

Lecture III

"Temperance"

by

Joseph Thompson

"And beside this, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue; and to virtue knowledge; and to knowledge temperance; and to temperance patience; and to patience godliness; and to godliness brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness charity." (2 Peter 1:5-7)

This is the third figure in that sum in compound addition, the footing up of which makes the complete Christian character. Though the virtues and graces here enumerated are of different denominations and values, every one of them is not only important but indispensable to a correct result. The distinction between some of these traits may seem merely verbal, but upon analysis we find that each word conveys a separate and important thought, a distinction which the mind should dwell upon till it has become fixed as a trait to be studied and cultivated in ourselves.

If we could but carry on this addition in our hearts as rapidly as we can make it in our thought and speech, we should soon grow to be substantial and complete Christians. And surely while studying this text as to its meaning, we ought to be making these virtues our own, strengthening and improving what we already possess and seeking to develop what we have hitherto neglected. Every virtue in the list should be cultivated by every Christian, and so cultivated that each shall have its due place and proportion in the character.

Have you, then, renewed your diligence in cultivating a manly regard for truth and duty? Are you adding to your Faith the firm determination to obey God, to do always and without shrinking that which a conscience enlightened by his word requires? And with this Virtuous persistence in truth and duty, and in order that this may never become a misguided and excessive zeal, are you at the same time seeking that inward personal Knowledge of Christ which shall guide you by his Spirit in doing his will--that Knowledge, which by elevating the soul into the calm, pure regions of spiritual light, quickens its discernment of practical duty and leads it whither Christ would have it go?¹

Virtue makes us active, open, strenuous, bold, firm, whenever truth requires this manifestation at our hands, Knowledge makes us clear, calm, considerate, discerning as to what should be done or avoided for the glory of God and the best good of our fellowmen.

¹ "Virtue" and "knowledge" are covered in Lectures I and II.

To these virtues the apostle bids us add TEMPERANCE. Our modern use of this word restricts it mainly to abstinence from strong drink, making temperance the opposite of drunkenness, or of any excess in the use of intoxicating drinks or drugs. In the old English, however, this word had special reference to chastity or continence; and the original term has a still wider meaning, denoting the control of all the appetites and passions. *Abstinence* alone does not fully express the idea since this presents rather its negative side. The word means strictly "ruling with a strong hand," having the mastery. And when applied to a person, the temperate man is he who governs himself firmly, who has the mastery especially over the passions and appetites of his lower nature. Temperance is *self-control*, "an entire command over our passions and desires, so that they receive no further allowance than the law of God admits," and reason and conscience, enlightened by that law, approve.

Let us now inquire what this self-control involves or implies, and by what means it may be attained.

I. WHAT THIS SELF-CONTROL INVOLVES OR IMPLIES.

[**First**], this Christian Temperance of self-control implies and demands the *absolute subjection of all evil appetites, passions, and desires*. Sin, in its radical idea, pertains to a state of the Will, as contrary to or alien from the will of God. But this willful alienation from God, this voluntary self-seeking, this supreme love of self or of the world (by whatever name we characterize it as a principle) acts in every individual mainly through some particular form or forms of carnal or worldly desire, which become prominent as specific sins or sinful habits. And like certain venomous creatures, whose parts continue to move and to give out poison even after the head is cut off, these habits, impregnated with the virus of the sinning will, retain their vitality and their power of evil long after the will itself is changed in its supreme and permanent direction. Hence, while in urging men to repent, the Bible lays stress upon the change of heart, mind, will, purpose--a change of the voluntary state of the man--as the radical, essential, and comprehensive thing. It also exhorts those who have made this radical change of purpose and life to subdue specific sins which have acquired in them the force of habit.

