

Lesson 27 – The Cardinal Virtue of Prudence

What is a virtue?

What is the virtue of Prudence?

What are the three stages of an act of Prudence?

What is Prudence about?

Why do we need the virtue of Prudence?

What three emotions can hinder making a prudent decision?

What is the difference between Prudence and problem solving?

1835 Prudence disposes the practical reason to discern, in every circumstance, our true good and to choose the right means for achieving it.

I. THE HUMAN VIRTUES

1804 *Human virtues* are firm attitudes, stable dispositions, habitual perfections of intellect and will that govern our actions, order our passions, and guide our conduct according to reason and faith. They make possible ease, self-mastery, and joy in leading a morally good life. The virtuous man is he who freely practices the good.

The moral virtues are acquired by human effort. They are the fruit and seed of morally good acts; they dispose all the powers of the human being for communion with divine love.

The cardinal virtues

1805 Four virtues play a pivotal role and accordingly are called "cardinal"; all the others are grouped around them. They are: prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance. "If anyone loves righteousness, [Wisdom's] labors are virtues; for she teaches temperance and prudence, justice, and courage."⁶⁴ These virtues are praised under other names in many passages of Scripture.

1806 *Prudence* is the virtue that disposes practical reason to discern our true good in every circumstance and to choose the right means of achieving it; "the prudent man looks where he is going."⁶⁵ "Keep sane and sober for your prayers."⁶⁶ Prudence is "right reason in action," writes St. Thomas Aquinas, following Aristotle.⁶⁷ It is not to be confused with timidity or fear, nor with duplicity or dissimulation. It is called *auriga virtutum* (the charioteer of the virtues); it guides the other virtues by setting rule and measure. It is prudence that immediately guides the judgment of conscience. The prudent man determines and directs his conduct in accordance with this judgment. With the help of this virtue we apply moral principles to particular cases without error and overcome doubts about the good to achieve and the evil to avoid.

The virtues and grace

1810 Human virtues acquired by education, by deliberate acts and by a perseverance ever-renewed in repeated efforts are purified and elevated by divine grace. With God's help, they forge character and give facility in the practice of the good. The virtuous man is happy to practice them.

1811 It is not easy for man, wounded by sin, to maintain moral balance. Christ's gift of salvation offers us the grace necessary to persevere in the pursuit of the virtues. Everyone should always ask for this grace of light and strength, frequent the sacraments, cooperate with the Holy Spirit, and follow his calls to love what is good and shun evil.

PRUDENCE

Prudence is one of the four cardinal virtues. Like the other three, it is a virtue that can be practiced by anyone; unlike the theological virtues, the cardinal virtues are not, in themselves, the gifts of God through grace but the outgrowth of habit. However, Christians can grow in the cardinal virtues through sanctifying grace, and thus prudence can take on a supernatural dimension as well as a natural one.

What Prudence Is Not:

Many Catholics think prudence simply refers to the practical application of moral principles. They speak, for instance, of the decision to go to war as a "prudential judgment," suggesting that reasonable people can disagree on the application of moral principles and, therefore, such judgments can be questioned but never absolutely declared wrong. This is a fundamental misunderstanding of prudence, which, as Fr. John A. Hardon notes in his *Modern Catholic Dictionary*, is "Correct knowledge about things to be done or, more broadly, the knowledge of things that ought to be done and of things that ought to be avoided."

"Right Reason Applied to Practice":

Aristotle was closer to the truth. As the Catholic Encyclopedia notes, he defined prudence as "**right reason applied to practice**." The emphasis on "right" is important. We cannot simply make a decision and then describe it as a "prudential judgment." Prudence requires us to distinguish between what is right and what is wrong. Thus, as Father Hardon writes, "It is the intellectual virtue whereby a human being recognizes in any matter at hand what is good and what is evil." If we mistake the evil for the good, we are not exercising prudence—in fact; we are showing our lack of it.

Prudence in Everyday Life:

So how do we know when we're exercising prudence and when we're simply giving in to our own desires? Father Hardon notes three stages of an act of prudence: "to take counsel carefully with oneself and from others"; "to judge correctly on the basis of the evidence at hand"; "to direct the rest of one's activity according to the norms determined after a prudent judgment has been made."

