

## ***Wisdom: Temperance***

### ***Preference:***

Well friends, we're talking about temperance today. Temperance.

This is a normal word. It's ubiquitous. Like the word ubiquitous.

Most of us are at least familiar with the word.

It's one we just don't use anymore. It's old fashioned. And it does more or less mean, this side of 1900, avoiding alcohol. More broadly, more completely, it means, oh, moderation. Self-restraint. Saying no to too much.

### ***A Spectrum of Consumption:***

If on the one side you have abstinence--and let's be straightforward, if temperance is associated with drink, abstinence is associated with sex, but abstinence just means refraining from doing something. Abstaining. Sitting something out. So. One side: Abstinence, other side, oh, gluttony, voracity, piggishness. Barely-restrained consumption. Somewhere in the middle is temperance. The place where moderation sits.

And that's the Christian sweet spot, I think. That's what we want to note.

***Introduction:***

We're talking this morning about how we live in the world as consumers of the world. I'll spend most of the time talking about principles, and we'll emphasize, oh food and drink more than we emphasize anything much of anything else. In the background, though, will be the truth that we consume so much, and it could easily be said, from a fun-house mirror perspective, that what people basically are is consumers. It's said all the time from an economic perspective. But both those things pale and fade when we see ourselves with God's eyes.

And I think this is relevant this morning just because, frankly, many people lose all rhythm, control, sense of proportion, and..temperance, really...during the holidays. If you haven't, listen for some weak-willed person who hasn't yet become perfect.

Throughout this morning I'll probably use "moderation" and "self-restraint" more than temperance, but I really wanted to get our attention with it, frankly.

My hope is that we can do more than just talk about what it means to practice self-restraint and moderation, which are fundamentally about saying "no" to things. I'd like to also consider what we should say "yes" to.

Let's pray.

**Prayer:**

Prayer Prayer Prayer

**Some Things To Say:**

I think there are some things that need said in order to talk about today's topic well.

**Things: Personal:**

First of all, today's message can be--isn't always, but can be--something that can be very sensitive. There are few things as personal as the way we consume things.

We all consume food, drink, and entertainment. And the way we eat or drink or seek to be entertained reveals an enormous amount about what we care about, what we believe about ourselves, God, and people, or the way the world works.

Any too-close examination of our consumption habits automatically makes us feel vulnerable and we respond with defensive or offensive self-protection. We do. "You're eating that? You're watching that? You're buying that? You're wearing that? You're drinking that?" Even if these questions could be asked without judgment and negative subtext, we don't respond well

when they're asked of us.

I hope that we can remember that our identity is secure in God's love for us, and we can face our sins and failures without fear of judgment. We don't have to respond with anxiety to what others do or say about us. My hope is that a few frank statements about our appetites might position us for a healthy dose of self-reflection. I pray that a dose of self-reflection might position us for courageous change if we need it, and greater dependence upon Christ.

### ***Things: Jesus & Pleasures***

There's this, too: Jesus is not against pleasures. I hope we realize that.

There is a strain in Christianity that sees anything in this world as utterly tainted, and abstinence is seen as the only Christian response to anything that brings us physical pleasure.

We can know how more or less we've bought into this by noticing how guilty we feel simply at being happy, content. If you feel compelled to explain why you are feeling good, almost apologetically, this may be something that has influenced you in some measure.

But this is wrong, this attitude--at least, the belief that drives it is wrong. I would even say it's sinful. Paul says, regarding those who would reject physical

pleasures, who “forbid marriage and demand abstinence from foods” that “everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected, provided it is received with thanksgiving; for it is sanctified by God’s word and by prayer.”

Now: What we want to know when we hear this passage is “What can I get away with?” “What about--whatever. Pot. Cigarettes. Some kind of unusual booze.”

A more mature response would be “How can I enjoy what God’s made?” What Christianity lost when its Greek trunk was grafted onto its Jewish roots was the reminder that when God made the world, He said it was good. Despite the sin that has marred everything, that first pronouncement wasn’t done away with.

***Things: Control & Restraint:***

And honestly, the “abstinence is the answer” attitude--this idea that pleasure is dangerous--tends to often go along with a perspective that sees the highest human virtue as one of controlling--even dominating, forcing into submission--those passions and appetites that we have as people.

Have you ever met someone who seems driven by this sort of control?