The epistles of Paul, addressed for the most part to persons who before conversion had lived in all the vices and corruptions of heathen society, abound in exhortations and warnings against specific sins. Thus he writes to the Ephesians: "Be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess;" "fornication, uncleanness, or covetousness, let it not be once named among you, as become saints." And to the Corinthians he says, "I bewail many which have sinned already, and have not repented of the lasciviousness which they have committed."

Those grosser social vices with which the pagan society of the old world was thoroughly infected, and which the old pagan religion encouraged (vices which destroyed home, corrupted literature, debased art, and defiled the altars of the gods) were so little thought

of as evils, were so fully sanctioned by custom, were so gilded over by the example of public men, the toleration of law, and the flattering arts of genius, were so protected by the priests who made them a means of revenue, that it was an easy thing for a Christian at Corinth, at Ephesus, at Antioch, or any like luxurious capital, to slide into sins the bare suggestion of which we should resent with abhorrence.

Paul recognizes as Christians--the children of God, the followers of Christ--those whom he warns so earnestly against specific and grievous sins. As he writes to the Romans: "When we were in the flesh" (living for mere self-gratification), "the motions of sin did work in our members" (incitements to sin wrought upon us through the natural appetites). Wherefore, he says, "Let not sin reign in your mortal body, that ye should obey it in the lusts thereof. Neither yield ye your members as instruments (or agents) of unrighteousness unto sin."

In the same tome he says again, "If ye live after the flesh ye shall die" (if you make the gratification of natural appetites and tastes, and carnal desires your aim in life, you shall lose the life of your soul). "But if ye through the spirit do mortify the deeds of the body, ye shall live. MORTIFY, therefore, your members which are upon the earth. They that are Christ's have crucified the flesh, with the affections and lusts."

Such language addressed to Christians shows that over and above that surrendering of the will to God, which is conversion, that yielding up the soul to Christ in trustful obedience, which is faith--over and beyond this there is a work of self-subjection with regard to specific passions, habits, and desires which every Christian must labor to achieve in himself. The apostle describes this by such words as "mortify," "crucify," which show that this work of conquering particular passions or habits of evil requires severe and painful effort.

Precisely this conquest, even to the destruction of every evil habit, is required in that Temperance which the text enjoins. It is *ruling such passions with a strong hand*, subduing and keeping them under effectually, which makes the self-control of the Christian. That self-control is not complete till every passion or tendency in its nature to evil is not barely restrained or brought within bounds, but is put down and mastered so as to rise no more.

Anger, in the common use of the word, is an evil passion. While there is such a thing as a virtuous indignation against outrage and wrong, a holy indignation at sin, yet by anger we mean a violent passion or excitement of mind on account of injury--real or supposed--attended with a feeling of resentment, a desire to retaliate upon the offender. Now such a passion is evil, and only evil; and self-control requires its absolute subjection.

An excitable temperament or a passionate habit of mind allowed in youth may palliate [lessen] in the Christian occasional freaks or outbreaks of passion, so long as he is conscientiously and earnestly endeavoring to conquer his propensity to anger. But this

cannot serve him as a standing pretext for the indulgence of this passion. It is his duty to subdue it, to govern his temper. It is not enough that he should be sorry after anger and willing to humble himself by confession. It is not enough that he should deprecate [belittle] this as an infirmity. It is not enough that he should learn to bite his lips and curb his tongue while he is choking with rage within. He must so master temper and temperament that he shall hold the passion of anger in complete subjection, never suffering it to rise. A passionate man cannot exercise self-control till he has gained that conquest. Some ancient philosophers used the word "temperance" as the specific opposite of irritability.²

Self-indulgence in appetite, whether under the form of drunkenness or of gluttony, is a sin. It is a sin against the body, whose beautiful mechanism we strain and impair by any excess. It is an offense against the mind, whose faculties we clog and stupefy by excess of food or drink, or derange by an unnatural stimulus, and whose lawful dominion over the body is usurped and dishonored whenever an appetite gains the ascendancy over reason. It is a sin against God, the gifts of whose bounty are perverted when used as if appetite were the chief thing to be consulted. "Ye ask and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may consume it upon your lusts."

