

Acquiring Virtue

One

What is Virtue?

When we talk about the kind of people we want to be, one of the clearest ways to explain it is to talk about virtue.

Virtue is the perfection of the human being by perfecting the way we act. Human beings are designed in such a way that our character is expressed in our action, and then our action shapes our character. In other words, what we do is connected with the kind of people we become. So a virtuous person is a person with good character and that good character is confirmed and perfected by virtuous actions.

So, what's the definition of a virtue?

A virtue is a good action we turn into a habit that becomes a stable character trait by which we do the good quickly, easily, and joyfully. This is what the saints show us best of all, that it's possible to be a person who habitually and naturally does the right thing and enjoys doing it. In other words, having virtue is what makes you good and happy. So it's the goal of human nature to become virtuous.

So then how do we become virtuous? How do we get virtue?

Two

How do you get virtue?

The first step to acquiring virtue is to realize that we don't have it yet. A lot of times, we don't do the right thing, and what's worse, we don't *want* to do the right thing. Sometimes, even when we *do* manage to do the right thing, we don't enjoy it. Obviously, it's honorable and sometimes even heroic to do the right thing when you don't want to, but that's not actually virtue yet.

A virtue is when you like being kind, and chaste, and humble, and generous, and considerate, and prayerful, and moderate in your speech. And where you *don't* like bragging, or complaining, or criticizing, or lusting, or being slothful.

So the first thing to realize is that most of us have a long way to go. But don't be discouraged, because all that means is that we're beginners. And it's always tough when you start.

But again, that brings us back to the question: how do we start to acquire virtue? How do we get to the point where being good is so easy that we enjoy it?

Three

You have to practice

Becoming virtuous is like gaining any skill, like the skills of learning a foreign language and learning to play piano or shooting a basketball.

Now when you begin a foreign language, it's not easy, and it's not much fun. You have a hard time making sense of anything (why does everything have to be masculine and feminine? How many words do they need for "the"?) And whenever you try to talk in the new language, you sound really silly, you can't even make childishly simple sentences without mistakes, and you spend all your time trying not to screw up.

This is why so many people, especially English speakers, just give up before they reach fluency in a foreign language. Because it's hard, it feels artificial, restrictive, and unpleasant, and you spend most of your time trying not to screw up.

But those of you who have stuck with it, and become fluent in a foreign language – you know what a transformative thing it is. How you can think in another language, read the literature of another people, make jokes, feel at home in a fantastically different culture, and appreciate the unique insights which are incarnated in different languages.

You get something similar when learning to play piano. You have to start by holding your hands like you're a menace to society. There are these weird little black dots and you have to learn that every good boy does fine, and you do drills that sound awful. It's uncomfortable, and it has nothing to do with the music you like, you're lucky if you can play Mary Had a Little Lamb, and again you spend your time trying just not to make mistakes.

But if you stick with it, what a superpower it is to play piano beautifully! To be able to have the music of the great composers pass through your body and out into the air! To compose on your own, maybe, and to make music with other people spontaneously – which is a kind of community experience and thrill you can't imagine if you haven't felt it.

The point is: it's worth it. It's worth it to commit to certain skill sets that can change your life. And that's exactly what virtue is. Only it's the skill set of happiness.

Four

Moral Life Beginners vs. the Advanced

So when we look at learning piano and a foreign language we see that there's a world of difference between beginners and those who are advanced. Beginners find the whole process artificial, unnatural, arbitrary, restrictive, and unpleasant – and then spend their energy mostly trying not to screw up. But if you *stick with the program*, if you persevere,

you find that you become freer, able to do things you would never have imagined. It's almost like a super-power, and it makes you happier.

Now notice what people say about the Church's moral teachings. Notice the criticisms the outside world makes. They say the Church's rules are arbitrary, restrictive, unnatural, and unpleasant, and that it's focused on avoiding doing the wrong thing. There are all these "thou shalt nots," they say.

What does that show? Does it show that there's something wrong with the Church's program? No! It just shows that these people are beginners in acquiring virtue. But if they commit to the program and stick with it, they can become excellent. They can become saints.

Even worldly people are forced to acknowledge the amazing example of the saints, the astonishing goodness and happiness of Mother Teresa and St. Francis and John Paul II. And these saints are just those who have stuck with the program until they have advanced to the point of great virtue.

And that's what we should all be doing.

Five

A simple plan to gain virtue

Receive Jesus in the Eucharist as often as possible. He's the goal of life, we want to be united to Him, because only He can give us the divine life.

Think about the way God wants you to live in daily meditation, like we are right now in the Rosary. Make a decision, a resolution to practice some good action that is inspired by your meditation. By practicing good actions we turn them into habits and we become virtuous. But without Jesus in the Eucharist, without thinking about how he wants us to live in meditation, and without practicing good resolutions, good actions – we will never make it.

But if you commit and persevere, you will make it, I promise!

Prudence

One

Truth

The first of all virtues is the virtue of *prudence*. This is the virtue that must ground all the others, because it is a virtue of the mind, of knowledge.

The fundamental fact that our society seems to have largely forgotten is that *you cannot pursue the good unless you know what the good is in the first place*. It's the mind, it's understanding, that enables you to do the right thing in the first place because it tells you what the right thing is.

So the *entire* moral life is based not on your instincts, not on your gut, not on your good intentions. The entire moral life is based on the discipline of reflecting on the truth, being willing to seek the truth relentlessly, to consider it rigorously, and to carry it out with painstaking conscientiousness. Which means, if you've never considered yourself a "reflective" person, if you just prefer to shoot from the hip, if you're not the sort who worries about thinking things through carefully, well, that has to change. Because the first and fundamental virtue is prudence. And you have to care about the truth and about getting the truth right. You have to care about acquiring that virtue.

Two

Not Comfort or Safety or Timidity

One early misconception about prudence that has to be corrected right away is this false idea that prudence is about comfort, safety, or timidity.

People always say "You have to be prudent," when they're justifying the safe course of action, the easier course of action. And yes, sometimes prudence does dictate the safer, easier course. Because sometimes that truly is the best option. But very often prudence *doesn't* dictate the safer, easier course.

Prudence could prompt you to have a fifth kid. Prudence could tell you to dive on a grenade. When Christ spoke to the rich young man and told him to go sell all he had, give it to the poor, and follow Jesus, that *would* have been the prudent thing to do.

So don't use prudence as an excuse for not being heroic. Sometimes in every life, heroism is actually going to be the only prudent thing to do.

Three

The truth about timeless principles

Prudence is the virtue that makes you live your life according to the truth about reality.

Prudence makes you live not on your feelings or your own personal experience of things, it makes you live according to the way things are. And that's why, in order to be prudent, you have to know the ultimate truths of life. You have to know the timeless principles of faith and morals.

In other words, you have to be a well-educated Catholic. Because if you don't know the general truths of God and man and our ultimate destiny and design, then you're certainly not going to be able to judge rightly in particular situations. Just like somebody who didn't have a general knowledge of human anatomy couldn't make a good judgment about what to do during a particularly tricky heart surgery, we will not be able to make good decisions in particular situations if we do not have a good grasp of the general features of the world. And that's what the faith offers us.

So the first part of prudence is making sure you learn the faith. Then you'll be better equipped for individual situations.

Four

The truth about the situation

Prudence, though, is the virtue of being excellent at applying moral truth to concrete situations. That's basically the definition of prudence. Being really good at applying moral truth to concrete situations.