Here’s a problem, though: It is often the case that

those who are most controlling in some area of their lives have some secret place where they have no restraint at all over some appetite or behavior. They are utterly controlled. Whether it's addiction, or rage, it's there; just hidden.

We could talk about this for awhile, and at depth. There's so much tied up into it. First of all, vows have power, and it's negative power, so what we vow to never do again, who we vow to never become like, and the will and energy we put into avoiding something almost always turns in on itself such that we desire even more that which we've vowed to refuse or we become even more like the one whom we've vowed to avoid becoming like. Because we've chosen to control and force into submission some aspect of our lives, rather than inviting God to change us as we ever-more completely depend on his grace and power to be changed, the devil and the world and our sin coordinate sabotage.

Beyond this, people only have so much will power, I think. I could be wrong on this. But our concentration, our energy, our strength, these are things that wax and wane, and do get used up. If we're putting all our energy and effort into avoiding something, it means that other things we should also be careful of aren't getting the attention they need. It also means that things that should be receiving our energy in some constructive, positive way aren't getting what they

need.

Maybe this is why community is so important when it comes to resisting sin; there's someone to have your back on those days when you must keep all your attention to the front.

***Things: We become that which we do?***

And I think it's true that over time we can really lose our ability to act with will in the world. We can lose control over our own behavior and choices.

What I mean is that if we embrace, and create a habit of embracing, our appetites, over time we can lose the choice to say no to something. This is the essence of addiction, right? We become addicts--people who can't say no to something. we become like those Paul cries over: "Their end is destruction; their god is the belly; and their glory is in their shame; their minds are set on earthly things."

Through the choices we make we modify our default setting over time.

If we're always thinking about and seeking out fat, sugar, or salt, over time maybe we can't help but seek it out, you know? If the first thing we want in the morning and the last thing we want at night is a cup of coffee, then maybe we don't have control anymore. If our minds are filled with sexual fantasies--or, maybe,

any sort of fantasies--it doesn't take long until that's all our minds are filled with.

Think of anything that is neutral or good in the world: Giving into our appetites too often and too regularly can create in us a desire that we have no control over and that ultimately controls us. Until Jesus returns, we may always be able to find the grace to interrupt that hunger and be freed from addiction, but I wonder that doesn't happen as easily or often as we hope it does.

And, turning to the other side of that spectrum, I think it's true that those appetites and hungers that we refuse to feed, they lose their power to sway us. I haven't eaten meat for years, and have very little desire for it, right? Rarely, the idea of some buffalo chicken wing or scallops can make me salivate. Most of my life, the hunger and desire isn't there, is nearly the opposite. I think it's true for anything desirable, that by not feeding them--fantasizing about them, testing and tasting them--we decrease their power to influence us, decrease the volume of the voice they use to urge us on.

We can quench our desire to a point, become people more satisfied and content with infrequent tastes of whatever it is we might otherwise be addicted to.

***What Self-restraint Can Do: Clarify Needs & Wants***

But let me remind us--and I think it's a reminder more than surprising news--I'll remind us about what self-restraint can do. The benefits of practicing self-restraint.

### ***What Self-restraint Can Do: Clarify Needs and Wants***

Because if it's not good for you, then why bother, right?

I mean, "Food for the stomach and the stomach for food!" Shouldn't we "eat, drink, and be merry" as long as we can? I'm quoting Paul, here--but of course, I'm quoting Paul as he caricatures those who have no self-restraint, who as far as he's concerned, are the worst sort of role-models.

Why would we literally consume less when there are so many great things to eat and drink?

First of all, of course, we were made for more than our stomach, for more than consuming things, devouring things.

Luke tells us that after Jesus' 40 day stretch of fasting, he was "very hungry," the best understatement in the New Testament. And tempted by the devil--a temptation one author describes as the temptation to provide for his own needs, rather than trust God will

meet them--Jesus responds with this:

“One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.” Jesus rejects the devil’s temptation to meet his own needs, and responds with a scriptural truth.

Practicing self-restraint can provide us with an opportunity to clarify our needs from our wants, and to trust that God would meet our needs. It provides an opportunity to clarify our needs from our wants, and to trust that God would meet our needs.

Look. We think we need far more than we do. It takes very little to keep a person alive, and not much more to keep them alive well. Basic food, water, health care, loving relationships.

We almost never need another serving of whatever it is we’re reaching across the table for or lifting up to our mouths. But we take it, we take it anyway. And practicing moderation, self-restraint when it comes to what we eat, drink, seek to be entertained by, or consume generally, it can force us to deal with just how badly we want what we don’t really need.