Covetousness is specified again and again in the word of God as one of the worst forms of carnal passion, and the subjection of this is indispensable to self-government. Hardly any passion so blinds its victims, so insinuates itself into every thought and plan of life, so paves the way for all that is unlovely in spirit and evil in practice. Hence the Bible always puts the covetous man in the worst possible company: "Mortify your members which are upon the earth; fornication, uncleanness, inordinate affection evil concupiscence, and *covetousness which is idolatry.*" Our blessed Lord has taught us that "out of an evil heart proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, thefts, *covetousness*, wickedness, deceit." And with solemn emphasis he warns us, "Take heed, and beware of *covetousness.*"

The greed of gain must be subdued or it will choke the life of Godliness in the soul. The Christian must learn to moderate his views and desires of worldly possessions. If he finds the least disposition to count upon these as his portion, if he finds himself hankering after more and more of this world's good, he must give himself no rest till he conquer that passion, or it will conquer and degrade and destroy his soul.

The tendency to a *self-satisfied and even luxurious enjoyment of the world* is perhaps the strongest antagonist in our times to a simple scriptural piety. The grosser vices which were tolerated and even sanctioned in the best society of Greece and Rome, and which are constantly referred to in the apostolic letters, have been so thoroughly branded by Christianity that they are outlawed by the code of our civilization. Yet the propensity to self-indulgence in the world is not subdued but rather whetted by the refinements of modern luxury.

² See in Passow -- *Mässigung*; comp. in Flügel.

The world is still a tempter and a snare to whatever soul may incline towards it for its satisfaction. "All that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father but is of the world." Sensual appetite, pleasure-seeking for its own sake, and frivolity in the methods of enjoyment, a vain love of pomp and show--these proceed from a propensity which cannot be reconciled with the love of God. These must be conquered if the soul would give itself unconditionally to the love of the Father. Here lies the test of piety in our times. Clothed in better raiment than adorned the court of Queen Elizabeth, living in more sumptuous abodes than were the palaces of England three centuries ago, living in a society which makes the pomp of furniture and the richness of entertainments the test of social worth, and which even used religion as an auxiliary to fashion, we are called upon to preserve the unaffected simplicity of the Gospel and to keep ourselves "unspotted from the world." *Here* it is that the Christian of today has most need of Temperance. *Virtue* to assert his faith, *Knowledge* to discern his duty, and a rigid and watchful *Control* over those propensities toward pleasure and pride which would bring him under the dominion of the god of this world.

[Second], besides this absolute subjection of all evil passions and propensities, the law of Temperance requires that *those natural desires which are in themselves innocent and lawful should, both as to the manner and measure of their indulgence, be regulated by a regard for the highest good of the soul.* Appetites and tastes we have, which were never designed to be our tempters and tormentors (making the body a mere battlefield of the soul), but were meant to minister to a pure and healthy enjoyment. But the peculiarity of these native appetites and tastes in man is that they do not, like the instincts of animals, regulate themselves but require the mild restraint of reason. Hence the Christian law of Moderation, an enlightened regard for the soul's highest welfare, must control the measure and the method of all lower gratifications.

A person who on medical advice had begun the daily use of wine, being accidentally deprived of it, felt such a hankering for its exhilaration that he took the alarm and at once abandoned it, choosing rather to suffer a physical infirmity than to endanger his self-control. This is a nice [fine] point--a hairline--where Desire, instead of ministering to rational enjoyment, oversteps the bounds of reason and becomes an ungovernable passion. Keep well within that line.

[Third], it has been assumed in this discussion that since all sin concentrates in a selfish Will, this of course must be subdued in order to a sound and perfect self-control. But I wish to insist for a moment upon the idea that selfishness is not merely to be restrained, moderated, held in check by compromises, but to be conquered if ever the soul would gain the mastery of itself for God. Our love of God, to be complete, must be unconditional. The moment we attempt to *condition* it upon what He may be willing to do for us, it ceases to be love and becomes a mere mercenary passion.