Which means, as we just said, that you need to have a good knowledge of moral truth, and in particular of the moral teachings of the Catholic Church. But you also have to learn to think through a concrete situation. To really see the important truth about it, and not just what matters to your ego, or comfort, or convenience, or feelings.

That's very difficult. So many of us would rather just say, "Well, whatever. We'll go with this and see what happens." But planning and consideration are essential to any form of excellence – and they're certainly essential to virtue. Because, again, virtue is based on truth. And trying to understand the truth about the situation is going to be absolutely necessary to a virtuous life.

Five

Practice

All the cardinal virtues – prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance – take practice. They aren't easy, especially at the beginning. And God is very generous and patient with us. He gives us the opportunity to practice.

Often, when we've made the wrong decision in a set of circumstances, he'll give us an opportunity again to make the right decision in a similar set of circumstances. But the first step is wanting to grow in that virtue. And we have to want to do the work it takes to live thoughtfully, to live prudently, to live according to the truth.

The Art of Making Good Decisions

One

The Steps to Making a Prudent Decision

There are seven virtues from which all good actions flow: the Cardinal virtues of prudence, justice, fortitude and temperance and then the three theological virtues of faith, hope, and love.

Prudence is the first of the Cardinal virtues. It's the virtue every other virtue depends on because doing the good depends on knowing what the good actually is.

Prudence, like all the other virtues, also takes practice. You don't become prudent overnight, but if you work at it, eventually you get better at making smart, informed decisions that make you happier and holier and serve God and neighbor.

Now when you practice anything, you especially want to focus on your weakest area. That always needs the most attention.

So we're going to go over the three steps of making a prudent, wise decision, and as we do, pay attention and see which of the steps is your weak spot. Then make a resolution to ask for God's grace to do a better job with that part of this most fundamental human virtue and practice it.

Two

Step One: Deliberation

The first step of prudence, of making a good decision is gathering and considering the information available. This is called deliberation. It's where you think things through, think about the moral principles, think about the facts of the situation, sift the relevant information from the irrelevant information. Because some facts are more important than others in terms of how they factor into the decision you need to make.

Also, you don't just deliberate by yourself, especially if it's a big decision. You pray, you ask for the Holy Spirit's gift of counsel, you consult other wise, holy persons. And you take a reasonable amount of time, depending on how serious the decision is, before you settle on a course of action.

This is difficult for some people. Many of us suffer from the vice of rashness. This is where we're intellectually lazy and unreflective, or where we just can't handle the waiting, the lack of closure, the effort of trying to reach a good decision. So instead of thinking it through, we rush into a decision. This is death to prudence, and so death to

virtue. If you act without thinking, you will ruin your life and the lives of others.

Think before you act! That's the first rule of prudence and the first step of prudence. Don't skip the stage of deliberation.

Three

Step Two: Judgment

Some people *are* willing to gather data and think about it forever. In fact, they deliberate so long that they never make a decision, they never get to the second step of prudence, which is judgment.

This is where you actually come to a decision, where you say, "I'm going to do *this*."

People who never arrive at the point of making a decision suffer from the vice of indecision. There's a lot of this today: analysis paralysis, beating about the bush...

People are worried about committing to a particular course so they just sit around wondering what they should do, and eventually, the urge to do anything dissipates and the chance for good is gone.

There has to be a time for consideration and deliberation. But that time has to come to an end, and then it's time to make a decision, a choice. If you don't make it to the second stage of prudence, then virtue never gets underway.

Four

Step Three: Execution

Finally, the third act of prudence is when you stop thinking about what you *should do* or what you *will do* and you actually **do it**.

In step two, judgment, making a decision, you form your resolution. In step three, execution, you carry out that resolution.

Unfortunately, perhaps the biggest obstacle to prudence today is the vice opposed to execution. It's called the vice of inconstancy or irresolutness and it consists in being unable to carry out your resolutions, the inability to follow through.

There are all kinds of people like this. They 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, then they change their minds and decide to do that major. The same happens in the case of jobs, or vocations. It's really tragic, because the movement of truth is stifled. It never finds its way into active expression. These folks

can't commit. And because they can't commit, they can't really love or be excellent, since neither love nor excellence is possible without commitment.

Don't let this happen to you. Take time, consider the information available, and seek counsel. Then decide. And then make sure you do what you have decided to do.

Five

Which Do You Need to Work On?

So which of these areas do you need to work on?

Are you thoughtless and rash? Then slow down, think, and give more time than you usually do, more than you're comfortable with before you decide and take action – say, twenty-four hours – before you rush into anything in private or professional life.

Are you indecisive? Then set strict deadlines to limit how much you hem and haw before coming to a decision, a *judgment*. Don't let your own lack of certainty or confidence hold you back from pursuing what is good.

Are you irresolute? Then be very careful about your resolutions, but once you have made one, try not to think about it anymore. Just do what you have said you would do. Follow through on your commitments.

Make it so other people can count on your word because *you* come through when you say you will.

This is prudence. This is the foundation of truth that undergirds the whole moral life. And practice makes perfect. So ask God to show us what we need to work on, and ask Him for the grace to improve, then practice!

Don't Wreck Your Decisions

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.

Justice

One

Definition of Justice

The second of the Cardinal Virtues is Justice.

What immediately comes to mind when you hear justice? What someone deserves, like a punishment, or worse, vengeance? Or maybe, what is owed to me in the sense of fairness? But actually, justice is the virtue by which you are able to give people what you owe them.

In justice you give people *what they have a right to expect from you*.

But here's an interesting question: what gives people the right to expect anything from you? Where did they get that right in the first place?

Two

God is the Foundation of Justice

How can someone say, "I'm owed this," or even, "I have a right to this"?

Notice too that only certain things have rights, not others. No one owes anything to a rock. There's nothing that belongs to a tree by right.

Merely material things don't make claims on us and don't enter into questions of justice.

This is a critical point: *only persons deserve justice*.

All human beings have been created by God with a spiritual soul, to be in His image and likeness. That's why human beings must be treated justly, because of their special stature in relation to God.

As the *Declaration of Independence* states, "They are endowed by their *Creator* with certain unalienable Rights," and these rights must be taken seriously. The American Founding Fathers recognized this essential truth: that God is the source of human rights, and that justice depends on recognizing His unique love and gifts to humanity.

If we see the human person merely as a random collection of atoms, instead of as a child of God, then we destroy the foundations and we won't be able to maintain justice.

No wonder then that historically, whenever a society attempted to rid itself of God and religion, the stage was instantly set for widespread injustice.

God is the only safeguard of justice.

Three

Justice and Relationship

Justice is the virtue that's primarily concerned with the way we deal with other people. That's what makes justice so important, and the reason why it comes right after prudence in the order of primacy.

With justice, we don't just realize our own private good, we are also empowered to cultivate the good of relationships. And because justice focuses on other persons, it's a broader, more encompassing virtue than fortitude and temperance, which focus primarily on the self.

Justice is therefore absolutely essential if we want to be happy. Because without it we'll fail in building relationships with those around us. And what's more pitiful, more miserable, than a human being left only with himself? Such a person is trapped and stifled within the narrow limits of himself. He's self-enclosed, lonely, and unfulfilled.

This brings us to a super-important truth: *those who commit injustice are worse off than those who suffer injustice*. Plato said the one who commits injustice is more to be pitied than his victim. And Jesus Himself, when He was suffering the greatest injustice of all, said, "Do not weep for me. Weep rather for yourselves, and for your children."