### ***What Self-restraint Can Do: Position Us For Safety***

In Proverbs 30 we read,

***“Two things I ask of you, Lord;  
do not refuse me before I die:  
Keep falsehood and lies far from me;  
give me neither poverty nor riches,  
but give me only my daily bread.  
Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you  
and say, ‘Who is the Lord?’  
Or I may become poor and steal,  
and so dishonor the name of my God.*”**

The writer asks for two things to happen before he dies; this what he wants:

Keep him away from liars.

Don't give him too much or too little, but “only my daily bread.” This sentiment should be familiar to us, I hope. Jesus, when asked by his first followers how to pray, prayed for them--this is what Jesus does, you know, models things--and he prayed “Give us this day our daily bread.” That's the way we translate it, anyway. “Bread” isn't actually in there. A better translation would be something like, oh, “Give us today what is necessary for our being, for being alive.”

The points the same, of course: Not too much, not too little, just enough. The truth is that most of us, if not all of us, by virtue of a hundred accidents and a few particular blessings, have far more than we generally need for each day. That's not a moral failure; the

moral failure, of course, is what we do with the too much. Do we act with generosity, as Paul calls us to, or do we live up to the Wisdom writer's fear: "I may have too much and disown you, [God], and say 'Who is the Lord?'"

For those of us who may, on any given day, have less than we need, our temptation is to act in a way that "dishonors the name of our God." Brings shame to the faith, and us and God with it.

Practicing moderation with regard to what we consume is an act of self-preservation. It is an act that positions us for safety. Because the extremes--going too long without and going too long in some unrestrained way--aren't safe for our faith and well-being at all.

If we try to go without for too long--in anything, although I'm remembering Paul's advice to those who are married about sex, suggesting that they shouldn't go too long without it, because the pent-up desire becomes useful for the devil's work of destruction--but if we go without for too long we can begin to act in ways that dishonor God. And maybe it's just some sort of jealous bitterness toward God and others because we feel like we're sacrificing, or things are being asked of us that are unfair, or something like this--when the truth is that usually God hasn't asked us to give up whatever we've given up, we've decided to do it for

reasons that aren't God's at all.

On the other hand, if we try to just toss restraint to the wind and get for ourselves whatever it is we want--whether it's a second or third or fourth helping, or drink, or another few netflix episodes--then we can lose track of the basic truth that we desperately need God.

I don't know if a person who can have more or less whatever they want when they want it can depend in any practical way on the providence or care of God. I don't think that they can.

But of course, none of us are so rich that this is our situation. The problem for us, though, is that most of us have the means in one or two areas to get as much as we want to get, and more than we need. Anyone can be a glutton; most aspects of the society we live in encourage it. There are times to feast, you know? But not all the time. It's just very hard to thank God for the extra when we take it for granted, and when we're taking the extra for granted, we never truly thank God for the "enough."

So moderation can protect us. It can protect us. It keeps us from forgetting about God, His providence and his care.

### ***What Self-restraint Can Do: Help Us Say Yes***

But the reason we seek to say no to "too much," and

embrace “just what we need” is so that we can say yes to the right things.

There are things we are called to say yes too. Let me remind us of just a few of them.

### ***Saying Yes: Generously Meeting Needs in Christ's Name***

First of all, and most of us know this, I think, but the fewer of our resources that we use to consume things: food, drink, entertainment, pleasure generally, then the more resources we'll have to meet the real needs of others: food, shelter, health-care, friendship. And Christ calls us to meet the real needs of people.

This is just math, and it's basic math: I wouldn't be able to do it otherwise. But the less of our cash we use on junk food, the more we'll have to be generous with, right? The less of our money that goes to beer and wine, cigarettes and coffee, the more we'll have to be generous with. The less our time that we use up being entertained, the more time we'll have to act with compassion. Our resources--time, treasure, talent, anything that might be leveraged for some good--despite the lies of the world around us, these are limited.

If there is room for excess in them, much of that excess should probably go to meeting other's needs. Moderation and self-restraint reveal to us just how

much we can go without, and just how much more we can care for those who need our care.

Has practicing moderation positioned you to be generous? Could it?

### ***Saying Yes: Self-Confidence***

Secondly, practicing self-restraint forces us to make choices. I'm framing this as a positive thing.