What should we think of a child who should make his love for his father for the day depend upon his father's giving him this or that which his fancy might covet or his

appetite crave, and should withhold his kiss of affection until he should see what *gain* the day would bring to him? The existence of this calculating, selfish spirit is incompatible with the very idea of love. Till we have put down all self-seeking so as to say today, and tomorrow, and always, and unflinchingly, "THY will, not mine, be done," we have not conquered ourselves for God.

II. This virtue of Temperance, or self-control, we are commanded to cultivate with all diligence. Let us now inquire, therefore, HOW SHALL IT BE ATTAINED?

[First], *not by mere force of will*, determining to override, and if possible to annihilate, the sensibilities and propensities of our nature whether for good or evil. The cold impassiveness of marble is not self-control. Nor can the Christian perfect his moral nature by cutting away all natural emotions and sympathies, and carving his soul into a statue to be mounted upon an iron pedestal and to look always in one direction. If Washington himself had been a statue, we should never have erected a statue of Washington. If his soul had been of brass, his self-control would never have impressed us, as it now does, with the magisterial dignity of his character. The stern, cold, iron discipline of the ancient stoic and of the modern Buddhist, hardening the mind to an unnatural insensibility to pleasure or pain from without, has nothing in common with Christian self-control. One may conquer many an appetite and passion by mere force of will, and in so doing may strengthen the will itself in resistance to God, and may stiffen that will with the pride of self-righteousness.

The philosophy of this stoical indifference to natural desire is as far from the philosophy of Christian self-government as is the crank that moves the springs and wires of an automaton from the soul that moves the nerves and muscles of the man. One who refused to govern his appetites by the moral law may be rendered very temperate by a fit of the gout. But we do not feel that his coerced abstinence by mere force of will, under pressure of danger, is Christian self-control; for when the twinge of pain is over, the will relaxes and appetite again has sway. Not abstinence alone through some stern intellectual or medical philosophy, but the control of self by the love of God is the true Temperance.

[Second], neither is self-control to be attained by *the arbitrary mortification of the body by means of denials and penances*. Christianity was not made for the desert and convent but for the living and hostile world, and we are not to become saints by secluding ourselves from the outer world but are to *be* saints in it by the power of a new life. The experiment of monkery, of celibacy under a vow, of hermit life away from the haunts of men as means of promoting personal holiness, has resulted either in a morbid Pietism, a bigoted Fanaticism, or a gross Sensuality of life.

The monk and the hermit, subsisting on scanty fare and mortifying the body by hard usage and voluntary tortures, have not conquered pride and self-will, have not thus subdued Satan within them--have even made new devils out of phantoms--have not always even conquered the lusts of the flesh. The gross and monstrous "chambers of imagery"

still to be seen in old Egyptian temples (as at Dendera) were transcripts of the pent imaginations and passions of priests who devised them, and of later monks who inherited them. A vivid writer who has reproduced the era of Christian monkery in Egypt rightly combines a fanatical outward abstemiousness with the cravings of morbid desires.³

You cannot conquer the world by running away from it, much less can you conquer yourself by hiding away from the world. The avoidance of temptation, always a duty, is not to be accomplished by putting locks and bolts upon the doors of our houses but by watching at the door of our hearts. The spirit of Christian Temperance is not the spirit of monkish penance, making a virtue of some forced outward abstinence. The control which the text enjoins is a matter not of outward regulation but of inward power over self. It does not consist in checks imposed upon the outward *action* of the desire or will but in reducing the *inner man* to a state of harmony with reason and the law of God.

We need not bid for cloistered cell,
Our neighbor and our work farewell,
Nor strive to wind ourselves too high,
For sin sinful man, beneath the sky.