Because, after all, a just person has healthy, properly ordered relationships with others, and so has many avenues of escaping his solitude and emptiness, enjoying the goods of friendship and society. But an unjust person cuts off every bridge between himself and another person, and ends in the hell of their own loneliness.

Four

Justice and Balance

Justice is often rightly associated with the notion of "equity" or "fairness." But it's really important to emphasize that when we talk about justice and equity, that doesn't mean that in a just society, everybody winds up being the same or having the same in talent, or wealth, or health, or authority.

That's silly. When two things are described as equal, it means they are the same in every way. All people are equal, the same, in the sense that we are persons with a dignity that must be respected. After that, we are not the same. We are all different and that is a good thing because that is what makes each person unique and unrepeatable.

But we are not all the same, thank God. So don't make justice about making everyone the same and destroying all the differences that make each person and the world beautiful.

But since we are all equal because we are all human persons, we all have to treat each other as equally important in the most basic sense. We are all equally God's children, we all have the same right to be shown respect and goodwill.

And, importantly, when we interact with each other, especially when we've made commitments to one another, we have to recognize that the good you do for me demands that I do a proportionate amount of good for you.

So, for instance, if my boss gives me a fair day's wage, I owe him a proportional amount of service in return. And if someone comes to do work on my house, if he does good work, I owe him an amount of money that's proportionate to the value he's contributed to me.

Justice does not mean I have some bogus right to an equal amount of money or fame or influence as anybody else but in the sense that when we receive something, money or goods or services, we should consider ourselves obliged, and indebted, and should try to give something of roughly equal value in return.

That's justice. It goes for families and friends and towns and economic systems and international communities.

Five

Justice and Love

Justice is a great virtue. It preserves the fundamental good of relationship by making sure that when I pursue *my* good, I don't do it at the expense of *your* good.

But actually, for relationships really to thrive, we have to go beyond the limits of strict contractual equivalence. The fulfillment of justice can be found, ultimately, only in love. Because love is the greatest virtue. It unites one who loves with the one who is loved.

With justice, there's still a tension between your good and my good, and I have to be careful that I don't damage yours by seeking mine. But with love, that tension disappears. Because I love you, the good that I want, that I desire *is your good*. So, we don't have to fight about what you owe and what I owe. Love says, "The good I want, the good I will work for, is your good, your happiness."

That's how God loves us. That's how, by His grace, we may become capable of loving one another.

What We Owe God

One

Justice and Relationship and God

Justice, as we've seen, is the cardinal virtue that preserves and protects our relationships with others. It's the virtue that causes us to do right by the people in our lives. It enables us to give them what we owe them.

But who is the most important person in our lives? Who is the one we owe the most to?

Obviously, it's God. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are the most important Persons in our lives. God is the one we owe the most to. So being just actually begins with being just to God.

Aquinas calls Justice to God, "The Virtue of Religion," and says it's the most important part of justice.

So what does it mean to be just to God?

Two

What we Owe God

How can we be Equitable toward God? How can we give Him all He's given us?

He's given us our very life, our existence, our salvation, and all our other blessings. So right from the beginning, we can never attain a level of pure justice with God, because we can never repay our massive debt to Him. "Man can never say to God: we are even."²⁶

Nonetheless, we still have an obligation to at least pay back what we can. This means giving God all that we are, our body, soul, and spirit, and all that we have. It's a matter of justice, or rather, less than justice since we can never do for God what He's done for us.

Still, we need to try to make our little offering to Him in humility. As Our Lord said, "When you have done all you have been commanded, say, 'We are unprofitable servants; we have done only what we were obliged to do.'"

Three

Liturgy: The Primary Act of Justice

When Aquinas discusses the virtue of religion, of justice to God, he says that the chief

act of justice is *liturgy*. That may sound strange until we remember that the primary purpose of the mass is to be a sacrifice, an offering up of everything to God. We offer up to Him everything He has given us. We give ourselves, our joys and our sufferings and our lives – all of it symbolized by the bread and the wine and even the financial offering which represents our labor and our worldly security.

But we also offer up to God the greatest thing He has given us: we offer up His Son, Jesus Christ.

Mass is therefore the greatest obligation in justice we have. This is the most just thing any of us ever do, where we try to make ourselves right with God.

So if you're not willing to perform the most basic act of justice there is by participating in the Mass' offering to God, the God to whom you owe everything, then you are failing in the most basic act of justice there is.

And spiritually, if you are living a fundamentally unjust life, that's a big, big problem.

Four

Tithing

One facet of striving for justice with God is the practice of tithing. Sadly, this aspect of justice is often lacking from the lives of many believers.

We forget that God is entitled to a portion of our earnings, that our relationship with Him demands a financial offering as well as an offering of every other dimension of our lives.

The word "tithe" literally means "a tenth part," and practically, it is usually best to give at least ten percent of our income to God, through donations to the Church or to some other holy cause.

Again, this isn't a question of preference, or "going the extra mile." We owe this to God. It's not even justice. After all He's done for us, it's the least we can do.

Five

Thanksgiving

During the mass, where we offer everything up to God – including, hopefully, a financial offering – we also have to be sure to offer thanks.

If someone does something really kind and generous for you, and you don't even acknowledge it by saying thank you, that's not just a failure in courtesy, it's a failure in

justice.

That's why the mass is packed with thanksgiving. Because that's a fundamental aspect of our just return to God.

The very last words of the entire ritual are, "Thanks be to God." The word "Eucharist" actually means thanksgiving. And when the priest says, "Let us give thanks to the Lord our God," we respond, "It is right and *just*." And even outside of mass, it's the practice of being continually grateful to God that will remind us how indebted we are to him.

Only when we realize how profound our debts, how incredibly obliged to God we are, will we be able to joyfully, eagerly work towards paying God back in justice by being his good servants, and His worthy children.

Justice and Relationships

One

Justice and Relationships

Am I a good person? Am I just?

Justice is about giving people what you owe them and not taking away what they have a right to. When we do that, the result is good relationships. So, justice is the virtue that makes good relationships.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church mentions three kinds of justice: *commutative, distributive, and general.*

Commutative justice is the kind of justice we owe our peers. It's when we give our spouse, or a colleague, or a friend what we owe them, and we don't deprive them of anything they have a right to.

Let's do a little examination of conscience related to justice.

Am I giving my spouse the love and honor I owe her or him? Do I think about what they need and then anticipate and take action to fulfill those needs without them asking? Or do I just fall into the trap of thinking of my own wants and needs? Do I even know my spouse well enough to really know what they need? Maybe that is the best place to begin by getting to know my spouse better so I can love, I can give to them better.

How about at work? Am I communicating in a way that respects those I work with? Do I respond in a timely manner to messages? Do I keep people informed? Do I take into consideration how my decisions and actions affect them or do I just do what I think needs to be done the way I want? Do I meet deadlines and follow through with things so that others don't have to pick up slack? Do I take the initiative to problem solve or do I leave that to others out of laziness? Do I sew a cancer in the team by gossip and politicking?

Am I just toward my siblings? Am I taking care of my share of the responsibility toward our elderly parents or have I left it to others?

How about justice toward your friends? This usually revolves around communication, trust, and respect. Do I take the initiative to get together with my circle of friends or have I been unresponsive leading to feelings of neglect? Do I consistently cancel plans or fail to follow through on promises which can make friends feel undervalued?

One-sidedness is an injustice. When one person feels they are putting more effort into the friendship than the other...