We do not choose well, generally. Even with all the resources we have as Christians--one another, the Holy Spirit, the Bible, our own reason and emotions--what we generally do, if we can help it, is avoid making choices.

At the same time, though, we know that making choices is inevitable. It's basic to becoming an adult.

I think that if we practice self-restraint, really work at it, we can gain a level of self-confidence that enables us to make much more difficult choices than not having a third beer or a second ice-cream sandwich. Those can be difficult choices; but learning how and when to say no or yes to our appetites, and realizing the healthy sense of control that we have over our desires, will give us the confidence we need to make the many difficult decisions that life calls for.

Mastering big things always relies on mastering little

things; the greatest pianists still practice their scales. Learning to say no or yes to what we consume helps us to become more than consumers, but decision makers and responsible people.

Has practicing moderation positioned you to be confident in yourself? Could it?

### ***Saying Yes: Feasting***

Lastly, practicing moderation helps us, when the time calls for it, to really feast. It helps us to really celebrate and enjoy all the pleasure that God has packed the world with.

Over-indulging in something numbs our ability to enjoy it. We can become as tolerant of sugar and fat and humor as we can of prescription drugs or whiskey. But sometimes feasting and celebration is called for, and we're meant to enjoy those moments. How can we if we've become too used to them, and have begun to treat every meal like a feast?

Has practicing moderation positioned you to feast and celebrate well? Could it?

### ***Saying Yes: Embracing***

There are other things, of course, that restraining our appetites can do for us. It can help us embrace physical health in an economic system that seeks in every way to undermine it. It can help us to become

more satisfied with less, and grateful for what we do have rather than what we don't have. It can do all sorts of things, not least of which is to give us more time generally, time with which we can do almost anything Christ calls us to do.

***Seeking Self-Restraint:***

So. What can we do to practice this virtue, this habit that effects the character and quality of our lives? (If, of course, we care to try to be well-moderated, restrained people.)

***Seeking: Consume with all of yourself.***

Most of us don't notice ourselves eating. We don't notice ourselves being entertained. We don't notice ourselves drinking. Even physical intimacy becomes something to rush through.

For all our talk about "focusing on the journey," and "caring about the process," it does seem like what we basically want in life is to finish things. Enjoying or lingering over pleasure isn't something we're oriented toward.

One thing we can do to practice moderation--if that's something we care about--is simply to consume with all of ourselves. When we eat, drink, seek to be entertained or experience pleasure, we should pay attention.

Enjoy your food. Enjoy your drink. Enjoy physical intimacy and relish the distraction of entertainment.

We are pressured to rush and finish everything we begin. We can't relinquish control over our character or our appetites to that pressure.

### ***Seeking: Consider your Capacities***

We should consider our capacities. How much time do we have? How much money do we have? How much room in our stomach do we have?

Other people--not us, of course--live as if they have unlimited capacities: We--sorry, they--can always buy bigger pants, they can always sleep a little less, they can always extend their credit a little more.

This habit trains us, slowly, away from moderation and toward unlimited consumption.

But it is worthwhile, no matter what our situation or stage of life is, to take stock now and then about what our capacities, which always change, actually are right now.

When was the last time we considered our capacities? How much time we have, money we have, room in our stomachs? What resources are we treating as unlimited?

**Conclusion:**

I'll end on this; it's a passage from James:

***Brothers and sisters, do not slander one another. Anyone who speaks against a brother or sister or judges them speaks against the law and judges it. When you judge the law, you are not keeping it, but sitting in judgment on it. There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. But you—who are you to judge your neighbor?***

Now. It seems as if James is talking about the “law” as distilled through what he earlier calls “the royal law,” that is, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” His point in this passage is clear, though, right? “Who are you to judge your neighbor?” None of us is God; we don't see with the compassionate, clear eyes of Christ. We wish we would, could.

I want to end on this note because I think that there is, when it comes to moderation, “no one holy, no not one.” We have none of us arrived. And yet, depending on what particular thing we want to focus on, we can all easily feel superior to others. We have said no when they have said yes--and to their loss. But there's almost always something, you know? Something we're repeatedly saying yes to that we should begin to say no to.

And that's what I'd ask us to explore. I'd invite each of us to consider our own selves, not one another, and pray about what appetite of ours are we saying yes to with too much frequency. How might we better practice self-restraint and moderation? Hoping, of course, that as we do Christ helps us to live as Christ lived.

And then, as we live into 2019, we'll discover all the things we can say yes to, freely and faithfully.