

TEN

Cultivating Self-Control in the Midst of Addiction

As for what fell among the thorns, these are the ones who hear, but as they go on their way, they are choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life, and their fruit does not mature. (Lk 8:14)

For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, despicable, hating one another. But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy, through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit. (Tit 3:3-5)

Over the years the Olympic Games have become an important fixture of our corporate life in the United States. Although some citizens keep a watchful and (often) prideful eye on the medal counts, most seem attracted for other reasons. For many there is the irresistible lure of determining the "best in the world." Others are drawn by the human drama that inevitably unfolds around the Games. Over and over again we find ourselves profoundly moved by stories of men and women who have overcome tremendous obstacles in order to participate and excel. Still others are drawn primarily because of their deep respect for those who have pursued this Olympic dream so single-mindedly. Although many of us at some point in our lives may have fantasized about being Olympic athletes, we recognize that these athletes did not achieve this level of excellence without considerably

more dedication and discipline than most of us can muster.

Athletics seem to be one of the few areas in our society where we encourage and honor self-discipline and self-control. If sports have a redeeming value in our society, it is in the potential that they have for training us to be disciplined, to exercise control over both mind and body. The hope, of course, would be that this practice of self-control would influence other areas of our lives. Although many athletes testify that this has indeed happened in their own lives, there are no guarantees. One need only be a casual follower of sports to think of examples of prominent athletes who have enormous difficulty controlling their tempers or their appetites for gambling, drugs or illicit sex. Many are well known for their outbursts of violence both on and off the playing field, and one widely idolized sports hero is reportedly addicted to competition itself.

Of course, athletes are not the only persons in our culture who are expected to exercise discipline and self-control, nor are they the only ones who find themselves battling addictions. Are there specific features of our society that impede the cultivation of self-control and encourage addiction? And equally important, does the popular understanding of self-control in our society today coincide with what Paul seems to have had in mind?

The Character of Self-Control

Most wisdom traditions have recognized how easily human beings become enslaved to their passions. For example, Buddhism has taught for millennia that the root of all human suffering and dissatisfaction is unbridled desire. A similar sentiment is expressed by the writer of Proverbs, who employs the image of a walled city: "He that hath no rule over his own spirit is like a city that is broken down and without walls" (Prov 25:28 KJV).

Although wisdom traditions have generally agreed that unconstrained passion and desire threaten human well-being, they have not always agreed about how best to address this threat. Buddhism recommends that unhealthy cravings be extinguished, often by means of meditation on the transitory character of all life. Other wisdom traditions have recommended the exercise of what we today commonly call "self-control." However, we should be

cautious here because this common English translation of the Greek word for this concept (*egkrateia*) is relatively recent and may actually lead us to miss (if not undermine) the radical challenge that Paul is mounting to the popular ethics of his day. To see this we must understand the important role the concept of *egkrateia* played in Greek thought prior to the writing of the New Testament.

Egkrateia was widely praised by the Greeks long before the time of Paul. In fact, ancient Greek philosophers such as Socrates considered it to be the foundational human virtue. Xenophon, a follower of Socrates, summarized well his teacher's views on the subject:

Shall not every man hold self-control [*egkrateia*] to be the foundation of all virtue, and first lay this foundation firmly in his soul? For who without this can learn any good or practice it worthily? (*Memorabilia* 1.5.4-5)

For the Greeks, virtue could not be learned if one was continually overcome by one's passions and desires. To take up the life of virtue, therefore, required that one begin by bringing one's own desires under control. Hence, the first and foundational virtue for all others was *egkrateia* (variously translated as "temperance," "continence," "moderation" or, most recently, "self-control"). As sensible as such an argument seems, even Plato was readily aware that this seemed to involve a paradox if not a contradiction. In brief, the paradox is this: when we speak of self-control or self-mastery, who is "the self" that is being controlled or mastered, and who is "the self" that is controlling or mastering? Isn't it in both cases the same "self"? Or as Plato writes in *The Republic*,

Isn't the phrase "self-mastery" absurd? I mean, anyone who is his own master is also his own slave, of course, and vice versa, since it's the same person who is the subject in all these expressions. (*Republic* 430e-431)

Plato goes on to argue that if we can make any sense out of this expression at all, it must mean something like this: a person's noble and less noble aspects are often at war with each other about which will rule a person's life. When the nobler part brings the less noble part under subjection, we say that a person

exhibits self-mastery or discipline. When the less noble part wins out, we say that the person lacks these virtues. For Plato the nobler aspects of humanity are always associated with rationality; moreover, only a limited number of citizens are capable of exercising these rational capacities in order to bring pleasure and desires under control. These elite few, by virtue of their ability to exercise discipline and self-mastery, deserve to rule the republic.