Are we trustworthy in our friendships or have we broken trust by revealing things were supposed to be confidential, or by gossiping? Betrayal is one of the worst forms of injustice in friendships. I mean, look what Judas did to his friend Jesus.

Two

Justice is not just about what we owe people, it also considers what we should not deprive them of.

Justice asks, "What do I owe my neighbor?" But in justice, we also make sure we are not depriving people of things they need. This is where the Ten Commandments come in. Let's look at just a few of them:

Innocent persons have a right to their lives. Murder (particularly abortion) is the violation of that right, and so is unjust. Before engaging in any sexual activity, our partner has a right to a full, personal commitment, which can only take place through marriage.

Fornication and adultery is the violation of that right, and so is unjust.

Persons have a right to certain material possessions. Theft or swindling is the violation of that right. (Note: this includes any kind of scam, where profit for one party depends on the loss of another party).

Others have a right to a good name, a good reputation. Gossip or slander is the violation of that right, and so is unjust.

Everyone has the right to be treated courteously. Rudeness is the violation of that right, and so is unjust.

Each person has the right to be respected. Malicious mockery (that is, to make fun of someone with the purpose of belittling him) is the violation of that right, and so is unjust.

Persons have the right to their spiritual dignity, that is, to be appreciated for their full personal value (as opposed to being treated as a merely physical object). Pornography is the violation of that right, and so is unjust.

Others have the right to our good example. Scandal is the violation of that right, and so is unjust.

Innocent and sincere persons have the right to truth. Lying is the violation of that right, and so it is unjust.

So you see, the Ten Commandments aren't just about arbitrary rules. They're about justice and the good of relationship. They're about giving people what you owe them,

and not taking away what they have a right to.

Three

Distributive Justice

Peer-to-peer justice is the most basic, familiar kind of justice. But human relationships aren't just about relationships between people in an equal position. Some people have authority over others, and they have to exercise that authority justly.

This is called *distributive justice*, which is the justice where those in authority must make sure they're being just to those under their authority.

The reason we have authorities is because we need communities, and a community requires that there be some kind of governance. An authority exists to take care of the community and the common good. But the person with authority has to recognize that the community contains many individuals and that each of these individuals has rights.

So distributive justice is the justice that concerns the obligations of the community to the individual, as carried out by the rightful authority.

In other words, whether you're a father, a mother, the owner of a business, a boss, a pastor, or a politician, you have to make sure that *your goals for the community respect the good of each and every individual under your authority*. Anything less is simply an unjust abuse of power.

So let's ask ourselves, Who is under my authority and care and am I giving them what I owe them, am I giving them what they really need?

Consider each of your children, your employees or the people you manage. If each of those people under your responsibility were asked and they answered fearlessly and frankly – would they say you are just toward them?

Four

General/Legal Justice

So we've talked about the obligations of one individual to another individual, and the obligations of the society, and the one who leads it, to the individual. But there's also *General Justice*, which is about the individual fulfilling his obligations to the society he's a part of.

We owe a lot to our families. We owe a lot to our places of work. We owe a lot to the nation. We owe a lot to our parishes, and to the universal Church.

General justice is where you recognize your debt and the corresponding obligation it imposes.

General justice is where you recognize that “giving back to your community” isn’t just some extreme form of altruism or community spirit. It’s just a basic demand of justice.

It’s what prevents you from becoming a leech on society, a self-entitled brat in your family, a lazy free-rider at work, a worthless, self-serving member of the mystical body that is the Church.

General justice demands that we respect the legitimate authorities of our communities and that we be committed to serving, not just taking, from the society we’re part of.

Five

Why You Need Them All

We need all these forms of justice.

Without a sense of General Justice and our obligations to society, we become lazy, selfish, and self-entitled. Without a sense of Distributive Justice and a sense of the rights of the individual, you get a totalitarian state – whether communist or fascist – in which any individual or even large groups can be sacrificed, tortured, violated, falsely convicted, and liquidated for political aims. And without a sense of Commutative Justice, a sense that I have to treat my peers with the same respect and consideration I think I deserve, we all just become hideous jerks to one another – and that doesn’t lead to happiness for anybody.

So take a moment to consider your peers, the people under your authority, and the societies you’re part of. And if you get the sense that you haven’t been fulfilling your obligations in one of those areas, make a resolution to help you be more just. And ask the Holy Spirit for the grace to make good on that resolution.

Solidarity and Subsidiarity

One

Lessons from a Tree House

When my son Xavier was nine he taught me a valuable lesson about two principles central to the Catholic Church's teaching on justice: "solidarity" and "subsidiarity."

When he was nine, Xavier wanted to build a tree house.

I thought he wanted me to build a tree house for him. I can't build anything. So, I called a friend who came and built the Taj Mahal of Tree Houses. Xavier hated it and refused to go up in it. The next day Xavier got the scraps of wood, saw, hammer, and nails and built a *piece of junk* on his own in the other tree.

What did I miss?

Xavier wanted to build a tree house. He wanted to use his freedom, initiative, and creativity to build something and in the process, grow and mature as an individual. He knew he needed help, but he didn't want me to push him aside and do it for him.

I left both tree houses to remind me of two principles: Subsidiarity, which means we need to let the individual do what they can so they become responsible and mature – that is subsidiarity – respect the role of the individual. Solidarity, when individuals need help from the community, give them the help they need but don't do it for them.

So the Church has articulated two moral principles to stress both the importance of the human individual and the importance of the human community. And those moral principles are *the principle of subsidiarity* and *the principle of solidarity*.

Two

Subsidiarity – the good it promotes

The principle of subsidiarity stresses the responsibility and role of individuals and small groups. It recognizes that every person is unique, that every person has a distinct intellect and will. It recognizes that it is the individual who takes initiative and responsibility and creates. It rejects any form of socialism or communism where the higher authority or the Government takes over what the individual should do.

Subsidiarity comes from the Latin for "help" (it's the same root as the word "subsidy" or "subsidize.")

Subsidiarity is the principle which says that leaders should help those under them do

what they can and make their distinctive contribution, but don't do it for them.

So, bosses, for instance, should equip their workers to do their particular jobs. Parents should make sure their kids have what they need to do their homework or chores but not do it for them. Governments should make sure that citizens have the opportunities to thrive since that's the whole point of having a government in the first place, but not take over so that the citizen doesn't have to take responsibility.

So, actually, the first thing the principle of subsidiarity says to do is for leaders to help those under their authority. But the principle of subsidiarity also warns leaders against trying to help the folks underneath them too much.

Three

What the Principle of Subsidiarity says *not* to do

So subsidiarity is about helping individuals and small groups take responsibility and initiative and fulfill their distinctive task, and make their unique contributions. But, sometimes leaders try to help so much that they actually get in the way of individuals and small groups doing what they're supposed to do.

So the principle of subsidiarity also tells you what *not* to do. It tells you not to micromanage. It tells people in authority that if the individuals or small organizations under them can fulfill their function, do their job, or carve their path in life without your interfering, *then let them do it without interfering*.

The principle of subsidiarity says you have to trust people and give them space to make their unique contribution and express their unique character.

A company manager shouldn't stifle his subordinates by micromanaging. The government shouldn't stifle the economy, or healthcare, or education by micromanaging. A pastor shouldn't stifle his parish by micromanaging. And a father shouldn't stifle his kids by micromanaging.

Now, sometimes a parent or boss or government has to intervene to set things right. But that should be the exception, not the rule. That's the principle of subsidiarity.

Four

The Principle of Solidarity

"Solidarity" means community spirit.

