

“Wisdom”

Proverbs 2:6; Proverbs 8:10–13;

Psalm 111:10

The fear of the Lord is wisdom and wisdom is the beginning of the virtues

This week—the first week of the New Year (Thanks be to God!)—we begin a seven-week series on the virtues. We will look at Aristotle’s four cardinal virtues: wisdom, courage, justice, and temperance, as well as three that are sometimes called “heavenly virtues”: patience, kindness, and humility.



Why consider the virtues? Because they are simply good moral habits. They are more than what you do. Virtues, or the lack thereof, describe who you are. James K. A. Smith puts it well in his excellent book, *You Are What You Love*:

Virtues, quite simply, are good moral habits. (Bad moral habits, as you might guess, are called “vices.”) Good moral habits are . . . character traits that become woven into who you are so that you are the kind of person who is inclined to be compassionate, forgiving, and so forth. Virtues thus are different from moral laws or rules In fact, as Thomas Aquinas points out, there is an inversely proportionate relationship between virtue and the law: the more virtuous someone is—that is, the more they have an internal disposition to the good that bubbles up from their very character—the less they need the external force of the law to compel them to do the good. Conversely, the more “vicious” [as in “vices”] a person or group of people is, the more they need the “stick” of the law to compel them to do what they ought. Anyone who has raised children is intimately familiar with these dynamics. Early on, we need to constantly tell (and compel) our children to do the right thing. We are training their moral sense. But the goal and hope is that, in the process, they are internalizing a sense of the good and will become the kind of people who do this without the “stick” of rules compelling them to do so.¹

The four cardinal virtues are the earliest collection of foundational moral habits in ancient Greek and Christian thought and practice. Initially developed by Aristotle, they are an attempt to grasp what most characterizes a person able to live a truly good life. These four—wisdom, courage, justice, and temperance—are called “cardinal” virtues, from the ancient word for “hinge,” for they are the pivots on which all the other virtues turn.

Though much developed and pondered by Christian theologians, the four cardinal virtues come from philosophy, so there is nothing distinctly Christian about them. Indeed, we all know that Christians do not have a monopoly on virtuous behavior. Nonetheless, the enduring universality of the cardinal virtues reflect, I think, the fact that we are all made in God’s image and bear God’s mark, making even these cardinal virtues something like bridges to God’s truth and the work of his Holy Spirit in us and in the world.

Wisdom/prudence

Wisdom, or more specifically, prudence, underlies all the rest. Wisdom is the only “knowing” virtue; the others are about “doing.” Prudence is practical wisdom; it is knowing the right goal/end and the right means to accomplish it. “Prudence is the virtue that disposes us to see rightly, the way things are in the world around

¹ Smith, James K. A. (2016). *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit* (p.16-17), Brazos Press.

us, and to employ that truthful vision to act rightly. It enables us to size up a situation accurately, to determine the best course of action, and to embark upon it.”²

Karen Swallow Prior pulls together a summary on prudence/wisdom in her outstanding book, *On Reading Well: Finding the Good Life through Great Books*:

Virtue requires judgment, and judgment requires prudence. Prudence is wisdom in practice. It is the habit of discerning the “true good in every circumstance” and “the right means of achieving it.” In other words, it is “applied morality.” A person possesses the virtue of prudence when “the disposition to reason well about what courses of action and emotion will best bring about our own and others’ well-being” becomes an acquired habit. Perhaps Cicero puts it most clearly and succinctly in saying, “Prudence is the knowledge of things to be sought, and those to be shunned.”

Prudence is considered the mother of the other three cardinal virtues. While temperance, fortitude, and justice are moral virtues, virtues related to doing, prudence is an intellectual virtue, a virtue related to knowing. Prudence is “at the heart of the moral character, for it shapes and directs the whole of our moral lives and is indispensable to our becoming morally excellent human persons.” Prudence measures the other virtues and determines what “makes an action good.” It is described as the “charioteer of the virtues,” the basis and the measure of all other virtues, helping us to apply general principles to particular situations in ways that avoid evil and accomplish good.³

Wisdom and Folly

But how can we to know what are the right goals and the right means of achieving them? Christians have always recognized that our ability to reason is insufficient, for it is clouded by sin. If we are going to know better what is right, we would best start with God and his way. The book of Proverbs puts it this way: we have two choices. We can either seek out Lady Wisdom (God’s way) or Lady Folly (our own way). The first third of Proverbs is an extended presentation of the value of wisdom and the danger of folly. In an extended metaphor, a young man is wooed by two women, Wisdom and Folly. Which will it be? Who, or what, will we follow? Who is our god? Will our god be money or time or career or family or flag or the “divine within” or spirituality? Or will our god be the one true God, revealed fully in Jesus?

This choice is the most important choice any of us ever make in our lives. Scripture always casts the choice in stark terms – the way of the wise or the way of the foolish, the narrow path or the broad, for God or against God. We cannot have it both ways. It is this choice that God lays out before us in the first part of Proverbs, for unless we embrace God as the foundation of our life from which all things follow, there is not much point in reading the book of Proverbs. Without God, Proverbs becomes nothing more than yet another self-help book – and who needs another one of those.

By beginning Proverbs with the choice between Wisdom and Folly, God reshapes the specific advice that follows. If we choose Folly, the way of the world, then all the specific advice in the proverbs becomes nothing more than helpful tips that might get you further in life, depending on your goals.

But if we choose Wisdom, the way of God, then *Proverbs* become infused with God-awareness and God-purpose. And it is with this awareness and purpose that we can confidently go about developing the virtue of prudence, coming to see the world through God-shaped glasses and learning to act accordingly. And in all this, we know that the Spirit of Christ works in us, strengthening and encouraging us on the path of prudence.

² Mattison III, William C. *Introducing Moral Theology* (p. 98). Baker Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

³ Swallow Prior, Karen. *On Reading Well: Finding the Good Life through Great Books*. Baker Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.