

The Four Cardinal Virtues

Many in today's society are searching for that something that will make them successful, will allow them to overcome their obstacles, will finally propel them to attain that which they have for so long dreamed. In order to accomplish this they go to seminars, read books, listen to audio and watch videos. Many great slogans are learned to help them in their quest. Slogans such as "check up from the neck up", "aspire to greatness" and "the power to excel" keep them chugging along. This is how such terms as "quick fix", "magic bullet" and "life hack" came into existence. The meaning of these terms is generally an expedient, temporary solution, especially one that is superficial and momentarily negates the need to address the overall problem. The personal development and self-help industry has propagated these types of "solutions" for approximately the past one hundred years and has become a multimillion dollar juggernaut in the process.

Dr. Stephen Covey wrote about these phenomena in his book "The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People." In this book he explained that from the middle of 1700's up to a little after World War I society believed in the "*Character Ethic* as the foundation of success—things like integrity, humility, fidelity, temperance, courage, justice, patience, industry, simplicity, modesty, and the Golden Rule."¹ He also explained that from that time period up to now has been dominated by what he describes as the *Personality Ethic*. He describes it as such: "Success became more a function of personality, of public image, of attitudes and behaviors, skills and techniques, that lubricate the processes of human interaction."²

Freemasonry teachings clearly fall into Dr. Covey's *Character Ethic* category. Although I have noticed that Masonic literature has taken a similar turn as the one Dr. Covey describes in his book. I also think that currently we are further hampered by old definitions that are hard to understand, let alone put into practice, in today's modern world.

It is in that vein that I would like to explain and up-date the meaning of one of Masonry's foundational concepts. Let's take a closer look at the four cardinal virtues.

The four cardinal virtues are very old concepts that have been highly valued.

The Roman philosopher and statesman Cicero states "Virtue may be defined as a habit of mind (*animi*) in harmony with reason and the order of nature. It has four parts: wisdom (*prudentiam*), justice, courage, temperance." (*De Inventione*, II, LIII)

The cardinal virtues are listed in the Bible. In the book Wisdom of Solomon 8:7 states, "She [Wisdom] teaches temperance, and prudence, and justice, and fortitude, which are such things as men can have nothing more profitable in life."

Temperance

Temperance is generally regarded as self-control. It is further defined by these subcategories: chastity, modesty, humility, self-regulation, forgiveness and mercy.

A man who is temperate does not gossip, attempt to manipulate or speak ill of others. This person knows when to speak, and more importantly, when not to

Fortitude

Fortitude is most often associated with courage. Courage in this case is further defined as the ability to face death, fear, pain, uncertainty and hardship.

A man who possesses fortitude is willing to stand up for what he believes in, openly opposes injustice, chooses his family first, takes responsibility for failures and keeps going even when there is no light at the end of the tunnel

Prudence

Prudence is most often associated with insight and wisdom.

A man who acts with prudence is viewed as having a clear understanding of right and wrong, virtuous and vicious, appropriate and inappropriate.

A prudent man uses this knowledge and wisdom to determine the appropriate judgment in any given situation.

Justice

Justice is most often associated with righteousness based on moral, ethical and legal principles that have become accepted standards. It is basically a concept.

A man who embraces this concept with fervor is viewed as someone who consistently does the right thing, is fair and doesn't give advantages to those who have not earned them or condemn them without proper cause.

Freemasonry has for a very long time taught these virtues in order to populate the world with men who possess them and can use them at will.

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1 The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People by Stephen R. Covey

2 Ibid.