In much of Greek thought, therefore, the virtuous person was the self-directed person, while the weak and despised were those who had little or no control over their passions. To be driven by passions and desires was to be driven by those enticements and pleasures that were external to the self, a person so driven, therefore, was always under the control of another. For the Greeks, who highly valued their freedom, the highest ideal was to master one's desires so that one was free to enjoy them rather than be enslaved to them.

Given the central role that *egkrateia* played in Greek philosophical thought and ethics, what is most striking about its usage in the New Testament is its relative infrequency. The word *egkrateia* only appears three times (Acts 24:25; Gal 5:23; 2 Pet 1:6) and its cognates only three more (1 Cor 7:9; 9:25; Tit 1:8). One might be tempted to conclude that this human problem to which *egkrateia* was the recommended solution was unknown to the New Testament writers, but this is hardly the case. Numerous times in the New Testament writers allude to the problem of "licentiousness" or "lasciviousness" (Mk 7:22; 2 Cor 12:21; Gal 5:19; Eph 4:19; 1 Pet 4:3; Jude 4). Although neither word is a common part of our everyday vocabulary, both point to the willingness to abandon oneself to one's passions and desires. Moreover, the New Testament includes numerous references to our disordered affections and desires. These are referred to variously as "lusts," "desires," "lusts of the flesh," "passions of our flesh," "fleshly desires," "worldly passions" or "inordinate affections" (Mk 4:19; Rom 7:5; 13:14; Gal 5:16, 24; Eph 2:3; 1 Tim 6:9; 2 Tim 2:22; 3:6; Jas 1:14-15; 4:1-3; 1 Pet 2:11; 4:2-3; 1 Jn 2:16). Much like their Greek counterparts, the New Testament writers seem to agree that "people are slaves to whatever masters them" (2 Pet 2:19).

If the New Testament writers rarely appeal to that concept (*egkrateia*) that was at the heart of so much Greek ethics, I believe it was because they sensed

that a new power had been made available to them through Christ. This power was not of their own making, nor was it a power inherent in the human person. Instead, this power was intimately bound up with Jesus Christ and made possible a new way of life, a way that could only be described by contrasting it with the old way of death. Indeed, this death of the "old self" liberates us from that self-imposed bondage created by our disordered desires, freeing us to live in God's likeness.

We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. (Rom 6:6)

You were taught to put away your former way of life, your old self, corrupt and deluded by its lusts, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness. (Eph 4:22-24; cf. Gal 2:19-20; Col 3:1-10)

This suggests that whatever the New Testament writers may have meant when they employed the concept of *egkratia*, we should not too quickly assume that they meant "self-control," which in our day means something akin to control of the self, *by* the self, *for* the sake of the self. At this point we should also remind ourselves once again that Paul's list of the Spirit's fruit not only comes after a lengthy list of "the works of the flesh" but is also framed by two admonitions. In the first, Paul exhorts the Galatians to "live by the Spirit" and "not gratify the desires of the flesh" (5:16). In the second, he notes that "those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires," so that those who live by the Spirit should also be guided by the Spirit (5:24-25).

So if Paul likely does not mean what his contemporaries meant when they employed the term *egkratia*, can we surmise what he might have meant? I believe we might get a hint when we consider Paul's extended discussion of his apostolic ministry in 1 Corinthians 9. Here we find that Paul contrasts exercising *egkratia* with running "aimlessly" (1 Cor 9:25-26). In other words, Paul argues that athletes exercise *egkratia* because they have a clearly defined purpose or goal. Such people cannot afford to be distracted by every passion or desire that comes along. If we combine this insight with the radical

suggestion in Galatians that *egkratia* is first of all a fruit of the Spirit's work and not of our own, then we might suggest that its meaning (in at least these two instances) is something akin to "control of the self by the Spirit for the sake of the gospel."

