



PAPER

Seven Cardinal Virtues

Summary: A short talk which seeks to explain the historical meanings of the Seven Cardinal Virtues.

Our Ceremonies in their present form, are now approaching an age at which many, many books have been written giving an explanation in order that they are to be thoroughly understood. The words of our ritual really date back to William Preston, 1742–1818; who wrote his *Illustrations of Masonry* in 1772. In parallel with this, the American Thomas Smith Webb (1717–1819), born of English parents, wrote *The Ancient Charges*, and was responsible for many of the Craft Lectures, including *The Four Cardinal Virtues*.

There are perhaps, not many words or phrases in the Ceremonies worked today to which most Brethren can attach some meaning. However, it cannot be expected that the words that are used should convey just the same impression in the first quarter of the 21st century as they did to the Brethren almost three hundred years ago for whom they were settled in their present form. This is the fascinating thing about the study of our Craft ritual, with particular regard to what the words and phrases actually mean.¹

The word ‘cardinal’ comes from the Latin *cardinalis* – meaning essential, most important, upon which other matters depend. Craft Masonry names but four cardinal virtues. These date back, as one might expect into antiquity. They are Temperance, Fortitude, Prudence and Justice.

However, in the First Degree Tracing Board we find reference to Jacob’s Ladder. The first three rungs of the ladder denominate the virtues: Faith, Hope and Charity. The ancient church, added these as ‘theological virtues’. These seven constituting what was considered to be the most admirable in human character.

Freemasonry also has its principal tenets, which might well be called ‘cardinal’ as they are amongst the most important. In most Jurisdictions these are: Brotherly Love (friendship), Relief (charity) and Truth (integrity). ‘Tenet’ is a curious word; the Latin has *tendere* - meaning ‘keep holding’. This used in the context of our ancient Craft is: ‘a belief strongly held as a matter of faith’.

In the Volume of the Sacred Law, Temperance, Prudence and Justice are all mentioned. Fortitude does not appear, but courage does many times. Wisdom is a much used word in the Bible, it was one of the original cardinal virtues of the Greeks. Interestingly, they used wisdom instead of prudence, and courage instead of fortitude. These virtues first appeared at the time of Plato (4th Century BCE) as part of the Philosophy and Ethics of the time. Plato considered these virtues to be inherent. Aristotle believed that they were acquired by habit.

Certainly Freemasonry, with its Brotherly love (friendship), relief (charity) and truth (integrity), and its expression of friendship and selfless interest as set forth in *The Five Points of Fellowship*, stresses benevolence, but not under that name. Philosophers maintain that temperance, fortitude, prudence and justice are functions of the mind.

- A man restrains his desires when he practices temperance.
- He undergoes danger and trials for a cause by means of fortitude.
- He is prudent when he allows wisdom to rule his actions.
- Justice is wholly a man-made conception.

Moralists who form systems for the practice of ethics believe that the heart and soul, emotions and feelings have an important part to play in the development of 'the perfect character'. So, we have the well-known triplet from St. Paul in the authorised version of the Bible: Faith, Hope and Love (In the King James version Charity is substituted for Love).

Here we have the problem of the modern interpretation of the early vocabulary. In our Lodges we emphasise Wisdom, Strength and Beauty. If we take the words literally, then 'strength and beauty' are not virtues. Strength is either power or resistance, there is no virtue in either. Masonry makes of Beauty that which beautifies and adorns a structure, it therefore difficult to interpret it as a virtue in a human character. This is, again another difficulty with modern interpretation.

To many, if not all Initiates, the Lecture of the Entered Apprentice degree which teaches *The Four Cardinal Virtues* (Written by Thomas Smith Webb in about 1800 CE) means just what it says:

- Temperance is abstinence from strong drink.
- Fortitude is not telling what you know, even if threatened with bodily harm.
- Prudence here seems directed to keeping Masonic secrets to Masons.
- Justice referred to as 'cement and support of civil society' (then an inherent quality in a good mind).

William Preston was really a father to the work of Thomas Smith Webb, but both can be considered as the foundation to Craft ritual as we know it today. Both these brilliant minds were concerned with making Freemasonry simple to understand to men who had experienced little or no education. Certainly no Mason today would wish to radically depart from the Prestonian work. Nevertheless, all will recognise that the world has come a long way since 1742. Every member of the Fraternity can read and write to begin with. It is therefore understandable that the modern concept of *The Four Cardinal Virtues* reaches greater heights than either Preston or Webb could have imagined.