Solidarity is the principle that reminds us that no man is an island. We all need each

other in the community, and we all have to be committed to help one another. It's what makes one sibling help out another sibling. That's a mature kid because that kid realizes that he has to be committed to the family's good.

Solidarity is what makes one colleague help out another colleague at work, even though it's not technically his job. Because he recognizes that we're all in this together and that the good of the business depends on the workers having a generous spirit with one another.

Solidarity is when someone with a snow-blower uses it not just to clear his own sidewalk and driveway, but also clears the snow from the other houses on his block. Because they're his neighbors.

Solidarity is what prompts one nation to send major relief packages to another nation after a natural disaster. Because we are all part of the human family and we need to act like it.

Human beings need each other. We rely on one another's generosity and goodwill. And that's what the principle of solidarity ensures.

Five

Not Individualism and Not Collectivism

In the last hundred and fifty years, the Church has had to fight two horribly destructive ideas of the human person.

One is socialism or communism. This sees humanity as nothing more than a hive, a herd, and it's led to the violation of countless individual rights and dignities in the name of a faceless "society."

The Church opposes socialism or communism with the principle of subsidiarity, which says, "No, individuals are important, precious, the source of all our innovation, creativity, and responsibility. You must not attack them. You must give them the tools and the space to let them flourish."

The other deadly error is individualism, associated more with Western liberalism.

This error sees humanity as nothing but free individuals, and society exists just to let them compete, earn, spend, and do whatever else they want with no restrictions and no thought of anyone else.

It's an anti-family mindset, an anti-community mindset, an anti-love mindset. It's the mindset of Cain, who dared to ask God, "Am I my brother's keeper?"

And the Church replies, with the principle of Solidarity, “Yes. You are your brother’s keeper. You have been created in family, in community, in a state of interdependence with the rest of God’s children. So act like it.”

So, let’s remember the lesson of the tree house. We need to let individuals be responsible and do what they can. Don’t do for them what they should do for themselves. Second, always be ready to help your kids, your colleagues, and the people in your community when they need your help. That’s subsidiarity and solidarity.

Every meditation should end with a good resolution. When it comes to my family, workplace, parish, or community, where am I micromanaging when I shouldn’t and where am I acting like a selfish individual. What specifically am I going to do to change?

Fortitude

One

The Nature of Fortitude

The third Cardinal Virtue is *Fortitude*, also known as courage or bravery.

This is the virtue that enables us to overcome our fears and to do the right thing even when we don't want to.

Fortitude prompts us to take action or keep going, even when we're threatened by significant suffering and loss. Because we know that the good we're pursuing and protecting is more important than the good we're risking.

Just like St. Maximilian Kolbe who knew that union with God, faithfulness to the truth, and a willingness to forgive and that saving another human life were all more important than saving his career and all he had built, or preserving relationships or protecting his health or even saving his own life. Because courage is the willingness to sacrifice lesser things for the sake of greater ones

So, Kolbe spoke the truth and it got him sent to Auschwitz by the Nazis and Kolbe forgave those who tortured him in the death camp, and he gave away his food rations to other prisoners, and finally, Kolbe traded places with a man condemned to death.

Kolbe could do this because he was a man of courage. Am I? How would I know?

Two

Overcoming the Fear to Lose *All* Goods and the Fear to Lose *Any* Good

Courage or Fortitude is about overcoming fear in order to do the right thing. And fear is always a fear that we will lose some good thing or the importance of some good.

Now, the primary human fear is the fear of death because death represents the loss of every created good, everything in this world.

That's why Our Lord says that no one has greater love than this, to lay down his life for his friend. Because in laying down our lives, we are laying down all earthly goods at our disposal.

So to be really brave, we *can't* be dominated by a fear of death. If we are, then as the book of Hebrews says, we will be kept in slavery to the devil all our lives.

But if we are willing to die and lose *all* earthly goods for the right cause, then we should be willing to lose *some* earthly goods for the right cause too.

To really be brave, we have to look around at everything we care about – family, friends, job, reputation, health, financial security – and we have to ask God to give us the grace so that, if need be, we can do the right thing even if it means letting go of the things that matter deeply to us.

Because that's what courage means.

Three

Not Fearlessness

We said that fortitude is about overcoming fear in order to do what's right. But that doesn't mean that the brave person, the person with fortitude, is fearless. Quite the contrary, if somebody is fearless, it means he *doesn't* have fortitude. That's because fear is based on love. The only thing that makes any of us afraid is when there's something we love, and we're afraid to lose it. Which means, if you had no fears, it would be a sign that you had no love. And having no love isn't a virtue, it's a vice.

No, what makes a person brave isn't that they have no fears. It's that their fears, like their loves, have been put in the right order so that you love and fear losing greater things over lesser things. And then you are willing to pursue and cling to the greater goods, even if it means losing the lesser goods.

At the end of the day, courage is an expression of prudence and prudence says to prioritize what matters most. So, courage is the willingness to sacrifice lesser things for the sake of greater.

Four

Loving Most That Which is Best

So if you want to be brave, you have to start by figuring out your priorities.

What matters most? What do you love the most? What do you fear losing the most?

The answers to those questions should all be the same. The answer to all those questions should be God. He is, objectively, the most important thing there is. The best thing. So you should love Him the most. You should fear losing Him the most.

That's why Scripture says that "the beginning of wisdom is fear of the Lord."

It could also say that the beginning of Courage is fear of the Lord. Because you can only

be prudent and brave if you prioritize God above all things. That will make you fear losing Him the most. And that will make you willing to sacrifice everything for Him, if need be, which is the virtue of Fortitude.

Again, examining our fears will reveal what we love. So what do you fear the most? Do you worry most about your career? Or your kids? Or finances? Or your reputation? Or health?

If that's what worries you the most, then your priorities are out of whack. In which case you're going to have a hard time being brave. But if you want union with God most and fear losing him the most, then you have the beginning of wisdom and the beginning of courage.

Five

Ordering your fears, ordering your loves

We have to love created things. Our lives, our kids, our friendships, the jobs, the material goods God has blessed us with. It's good to love those things, and it's right that we should fear losing them. If we didn't fear losing them, it wouldn't be a sign of courage, it would just be a lack of appreciation. But we have to know that true happiness and salvation are only to be found in God.

The things of this world will eventually let us down and leave us empty. God won't. The created persons in our lives can't save us and we can't save them. But God can.

So however much we love created things, we have to love God more. However much we fear losing some good thing, we have to fear losing God more. Once we have those loves and fears prioritized, we will know how and when to sacrifice. Because virtue is just getting our loves in order.

Love the lesser things less and love the greater things more, for virtue is rightly ordered love.

The Age of Cowards

One

Willingness to Sacrifice and Risk the Lesser for the Greater

Fortitude is the virtue that makes us willing to risk and sacrifice what is objectively lesser for what is objectively greater. It makes us sacrifice our sleep and leisure time for the well-being of our kids. It makes us sacrifice our job prospects for the sake of preserving our integrity. It makes us sacrifice our social comfort for the sake of witnessing to our faith.

Again, in all these cases, we show that we are willing to sacrifice what is lesser for the sake of what is greater. But in order to do that, we need to know what is greater and what is lesser. In other words, you must believe in objective truth and objective morality. And that is precisely what has come under attack in the post-Christian world.

Which is why we are breeding a generation of cowards.

Two

The Attack on Objective Values

Over the last century or so, there's been a powerful movement to present morality as though it were nothing more than an expression of personal preference.