The trivial round, the common task,
Would furnish all we ought to ask;
Room to deny ourselves; a road
To bring us daily nearer God."

(Keble's "Christian Year")

[**Third**], but in order to gain Self-control we must *study ourselves*, especially as to our weak points of character, and *aim to conquer specific modes or habits of evil to which we are prone*. The apostle speaks of "the sin which does so easily beset us." And everyone who is accustomed to study his heart finds some point at which Satan works with special facility. If one is repeatedly affected with heartburn, with headache, with nervousness, with nightmare, he begins to scrutinize his diet; and when he ascertains what it is that deranges his system, he refrains from that as if it were poison.

If we were half so careful in the dietetics of the soul, we should keep up a far more healthy and vigorous tone of Virtue. Whenever anything goes amiss in our outward conduct, or when we find an indifference or languor of heart towards spiritual things, if we search into the springs of our spiritual life we shall discover that at some point an evil propensity, an old unconquered habit, has gained a temporary ascendancy over us and has betrayed us into sin. And we must set ourselves resolutely by the grace of God to conquer that evil.

I have instanced the case of one who found himself insensibly contracting an appetite for

³ Kingsley's "Hypatia."

spirituous drinks, which he had begun to use as a medicine. The discovery of the danger gave him resolution for the remedy. I have learned also of one who, finding the spirit of covetousness growing with the increase of his wealth, fought it down by signing checks in blank for benevolent societies and keeping these ready to be filled up on every application. He conquered himself by writing his name.

Robert Hall, so weighty and eloquent in the pulpit, was apt to be impetuous and overbearing in uttering his opinions in private. But he watched and prayed against this infirmity till he perceptibly gained in modesty and sweetness of temper. Once when he so far lost his self-command as to become heated in a debate, he abruptly closed the discussion and left the room. The company supposed that he had gone away in anger. But he was overheard to ejaculate with deep feeling, "Lamb of God, Lamb of God, calm my excited spirit." He went away not to show anger but to conquer it by prayer--willing to lose his accustomed triumph in an argument if he could win the greater victory over himself.

[Fourth], the power of Self-control will be strengthened *if we cherish habitually the sense of God's presence and of his watchful eye.* When David has portrayed the omnipresence and omniscience of God in that Psalm which is as the fire of Sinai kindled within the soul, when he has realized God in his spiritual Personality as knowing every word of the tongue and every unuttered thought, compassing the earth and the sea, outflying the wings of the morning and piercing darkness with the blaze of noon, he prostrates himself before the omnipresent and omniscient Jehovah and cries, "Search me, O God, and know my heart. Try me and know my thoughts, and see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting" (Ps. 139:23,24).

Could we form worldly and selfish plans if we felt the presence of God about us, felt his eye upon us? Should we debase ourselves by any evil appetite or passion if we saw the Lord continually before us? Could we allow ourselves in anger or in vain and foolish talking if we remembered that there is not a word on our tongues but the Lord knows it altogether? Do we not first put God out of mind and then abandon ourselves to sin? There is no government over our evil propensities like the simple thought, "Thou God sees me."

Oh! may this thought possess my breast,
Where'er I roam, where'er I rest;
Nor let my weaker passions dare
Consent to sin, for God is there.

And not only the thought of God as ever nigh to us but *the presence of God by his Spirit within us* must be cherished if we would govern ourselves by His law. The Apostle enumerates Temperance (self-government) among the fruits of the Spirit. And surely when the Holy Spirit is so honored and cherished in our hearts that He consents to abide there as in a temple, [and] when his blessed influence sought by prayer steals over us like

the fragrance of heaven, like the music of angels, [then] every selfish wish, every carnal desire must lie vanquished before Him. . . . "If ye through the *Spirit* do mortify the deeds of the body, ye shall live; for as many as are *led by the Spirit of God*, they are the sons of God."

And now, in conclusion, let me urge you to give all diligence to add this grace to your character, *to perfect yourself in the government of your own heart*.