I do not believe that Paul placed *egkratia* at the end of his list strictly by chance. Although he continues to use a word with wide currency in his day, his placement of it at the end of this list suggests a *dis*-placement. Rather than see self-control (understood as self-mastery) in the way that many of his contemporaries did—as the foundation for all other virtue—Paul's reconfiguration suggests that "the self" no longer occupies center stage. As we have noted, each fruit of the Spirit that Paul has listed to this point is decidedly other-directed; moreover, each has also been a reflection of God's own character. Yet *egkratia*, as commonly understood, was decidedly self-directed, and such a "virtue" is nowhere in Scripture predicated of God's character. Is this final fruit an exception to the pattern established to this point? I don't believe so.

To suggest that Paul is an advocate of *egkratia* as a form of self-mastery for the sake of the self would be to believe that Paul concludes his list in a way that runs counter to all that he has commended thus far. In contrast to such a view I believe Paul placed this highly regarded virtue at the end of his list in order to underscore the radical orientation of the Christian life. In so doing Paul not only stripped this virtue—and "the self"—of its previously foundational character but also imbued this word with new meaning. "The self" and the passions that threaten to drive it to excess are not robbed of their power and bondage by a further and more determined exercise of the human will or human reason. Instead, Paul seems to suggest that when our lives are other-directed (toward God and neighbor) in the ways they must be if we are truly to embody the fruit of the Spirit, "the self" and its twisted desires cannot remain at center stage. In sum, the desires of the self are most determinatively ordered not when we strive most diligently to bring the self under control but when we use our freedom in the Spirit to become servants of God and our neighbors (Gal 5:13). Understood in this way, this final fruit, by being other-directed and reflecting God's own other-directedness, does not contra-

dict the pattern but reinforces it. In other words, if the Spirit brings to harvest these first eight fruit, this final fruit will also be among the harvest.

Given the potentially misleading character of our contemporary notion of self-control, we would do well to find a different way of naming this final fruit of the Spirit. We do not seem to have a suitable word in current English usage that does not bring with it a good deal of unhelpful baggage. Nevertheless, in an attempt to remind us of the problems of speaking about self-control, I have rendered Paul's notion of *egkrateia* with a word that carries slightly less baggage: *continence*. By choosing a word that is not compounded with *self*, I hope to remind readers that even though Paul does employ the popular Greek concept of *egkrateia*, he effects a radical transformation of its meaning by suggesting that this new life in Christ is animated not by the demands of the self but by the other-directedness of the Spirit.

Obstacles to a Life of Continence

We live in a society characterized by excess, addiction and attempts at self-mastery. Although we may joke about being "addicted" to such things as chocolate or romance novels, beneath our jokes an uneasiness often lurks. When we are honest with ourselves, each of us realizes that we are capable of indulging in addictive behaviors. Thus while we may often find ourselves looking down our noses at those trapped in lives of addiction, most of us can remember times in our own lives, past or present, when we ourselves were enslaved to such single-minded and reckless pursuits.

To get an idea of the scope of the problem, one need only explore the enormous resources this society dedicates to the treatment of addictions. A cursory search of the Internet reveals that twelve-step programs are available for those addicted to alcohol, narcotics, overeating, sex, work, debt, marijuana, cocaine, nicotine, gambling and even emotions! The study and treatment of addictions is also becoming increasingly institutionalized and professionalized. To combat addictions we now have research institutes, international symposia, social-scientific journals and addictive recovery institutes staffed by "certified rational addictive therapists." Even when we attempt to control our addictions, we are often driven to excess. Some people have even argued

recently that people are becoming addicted to twelve-step programs. Whatever the merits of that argument, much about the contemporary situation remains embarrassing, even shameful, as we swing from one excess to another. For example, while one billion people around the world each year suffer from the effects of malnutrition, we live in a country where roughly three-fourths of our citizens are overweight, one-third are clinically obese and over thirty billion dollars a year are spent trying to lose weight. Where else in the world are so many resources dedicated simultaneously to our self-indulgences and the eradication of their harmful effects?