This idea is sometimes called moral relativism, sometimes emotivism, or hedonism. Common catchphrases in American culture that capture the essence of moral relativism are "Who am I to judge" or "You do you." These phrases suggest that individuals should act according to their own beliefs and preferences, implying that what is right or wrong can vary from person to person. It comes from the error that there are no absolute truths, no universal moral standards that apply to everyone equally.

The denial of objective and universal moral principles means people think they can just decide, "what's the most important thing for me," and that that's all there is to it.

They don't get that some things are just objectively more important than others. And when you think truth and morality is something you get to make up for yourself, you simply cannot be brave.

Three

Values or Feelings?

A brave person is someone who is able to sacrifice their personal feelings for the sake

of what they know to be objectively right. But if you don't believe that something is objectively right then you can't sacrifice your feelings for it.

If you don't believe in objective truth, all you have to go on is your feelings. All you can do, in any crisis, is choose what makes you, personally, feel better. And that is the very definition of the coward. Someone who just does what's easier for him personally in every crisis. Someone who puts his own feelings and sense of comfort first.

That's why relativism kills, absolutely kills, any chance at fortitude and makes for a culture of cowards.

Four

An Unreflective Age = A Cowardly Age

You need conviction in order to exhibit fortitude by standing up for your convictions. But moral relativism has destroyed people's convictions about objective standards of right and wrong. And even if people aren't explicitly relativistic, they have become so unreflective that they haven't spent any time reaching conclusions about objective truth and value.

You need to be able to answer the question: is there a God and how do we know? You need to be able to answer the question: why do human beings exist? What's the purpose of human life?

You need to be able to answer the question: how do we know the difference between right and wrong, between good and evil, between damaging people and really helping them?

Because if you can't answer those questions, then the sad fact of the matter is that you don't know enough to be brave. Your ignorance, your refusal to do the work of thinking things through, means that when crises come, you won't have the truth to guide you. You'll just have your fears and needs and preferences.

Which means, I'm sorry to say, that you are already a coward.

Five

Courage can only be in accord with truth

Virtue is only virtue if it aligns with the truth. Get rid of truth, and you get rid of all virtue, especially fortitude.

Of course, we all want to believe in courage, in bravery, in heroism. But without conviction in objective right and wrong, that belief is totally unsustainable. That's why you'll hear

totally conflicting descriptions of courage. People will talk in one breath about someone's courageous battle with cancer and then they'll talk in the next breath about someone's courageous decision to euthanize themselves. But striving to live and striving to die are opposites. How can they both be courageous?

Or people will talk in one breath about someone courageously fighting to save their marriage and then they'll talk in the next breath about somebody courageously leaving their marriage. But being true to a marriage and walking out on a marriage are opposites. How can they both be courageous?

The truth is that in a relativistic society, a society which does not recognize universal, objective values – the word “courage” and “fortitude” means nothing at all. It can be used for anything. Because people without objective truth and moral principles can't be brave.

They can use the word “courage” all they want. But it becomes easier and easier to see that they use it, very often, to justify their most cowardly decisions.

Our Lord, however, gave us the truth. He showed us what was most important, fidelity to God's will, love of neighbor, holiness, and salvation. And He showed us how to be brave by His willingness to sacrifice everything for the sake of those supreme goods.

We can be courageous, we can become heroes, if we look to the example of the God-hero on the cross.

Attack and Endure

One

Two Ways of Being Brave

We've seen that the virtue of fortitude, of courage, means overcoming our fears for the sake of the greater good. It means doing the right thing, even when we really, really don't want to. But there are two ways to do this.

There are two ways to pursue the good, despite the risk and the hardship involved. One is by actively attacking some evil. And the other is by clinging to the good, no matter what: to attack or endure.

Two

Courageous Attack – Righteous Wrath

Sometimes, courage makes use of the passion of anger, which gives us the energy and the drive to actively attack some source of evil.

This is the first act of courage, courageous attack, also called "Righteous Wrath" (sounds like the name for a heavy metal band, doesn't it?)

Attack does not mean that it is your job to fix or condemn all the people and problems you see. Attack means to eliminate any evil that is under our authority or within our control. We see Jesus live out this courageous attack when he cleansed the Temple with the whip.

Most importantly, righteous wrath is supposed to be directed at our own sins. It's what gives us the strength to take action in cutting out sinful behavior and the temptations, the near occasions that lead to sin. It takes courage to attack the root of our own personal evil. It takes courage to pluck out the eye or cut off the hand that causes us to sin – which means to root out of our lives anything that's a source of temptation. We need the energy of anger for that, we need that feeling, "You know what? I'm fed up with this. I don't want to commit this sin anymore. I'm cutting the occasion for this sin right out of my life."

Another way fortitude expresses itself is in courageous speech that counteracts falsehood and depravity.

Righteous wrath makes us speak out against injustice. It gives us the courage to say, "Hey, watch your language" when someone misuses Our Lord's name. Or "That's inappropriate" when someone makes a filthy joke. Or maybe just "That's not true" when someone repeats a slur against the Church.

That takes courage. And those acts of fortitude bring us closer to God and peace and happiness.

Three

Endurance – the true test of Fortitude

We should do all we can to attack evil, to change bad things when we can. But what do we do when we can't change or fix things? That is when we endure cheerfully. What is required is a persistent pursuit of the good in endurance. In fact, endurance is the supreme test of fortitude, since when you've run out of other options, fortitude still enables you to hold your ground and persevere through any oppressing hardship.

So, ask yourself, what hardship is present in your life that just won't go away? Is it some addiction you can't break? Some disappointment you can't get over? Do you have some kind of chronic problem? Are your family relationships or your friendships always strained? Is there something you've never been good at? Are you depressed? Can you not figure out what to do with your life? *What's the problem you just can't fix, no matter how hard you try?*

Because that difficulty *is* the opportunity for you to become brave.

So, will you persevere in doing the good in spite of whatever problems continue to weigh on you?

Let's say you can't manage to stop a certain vice: will you keep going to confession and keep trying to do better? If so, that's fortitude.

Maybe you're in a marriage that's terribly unhappy, deeply unsatisfying both to you and your spouse. Will you stick it out, continue trying to love your spouse and children, and ask God for the graces to bring peace into your family? If so, then you are proving your courage, and the Lord won't let that courage go to waste.

Four

Patience

When we talk about endurance, the supreme test of fortitude, we also have to talk about the virtue of *patience*. Patience is what makes you able to endure *cheerfully*. Because the truth is, you're not really brave unless you can endure cheerfully. Fortitude isn't a virtue for downcast, pessimistic, broken people.

Patient, persevering people aren't the ones who say, "Yeah, you know what, I don't even care anymore, so whatever."

As opposed to giving up and entering a state of dejection, “to be patient means to preserve cheerfully and peacefully in spite of the difficulty or suffering endured.

Courage isn’t an attitude for sad, weak people, but rather for the strong and joyful. What motivates patience, like what motivates all the virtues, is the desire for union with God.

So, there should be an optimism that characterizes our endurance, since we who believe in heaven and God’s final triumph over history know that, “What’s worth having is worth fighting and suffering in endurance for.”

Five

Dying on the Right Hill

When we talk about these two acts of fortitude, attack, and endurance, we have to remember that sometimes we are called to take a stand and sometimes we aren’t.

We have to pick our battles. And there’s a real sense in which there are three tragic mistakes that you want to avoid.