[First], I urge you to this diligence *by the greatness of the object to be obtained*. Consider what it is to gain the mastery over a single passion. And think also what it is for the mind to be ruled by an appetite! Look at Coleridge, a poet who might have sung for all time, a philosopher capable of teaching and molding generations, skulking away from the eye of friends and of servants to drink his bottle of laudanum, and then bewailing his weakness and sin with an agony the bare recital of which makes our hearts bleed for pity. Think of the poets, the statesmen, the warriors who have sunk under the inebriating cup and have left a dishonored name.

And as you mourn over the melancholy ruin of greatness by appetite and passion, think how great it is to master these, to subject all passions and desires to the wise and sound control of Reason acting for Love. It is not only to subdue a serpent, to tame a lion; there is a whole menagerie of evil passions to be kept in subjection. "Every kind of beast and bird, of serpents and of things in the sea, is tamed and has been tamed of mankind. But the tongue can no man tame. It is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison." The grace that can subdue tongue and thought and heart to the mild constraint of love is the very power of God.

[Second], I exhort you to be diligent in this Self-conquest because *it is made practicable by timely diligence*. Passions indulged have a rapid and fearful growth. Give them sway and they become like very fiends within you. But as the crocodile of the Nile, which devours a man at a meal and snaps a boat asunder with its jaws, can be crushed within your hand when in the egg, so the passions that devour human souls could be exterminated by one *timely* and decisive blow. "*Resist the Devil and he will flee from you.*"

[Third], I exhort you to this Self-control *for your own peace of mind*. In a sense all our unhappiness proceeds from the want [lack] of self-regulation. I use *unhappiness* in distinction from that sorrow which afflictions bring. The personal experience of David at various times, as recorded in the Psalms, points this contrast between the man made unhappy by his own sins and the saint afflicted by God's Providence.⁴ Unhappiness is quite another thing from that sacred and chastened sorrow which the heart may lawfully indulge under afflictive dispensations of Providence.

Whenever we are unhappy it is because of some ground of perturbation within ourselves.

⁴ The contrast is most effective when you throw these experiences (Ps. 51 and Ps. 27) into parallel columns and compare them side-by-side.

But the due control of our desires removes all those inward occasions of perturbed feeling which produce an unhappy spirit. "Let your moderation be known to all men. . . . Be careful for nothing." Allow yourself in no excess, indulge no solicitude for worldly good "and the peace of God, which passes all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus."

When Mr. Webster stood before the eager thousands at Bunker Hill on an occasion which must have agitated any common man, his wife, regarding [viewing] him from a distance, observed to a friend, "I do not care to remain; for I see that he is *calm*, and I know that he will succeed." A conscious Self-control gives that assured calmness which is the repository of strength.

[Fourth], *your duty to Christ and your professed hope in Him require that you shall govern your hearts in his spirit.* "He died for all, that they which live should not henceforth live to themselves but to Him who died for them and rose again." And if Jesus was nailed to the cross to deliver you from sin, shall not you nail to his cross every darling lust? You owe it to your professed hope in Christ that you shall be an example of holy living. "Every one who has this hope in Him purifies himself even as He is pure."

Let us keep ever in mind that saying of Paul, who having endured all earthly loss and shame for Christ still enjoined upon his own heart the most vigilant self-control: "Every man who strives for the mastery is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a corruptible crown, but we an incorruptible. I therefore so run, not as uncertainly. So fight I, not as one who beats the air. But *I keep under [discipline] my body, and bring it into subjection*, lest, that by any means when I preach to others, I myself should be a castaway."

This is Lecture III in *The Christian Graces, A Series of Lectures on 2 Peter 1:5-12*, by Joseph P. Thompson (New York: Sheldon & Company, 1859). **Note:** The text has not been modified, except that punctuation and KJV-era pronouns and verb forms have been modernized and long paragraphs have been divided.