Disregarding the advice or warnings of others whose judgment does not coincide with ours is a sign of imprudence. It is possible that we are right and others wrong; but the opposite may be true, especially if we are in the minority.

Some Final Thoughts on Prudence:

Since prudence can take on a supernatural dimension through the gift of grace, we should carefully evaluate the counsel we receive from others with that in mind. When, for instance, the popes express their judgment on the justice of a particular war, we should value that more highly than the advice of someone who stands to profit monetarily from the war.

And we must always keep in mind that the definition of prudence requires us to judge *correctly*. If our judgment is proved after the fact to have been incorrect, then we did not make a "prudential judgment" but an imprudent one, for which we may need to make amends.

What is the virtue of prudence?

Prudence is the acquired habit of right judgment. **Natural prudence** is about making right decisions from a purely natural perspective and **supernatural prudence** is about making good decisions in accordance with God's will, which is good and the very best for me, that will benefit me now *and* eternally.

The natural virtue of prudence is basically common sense in sound judgment regarding practical matters. It assists people to arrange their lives and activities in order to achieve the goal of a happy life. It is naturally prudent to look both ways before crossing the street.

The supernatural virtue of prudence makes us order our activities, desires, resources, and behavior in accordance with the Gospel so that we may come to eternal life. The Church reminds us that we must use supernatural prudence and courage when we are faced with evil. We can do many things that are imprudent from a worldly perspective but which are prudent for eternal life. The martyrs are celebrated for their living witness of supernatural prudence—they gave up their natural life for Jesus' sake. An example involved those Christians who protected Jews from death camps.

Why do we need the virtue of prudence?

Prudence helps the intellect to see the right thing to do and to choose the right means for achieving it. Choosing wisely involves taking good counsel while obtaining knowledge from the past and present.

Prudence entails the application of good moral principles to particular cases assisting us to know what to seek and what to avoid.

Prudence is necessary in order to seek the common good for all.

Prudence helps us to see what aids our salvation and what hinders our progress. Supernatural prudence may involve a certain degree of discomfort or even risk of the things that we cherish. We seek first the Kingdom of God by following the example of Christ.

Prudence aids us in not going along with evil in the event that we do not know what to do or because we are afraid of the consequences of opposition to the prevailing point of view.

Practices to foster the growth of the virtue of prudence

A virtue is an habitual and firm disposition to do good. Our task is to ask for and cooperate with God's grace in developing the virtue of prudence, and allowing Him to perfect it in us. In addition to studying the Catholic Faith, determine who in your life will offer you good counsel in order to help you develop the virtue of prudence.

Scripture passage.

Matthew 7:24-29 The wise man builds his house on the Rock, Who is Christ

Acts 6:1-7 The appointment of assistants who are spiritual and prudent

How would someone know you are prudent and that you model the virtue of prudence?

Example: When facing a decision, you take time to pray and determine God's will in the matter. You always take the time to think things through to choose the "right" thing to do.

The principles of Thomas Aquinas on the relations between faith and reason are:

1. Reason alone is not sufficient to guide people, they also need Revelation. Revelation is all that God has revealed to us in Sacred Tradition (teachings of the Church) and Scripture.

2. Reason and Revelation are not opposed to each other.

3. Faith preserves reason from error.

4. Reason provides service in the cause of faith by explaining and helping to develop understanding of the truths of Faith and by defending the truths revealed by God.

How do we know when we're exercising prudence and when we're simply giving in to our own desires?

In the Modern Catholic Dictionary, three stages of an act of prudence are noted: "to take counsel carefully with oneself and from others"; "to judge correctly on the basis of the evidence at hand"; "to direct the rest of one's activity according to the norms determined after a prudent judgment has been made."

□ Why would it be imprudent to disregard the advice or warnings of others? Example: Someone may have a better understanding of the situation that could help me in making a good decision.

