

2013: TIME TO CHOOSE

January 20: Prudence: Discerning What Hinders and What Helps:
Matthew 3:13-16

Intro: Prudence is the ability to judge wisely among possible actions and do what is right and good at a given time. Prudence is love distinguishing with sagacity between what hinders it and what helps it (Augustine).

Prudence is a contraction from the word providence. Prudence is derived from what we perceive to be the character of God. Virtue depends upon the ability to make right decisions, and this is prudence at its core.

Prudence implies that the decision-maker is imbedded in the complex of issues, persons, and ideas. We cannot discuss prudence without thinking about our own costly choices in the past—money lost, failed businesses, relationships we severed.

“A righteous man falls seven times and gets up again, but the wicked fall into calamity” (Proverbs 24:16). Whatever our past in regard to wisdom and folly, we can rise up and try again.

Today we are looking at the way you think, the way your mind works. We are looking at the motives that rise to the surface when you are in a dilemma. We are examining the values that inform you as you experience conflict. And we are searching for the role of love in your mental process.

I. Prudence Wants to Do Right: Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness (Matthew 3:15).

A. Jesus identifies his MOTIVE at his baptism. He wants to

do what is right.

1. Jesus was able to identify this motive because it was his practice, his lifestyle. This is consistently what he is seeking to do.

2. Jesus did not live a perfect life because he was never tempted to err, to sin. He lived a perfect and sinless life because doing right, fulfilling all righteousness, was at the top of his mind and heart.

3. He exemplifies this motive to do what is right all the way to his death upon the cross.

B. Prudence begins with your motives. So what really drives you?

1. Doing right is all about doing what is good, true, honest and just.

2. A popular phrase is, "that's not right." We use it in a variety of ways, but it reflects a general sense of morality that most all humans share.

C. Why should I seek to do what is right? Don't good guys finish last in this life?

1. Prudence for the follower of Jesus means that I am putting my mind and heart in the very place where I see his mind and heart. "Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 2:5).

D. Prudence sometimes refers to a process of thought, apart from ethics, that seeks self-interest. We are not talking about a thought

process that is all about personal profit: if you are richer, then you were prudent. We are talking about a process of thought that is anchored in what is right and good and true—that seeks to fulfill all righteousness.

1. Prudence is the foundation of personal morality. It is an essential part of a person's practical moral thinking.
2. Prudence involves a personal process. Prudent thinking should produce an appropriate choice for the individual and those he loves. Prudence is a process of knowing and loving whose ultimate goal is the glory of God.
3. The Lordship of Christ includes the development of prudence in the believer.

II. Prudence Seeks to Know the Facts: But John tried to deter him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" (Matthew 3:14).

A. Both Jesus and John are working with the facts.

1. As John saw it, baptism requires the submission of one person to another, their surrender into the hands of a friend. Jesus was greater than John. John thought that these were the facts and that it would be inappropriate for him to baptize Jesus.

2. Jesus knew the facts better than John did, that submission is a divine quality. Doing what is right often means taking secondary role. His baptism would be an encouragement to all people who were seeking to do right. Even though he knew that he was greater than John the Baptist, he also knew that John was a great man and that he could submit to his baptism without regret.

B. Know the facts before you act.

1. Making decisions is not just a matter of prayer, although prayer is essential. Right living and right thinking involve taking the time to investigate, research, and understand the issue at hand.

2. When we act without knowing all the facts, we can discipline the wrong person. We can entrust our money to dishonest people. We can hurt someone unintentionally.

***I had to ask forgiveness from one of my children at least once when they were under my care because I rashly assumed that child A was guilty of the infraction when it was actually child B. I made myself go to my daughter and apologize to her. I was rash and angry about the infraction and did not do what was right. I punished the wrong person. I had personally been punished before when I was not in the wrong, and the punisher, upon finding out it was not me that erred, said, "Well, you're guilty of something." And that justified the wrong-headed punishment in his mind.

3. Some of our decisions are complex.

***I was part of a conference that involved family members, nurses, chaplains, and physicians when the decision was made to release Mark Sullivan to an extended care facility.

Science is not always the last word on a decision. Once you know the science that does not always mean that you have your answer (Jurassic Park?). Science can do things that it should not do. It can go places where it should not go.

But to make decisions without the science is imprudent and

foolish and unwise. When we jump to conclusions without knowing the facts, we betray the Lord who bought us.

And followers of Jesus do this all the time. We are plagued by intellectual laziness. We don't want to think beyond a sound bite.

***A deacon informed me when I was very young that I was preaching from the wrong Bible. It did not have the seven seals. He illustrated with his Bible which did have seven bands impressed in the leather on its spine. My newer version, the NASB, had only four bands across the spine. He thought this was proof positive that I was using the wrong Bible. Most of us chuckle at his perspective now, but back then they were burning new translations because they thought they were of the devil.

4. Let's take the time and effort to understand the facts before we buy some other person's conclusion without vetting the information ourselves.

C. Maintain intellectual humility. Recognize the limits of your own understanding. Maintain an open mind. This humility is the necessary companion of all intellectual discipline and right thinking. Set aside presumption of omniscience.

III. Prudence Is the Proper Balance of Mind and Motion: Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this (Matthew 3:15). In a perfect world, Jesus would not have to be baptized by John. In the future this would come to light. But for NOW, we have permission to work within the limits of our circumstances.

A. Prudence is Fierce Loyalty to Principle.

1. We always operate under the Lordship of Christ.

2. We always seek to do what is right.

B. Prudence keeps the disciple in motion.

1. We work toward the good which we only achieve imperfectly in this life.

2. We keep the Kingdom of God in motion in our own lives and the lives of others. We do not suffer the paralysis that idealism or perfectionism may bring. Prudence is both Mind and Motion. We are careful without being timid, thoughtful without procrastination, and determined without being reckless. Prudence is the ability to govern and discipline so that justice, mercy and truth prevail in this imperfect world.

***A friend of mine has been working in the political arena for a long time. He is himself thoughtful and effective. He has come to the conclusion that the political process almost always involves some level of sin and evil even when it achieves good ends.

Any system that you set up will be flawed in some way. But you have to set up that system in order to harness the cooperative efforts of humans. Jesus founded the church not because it was perfect but because it was effective for the spreading of the gospel and the incarnation of love. We never quit trying to be more like the Savior. We never surrender the ideal of the Kingdom, peace on earth and good will toward men. We pray for it every day. And we work with what we have, the systems we have, to achieve the best we can achieve for the people who are most vulnerable.

David E. Crosby, FBNO Pastor

Five competencies to pursue: Worship with our lives, Gather to go, Teach to transform, Disciple in motion, Embrace the future