

FOUR CARDINAL VIRTUES

by [Norm McEvoy](#) June 12, 2011 2870 views

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Past Master

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To begin, let me first address what is meant by a “Cardinal” Virtue and where that word originated, however, rather than try to reinvent the wheel, I have decided to simply provide you with what has already been written so well on this important subject.

The following is transcribed from the “**Freemasons Guide and Compendium**” by Bernard E. Jones.

“We speak in Freemasonry of Cardinal Virtues, Cardinal Points & Cardinal Winds. Briefly this curious word means ‘Important’ ‘Significant’ and carries with it a mental image of matters of great moment all revolving round a centre-point acting as a hinge, or pivot, (Latin, *cardo*).

Much ecclesiastical history is wrapped up in this word, which is associated with the red colour of the robe worn by a Roman Catholic Cardinal—that is, worn by a powerful priest occupying a fundamentally important place.

We now go to the doors made and hung by the ancient peoples for the original idea of the meaning of the word.

There are two vertical pins, or dowels, projecting from the door, one from the top and the other from the bottom, each fitting into a socket, and on these pivots the door swung. The ancients took this hinged door as a figure, or symbol, and supposed that at the TOP of the Universe was a pivot upon which the heavens revolved, while at the BOTTOM was another pivot, corresponding to that at the bottom of the door.

In course of time, the old Roman writers applied the word “Cardinal” to the four points: East, West, North & South, and to the winds blowing from those quarters.

The East symbolizes **WISDOM**, the West **STRENGTH**, the North **DARKNESS** and the South **BEAUTY**

We are told that the Cardinal—that is the most important—virtues in Freemasonry are

PRUDENCE, TEMPERENCE, FORTITUDE and JUSTICE,
Now lets us look at these Virtues individually

PRUDENCE

Prudence. As defined in Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary,
The ability to govern and discipline oneself by the use of reason.

1.

1. *Sagacity or shrewdness in the management of affairs.*
2. *Skill and good judgment in the use of resources.*
3. *Caution or circumspection as to danger or risk.*

Prudence. As defined in “Lexicon of Freemasonry” by Albert G. Mackey (1908)

One of the four cardinal virtues, the practice of which is inculcated upon the Entered Apprentice, Prudence, which, in all men, is a virtue highly to be commended, as to teaching them to live agreeably to the dictates of reason, and preserving to them by its cautious precepts the realities of temporal welfare, and the hopes of eternal happiness, is to the Mason absolutely necessary, that being governed by it, he may carefully avoid the least occasion, by sign or word, of communicating to the profane those important secrets which should be locked up only in the repository of faithful breasts. Hence is this virtue, in the lecture in the first Degree, intimately connected with and pointedly referred to, a most important part of our ceremonies of initiation.

Prudence. As defined in Webster’s New Complete Thesaurus,
A quality in a person that allows him to choose the sensible course.
Synonyms; are canniness, caution, discreetness, discretion, foresight, forethought, precaution, providence.

Comment

You may wonder why I have gone to such lengths to show the definition of this word, well I have done so from the position that, while it is not common in daily use, it is widely used in our rituals, and as such we all need to be very aware of how we, as Masons, are committed to act.

I do believe the matter of what is a **SECRET** has been covered in previous editions, and while I do not purport to be an expert, I personally believe that

what is being referred to, are those Signs, Tokens & Words by which we can identify one another by day as well as by night.

TEMPERANCE

Temperance As defined in Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary,

1.

1. *to Moderate ; be moderate*
2. *Moderation in action, thought and feeling.*
3. *Habitual moderation in the indulgence of the appetite or passions.*

Temperance As dealt with in The Freemason's Guide and Compendium.

Bernard E. Jones.

The most important virtues in Freemasonry are:- Prudence, Temperance, Fortitude & Justice

*"The first to direct, the second to **chasten**, the third to support a Brother and the fourth to be a guide to all his actions"*

I was unfamiliar with the word **chasten** so, in the thought that there could be others just like me, I decided to look it up. Webster's defines it as follows:-

1. *To correct by punishment or suffering.*
2. *To prune off excess, pretence or falsity.*

Temperance From Lexicon of Freemasonry by Albert G. Mackey

"One of the four Cardinal Virtues, the practice of which is inculcated in the first Degree".