Is there something about our society that thwarts the development of continence, that indeed nourishes this kind of excessive and addictive behavior? In many ways, what is said below echoes much of what has been voiced in previous chapters. This should not be surprising, for if the final eight fruit of the Spirit are best understood as further specifications on the first fruit of love—and these fruit are characterized by their other-directedness—then a life marked by disordered passions will be a life that bears little of this Spirit's fruit. In short, a life dedicated to the pursuit of pleasure (or its eradication) is by definition a life focused on self; it cannot, therefore, at the same time be a life focused on the other, whether that other be God or neighbor.

Pursuing happiness. As already noted, in our society we are promised not only the freedom to pursue happiness but also the freedom to define what constitutes happiness. For many people happiness is equivalent to experiencing pleasure. Thus for many the pursuit of happiness is easily transformed into the pursuit of pleasure. This tendency, coupled with the pride that many people take in being driven about everything they do, offers up a fairly straightforward recipe for excess and addiction. In a culture where freedom is widely understood as freedom from restraint, the combination of being driven and yet having little guidance about what it is good to be driven about encourages people to become enslaved to their own private pursuits of pleasure.

Controlling the self (by the self, for the sake of the self). In a society as preoccupied with self and self-gratification as is ours, it is understandable that discussions about the right ordering of our desires and appetites rarely come

up. Discussions about disordered desire arise most often with respect to recognized addictions, when it becomes apparent that a person's bondage has become self-destructive (or destructive of those personal relationships deemed important to and by the self). In a society where the individual is routinely exalted for its unlimited potential, it comes as no surprise that when the subject of disordered desire does arise, it is often framed in terms of self-control or self-discipline (understood as self-mastery). A welcome exception to that rule are various twelve-step programs, which require the person in recovery to admit both their powerlessness and their need to depend on a power outside themselves. However, a recent backlash against such programs by those who believe that the self and its own resources are all that is necessary to overcome addiction suggests that belief in self-mastery is alive and well.

In addition to discussions about how best to deal with addictions, our culture also circulates numerous stories about the benefits available to the self through self-mastery. Indeed, our society has long valorized self-mastery, insuring that it has a deep hold on our national psyche. The stories passed down to us about the Puritans always emphasize their Protestant work ethic, which was fueled by their industry, thrift and self-discipline. The public schools in this country, from their very beginnings in the late nineteenth century, saw it as their task to instill, among other virtues like obedience and respect for property, self-control and self-discipline. Most of us have a ready repertoire of stories of people who learned such lessons well and "made good." Furthermore, anyone who has read Benjamin Franklin's well-known autobiography will remember that he delineates thirteen virtues he desires to pursue, beginning with temperance (understood as "Eat not to dullness; drink not to elevation"). Franklin is quite clear that if he is to master these virtues, he will have to do so one at a time and that it only makes sense to start with temperance because such will provide him with the "coolness and clearness of head" necessary to master the rest. With such a history of self-mastery as our legacy, it seems appropriate that the first chapter of William J. Bennett's widely praised collection of stories *The Book of Virtues* is dedicated to "self-discipline."

The cumulative impact of this legacy is likely most visible, however, not in our literature but in our own attitudes. Who in our society do we most admire? Do we really admire those whose lives are characterized by genuine continence, those whose passions we discern are rightly ordered? Or do we find ourselves admiring most those who have purportedly mastered or disciplined themselves for the sake of some chosen goal, such as an Olympic medal, an NBA contract, a bigger house or a slimmer waistline? As a former athlete I well remember the frequent injunctions (offered by others and me) to exercise self-discipline and self-control—by which was meant the control or discipline of the self for my own future benefit.

Someone might object at this point, arguing that the exercise of such self-control or self-discipline is certainly to be preferred over the exercise of self-indulgence. Although I would certainly agree, I would still insist that we not confuse the exercise of such self-control or self-discipline with what Paul identifies as the final fruit of the Spirit. When it comes to nurturing that fruit, our culture's notions of self-control and self-discipline—exercised for the sake of the self—are likely to be serious obstacles.