The Prudence of Jesus Christ

“As a woman had shared in the fall of man, so woman should share in his redemption. In no better way could Our Lord reveal woman’s role in the new order than by giving John, that disciple whom He loved above the others, to His Mother whom He loved above all: ‘Son! Behold thy Mother... Woman! Behold thy son!’

The Kingdom of God was born! Heavenly prudence had chosen the right means to reveal the new ties born of redemption. Mary was to be our Mother, and we her children.”

(The Seven Virtues, Most Rev. Fulton J. Sheen)

Prudence

Or: Smart Living

We want to be happy, and we want to pursue goods in a way that will make us happy. This means we have to learn how to act well, which in turn involves an acquisition of virtue. If that sounds complicated, let me put it more simply: virtue is about doing the right things, and if we do the right things, we will become happy. But what is the first thing we need if we want to do the right thing? Well obviously, we need to know what the right thing to do is. This is where prudence comes into the picture.

Prudence is the first of the cardinal virtues because it is the ability to look at a concrete situation and know what ought to be done. It is the ability to make right judgments. Prudence gives us the knowledge of what must be done, when it must be done, and how it must be done. There is often a great misunderstanding about the real nature of prudence, so let's begin by saying what prudence is not. Prudence is not timidity, an avoidance of all danger, cowardice, lack of initiative, self-preservation, never spending any money, or an excessive focus on manners (e.g., the term "prude"). On the contrary, sometimes true prudence could lead one to dive on a grenade, fight courageously, say things which are very awkward or politically incorrect, make a huge investment venture, or be open to having a fifth, maybe even a tenth child.

How Prudence Works

Prudence is the art of taking moral principles and applying them to concrete situations. Let's take some examples. We all know the maxim: "Love your neighbor as yourself." This is a general moral principle. But even after we learn this principle, the question still remains, "How do I love this neighbor, here and now?" We still have to take the general moral principle and make it concrete in particular situations. To take a second case, the Church teaches that drunkenness is a grave sin, which we should avoid. But how do I avoid drunkenness, here and now? Prudence tells me when I should stop drinking; what beer or glass of wine should be my last; or what about the principle that sexual activity must be reserved for marriage? Practically speaking, how do I protect my sexuality from misuse? Well, prudence tells me that I probably shouldn't be alone with my girlfriend in her bedroom, as it may lead to serious sin. Prudence therefore demands two aspects:

First, knowing the principles, that is, knowing what the goods of human nature are, and that we must work towards them and never against them. Consequently, it is never prudent, regardless of the situation, to act against the moral principles. There is no such thing as a prudent abortion, because it always violates the good of innocent human life. There is no such thing as prudent contraception, because it always goes against the good of human life and against the good of the marital relationship. There is no such thing as prudent pornography, because it goes against the good of human relationships.

Secondly, we must know how to apply the principles to the concrete situation. The first part is knowing the goals; the second part is knowing how to choose the means for obtaining the goal. In the words of St. Thomas Aquinas: "The prudent man considers things afar off, insofar as they tend to be a help or a hindrance to that which has to be done at the present time. Hence it is clear that those things which prudence considers stand in relation to the end." With prudence, we look at every decision in light of the ultimate goal, that is, goodness and happiness.

Prudence is a lot like going on a vacation. The first thing you have to do before going on a vacation is figuring out a destination. Where do you want to go? Well, we discussed our intended destination in the first chapter when we talked about the basic goods, and how they bestow happiness. Those goods are our destination. But then you have to figure out the best way to reach the destination. After all, how you pack and prepare for the trip depends on where you're going. As we make all our individual decisions, we need to keep our ultimate goal in mind. That's prudence: selecting the right means for bringing us towards happiness.

Conscience

Related to prudence is the notion of conscience. "Conscience" is a brutally misunderstood term in most circles. People will often use the phrase "Follow your conscience," without any clear idea of what it really means. Usually they think conscience is some vague feeling, or a quiet inner voice, or perhaps a small cricket who tells Pinocchio what to do. Actually, the meaning of "Follow your conscience" is much more precise than that. It just means "**Do what you think is right.**" That's it! Maybe that sounds so obvious we shouldn't even have to say it, but the fact is that many people never even think about what is right. They just do what feels right. **Conscience isn't about feeling; it's about thinking that something is right.** Another translation of "Follow your conscience" is "**Follow what prudence tells you,**" or "Apply moral principles to concrete situations, and then act accordingly."

