

GUIDING LIGHTS: RECLAIMING EVERYDAY VIRTUES

Chill Out - Temperance

1 Corinthians 9:19, 22-27

September 14, 2025

It happens every time. Here's the scene. We train our fourth- and fifth-grade runners to find a tempo that they can hold for two miles. Then race day comes, and I watch our plan unravel in real time. The starter's pistol cracks, and half the kids blast off like it's a 100-meter dash. It's glorious to watch. Arms pumping, legs flying—for twenty seconds. Then, predictably, inevitably, shoulders slump, breath shortens, faces tell the story: the pace will not last.

But here's what I also notice: the kids who do keep pace never run alone. They move in a pack, encouraging each other without words, effortlessly matching rhythm, keeping an eye out for a friend falling further behind.

The sprinters are immediately isolated, often gasping by the side of the course.

But the pacers finish together. In Indiana, we know that well.

There's a lesson here. In life, too, we sprinters can find ourselves outrunning the most important part of the journey: the community meant to pace us. The danger isn't just burnout; it's the heartbreaking irony that we can win the race and discover that we're standing at the finish line all alone.

This isn't about running out of time. It's about losing the very thing we're running for.

And friends, this isn't just personal burnout. We are being sorted into separate realities. We are running through life alone. Different fears. Different enemies. Different facts. Families are fracturing not from busyness but because they literally inhabit different worlds of information. Neighbors cease communication because they've been convinced the other side is evil. Church members turn on each other over issues engineered to divide us. This is more than fatigue. It is the tragic loss of our ability to see each other as human.

For Greek philosophers and ancient Christian thinkers alike, virtue grows. It requires two necessary elements: sustained practice and a supportive community. Aristotle named four "cardinal" virtues—temperance, prudence, justice, and courage. The ancient Greeks argued that all four virtues require practice and communities of accountability and support. Christian theologians added faith, hope, and love for a biblical seven. This month, we take up the four cardinal virtues.

Temperance. *Not* the flashiest virtue. In fact, it feels somewhat outdated, somewhat awkward, ill-suited to an age of excess. And yet, when violence is celebrated, when retribution is regarded as a rational response, and rage poses as righteousness, temperance offers an answer and an antidote. It is self-control in the service of others. It is the proper ordering of our human desires. It is the radical act of saying no to the forces of destruction so that we can say yes to the path of healing.

For personal reasons, I love that Paul uses running as a metaphor for the life of faith. He does it in several of his letters. In this particular letter to the church in Corinth, Paul knows that the Corinthians have turned spirituality into a race, a contest, a competition. They wanted to know which spiritual gifts dazzled the most? Which spiritual résumé looked most impressive? Whose prophetic powers were most verified? Who spoke in tongues with the most convincing accent?

Paul sketches a different course. He begins by asserting his freedom. "Though I am free with respect to all." But then Paul chooses limits for the sake of love. "I have made myself a servant to all."

That turn is temperance: Spirit-formed self-control for the sake of others. So when Paul writes, "Run in such a way as

to win the prize," he is not blessing a breathless sprint; he is subverting the goal of solo glory. He's clear. The prize is not one person's medal. It's the whole body crossing the finish line together. Self-control is not for outperforming. It's so no one gets left behind.

It is helpful here to remember that Paul's letters were written to real Christian congregations, real people, communities, wrestling with how to live together in difference and diversity. It's helpful to remember that Paul's instructions to the Church have not changed, nor has our unique call. And here it is: we are called to embody the way of Jesus in the world. If we ended every program and partnership, every class and small group, every event and program our church offers, our mission would be the same. We are to embody the way of Jesus in the world. And you cannot learn to forgive, or love, or show the compassion Christ requires unless you first commit to the messiness of community. That's the secret of temperance we too often forget: it is not a private virtue; it's a communal practice. *Remember: the pacers finish together.*

It probably goes without saying that our culture makes this nearly impossible. When anything less than extreme feels like failure, we overschedule ourselves and our kids. We glorify hustle as if only exhaustion proved love. If you add the digital overload of notifications buzzing, screens glowing, endless reels highlighting the perfect vacation, the most well-organized home, the family that has it all figured out—and the comparison engine never shuts down. We say we use technology to stay "connected," but here's the truth: it's making us sprint alone. Meanwhile, the ancient practices we too often skip—communal worship, shared meals, face-to-face conversation—they create the connectivity we're desperate to find.