Indeed, by wrongly assuming that Scripture advocates self-control as a form of self-mastery, Christians have often zealously championed self-control. In so doing, these well-meaning Christians have assumed that people (including Christians) can be trained to be masters of their own unhealthy desires and passions. By wrongly believing that we are individually equipped to deal with these problems by ourselves, we have unwittingly cut ourselves off from the very resources God has entrusted to us for our common benefit. Perhaps even worse, by encouraging people to "pull themselves up by their own bootstraps," we have set them up not only for likely failure but also for the enormous guilt that accompanies failing at something one had been assured one could do if one simply applied oneself diligently.

Moderation in all things. Paradoxically, another possible obstacle to the cultivation of continence is the maxim "Moderation in all things." In a culture that exhibits excess at nearly every turn, it is surprising how often this injunction is invoked. A cursory Internet search found a number of churches that even list "moderation in all things" as one of their core doctrines. What

is most instructive, however, is not simply that this maxim is invoked but when. Often it is not with reference to food, drink or work but with reference to our deepest convictions. In our society few epithets sting as deeply as being labeled a “fanatic,” and so many people have adopted as a kind of general principle this maxim written six centuries before Christ by a pagan named Theognis: “moderation in all things.”

Although there are undoubtedly many areas of our lives where such advice is certainly prudent and wise, it is not clear how such a maxim is to be applied to the Christian life itself. Taking this maxim as a guide to all of life encourages many people to believe that the Christian life—like all pursuits—is fine in moderation, but one should avoid taking these matters too far or too seriously. So, for example, when confronted with Jesus’ call for us to love our enemies (which might presumably preclude us from killing them), it is not uncommon for Christians to reply that they simply cannot adopt such an “extreme” position. Of course, they are right: this is an extreme position, if by *extreme* we mean a position not held or practiced by the majority of people. But surely Jesus was aware of this when he called us to love in this way. On what basis and by whose authority do we allow the pagan Greek maxim “moderation in all things” to trump the words and call of Jesus?

As a result of our uncritical adoption of this maxim, many of us are addicted to “balance,” or more precisely, to mediocrity and lukewarmness. Too often we have used phrases such as “moderation in all things” to avoid the hard demands of the gospel. Perhaps the church at Laodicea, referred to in the book of Revelation, had a similar problem. Jesus criticizes them for their lukewarmness and warns them that because they are neither hot nor cold that he is about to spit them out of his mouth (Rev 3:14-17). Like the church at Laodicea, we want to be “balanced,” by which we mean not overly committed to any one thing or person. To stray from this middle path—at least in the eyes of the wider society—is to risk becoming a fanatic. Yet would anyone who read the Sermon on the Mount for the first time suspect that Jesus was an advocate of “the balanced life”? Jesus does not call us simply to moderate the tyrannical demands of the self; rather Jesus calls us to a cross, where our old self is called to die. The Spirit-animated Christian is not one whose life

is characterized by a modicum of selfish desires and flights of self-indulgence but one whose passions are oriented toward loving God and neighbor. The tragedy is that our lives are often marked by excess with respect to those things about which we are called to continence, while we are quick to moderate (or be lukewarm about) those things about which we should be passionate. For example, if I want to orient my entire life around my favorite college football or basketball team, adjusting my schedule to attend all home and away games, spending my days memorizing statistics and talking strategy with fellow “fans” (a word from the same root as *fanatic*), some people may consider me slightly eccentric, but most will admire my devotion. Such behavior is accepted, even encouraged, in our society. If, however, I choose to orient my life around a two-thousand-year-old community brought into existence by a Jewish carpenter, I am likely to be regarded as a “religious fanatic” who needs to learn the virtues of moderation and balance. Given the present shape of our society, therefore, it is not likely that living as God would have us live in the midst of it will appear “balanced.” In fact, I suspect that living the Christian life faithfully in the United States will look suspiciously like fanaticism to a lot of people, including many Christians.

“Cultivating” Continence

If my argument to this point seems plausible, then such an argument would also seem to have a bearing on how we open ourselves up to having this fruit cultivated in our lives. Stated bluntly: we cannot actively cultivate continence, because such a strategy of self-mastery would likely only empower and further entrench the very self that first needs to die. If our lives come to bear the fruit of continence, it will not be because we have strained to control and direct our passions and our desires. Rather this fruit will be one of the natural byproducts of the Spirit’s work in our lives. That is, when the Spirit produces the other eight fruit in our lives, it will also produce the fruit of continence, because the other eight already require a displacement of the self in order to thrive.