Temperance: From the Latin *temporare*, meaning 'to moderate, or regulate' all human actions.

- Fortitude: Means considerably more than withstanding an attack, rather than disclose the secrets of The Craft. It means moral courage; the strength to stand by an unpopular decision because it is right.
- Wisdom: Regarded by many as a substitute word for 'prudence'. In Freemasonry, this virtue is about wisdom of the heart, wisdom of the mind, wisdom, if the Brother so wishes, of the soul. It is an approach of man to his Creator. It looks forward to better days, and a looking up to higher things. Consider 'prudence' as meaning 'wisdom' of both heart and mind and it becomes something high and holy and much more impressive than mere 'precaution', judged in modern times as the colloquial meaning of the word prudence.
- As for Justice: the Masonic lecture sets forth one of its important aspects which is 'keeping together of society, and making all men equal before the Law'. The symbol of 'justice' can be seen towering above

The High Courts in London represented by a blindfolded woman holding scales in one hand and a sword in the other.² To an Initiate he may consider the virtue of justice, as he reflects upon, and doubtless admires the administration of legislation as it is administered in the Courts of Law in accordance with pronouncements laid down by the supreme legislature. In the final analysis the justice of civilised society rests upon force. The justice taught in Freemasonry includes this, indeed the ritual so specifies. But this virtue in the Masonic sense, is something loftier than this. It is the justice that beholds with 'open-eyes' rather than that which weighs blindfolded and threatens with a sword! To a Freemason justice in an abstract sense is one of personal judgement, by which a man governs his actions and determines his conduct towards others with no force whatsoever. It is the justice in a man's soul, which Freemasonry stresses. It is this virtue which is behind all unselfishness, all self sacrifice, acting for the interest of others. This being accomplished 'because it is right' not 'otherwise it will be force and prison bars'.

The Theological virtues are extremely important and are depicted as Faith, Hope and Charity (Love). The Principal Tenets are Brotherly Love Relief and Truth (friendship, charity and integrity) to these can be added friendship and morality. In simple terms:

- Brotherly love and Charity are the same
- Morality is one facet of Truth
- Friendship certainly encompasses Relief.

One of the many joys about the gentle Philosophy of Freemasonry is the total absence of threat or punishment. This is particularly relevant since the introduction of 'The Symbolic Penalties'. Nowhere in the ritual of our Order do The Seven Deadly Sins appear. We do not instruct our candidates 'Thou shall not' rather the more gentle approach in our Obligations 'I will not'.

One of the great attractions that Freemasonry has to those who love her, is this note of faith in man, as well as faith in The Great Architect of the Universe. The Seven Cardinal Virtues are the living proof to any of its members who 'Shall Seek to Find'.

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Endnotes

1. Samuel Johnson's 'Dictionary of the English Language' (1754) was the standard dictionary in use for the second half of the 18th century.
2. Authors note: To the flippant minded - reminiscent of the modern traffic warden.

Recommended use of Papers

Papers offer a simple, direct means of advancement in a particular aspect of Masonic knowledge. They can be used in a variety of ways:

- Read at home for private study
- Shared for pre-reading by members of a discussion group
- Read aloud in Lodge or Chapter, or in an LOI/COI/new members forum
 - Followed by 'any questions'
 - As a precursor to a discussion (in which case much more time is needed, possibly more than double that allocated to the paper itself)
 - Supported by audio-visual aids, if necessary

They can be delivered by a single person or split into bite-sized pieces and read by multiple presenters (in which case, the speaker(s) should have read and practiced the delivery of the paper beforehand).

*Note: All biblical passages are taken from the Authorized King James version unless otherwise specified.

If the paper is to be used to introduce a discussion, the presenter will need to have thought about the material, done a little research, and prepared some open questions to engage with the audience. Kipling's dictum can be of help in preparing open questions, which should begin with one of his 'serving men', as follows: *'I keep six honest serving men (they taught me all I knew). Their names are, What and Why and When and How and Where and Who'*. Rudyard Kipling

If used as part of an event, the paper should be advertised and promoted by way of trailers, flyers and announcements, in summonses, letters, emails, notice boards, and on social media.

For further papers and other learning materials visit *Solomon* at <http://solomon.ugle.org.uk>

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