Yes, life in the age of excess rewards the sprint. And right now, we're caught in the most dangerous sprint of all—a vicious cycle where violence breeds more violence, where the race toward retribution only speeds our descent toward total collapse. When acts of violence go viral, when tragedy is trending, when the rhetoric of leaders fans the flames, temperance turns down the heat. And so, I believe we must rediscover temperance—not as personal willpower, but as

pack running—before it is too late. For the sake of the future we must share. For the sake of what has been built before and is ours to steward now. We must choose temperance over conquest.

Our lives on this planet are too short, the work to be done is too important, to let a spirit of fear-fueled fury animate our action. We finish together or we will not finish at all. The gospel's vision of temperance provides a guiding light down another path.

It is Jesus who modeled this shift. Jesus who gathered disciples. Jesus who traded power for humility, who emptied himself, who humbled himself. Jesus who chose sacrificial love over domination, building a community meant to carry his mission forward. *Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who humbled himself to the point of death, even death on a cross.* Jesus is the model for our life together. The call of the church is to embody the way of Jesus in the world.

The most sacred moments in any race come when the community rallies around the individual. Sometimes the pack creates the possibility for individual excellence, a new PR. Other times the supportive crowd enables a struggling runner to dig a little deeper than they thought possible.

But temperance isn't just personal. It must be public. We need leaders who practice what we might call "sacred slowness"—resistance to moving at the speed of fear, choosing instead the speed of love. We need public officials who choose long-term flourishing over short-term political wins.

The causes of our dis-ease are legion, but I believe we must consider the power of technology. Our screens reward excessive, and even addictive, patterns. They require constant engagement designed to outrage us. We feel it draining us, and still somehow we can't stop. The tactics of past temperance movements are transferable here: collective action and communal resolve for health and wholeness. So, here's an idea. What if we formed Technology Temperance Societies in our homes and in our communities, in our schools and in our congregations? What if we tempered technology and tried a tech-temperance rule? Something like phone-free dinners, no

devices in bedrooms, weekly screen sabbaths, turning off the comments. Saying no is hard alone, but in community it becomes possible. And the well-being is worth the discipline it requires.

This is temperance as Paul understood it: not stamping out our passion but directing it intentionally so that everyone—and not just the strongest—can finish the race.

This is why belonging to a community like ours matters. The counter-cultural act of joining a family of faith creates the conditions in which temperance can be practiced. Paul knew this. He knew it's hard to set a tempo when you're running all by yourself.

You need a pack. That's what we can be for each other. *The pacers finish together.*

And so, when the cultural current pulls us toward the sprint, we remind each other what matters. We remember that we're running toward something—toward Christ, toward each other, toward the flourishing of our neighbors.

You see, our temperance is not personal discipline. It's about making room for those who can't survive the cultural sprint. The elderly who are dismissed as irrelevant. Children who are treated as productivity projects rather than human beings. Struggling families who are told their poverty is a moral failing. Whenever a society abandons its most vulnerable, it has lost its soul.

None of us can run this race alone. Life is designed to exhaust us these days, to isolate us, to convince us that our worth is in our productivity, that our consumption determines our value, that our tribal loyalty is our most important identity.

Paul casts a different vision: temperance as collective resistance to the machine of rage, retribution, and relentless excess. When the culture screams, "Run faster, win bigger, yell louder," we can choose the radical discipline of running together.

The world is desperate for communities that refuse to be swept up in cycles of vengeance, desperate for people who turn down the noise and turn toward each other.

I think of those young runners, who will learn over time to hold something in reserve—and to hold each other accountable. I promise you, at the finish line, the joy will not be in who started fastest. It's in who stays the course together.

My friends. My church. Do not succumb to despair. Do not submit to the forces of division and retribution. Do not let isolation and extremism win. Do not go it alone. Not now.

Find your people. Hold your ground. Choose your hope. We must finish together. By God's grace, we will. Amen.