This does not mean, however, that nothing we do will have an impact on whether this fruit develops. I have insisted throughout these pages that the

single most important venue for cultivating the fruit of the Spirit is the community gathered for worship. Here the gathered church receives its most important lessons in being other-directed. What are some of these lessons?

First, good worship might help us develop a sounder theology of pleasure.

Such a theology will help us to recognize and guard against our tendency to turn inward, to pursue that which brings pleasure to the self alone. With this tendency in view we see how engaging in and reflecting on worship offers us an important resource. We worship God because God is worthy of our worship and because Scripture and tradition teaches us that God takes pleasure in our worship. Worship therefore is first of all focused on that which is pleasing to God. Yet if God has created us for worship, then we should not be surprised if we find ourselves deriving pleasure from that for which we've been created. The same, I believe, holds for the pleasure we receive in serving our neighbors. Although such pleasure is not our goal, we need not deny the experience of pleasure that comes both from desiring what God desires and from acting on those desires.

Hence worship—rightly understood and practiced—shapes and reorients our desires. In gathering together in the presence of the God who created us, we listen again to the grand story of “God with us,” a story that both frees us from the necessity of spinning our own stories with ourselves at the center and frees us to locate our lives afresh within God’s story. In so gathering we do our best to quiet the voices of our own agendas, our own desires, our own strivings—in order to hear afresh what God desires.

At its best, worship should also engage more than our ears and our minds. Unfortunately, much Protestant worship embodies a certain asceticism, a certain denial of the importance of the body, particularly of those senses other than hearing. Most of us well realize that much of the pleasure we enjoy in this world comes through our senses: the sight of a crimson sunset, the sound of young children laughing, the smell of freshly baked bread, the sweet taste of early corn, the warm embrace of a dear friend. Such pleasures are surely God’s good gifts. Most of us would also admit that temptation often gains its initial foothold in our lives through those same senses, that our selfish and unholy desires are often shaped by the traffic we allow on those sensorial

avenues. Yet how often are we encouraged to direct all our senses to the things of God? That this rarely happens stems from our assumption that there are only two ways to regard the senses and the pleasures they make possible. One option is to pursue pleasure for its own sake, which always entails pursuing pleasure for the sake of the self alone. The other option is to deny the goodness of the body and its attendant pleasures and to seek, therefore, to minimize the role of the body in worship and to extinguish all our desires by engaging in some form of strict asceticism. The first option enslaves us to our own pursuit of pleasure; the second option denies the goodness of the body and pleasure. Although these two options appear to be polar opposites, they actually share at least one common assumption: that our bodily senses and the pleasures that come through them can serve no higher purpose than our own selfish indulgence.

For the Christian, neither option is viable. If we really are the temple of the Holy Spirit, then surely that Spirit is capable of sanctifying all of us and not just part of us. What we need, it seems, is a more sacramental view of the body. Just as bread and wine are transformed into more than bread and wine in the Eucharist, thereby sanctifying part of God’s good creation for a higher purpose, so full-bodied worship ought to facilitate the offering of all we are—including our bodies—to God as a sign of God’s re-creative and transforming work. Authentic worship of the God who created us as embodied beings and who will resurrect us as embodied beings at the last day ought to engage our material senses and make possible the sanctification of what we see, hear, smell, taste and touch. God calls us to be holy because God is holy, but such holiness involves not a denial of our embodiedness but a sanctification of it. Full-bodied worship ought to serve as a powerful reminder that the body is not always an impediment to a life of the Spirit but may also be a vehicle for God’s redemptive and sanctifying purposes. Those Protestants unaccustomed to full-bodied worship might need to reflect seriously on the potential resources that lie hidden beneath what might seem like strange practices of our brothers and sisters in other Christian traditions. Is it possible, for example, that the Orthodox Christian who regularly kisses an icon of Christ might be less likely to engage in unholy kissing than those who believe

their lips are only an avenue for human pleasure? Similarly, is it possible that those who raise their hands to God in worship might be less inclined to raise those same hands to strike a child or spouse?