Three Parts of a Prudential Act

Let's look at how to make a prudent decision. There are several steps we must all take if we want to practice prudence in our choices.

Step one: Deliberation. This is the stage where we gather all the relevant information, starting with a consideration of moral principles. This includes an awareness and acceptance of the authoritative teaching of the Church's Magisterium; since the Church's teaching gives us true principles, it's important to see if they teach anything definitively about the issue at hand. For example, if the Church says that a certain act is immoral, then you don't need to deliberate about that act any more; you know not to do it. While deliberating, we must also give a careful examination of the concrete situation, to be sure that we have understood it as fully as possible. It is also sometimes advisable to take counsel with those who are themselves experienced, prudent, and knowledgeable about the matter at hand. With this step it is absolutely critical that we be completely honest.

Prudence is about truth, the truth of what is and what must be done. It is the truth that sets us free; remember, we have to know what is true before we are free to do what is good. So we can't let our own feelings or preferences get in the way of a true understanding of the facts.

Today, married couples, government officials, and even moral theorists never seem to be able to agree about the right thing to do in any situation. This is because they base their decisions on feelings and preferences, not on truth. One of the major crises of the modern world is that we go on feelings instead of truth. **This is the error that we have to overcome in our own lives; we must base our decisions on a careful and conscious examination of the truth. So often we don't deliberate honestly, but rather focus on the aspects of the situation that we want to see. Prudence demands openness to the whole truth of the situation.**

Failure to deliberate is called rashness or thoughtlessness. This is when someone just rushes headlong into everything, without ever taking a moment to think it over. It is very dangerous to "act without thinking," to not consider carefully enough before action. It may work in a Star Wars universe (don't think; just trust your feelings, Luke!), but in the real world it's deadly. If you don't reflect on your decisions beforehand, you will make really stupid decisions. Look at the options, seek advice, pray to God for His guidance, reflect, and take a reasonable amount of time before you act.

Step two: Judgment. After deliberating, we must weigh all the evidence fairly, and then figure out the best course of action. Judgment separates the relevant information from the irrelevant information, and then applies it to the problem at hand. You can't just think about something forever; you have to come to some sort of conclusion. Failure to make a judgment is called indecision. Procrastination, beating about the bush, fiddling around, all are ways of expressing this common vice. Thinking about some issue without actually arriving at a practical result does no one any good.

Step three: Execution. Once we judge the right thing to do, we have got to act! If you figure out the proper action, but then fail to perform it, what's the benefit? You do not have the virtue of prudence until you actually do what you have judged to be right. Failure to carry out what you believe to be the proper decision is called irresoluteness. Plenty of people make hoards of decisions, and never manage to keep any of them. They can't be faithful to a resolution. One day they've decided to do this major in college, and then they change their minds and decide to do that major. The same happens in the case of jobs, or vocations. Such people suffer from the vice of inconstancy. A helpful exercise might be to analyze these three stages and see where it is that you most often fail in your own life. Are you thoughtless? Indecisive? Inconstant and undependable? Once you identify your weakness, you can make the conscious decision to work on that area of prudence, and so hopefully improve in this fundamental virtue.

Some Further Practical Guidelines for Prudence

One very helpful technique for strengthening prudence is the following rule: Take your time in consideration, but once you have reached a judgment, act quickly and decisively. It is unwise to rethink an act when you're in the process of carrying it out. Think about it before you begin it, and then just do it. Also, don't wait until you have absolute certainty before making a practical decision. As Josef Pieper states, "The prudent man... does not deceive himself with false certainties."¹ Remember that practical matters don't have the same logical exactness or clarity as mathematical equations, so if you wait until you've perfectly proven the right thing to do, you'll never do anything. All you can do is to try and understand the situation as best you can, based on the information and time available. Then make a decision and carry it out faithfully.

