

One

Tips for Getting Better at Prudence

Prudence, the virtue that makes you good at making decisions, like all the cardinal virtues of justice, courage and temperance, takes prayer and practice to really gain the virtue. So, what are some key things to keep in mind as we strive to get better at making good decisions?

First, don't rethink a choice when you're in the process of carrying it out. Think about it before you begin it, and then just do it. Put your hand to the plough and don't turn back. Take your time in deliberation, but once you've reached a judgment, act quickly and decisively.

Obviously, there may be times when you need to reassess, but since prudence is based on information, specifically relevant information, reassessment probably shouldn't happen unless there is new, relevant information that surfaces after the decision has been reached. And, as a rule of thumb, the realization that something is hard or I'm not enjoying this, doesn't usually count as new, relevant information because sometimes doing the right thing is hard, or not very enjoyable, at least at first. And since commitment is the core of virtue, you definitely don't want to get into the habit of not following through on your commitments just because something is hard or not enjoyable.

Two

Don't Look for Certainty in Prudential Decisions

Don't wait until you have absolute certainty before making a practical decision. As Josef Pieper states, "The prudent man does not expect

certainty where it cannot exist, nor on the other hand does he deceive himself with false certainties.”

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 try and understand the situation *as best you can*, given 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's no guarantee that our decision won't result in difficult consequences. But we have to be able to make decisions and act with abandonment and trust in 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.

Sometimes our decisions aren't the best, and sometimes they're downright poor. Look at how St. Joseph, who was a holy man and certainly must have discerned carefully, planned to divorce Mary quietly.

God didn't let St. Joseph's imperfect decision-making ruin His plans or Joseph's future.

We have to make our decisions with confidence, not confidence that we're definitely right, but confidence that God will bring good out of our honest efforts to be as prudent as we can.

Three

Don't Act Under Strong Emotion

There are certain times when it is prudent to avoid decision-making altogether if we can.

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's very difficult to maintain a proper perspective.

Thinking must rule our emotions, not vice versa, so it's imperative that we don't let an emotional reaction dictate our behavior. As Sirach says, "never act in a fit of passion" (10:6).

Emotions that very frequently throw our decision-making off track are: *Anger*. A prudent person will, whenever possible, avoid making a decision when angry. Don't say anything when you're angry, and for the love of Pete, please don't post or email anything when you're angry. Better to sleep on it, postpone the issue or put it aside until you can weigh things calmly and coolly.

Four

Lust and Discouragement

Lust. Lust can be a very powerful feeling, and many of us have said or done something ridiculously foolish while under the influence of sexual desire. In fact St. Thomas Aquinas goes so far as to say that failure in prudence is caused chiefly by lust. So if you're feeling sexual desire, and you're in a volatile situation, step back and get some distance and give yourself some time before you do something you'll regret later.

Discouragement. When we're feeling depressed, or even discouraged, our view on reality will be skewed. We'll 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 tend to derail our assessment of ourselves and even of the world, and so we should do our best to avoid decisions at such times.

Remember, prudence is about allowing the truth, not feelings, to determine our choices. So make sure you're in a place where you can think clearly when you decide. Don't let passion get the upper hand.

Five

Summary of Prudence

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.

And for the rest, trust that God will do great things, even with your incompetence and uncertainty, if you try to be courageous and prudent with the time, the information, and the intellectual faculties you've been given.