In addition to a theology of pleasure and a sacramental view of the body, Christians who want to understand how continence takes root in our lives would also do well to recover a theology of moral formation. Christians and non-Christians alike have understood for centuries the important role that habits play in shaping us to be the people we are. In light of this it is fascinating that recent research on brain chemistry suggests that there is a physical-material impulse to engage in behavior for which we have established neural networks. In other words, we may be closer to offering a physiological explanation for how habits work to direct our behavior. If so, then we may discover a deep connection between this physiological explanation and Paul's words in Romans that resonate so deeply with all of us: "For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do" (Rom 7:19).

Such work should remind us once again that we are fully embodied beings, not disembodied minds or souls that drag around a body like a ball and chain. Moreover, such work has important implications for how we help those in our midst who are enslaved to certain desires. In such cases it hardly seems prudent to foster self-mastery, since most people readily admit to being at war with themselves. What is possible, however, is the establishing of new habits. This obviously takes time and so should be attempted with the help of others who can offer encouragement and accountability while one continues to labor under the bondage of previous habits.

It is within such a context that Christians might rediscover one appropriate use of fasting. Rightly understood, fasting is neither a form of asceticism or renunciation for its own sake nor a denial of the legitimate place of pleasure in our lives. The Christian doctrine of creation stands as a constant reminder that God's creation is good. The problem is not with what God has made but with the ways we so consistently twist it to our own destructive purposes. As a result, temptation rarely takes the guise of doing something "purely evil"; more often, it comes as an offer to take God's good gifts and twist them to our own less-than-good purposes. For example, food is a good gift of God,

but when we eat excessively in order to avoid dealing with the stresses and conflicts in our lives, we twist God's good gift. Similarly, human speech is a good gift of God, but when we use our tongues to sow discord and tear down one another rather than to encourage and build them up, we twist God's good gift. The practice of fasting from food or speech, therefore, is not taken up because food or speech are evil but because we often need to be reminded of their proper places in our lives.

When we as Christians find ourselves trapped by our self-inflicted addictions, we might consider the benefits of fasting, not as an exercise in self-mastery but as an attempt to carve out space for God and neighbor. Ideally, fasting should be a last resort, for if we focus our energies on being other-directed and cultivating the other fruit of the Spirit, our attention will not easily turn to servicing the otherwise tyrannical demands of the self. The problem, of course, is that many of us have served ourselves for so long that we find it difficult to say yes to God and neighbor without first saying a definitive no to self. In such cases, a fast may prove helpful. Fasting, in this instance, is an exercise in learning to say no. But fasting alone is not enough, for it is quite possible to learn to say no to self without saying yes to God and neighbor. In such cases, we may find ourselves in a situation similar to the one described in the Gospels: an unclean spirit is driven out, but because the "house" remains empty, seven more unclean spirits return and take up residence (Mt 12:43-45). We must always be mindful that fasting is not an end in itself; fasting is an attempt to break the bondage to self in order to free us for others. If, for example, I choose to fast from watching television, I might do so not because I believe television is evil or because I desire an opportunity to feel self-righteous about my self-discipline. Instead, I might do so because I have come to realize both that hours spent watching television usually isolates me from those I am called to serve and that those hours spent watching regularly instill within me certain self-serving desires that impede such service.

As helpful as such a fast might be, it bears repeating that fasting, although a potentially useful resource for the Christian, should be used cautiously. Fasting that is undertaken as a form of self-mastery can easily reinforce the

self-centeredness that often fosters addictions in the first place. This potentially self-defeating feature of fasting has long been recognized. For example, Isaiah warned his listeners that their fasts were unacceptable to God because they sought to please God by their self-centered fasts while oppressing and being unjust to their neighbors (Is 58:3-14). Perhaps this is why fasting, when mentioned in Scripture in a positive way, is often linked with prayer (Neh 1:4; Mk 9:29; Lk 2:37; Acts 13:3; 14:23; 1 Cor 7:5). Both activities involve not a stifling or extinguishing of one's own will (by an act of one's will) but a willingness to bend one's will to God's will.

Taken together, therefore, prayer and fasting is not so much an exercise in self-denial as it is an exercise in cultivating awareness. Too often we unwittingly nourish our addictions because we so clutter our lives with busyness that we have little time or energy left to reflect on the direction of our lives. For such people, learning to say no to those behaviors in which we habitually and (often) unthinkingly engage to our own (and others') detriment may be the only way to create the reflective space to say yes to God and neighbor.