We have to realize that every practical decision entails risk; there is no security that our decision will not result in difficult consequences. But we must be able to make decisions and act with abandonment and trust to divine providence. After we go through the necessary steps of prudence (deliberation, judgment, and execution), **we've done our part, and we leave the rest to God.** At that point we need faith in Him, faith that He'll use even our imperfect human choices in bringing about His plan. Even if we don't see externally discernable results or successes coming from our attempts at prudential decision-making, God may be doing great things with our efforts. Many holy people died in apparent failure (Isaac Jogues, Louis Marie DeMontfort, even Our Lord Himself), but God used their work to bring about wonderful changes in the Church and the world.

Lastly, there are certain times when it is prudent to avoid decision-making. We have to be very careful that our judgments and actions are the result of an honest examination of reality, and in certain situations, it is very difficult for us to keep a proper perspective. It is important that our judgments and actions are not reactions to strong emotions like:

Anger. A prudent person will, whenever possible, avoid making a decision while he is angry. He will sleep on it, postpone it or put it aside until he can weigh things calmly and coolly.

Lust. Lust can be a very powerful feeling, with the potential to negatively influence our ability to think clearly. In fact, there is nothing like desire to interfere with the proper working of our reason. St. Thomas Aquinas goes so far as to say that imprudence is caused chiefly by lust.² The prudent person will step back and give himself space and time before allowing himself to be ruled by lust.

Discouragement. When we are close to despair, our view on reality will be skewed. We will be overly pessimistic, and so the decisions we make will be based on error. Having suffered a failure, or fallen in sin, or having made a stupid move; all these things discourage us, and so we should avoid decisions at such times.

Remember, prudence is about allowing the truth, not feelings, to determine our choices.

Summary

Prudence is about smart living. It's not just about being smart in school, or being a smart tennis player, or being smart in business. It's about being smart in life, and just like all the other virtues, this takes practice. Experience, too, is a great aid to prudence, not just your own, but also the experience of others. Seeking counsel of wise persons can be very valuable. Most importantly, you want to seek out the counsel of the wisest persons: The Blessed Trinity, Our Lady, the saints and angels. Go to them in prayer, and ask for their wisdom and guidance in making the right decisions in your life. Read the Scriptures, or the Lives of the Saints, for insights on how to make prudent choices.

Prudence

Prudence is one of the four cardinal virtues. Definitions of it are plentiful from Aristotle down. Father Rickaby aptly renders it as "right reason applied to practice". A fuller description and one more serviceable is this: an intellectual habit enabling us to see in any given juncture of human affairs what is virtuous and what is not, and how to come at the one and avoid the other.

It is to be observed that prudence, whilst possessing in some sort an empire over all the moral virtues, itself aims to perfect not the will but the intellect in its practical decisions. Its function is to point out which course of action is to be taken in any round of concrete circumstances. It indicates which, here and now, is the golden mean wherein the essence of all virtue lies. It has nothing to do with directly willing the good it discerns. That is done by the particular moral virtue within whose province it falls.

Prudence, therefore, has a directive capacity with regard to the other virtues. It lights the way and measures the arena for their exercise. The insight it confers makes one distinguish successfully between their mere semblance and their reality. Thus, without prudence bravery becomes foolhardiness; mercy sinks into weakness, and temperance into fanaticism. But it must not be forgotten that prudence is a virtue adequately distinct from the others, and not simply a condition attendant upon their operation.

This is because the moral agent finds in it, if not the eliciting, at any rate the directive principle of virtuous actions. According to St. Thomas it is its function to do three things: **to take counsel, i.e. to cast about for the means suited in the particular case under consideration to reach the end of any one moral virtue; to judge soundly of the fitness of the means suggested; and, finally, to command their employment.** If these are to be done well they necessarily exclude remissness and lack of concern; they demand the use of such diligence and care that the resultant act can be described as prudent, in spite of whatever speculative error may have been at the bottom of the process.

