us to become slaves to our pleasures.

Nevertheless, we may note that temperance is the most humble of the virtues. As Thomas Aquinas notes in his *Summa Theologica*, courage and justice are more admirable and wisdom is more necessary. Josef Pieper maintains that "Discipline and moderation and chastity are not [themselves] the fulfillment of man." André Comte-Sponville claims, "[Temperance] is not a virtue meant for extraordinary circumstances, but an ordinary, humble virtue, to be practiced on a regular basis, a virtue of moderation, not heroism." Most communities don't give out medals for the most temperate citizen, nor do we send biographies of consistently self-controlled individuals up the best-seller charts.

But why shouldn't we? Communities of recovering addicts rightfully give temperance the honor it is due. Why don't the rest of us? We likely downplay the virtue of temperance in our society because temperance seems at best a rather mundane character trait not as obvious an *excellence* as are the other virtues. We also likely reduce temperance to a virtue for those whose lives have crashed and burned, perhaps because many of us have a knee-jerk reaction against anything that rings of the irrational fear of pleasure that has swelled up in Christian communities every now and then.

A more helpful explanation of the deceptively unassuming character of temperance is that temperance reminds us of something that ironically goes against much of human nature (and American culture). Temperance calls us to *find contentment in simply being human* by discovering that *the simplicity of our vitality itself can be a sufficient measure of our desires*.

Consider what it means to say that temperance is an excellence of moral character associated with our *vitality*. We often associate intemperance with the excessive vices of gluttony and lust. Gluttony and lust are, however, perversions of our most basic desires as living creatures. Our vitality is that baseline of human existence lived out through our desires for self-

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preservation and species-proliferation, tangibly experienced in our embodied desires for food and sex, and celebrated in our capacities for pleasure, arousal, and delight. Lest we think by "baseline" we equate vitality with mere physical instincts to eat and procreate, we must remember that we are talking about human beings who are made in the image of God.

Vitality, experienced so wonderfully in our embodied delights of eating a delicious meal amidst animated conversation, exercising strong and attuned muscles in a game of sport, dancing rhythmically and fluidly to music, or embracing our beloved in erotic intimacy, is not mere animal energy dressed up with cultural accoutrements. Even the pleasures themselves of each of these human experiences are not merely physical.

Temperance, then, does not suppress our animal instincts so that our disembodied spiritual instincts may prevail; temperance enables our embodied spiritual vitality to flourish as a holistic and balanced mode of being. Human embodied vitality, when it is freed by the virtue of temperance and the grace of God, is a thoroughly human experience that is ordinate and in keeping with the whole of ourselves. For the temperate soul, to delight in a simple meal, a simple walk, or a simple embrace is still a thoroughly human experience and not mere physicality. The tempered desire arises from no compulsive neediness, but from the vital desires themselves that can be balanced within the soul by discipline. As Aquinas teaches, discipline is the condition for bliss.

So what is lust or gluttony? Lest we think that temperance is not concerned with a kind of limitation of our vital desires, the experienced destructiveness of lust and gluttony all too easily remind us of our own fallen tendency toward excess. C.S. Lewis notes that temperance never meant "abstaining, but going the right length and no further." Stories of the enslaved and frenzied pursuit of pleasure abound in our culture, so I offer one from another time and culture. St. Augustine offers a poetic description of his youthful desires in his *Confessions* that indicates the way that lust, itself often described in terms more befitting gluttony, disorders our vitality to the point of ruin.

"I came to Carthage and all around hissed a cauldron of illicit loves. As yet I had never been in love and I longed to love; and from a subconscious poverty of mind I hated the thought of being less inwardly destitute. I was in love with love, and I hated safety and a path free from snares. My hunger was internal, deprived of inward food, that is of you yourself, my God. But that was not the kind of hunger I felt. I was without any desire for incorruptible nourishment, not because I was replete with it, but the emptier I was, the more unappetizing such food became. So my soul was in rotten health.…I rushed headlong into love, by which I was longing to be captured. 'My God, my mercy,' in your goodness you mixed in much vinegar with that sweetness. My love was returned and in secret I attained the joy that enchains. I was glad to be in bondage, tied with the troublesome chains, with the result that I was flogged with the red hot iron rods of jealousy, suspicion, fear, anger, and contention" (*Confessions*, Book III.1).

The fact that gluttony and lust are so often paired throughout Christian history is no accident, given their common tie to vitality, embodiment, and pleasure, not to mention the shared metaphors we often use in our language to describe the desires of both.

Generally speaking, gluttony and lust are those habituated dispositions of character that *precisely inhibit, harm, or otherwise bring ruin to our vitality, embodied health, and pleasure*. The pleasures of contentment and satiation are impossible for the truly lustful and gluttonous. The intemperate, in these regards, may scorn limitations on their desires that seem to come from outdated cultural or religious conventions, but in the end they themselves, from their own internal discord, become prisoners of their own neediness.

The temperate, on the other hand, are not incapable of enjoying the occasional delights that come from either an exquisitely prepared meal or a particularly passionate embrace. The temperate person does not make decadence the standard for enjoyment, but finds contentment in ordinary vitality perhaps best modeled in the simplicity of the Eucharist itself, where bread and wine can make for holy feast.

Thus, temperance is the virtue that brings balance, harmony, and order to our desires by cultivating the habit of being content with the elegance and simplicity of our vitality. Is such temperance easy to achieve? Certainly not. As many in the Christian tradition have noted, while temperance is the most humble of the virtues, it is also the most difficult to maintain. It is a virtue that examines the whole self, particularly those embodied desires that so acutely disrupt the self. In the end, temperance even tempers the tendencies of the other virtues, such as wisdom or faith, which can unduly overshadow the rest, so that the light of Christ may shine forth through our entire embodied spiritual life. ■

## For further reading


*Back to Virtue: Traditional Moral Wisdom for Modern Moral Confusion,* by Peter Kreeft. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992.

*Gluttony,* by Francine Prose. The Seven Deadly Sins series. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006.

*Lust,* by Simon Blackburn. The Seven Deadly Sins series. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.

*Practice What You Preach: Virtues, Ethics, and Power in the Lives of Pastoral Ministers and Their Congregations,* by James Keenan. Lanham, MD: Sheed and Ward, 1999.

*Putting on Virtue: The Legacy of the Splendid Vices,* by Jennifer A. Herdt. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008.