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The Untouchables - Protecting our Addictions

By Marcellino D'Ambrosio, Ph.D.



Temperance. For older American, that word conjures up images of Carrie Nation shattering bottles of gin to usher in Prohibition.



But the word temperance does not mean abstinence from alcohol or total abstinence from anything, for that matter. It means that the desire for pleasures of various sorts is brought into balance with other legitimate needs and obligations. Also called moderation, this virtue is the power whereby pleasure is allowed to do its job of refreshing and rewarding us for life-sustaining activities (like resting, working, eating, procreating) but keeps the pursuit of pleasure from becoming an addiction that interferes with our duty and our health. It is one of the Cardinal Virtues, one of the key qualities, identified by both ancient Greek philosophers and God's inspired word, that anyone must possess and perfect who wishes to live a successful life.

In the absence of Temperance, the desire for pleasure drives us to overindulge with predictable results: indigestion and a hangover. Eating and drinking too much is Gluttony, one of the Seven Deadly Sins. But immoderate indulgence of any appetite, not just food and drink, is a type of Gluttony as well: too much TV, exercise, shopping, web-surfing, talking on the phone, etc.

The saddest thing about gluttony is that it causes us to be self-absorbed. Pursuit of pleasure leads to the neglect not only of our true health and well-being, but of the needs of those around us. Our compulsion for more pleasure finally leads to injustice: we'll take more than our fair share of the strawberries leaving our siblings with none.



This is the problem with the wealthy Israelites that Amos reproves in this Sunday's first reading. Their fault is not their wealth. Nor is it that from time to time they enjoy their wealth. The problem is that all they do with their wealth is indulge themselves, oblivious to the fact that the Kingdom of Israel is collapsing all around them.

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The same is true for the rich man of this Sunday's Gospel (Luke 16). **Dives** (Latin for Rich man) does not just feast on Sabbaths and holidays. He feasts every day. Not only does he fail to invite Lazarus to feast with him, but he fails even to share his leftovers with this sick beggar who sits right in front of the door to his house.

Did he mock the beggar, set his dogs upon him, or maliciously hurt him in any way? No, he did not commit any of these sins. His sin was rather a sin of omission: he failed to do what he could to relieve the suffering of someone right under his nose. He had allowed his self-indulgence to blind him to the needs of others and muffle the voice of his conscience.

There were eternal consequences to the rich man's choice. He who hardened his heart, refusing mercy, found himself exiled from Mercy for all eternity. The conversation at the end of the story between this damned soul and Father Abraham is pitiful. He thought that maybe the hardness of heart, the deafness of ear could be punctured by God shouting louder, in the form of a greater miracle than Moses and the prophets had worked. "If only someone would come back from the dead and warn my brothers . . ." His brothers' overwhelming commitment to their own comfort would cause them to shut out the voice of the Risen Lord, to turn off the hearing aid. Some will do anything to protect their lifestyle, their chosen form of addiction.

Why despite all logic, all scientific evidence, all mercy, is abortion-on-demand the law of our land? Because it is a necessary safeguard the lifestyle of a very large and powerful portion of our nation's population.

That's the price our country is willing to pay to protect one of its addictions. The question is, what addiction are you are protecting?



This first appeared in Our Sunday Visitor as a reflection on the scripture readings for the 26th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle C (Amos 6:1-4, 1 Tim 6:11-16; Lk 16:19-31). It is reproduced here by permission of the author.



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