Readiness in finding out and ability in adapting means to an end does not always imply prudence. If the end happens to be a vicious one, a certain adroitness or sagacity may be exhibited in its pursuit. This, however, according to St. Thomas, will only deserve to be called false prudence and is identical with that referred to in Rom., viii, 6, "the wisdom of the flesh is death".

Besides the prudence which is the fruit of training and experience, and is developed into a stable habit by repeated acts, there is another sort termed "infused". This is directly bestowed by God's bounty. It is inseparable from the condition of supernatural charity and so is to be found only in those who are in the state of grace. Its scope of course is to make provision of what is necessary for eternal salvation.

Although acquired prudence, considered as a principle of operation, is quite compatible with sin in the agent, still it is well to note that vice obscures or at times utterly beclouds its judgment. Thus it is true that **prudence and the other moral virtues are mutually interdependent.**

Imprudence in so far as it implies a want of obligatory prudence and not a mere gap in practical mentality is a sin, not however always necessarily distinct from the special wicked indulgence which it happens to accompany. If it proceeds to the length of formal scorn of the Divine utterances on the point, it will be a mortal sin.

ADDITIONAL READINGS

□

Each week, memorize a line or passage from a Proverb or another Scripture that relate specifically to the virtue of prudence. Examples:

Proverbs 3:21 My son, keep sound wisdom and discretion; let them not escape from your sight.

Proverbs 14:15 The simple believes everything, but the prudent looks where he is going.

Proverbs 14:18 The simple acquire folly, but the prudent are crowned with knowledge.

Proverbs 15:5 A fool despises his father's instruction, but he who feeds admonition is prudent.

Proverbs 16:21 The wise of heart is called a man of discernment, and pleasant speech increases persuasiveness.

Proverbs 18:15 An intelligent mind acquires knowledge, and the ear of the wise seeks knowledge.

Hosea 14:9 Whoever is wise, let him understand these things; whoever is discerning, let him know them; for the ways of the Lord are right, and the upright walk in them, but transgressors stumble in them.

Matthew 10:16 Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.

Ephesians 5:15 Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise men but as wise.

Colossians 4:5 Conduct yourselves wisely toward outsiders, making the most of the time.

Read the following passages from scripture for more insight into developing the virtue of prudence.

Proverbs 2 The Blessings of Wisdom

THE BLESSINGS OF WISDOM^a

¹My son, if you receive my words and treasure my commands, ²Turning your ear to wisdom,^a inclining your heart to understanding; ³Yes, if you call for intelligence, and to understanding raise your voice; ⁴If you seek her like silver, and like hidden treasures search her out, ⁵Then will you understand the fear of the LORD; the knowledge of God you will find; ⁶For the LORD gives wisdom, from his mouth come knowledge and understanding;^a ⁷He has success in store for the upright, is the shield of those who walk honestly, ⁸Guarding the paths of justice, protecting the way of his faithful ones, ⁹Then you will understand what is right and just, what is fair, every good path; ¹⁰For wisdom will enter your heart, knowledge will be at home in your soul, ¹¹Discretion will watch over you, understanding will guard you; ¹² Saving you from the way of the wicked, from those whose speech is perverse. ¹³From those who have left the straight paths to walk in the ways of darkness, ¹⁴Who delight in doing evil and celebrate perversity; ¹⁵Whose ways are crooked, whose paths are devious; ¹⁶ Saving you from a stranger, from a foreign woman with her smooth words,^b ¹⁷One who forsakes the companion of her youth and forgets the covenant of her God; ¹⁸For her path sinks down to death, and her footsteps lead to the shades.^c ¹⁹None who enter there come back, or gain the paths of life. ²⁰Thus you may walk in the way of the good, and keep to the paths of the just. ²¹ For the upright will dwell in the land,^d people of integrity will remain in it; ²²But the wicked will be cut off from the land, the faithless will be rooted out of it

Look up:

Proverbs 4 Wisdom: the Supreme Guide of Men

Proverbs 8 The Discourse of Wisdom

Proverbs 13 Prudence is Wisdom in action

Proverbs 16 Wisdom is better than gold

Proverbs 29 A wise man does not give full vent to his anger