

Temperance (Self-control)

The Fruits of the Spirit · Fruits of the Spirit

Temperance, or self-control, constitutes the ninth and culminating fruit of the Spirit, representing the believer's mastery over fleshly appetites, passions, and impulses through the Spirit's enabling power. The Greek ἐγκράτεια (enkratēia) signifies self-mastery—the capacity to govern one's desires, bridle one's tongue, discipline one's body, and maintain spiritual vigilance against temptation.

Note: The Greek ἐγκράτεια (enkratēia) derives from ἐν (en, "in") and κράτος (kratos, "strength" or "power"), literally meaning "strength within" or "self-mastery." This term appears in classical literature describing the ability to control physical appetites, emotional responses, and behavioral impulses. In Scripture, it denotes Spirit-empowered dominion over the flesh, enabling believers to say "no" to ungodliness and worldly passions (Titus 2:12).

Far from representing mere human willpower or stoic self-discipline, biblical temperance flows from the Spirit's transforming work, enabling believers to live soberly, righteously, and godly in this present age (Titus 2:11-12).

The Apostle Paul employed powerful athletic metaphors to illustrate temperance's necessity for faithful Christian living. He observed that competitors in ancient games exercised strict self-control in all areas of life—their diet, training regimen, and personal conduct—to obtain a perishable crown of laurel leaves. How much more, Paul reasoned, should believers exercise temperance in pursuit of an imperishable crown (1 Corinthians 9:25-27)? He testified, "I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection: lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway." This sobering declaration reveals that even apostolic ministry affords no immunity from the necessity of self-discipline; indeed, those who minister to others bear particular responsibility to govern their own lives with

strictness lest they disqualify themselves from the prize. The Christian life resembles a marathon requiring sustained endurance, strategic pacing, and unwavering commitment to the goal—impossible without Spirit-wrought temperance.

Scripture identifies multiple domains where temperance must operate. First, believers must exercise control over **physical appetites**—food, drink, sleep, and sensual desires. Proverbs 23:20-21 warns against gluttony and excessive drinking, while 1 Corinthians 6:19-20 reminds believers that their bodies constitute temples of the Holy Spirit, purchased at infinite cost. Second, temperance governs **speech and tongue**. James 3:2-10 declares that those who perfectly control their tongue have attained spiritual maturity, for the tongue, though small, exerts tremendous influence for good or evil. Third, believers must exercise dominion over **thoughts and imaginations**, casting down arguments and bringing every thought captive to Christ's obedience (2 Corinthians 10:5). Fourth, temperance regulates **emotional responses**—anger, fear, anxiety, and desire—preventing believers from being mastered by their feelings. Finally, self-control extends to **time and priorities**, enabling wise stewardship of the hours entrusted to each believer (Ephesians 5:15-16).

Biblical temperance differs fundamentally from worldly asceticism or self-mortification. Pagan philosophies often promoted extreme self-denial—bodily punishment, deprivation, and withdrawal from normal life—as means of achieving spiritual enlightenment or moral superiority. Paul explicitly condemned such approaches, writing that regulations like "Touch not; taste not; handle not" possess "a shew of wisdom in will worship, and humility, and neglecting of the body" but prove utterly ineffective against fleshly indulgence (Colossians 2:20-23). Christian temperance does not consist in rigid legalism, harsh treatment of the body, or withdrawal from God's good gifts. Rather, it involves the grateful, moderate, and God-glorifying use of all

things, neither enslaved to appetites nor bound by man-made prohibitions. The temperate believer enjoys God's creation with thanksgiving while refusing to be mastered by any created thing (1 Corinthians 6:12).

The cultivation of temperance requires active dependence upon the Holy Spirit combined with diligent practical discipline. Peter exhorted believers to add temperance to knowledge, recognizing that information alone proves insufficient—one must apply truth through self-controlled obedience (2 Peter 1:5-6). Believers cultivate temperance through several means. First, **prayerful watchfulness** proves essential; Christ commanded, "Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation" (Matthew 26:41), recognizing that spiritual vigilance prevents many falls. Second, **deliberate habit formation** strengthens self-control, as believers practice saying "no" to small temptations, thereby building capacity to resist greater ones. Third, **accountability relationships** provide external reinforcement, as Proverbs 27:17 notes that iron sharpens iron. Fourth, **meditation on eternal realities** weakens temporal temptations' power; Paul reasoned of righteousness, temperance, and judgment to come, causing Felix to tremble (Acts 24:25). Finally, believers must maintain **sobriety and spiritual vigilance**, remaining alert to the adversary who prowls seeking whom he may devour (1 Peter 5:8). Without temperance, believers remain vulnerable to Satan's devices, unable to stand in the evil day.

Key Verses

1 Corinthians 9:25-27

And every man that striveth 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 that beateth the air: But I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection: lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway.

2 Peter 1:5-6

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.

Proverbs 25:28

He that hath no rule over his own spirit is like a city that is broken down, and without walls.

Titus 2:11-12

For the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men, Teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world.

Acts 24:25

And as he reasoned of righteousness, temperance, and judgment to come, Felix trembled, and answered, Go thy way for this time; when I have a convenient season, I will call for thee.

1 Thessalonians 5:6

Therefore let us not sleep, as do others; but let us watch and be sober.

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