Reflection Questions and Practical Suggestions

- Have you ever had what you would consider to be an addiction? As you reflect back on that experience, how would you explain your coming to be addicted? As you struggled to overcome that addiction, did you ever experience the frustration that accompanies being at war with yourself? Have you ever felt guilty for not doing a better job of exercising "self-control"? How might Paul's displacement of self-mastery offer you a different way of thinking about these matters?
- Reflect on the way your own church tradition formed you to think of pleasure. How has it formed you to regard your body? Of the role of your body in worship? Ask several Christians you respect from various traditions of worship and spirituality how they think about these matters, including the rationale within their traditions for thinking of these matters in these ways.
- Are you ever tempted to deflect the gospel's "extreme" demands by retreating behind our culture's motto of "moderation in all things"? Which demands do you find most problematic? In what sense do you find them extreme?

- Devote some time to reflecting honestly and prayerfully on the orientation of your life. To what extent do you believe your life is other-directed? To what extent is your life taken up with the service of self? One way to get at this is to make a list of your current goals and aspirations. As you write down your list, be honest. List not only those goals of which you are proud but also those that are less noble and more self-serving. After you have completed your list, consider carefully how you can come to desire these things. Remember that every culture forms its participants to desire some things rather than others. With this in mind, reflect on the ways in which your desires have been shaped not only by the powerful cultural practices discussed throughout this book but also by other cultural practices as well.

If we agree that God's deepest desire is for us to be transformed into the image of Christ, consider whether the pursuit (or the attainment) of your desires listed above is likely to foster or undermine God's greatest and ultimate desire. After you have been as honest with yourself as you know how to be, seek out some trusted friends who know your desires well and with whom you can discuss these matters further. Ask specifically if they see any areas of your life where your desires and affections seem disordered. Give them permission to speak the truth to you in love, particularly on those points where their assessment of your life differs from your own assessment.

Odds are good that you will identify at least some areas in your life where your desires are disordered or misplaced. Rather than seeking to bring those desires "under control" by a further exercise of your own will, consider whether this disorder is not at least partially attributable to an inadequate harvest of the other fruit of the Spirit. If so, consider taking positive steps to do what is in your power to cultivate and nourish those fruit, steps which will of necessity require you to take your focus off of yourself. In the long run such an approach may do much more to nourish continence in your life than any direct attempt to exercise "self-control."

- If you do choose to fast in order to break the bondage of an addiction, keep in mind the potential dangers articulated in this chapter. At the very least, be sure that such a fast is coupled with prayer, linked to a plan to replace this activity with one more other-directed and monitored with the aid of another

Christian who can help you discern whether the fast is being used by God to create the space for further and more constructive action.

Brace up your minds for action, therefore, and be alert, and fix your hope fully on the grace that will be coming to you when Jesus Christ is revealed. As obedient children, do not shape your lives by the passions that controlled you in your previous ignorance; instead, as the One who called you is holy, so you yourselves should be holy in all your conduct, for it is written, "You shall be holy, because I am holy." (1 Pet 1:13-16 Modern Language Bible)

CONCLUSION

Hoping Against Hope

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. There is no law against such things. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit. (Gal 5:22-25, amended).

If we are called by God to holiness of life, and if holiness is beyond our natural power to achieve (which it certainly is) then it follows that God himself must give us the light, the strength, and the courage to fulfill the task he requires of us. He will certainly give us the grace we need. If we do not become saints it is because we do not avail ourselves of his gift.
—Thomas Merton

The analysis in the preceding pages is neither the definitive nor the final word on the subject. Indeed, if I am correct about the kind of discernment that the church must undertake in every place and time, there can be no definitive or final word. Every generation in every culture must take up the hard work of discerning the opportunities for and the obstacles to embodying the gospel faithfully in that place and time. The present study has focused on only some of the formidable obstacles that the dominant culture within the United States presents to communities of Christians who desire to be the body of Christ for the world. My aim has not been to offer an exhaustive catalog of obstacles, but to offer a model of Christian discernment. My reason for doing so is simple: the challenges that any culture presents to faithful embodiments of the gospel will always be