1. You can’t die on every hill.
2. You want to avoid “dying on the wrong hill.” This is where you make some great sacrifice, take some big stand, on an issue that isn’t important. You speak out aggressively, you risk or lose some significant benefit or some worthwhile position, for no good reason. That’s a sad waste of a witness. It’s a waste of courage.
3. But another tragic mistake is when you *don’t* die on the *right* hill.

When God offers you a chance for true heroism, to take a stand, make a sacrifice on behalf of truth and goodness... and you let that opportunity pass you by.

That’s a sad waste of an opportunity. We were made for heroism, and to miss your opportunity to be a hero, to be courageous, is to miss your opportunity at living the life you were meant to live.

So how do you know the right hill to die on from the wrong one? There’s no formula, just prayer and prudence.

When there’s some crisis, and you’re not sure whether to attack and be bold or simply be quiet and endure, immediately turn to Jesus and ask him. Say, “Lord, give me the prudence to know when I should attack an evil, and when I should patiently cling to the good.”

Then our courage will be guided by the Holy Spirit, who will lead us in all truth.

Then pray the serenity prayer, which does a nice job connecting prudence and fortitude, “Lord, grant me the grace to change the things I can change, to accept the things I can’t, and the wisdom to know the difference.”

Temperance

One

Avoidance of Sin is not the Goal of Life

Too many people see the goal of the Christian life as the avoidance of sin. If you were to ask the question, “What’s a good Christian?” you’d get a lot of people who’d answer in purely negative terms, “A good Christian is someone who doesn’t murder, or get drunk, or do drugs, or tell dirty jokes, or steal.”

That’s not a good definition of a Christian. After all, people in comas don’t do any of these things, neither do some terribly evil people, neither do the demons. But when we think of ideal Christians, hopefully, we don’t think of comatose persons, or evil people, or fallen angels.

A good Christian shouldn’t focus on avoiding sin, a good Christian should focus doing good.

Someone isn’t a good Christian, or even a good person, because he *doesn’t* do certain things, but because he *does* certain things, because he pursues union with God and the goods things of life, because he strives to promote beauty, health, holiness, friendship, truth, etc...

We have to make sure our focus is more on doing good than on avoiding evil.

Two

As we just said, the goal of life is to do good, not to avoid evil.

In the moral life, the best defense is a good offense, which is why more emphasis should be put on the first three cardinal virtues than on temperance. Prudence, justice, and fortitude empower us to *do* good, while temperance, the last virtue, enables us to *avoid* evil.

Prudence enables us to know what is good and choose it. Justice is giving God and others the good we owe them. Fortitude enables us to do what is good even when we have strong feelings pulling us away from it (like fear, pain, or boredom).

Prudence, justice, and fortitude help us do something good. Temperance is different from the first three cardinal virtues. Temperance helps us avoid evil. Temperance helps us not do something evil, even when we really want to.

Three

What are some examples of temperance that overcome strong sinful desires?

When we are tempted to pride, that is, all the ways we want to make up our own moral rules and live in self-reliance, we need temperance in the form of humility to follow God's law and trust in Him.

When we are tempted to vanity, to seek praise or be controlled by the opinions of others, we need temperance in the form of magnanimity which prompts us to do what is honorable rather than seek honor.

When we are tempted to tear others down to raise ourselves up out of envy, we need temperance in the form of goodwill to want good for others, think well of them, and speak well of others.

When we desire to attack someone in anger, by words or actions, we need temperance in the form of meekness, the calm strength to harness anger and direct it towards good.

When we are tempted to greed, to find our happiness and security in money and the things money can buy, we need temperance in the form of detachment, simplicity, and generosity to seek the love of God and neighbor over ourselves.

When we are tempted to gluttony or drunkenness in the desire to alter our mood or escape through food and drink, we need temperance in the form of abstinence and sobriety to enable us to delight in the good of food and drink without abusing it.

When we desire to use another person sexually to get what we want, we need temperance in the form of chastity and charity to give a genuine gift of self in love.

Four

Concupiscence

God created us to be passionate people, people full of good feelings, emotions, and desires that would propel us to good actions of love by doing good for God, for others, and for ourselves.

As a consequence of Original Sin and personal sin, we have made a mess out of our desires. Because of sin our desires too often push us with such a strong force to want things that are not good for us and to do things that are not good for us or good for others.

There is a fancy theological word for this. It's called concupiscence, which basically describes the human desire for things we know aren't good for us. Folks with diabetes

sometimes have sugar cravings, alcoholics sometimes want whiskey, and we all sometimes just have the urge for something sinful. We want something good, but we want it in a disordered way. That is the problem. Too often we are controlled by disordered desires, desires for things that are destructive to ourselves and others.

Temperance is the virtue or power that gets control of these disordered desires and directs them to the real and lasting happiness of union with God and the good things of life.

CCC 1809, “Temperance is the moral virtue that moderates the attraction of pleasures and provides balance in the use of created goods. It ensures the will's mastery over instincts and keeps desires within the limits of what is honorable.”

Temperance is the virtue that keeps us from doing what is wrong even when we really want to.

Five

Temperance and the Hierarchy of Goods

Guided by prudence, we know that union with God is the greatest of all goods and this knowledge, the most fundamental knowledge of all virtue, prevents the temperate man from running after things that will take Him away from God.

Temperance knows not to pursue some good things because it knows that other things are better. Temperance recognizes that a beer is a good thing but it knows that that staying sober is better than getting drunk.

Temperance recognizes that the love of a young, beautiful woman is a good thing, but it knows that fidelity to your wife, to the mother of your children, is better than the temporary pleasure you might get from an affair with a younger woman.

Temperance recognizes that reputation, accomplishment, financial security, and the world itself, are good things, but it knows that God is infinitely better and it profits a man nothing if he gain the world and lose his soul.

Curiosity

One

The Vice of Curiosity

The thirst for truth, and the proper cultivation of the intellect, is the foundation for a healthy soul and to live a good life. It's the basis of everything working right. If you don't know the truth, you can't direct any of the powers of the soul the way they should go.

We use the English word "curiosity" to mean the aptitude for wonder that motivates us to know the truth. That is a good thing. But Thomas Aquinas called this "studiousness" or studiositas.

St. Thomas contrasted this good search for truth, studiosness, with the vice of curiosity, the vice of investigating what does not concern you. It takes you down a rabbit hole and distracts you from the good things you should be doing and truth you should be pursuing.

Imagine a father or mother, wife or husband who can't stop looking at the news, sports, or social media on their phone and in the process neglects the people, the responsibilities, and the good things all around them. Hard to imagine, I know.

The vice of curiosity makes our soul a mile wide and an inch deep. We know a little about everything but we know nothing and no one well.

Curiosity is the vice where you seek out information, or knowledge, that you have no business looking into. It's where you spend your time looking for truth, but the *wrong truth*.

Two

Trivial Truth

The first kind of the vice of curiosity is the kind that wastes your God-given intellect on petty, ridiculously unimportant facts – trivial information. These are things like gossip, celebrities, social media browsing, and sports statistics.

Sure, there may not be anything *evil* about this kind of information, but come on, don't you know your mind was made for Truth with a capital T? What are you doing squandering your mind on this kind of vacuous content?

Remember the servant who took his talent and buried it in the ground? Do you remember how upset His master was that the servant hadn't done anything *worthwhile* with the time and the resources he'd been given?

So too if we bury our intellect, the gift of reason and rationality, in a lot of silly, aimless scrolling, we'll be held accountable for not using the Lord's gift of thought on something more meaningful.

Three

Disedifying Truth

Other information that we spend our time on isn't just trivial, it's downright destructive.

