

**The Application of the Four Cardinal Virtues – and
How They Relate to Our Institution
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Our ancient Brethren are credited with having consistently practiced the Four Cardinal Virtues, and today we are exhorted to follow their example. This is because if we embrace in our hearts what the degrees have taught and practice their tenets, then temperance will virtually flood the body, fortitude will energize the soul, wisdom will enlighten the mind, and justice will suffuse the spirit. To love all perfectly, is to be unjust to none.

We are reminded of the four Cardinal Virtues, namely Temperance, Fortitude, Prudence, and Justice, early in our Masonic careers, during the Entered Apprentice Degree, and considerable emphasis is placed on those virtues as the initiate is exhorted to practice every domestic, as well as public virtue.

The charge after initiation instructs us to let Prudence direct us, Temperance chasten us, Fortitude support us, and Justice be the guide of our actions. This is because these virtues are of paramount importance and figure prominently in the shaping of the character of every Freemason, helping him to lead a life according to the Masonic principles.

We call these principles “cardinal virtues” because they are fundamentally important. The word cardinal was derived from the Latin word “cardo,” which means a hinge. The word “cardinal,” therefore,

indicates, that on which something hinges. Ancient Roman writers used the word as implying “most important” and applied it to the four points of East, West, North, and South, as well as to the winds blowing from those directions. The expression, therefore, appears to mean the fundamental virtues which support and operate as hinges or pivots and on which our whole character develops. Similar examples are expressed by our Brother Mackey, and by Plato and Aristotle.

All the religions prescribe the practice of these virtues, and Christianity has adopted these virtues as the “Natural Virtues” to which it later added Faith, Hope, and Charity as theological virtues.

It is useful to contemplate how these virtues are described. One description of Temperance is that due restraint of the passions and affections, which renders the body tame and governable, and relieves the mind from the allurements of vice. This virtue should be the constant practice of every Mason, as he is thereby taught to avoid excess or contracting of any vicious and licentious habits whereby he might, unwarily, be led to betray his trust. Some would add that temperance means moderation, not only in drink, but in diet, action, speech, thought, and feeling.

Temperance is, therefore, styled as “the crown of all virtues.” Its influence can modulate the varied cords of lively sympathy or generous feelings, till each acquires its due tone and vibration and the whole become blended in harmony.

Fortitude implies a physical bravery, which leads one to resist insult or attacks with force, but, more especially, it is that moral courage that enables one at the risk of incurring the sneers of others, to refrain from a resort to violence, except when the necessity is imperative. However, when necessity arises, through fortitude, one is not deterred by pain or circumstance. Thus, it is said that fortitude enables one to overcome obstacles to progress and brave the dangers of the way.

Brother Mackey's views on fortitude are that it instructs the worthy Freemason to bear the ills of life with becoming resignation and to take up arms against a sea of trouble. By its intimate connection with a portion of our ceremonies, it teaches him to let no dangers shake and no pain dissolve the inviolable fidelity he owes to the trust reposed in him. Fortitude is that noble and steady purpose of mind, whereby we are enabled to undergo any pain, peril, or danger when prudently deemed expedient.

We learn that temperance will chasten us, fortitude will support us, and prudence will direct us. It is no surprise, therefore, that to some extent there is an overlap between fortitude and prudence. Prudence signifies the ability to meet every situation with common sense and reason and is the true guide to human understanding.

Prudence consists of judging and determining with propriety, what is said or done upon all occasions. Prudence teaches us to regulate our lives and actions, according to the dictates of reason, and is the habit by which

we wisely judge, and prudently determine all things relative to our present and future happiness.

“Let justice be the guide of your actions” is an essential teaching of our ritual, and Freemasonry attaches much value to justice. It has been said that justice is that station or boundary of right, by which we are taught to render every man his just due without distinction. It is not only consistent with the divine and human law, but is the standard and cement of civil society. Without justice; confusion enslaves, lawlessness overcomes equity, and social intercourse would not exist. Justice should be the measure of really good men, especially Freemasons. Thus, when we install the Worshipful Master we tell him that he it is his duty to charge each of his Brethren to practice out of the Lodge those duties which are inculcated in it, so that when anyone is said to be a member of the Fraternity the world may know that he is one to whom the burdened heart may pour forth its sorrows; to whom distress may prefer its suit; and whose hand is guided by justice.

I hope through this brief discussion of the Four Cardinal Virtues that you will remember three things. First, that they have been constantly practiced by Freemasons over the centuries. Second, that they are taught and practiced by us today. Third, and most important of all, that their practice helps make us “good men and true” and that guided by these principles we prove ourselves worthy of this great Fraternity to which we have the proud privilege to belong.