*The mason who properly appreciates the secrets, which he has solemnly promised never to reveal, will not, by yielding of the unrestrained call of appetite, permit reason and judgment to lose their seats; and subject himself, by the indulgence in habits of excess, to discover that which should be concealed, and thus merit and receive the scorn and detestation of his Brethren. And lest any Brother should forget the danger to which he is exposed in the unguarded hours of dissipation, the virtue of **Temperance** is wisely impressed upon his memory, by its reference to the most solemn portion of our initiatory ceremony"*

Comment

I must admit that when I first encountered this word I immediately thought of the Temperance Movement, which led to Prohibition in the 1920's, and also to the governance of Masonic Festive Boards.

Now I can see the greater scope of the word which includes our thoughts, words and actions, and which makes it even more appropriate for use in Freemasonry in general and to each of us in particular.

I do recall weather which was free of turbulence, bluster or storm being referred to as **Temperate**.

Possibly this is a word that could receive wider usage in our personal lives.

FORTITUDE

I must admit that this word has been driving me crazy, in that few words are used in my reference material regarding its meaning, however, this morning I woke up with a different thought of how to approach its meaning and I do hope you will understand my intent.

Fortitude Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary

1. *Strength*
2. *Strength of mind that enables a person to encounter danger or bear pain or adversity with courage.*

Fortitude Lexicon of Freemasonry Albert. G. Mackey

One of the four cardinal virtues, whose excellencies are dilated on, in the first degree. It not only instructs the worthy Mason to bear the ills of life with becoming resolution, "taking up arms against a sea of trouble" but, by its intimate connection with a portion of our ceremonies, it teaches him to let no dangers shake, no pains dissolve the inviolable fidelity he owes to the trusts imposed in him.

Fortitude Freemason's Guide and Compendium Bernard E, Jones Page 290 To support a Brother.

In that these definitions, while accurate, did not give me a clear message I decided to look at my Thesaurus and lo and behold here is what I found.

Fortitude Webster's New Complete Thesaurus

Noun. A quality of character combining courage and staying power.

Synonym: (the same or almost the same) backbone, grit, guts, intestinal fortitude, moxie, nerve, sand, spunk.

Related words: Courage, mettle, pith, resoluteness, resolution, spirit, stick-to-itiveness, tenacity, boldness bravery, courageousness, dauntlessness, fearlessness, intrepidity, valiancy, valor, valorousness, endurance, stamina, strength, constancy, determination, perseverance.

Comment

Now, [I believe](#) I better understand what our ancient brethren had in mind when they included this word as a Cardinal Virtue.

Personally, I think back through life to the times when I was faced with the choice of doing the “**EXPEDIENT**” thing and/or being faced with situations where

“**THE END WOULD JUSTIFY THE MEANS**”.

As I grow older I fervently believe that it is in situations such as this that we have the opportunity to identify ourselves as **MASONS** by doing what we **KNOW** to be **RIGHT**.

Remember to look for the **FOUR TASSELS** located in your Lodge Room and think of them as a constant reminder of the **CARDINAL VIRTUES**.

JUSTICE

I will now attempt to deal with JUSTICE

At first glance, I believe we all think we know what “Justice” is however it is also quite true, that it could mean different things to different people depending on their, location, cultural background, economic means etc.

With those thoughts in mind, I have decided to restrict my paper to the understanding of the word as it applies to us as Freemasons.

Justice Freemason’s Guide and Compendium Bernard E, Jones
Page 290 *“The balance is the symbol of Justice and impartiality, and the figure too, of man’s merits and demerits, one weighed against the other, and also of the things of the Soul in one pan outweighing all the things of Earth loaded into the other one”*

Justice Encyclopedia of Freemasonry Albert G.
Mackey (circa 1917)
*“One of the four cardinal virtues, the practice of which, is inculcated in the first degree. The mason, who remembers how emphatically he has been charged to preserve an upright position in all his dealings with mankind, should never fail to act justly to himself, to his Brethren, and to the World. This is the cornerstone on which alone he can expect
“to erect a superstructure alike honourable to himself and to the Fraternity”
In iconology, “Justice” is usually represented as a Matron with bandaged eyes, holding in one hand a sword and in the other a pair of scales in equipoise.
But in Masonry, the true symbol of Justice, as illustrated in the first degree, is the feet firmly planted on the ground, and the body upright”*