We talk about *morbid curiosity*, that means the curiosity that leads to death, when we enjoy digging into twisted, sick facts that we don't need to know.

We love scandals, we love to read shocking stories, or watching little specials about sexual depravity or crime and murder shows. We keep up on whatever ugly things have happened recently in the life of the Church or whatever stupid things are happening in the life of politics.

We can't do anything about any of this, of course. We just like to stay up on all the disfunction that's happening out in the world. To indulge in this, to spend large chunks of time thinking about or learning about this stuff, is to admit that you enjoy the darkness of the world more than the light of Christ.

St. Paul says to the Christians at Ephesus, "for once you were in darkness, but now you are light in the Lord; walk as children of light – for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true – and try to learn what is pleasing to the Lord. Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness" (Eph. 5:8-11).

In other words, if you don't need to know it and if it's not good, keep away from a mentality that focuses on knowledge of the ugly, twisted side of things.

Four

Distracting Truth

Some truth is good in itself and important in itself but it's a distraction for *you* right here and right now.

So, for instance, there are fascinating theological issues to explore. There are wonderful books filled with deep insights. There are ways you can learn about responding to the sophisticated ideological assaults that are confronting the faith from every angle all around us. But are any of those the things that should be consuming your mental energy right now?

Maybe they are. And that's great because they're wonderful things to think about and learn about. But maybe, instead of being an amateur theologian or culture warrior, you need to think more about other things: Where your marriage is headed, what you need to do to get ready for death, what kind of guidance your kids need, whether you're really fulfilling your obligations at work.

What do you think God wants you to be thinking about, learning about, and understanding more deeply, right now in your particular circumstances, with the obligations that come with your particular state in life?

That's the truth for you to focus on. Anything that distracts you from attending to that truth should ultimately be treated as a temptation of curiosity.

Five

Daily Meditation – Keeping Your Intellect on Target

Remember in the very first Star Wars movie, toward the end, when they are flying in to destroy the Death Star and one of the pilots keeps repeating, "Stay on Target." That's what we're supposed to be doing with our minds, staying on target, focusing on the truth that's important. And because of the temptation to curiosity, especially in a world with internet, that's really hard to do.

Well, the best way to stay on target is to set aside time every day, preferably in the morning, for prayerful meditation

That's where you spend time in mental prayer, thinking about the two most important, fundamental truths there are: The truth about God and the truth about what we can be doing better to please Him.

If you begin your day that way, dedicating your mind to God and His will for your life, you'll be giving your day the foundation of truth, and not just any truth, but the truth that matters to you.

That's the only way to ensure that your life as a whole doesn't get off track.

Virtue and Balance

One

Virtue and Balance

It was Aristotle who originally noticed that the cardinal virtues of prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance all involve balance: *Virtus stat media* – virtue stands in the middle.

Each cardinal virtue lies at a mid-way point between too much and too little. You can eat too much and you can eat too little. You can be too careful about money and you can be too careless about money. And virtue is where you find the balance.

It's interesting too that if you have a vice, it means you haven't found the balance, but it also means you have no sympathy for people with the opposite vice. For instance, a lazy person and a workaholic have no sympathy for each other.

To take another example, Dante imagined the misers and the reckless spenders in the same part of Hell, and he pictured them slamming into each other over and over, with the misers yelling, "Why waste?!" and the over-spenders yelling, "Why hoard?!"

All of this is to say, if you want the virtue of temperance, you should be able to appreciate the good things in life, but not let the desire for them get out of control.

Which means you have to resist two extremes: that of *intemperance* and *insensibility*.

Two

Intemperance – sacrificing the greater in pursuit of the lesser

Intemperance just means you don't have any self-control and you let your desires for lesser things ruin your chance at greater things. It's where you stay up all night watching shows or checking social media or playing some game on your phone. And because you can't resist your urge for entertainment at night, you spoil your chances the next day for prayer and being productive, peaceful, and grateful.

It's where you can't resist your urge to drink, so you ruin your family, work, and health. It's where you can't resist your urge to spread a piece of gossip, so you spoil your relationship both with the person you're gossiping about and with the person you're gossiping to.

So the main way to fight intemperance is to remember the greater good that you're foolishly sacrificing for some trivial passing pleasure.

Once I was on a highway in Louisiana and there were a fair number of casinos and strip clubs along the way. And then, thank God, someone had put up a billboard in response to those casinos and strip clubs. And on the billboard was the silhouette of a man with his wife and his kids. And the sign said, very simply, “You can lose this.”

That’s what you have to do when you are tempted – remember the greater good that you don’t want to put at risk: love, peace, the consolation of having done right by the people who depend on you, and especially, union with God in this life and the next.

Intemperance, a lack of impulse control, will take all those away from you.

Three

Intemperance – losing pleasure even in the lesser

Not only does intemperance spoil all the best things in life, it even spoils your pleasure in the lesser good you’re being intemperate about.

Addiction ruins appreciation. The mark of addiction, whether to sex or alcohol or gambling or exercise or work or whatever is that you no longer take pleasure in the thing you’re addicted to. The addict works or drinks or exercises or looks at pornography to get relief from his craving, not to peacefully enjoy the good.

There’s a horrifying story in the Old Testament about a man named Amnon who had an intemperate desire for a woman named Tamar. Amnon, instead of trying to temper his desire, attacked Tamar in order to gratify his out-of-control urges. But as soon as he gave into his desire, Scripture says something uncomfortably familiar to those of us who have been intemperate. Once Amnon has done this hideous thing, this thing that has spoiled his life and the woman’s life, has put him outside all decency, has lost him his place in society, has sacrificed her dignity and his self-respect, the moment after Amnon has sacrificed all these greater goods in pursuit of his selfish and passing pleasure with poor Tamar, the Bible says, “Then Amnon conceived a hatred of her that was greater than the love with which he had loved her.”

His attraction turned to revulsion. His desire turned to aversion. His longing turned to disgust.

In other words, intemperance doesn’t just destroy the greatest goods in life, it even takes away from us the lesser pleasures we sacrificed everything else to get.

No wonder Our Lord, when he was speaking of sinners, said, “Those who have not will lose even the little they have.”

Because intemperance ruins absolutely everything.

Four

Insensibility – a lack of love

So intemperance, a lack of self-control, is one extreme that has to be avoided. But the other extreme is what Aquinas calls the vice of “insensibility.”

This is where you don’t have a normal or healthy appreciation for the good things in life.

That’s not right either. God made the world a good place, full of good things. To not appreciate them is to fail to recognize God’s incredible gifts.

You’re not temperate if you don’t enjoy anything, you’re just childish and ungrateful and unhappy.

If you go around saying “I don’t like this,” and “I don’t like that” all the time, you’ve got a real problem, and you need to better discipline yourself in taking the time and putting in the work of recognizing the goodness all around us.

To be temperate, to moderate our desires and our loves, presupposes we have some love for things to start with. Being loveless isn’t temperate. It’s not a virtue, it’s a vice we need to get over.

Five

Temperance and a Resolution

Every meditation should end with a practical concrete resolution. So, where specifically are we controlled by our desire for too much or too little of something?

Are we tempted to too much work or exercise? Are we tempted to assuage our fears or pain or feelings of being overwhelmed through food or alcohol? Are we tempted to veg out with too much entertainment, news, sports, or YouTube? And do we slow down enough to really appreciate and delight in the truly good and beautiful things in life and thank God for them?

What do I need to work on specifically?