

## “Temperance: The Goldilocks Virtue”

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Place: Lakewood UMC

Texts: Galatians 5:22-25; 2 Peter 1:5-8

Occasion: Virtues, series

Theme: Balance, temperance, self-control

Today we turn our attention to the virtue known as temperance. I call it *the Goldilocks Virtue*, for reasons which I’ll explain in just a minute. In our modern world, temperance is the virtue that seems to be the least popular and most ridiculed. Most people, however, are not even sure what it means

In a nutshell, it simply means moderation. The ancient expression was “Nothing overmuch,” or “nothing in excess.” Temperance was seen by the ancient Greeks as the proper ordering of what is good within our natures.

The motto, “nothing overmuch, or nothing in excess,” applies even to itself. It is Oscar Wilde who is credited with saying, “Everything in moderation, including moderation.” Thus, temperance means avoiding the extremes, neither depriving oneself of a pleasure, nor overindulging.

Moderation, or temperance, is at the core of American dietary thinking. When you’re dieting, “Everything in moderation,” means don’t binge, and don’t abstain, but do take it easy on the bad stuff. Between the two poles of asceticism and indulgence, **moderation** is about never giving up or fully giving in.

You’ll remember in the fairy tale of *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*, how Goldilocks didn’t like the chair that was too big or too small but preferred the chair that was “just right.” And her preference was the same with the porridge, neither too hot nor too cold, but “just right.” And likewise with the three beds she found, “Not too hard and not too soft, but *just right*.”

*Temperance* is the Goldilocks virtue – all things in moderation. The opposite of temperance is intemperance, or a lack of balance. Out of balance can happen in one of two ways. In the first way part of us rules the whole of us. Or said another way, some *thing* begins to take over our life.

The addicted person is ruled by the part of their self that desires the thing to which they are addicted – be it television, video games, food, alcohol, gambling, pornography or whatever. There is no ordering of that desire; it has taken control of their entire life. The addiction becomes all-consuming.

While it's easy to dismiss this form of intemperance, as many of us believe we have no addictions, we shouldn't be so quick to deny the possibility that we have these tendencies, even if they aren't so extreme. It could be the drive to succeed, which puts us in conflict with our commitments at home.

Or, it could be our desire to put family first that puts us in conflict with other commitments – like church or community. If it takes over our life and becomes so dominant that we don't have time for other things, even that good thing is out of balance.

But I said there are two ways that intemperance shows itself. The first is when the whole self is dominated by one aspect of the self. The second way it shows up is by fragmenting the self – we get pulled in too many directions. Rather than one thing ruining the whole, it is the excess of many things that pulls us apart.

When our lives become filled with too many competing demands, we fall into the trap of intemperance. We become unable to find balance because we are unable to find our center, and then order our lives around that center. Prioritizing becomes difficult; as a result we are pulled apart.

We're going to come back and talk some more about this one, because many people today are troubled by this problem – being pulled apart by too many demands. But first, this clarification:

Temperance must not be confused with asceticism – totally denying oneself. Asceticism sees the world as evil and thus demands abstinence. We see this played out in conversations about the use of alcohol, or sexual activity, or eating habits. Asceticism would see all of those things as bad or evil, and therefore we must abstain from them totally.

Temperance sees all of creation as good, including our inner desires, but seeks to order those desires so that we remain free and productive. It's about boundaries; it's about balance; it's about moderation. The temperate person understands the idea of delayed gratification and is willing to make sacrifices.

Temperance is the art of finding balance within oneself. It is a blessing when achieved and a burden when it is not. The balance of temperance will be different for each of us. For some, it may involve abstinence in a particular area; where for someone else it may involve a seeming indulgence. But for all of us, it involves a prayer of discernment and hard work to balance and order our souls.

Temperance is a good value for anyone. But for the Christian there is a goal for finding such balance in our lives. Our lives are not simply to be well-ordered; they are to be well-ordered toward love – the love of God and the love of our neighbor.

Temperance is not just a good idea for balanced life, although there is that benefit. No, that well-ordered life is for the sake of God and others. We don't live unto ourselves; we live for God. The reason we seek balance in our lives, is so we can love God and neighbor more fully.

As Christians, Christ is our center. He is the one to whom we look to provide the order for our souls. When Christ is Lord of our lives, nothing else can be. When Christ is *not* Lord of our lives, anything and everything else will be. With Christ as our center, we are oriented toward wholeness, which prevents the whole from being ruled by a part, or the whole from being fragmented by the excess of too many things.

Placing Christ at the center of lives allows the Holy Spirit's power to move us towards temperance, towards this more balanced way of living. Temperance does not consist of a set of rules and laws, because in Christ we have been set free from the Law.

Rather than rules, we allow the Holy Spirit to direct our choices. A Spirit-filled life, a Christ-centered life is one of joyful obedience rather than grim obligation to a set of rules.

Following Christ does not mean joyless asceticism or a denial of life. But rather, it is a joyful, happy and free life, the blessedness of being led by the Holy Spirit. Like Goldilocks, we are looking for that golden middle ground, which is neither super-strict nor totally free from boundaries. It is a life of balance.

Before I close, I want to come back to the one form of intemperance I referenced earlier – too many demands which cause our life to become fragmented. Many of us are pulled in multiple directions: family, work, marriage, managing a household, caring for a sick friend or family member, the organizations we belong to, our various hobbies and things we do for recreation, the list goes on.

Ask the average person today how they are doing and they may well answer, "I'm busy." It's almost a badge of honor to say that. We seem to pride ourselves in filling our calendars with activities and responsibilities.

We certainly don't want people to think that we're lazy or irresponsible, do we?

In a mixed up way, we have confused busyness with a healthy, active life-style. And in the process we often feel exhausted, stressed and worn out. We talk about the "rat race," as if life were merely a hamster on a treadmill. We're peddling fast, but not really sure if we're going anywhere.

This is a sure sign of a life that is out of balance. We need to go to God in prayer and ask for direction. "Lord, what are the priorities that you would establish for my life? What do I need to keep doing, and what can I let go of?" And then, my friends, I give you permission to say "No." or to step away.

It is important that we keep in mind all of the gifts and graces God has given us and to ask God to lead us to use them in the way that God leads. But trying to "do it all" is not a healthy way to live.

Temperance, the Goldilocks Virtue, is finding balance as we are led by the Holy Spirit, with Jesus Christ as our center. Remember, it's not all about us and what we want. That would be selfish. But living a balanced life is what God wants for all of us.

It is a healthier way to live. It is a more productive way to live. It is a more God-honoring way to live. With Christ as our center and the Holy Spirit as our guide, may we each discover a life of balance and the virtue of temperance. Amen.

This sermon borrows heavily from *The Workbook on Virtues and the Fruit of the Spirit*, by Maxie Dunnam and Kimberly Dunnam Reisman, Nashville: Upper Room Books, 1998, pp. 68-76.