

CHRISTIAN ETHICS 103: THE FOUR CARDINAL VIRTUES

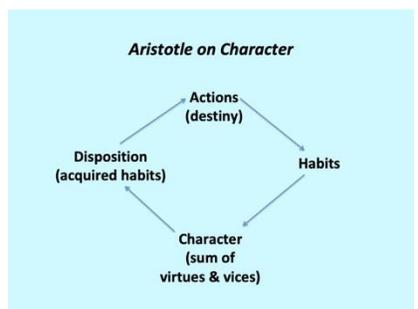
Jesus said: *Salt is good;
but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it?
Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.*
(Mark 9:50)¹

INTRODUCTION

Christianity is not first about beliefs. First, it is a Way of Life.

When we decide to follow Jesus, we begin to learn how to have “salt in ourselves.” We learn to be “seasoned” with the good in imitation of Jesus, who is for us Christians both a window into the divine and a mirror of humanity perfected. The question is *how* does one change to become seasoned with the good? It is a practical question. Divine grace plays its indispensable role, but how do we play our modest human role?

The early Christian theologians often referred to the classical philosophers to make practical the ethical teachings of Jesus.



In the previous ethics aide-mémoire (Christian Ethics 102: Character and Virtues), we saw that the philosophers and theologians were concerned, as Jesus had been, with *character and its traits: the virtues and their extremes, the vices.*²

This aide-mémoire will focus on four of the virtues; those that mattered the most in classical antiquity and in

¹ *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: NRSV Version*, 5th rev'd. ed., Michael Coogan, ed., New York, NY: Oxford University Publishing, 1989, 2018, p.1792. Known hereafter as *NRSV*.

² This primer is self-sufficient, but will make more sense with the context provided in the previous one. Please read the word virtue in the sense of a person's “excellence.”

Christianity. In our efforts to “have salt in ourselves” as Jesus taught, we would do well to focus on building up these four character traits:
practical reason, courage, self-control, justice.

The great teachers of antiquity emphasized these four as being the *cardinal*, meaning the essential, virtues.³ The cardinal virtues form the basic building blocks required for a virtuous character and life.

Plato first listed them in *The Republic* (c. 375 B.C.E.) He said, “Plainly then, [the virtuous city] is *wise, courageous, moderate, and just.*”⁴ The Roman statesman Cicero summarized the four cardinal virtues in *De Finibus* (written in 45 B.C.E.) as follows:

- *courage* is discernible in cases of great effort or danger,
- *self-control* in the foregoing of pleasure,
- *practical reason* in one’s choice of goods and evils, and
- *justice* in allocating each person their due.⁵

The four cardinal virtues are not listed as such in the Jewish Bible. They are found in two inter-testamental era biblical books. These were written during the occupation of Judea by the Greek and Roman empires (333 B.C.E. onwards) and their Hellenistic cultures.

The *Wisdom of Solomon* (c. 35 C.E.) reads:

And if anyone loves righteousness, her [Wisdom’s] labours are virtues; for she teaches *self-control* and *practical reason, justice* and *courage*; nothing in life is more profitable for mortals than these.⁶

The four cardinal virtues are also found in *4 Maccabees* (c. 1st c. C.E.):

³ The term “cardinal” came to English from the Latin *cardo*, meaning “hinge.”

⁴ Plato speaking of the virtuous city-state comprised of virtuous citizens in Book IV: 427e, in *The Republic of Plato*, tr. Allan Bloom, 2nd ed., Basic Books, 1968, 1991, p.105.

⁵ Cicero in Book V. 67, *On Moral Ends*, ed. Julia Annas, tr. Raphael Woolf, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001, p.140.

⁶ National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A., *The New Revised Standard Version*, 5th Ed., Anglicized, New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1989, 2018, p.1460. Hereafter referred to as *NRSV*.

Now the kinds of wisdom are *practical reason, justice, courage, and self-control*. *Practical reason* is supreme over all of these, since by means of it reason rules over the emotions.⁷

In 388 C.E., Augustine of Hippo wrote:

As to virtue leading us to a happy life, I hold virtue to be nothing else than perfect love of God. For the fourfold division of virtue, I regard as taken from four forms of love...

So we may express the definition thus: that

- *self-control* is love keeping itself entire and incorrupt for God;
- *courage* is love bearing everything readily for the sake of God;
- *justice* is love serving God only, and therefore ruling well all else, as subject to man;
- *practical reason* is love making a right distinction between what helps it towards God and what might hinder it.⁸

Let's explore each cardinal virtue, guided by two books. The first is that of Aristotle's foundational classic on virtue ethics, the *Nicomachean Ethics*.⁹ The second is that of contemporary French philosopher André Comte-Sponville, *A Small Treatise on the Great Virtues*.¹⁰ The purpose is to provide a survey of the four cardinal virtues, a sort of birds-eye view.

⁷ 4 Maccabees 1:18–19, *ibid.*, p.1754.

⁸ Chapter 15 ff., *Of the Morals of the Catholic Church*, tr., Richard Stothert, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series, Vol. 4.*, ed. Philip Schaff, Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publ. Co., 1887, rev'd. & ed. Kevin Knight, accessed at <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1401.htm>

⁹ *Nicomachean Ethics*, tr. David Ross. Revised by J.O. Urmson & J.L. Ackrill, New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1925, 1998. Known hereafter as *NE: Ross*. Aristotle named it the *Nicomachean Ethics* for his son Nichomachus.

¹⁰ André Comte-Sponville, *A Small Treatise on the Great Virtues: the uses of philosophy in everyday life*, tr. Catherine Temerson, New York, NY: Henry Holt & Co, 2001. Hereafter known as *Small Treatise*.

THE FOUR CARDINAL VIRTUES

1. PRACTICAL REASON

What does the term “*practical reason*”¹¹ describe? Aristotle says it is characteristic of the *practically wise to be able to deliberate well* about what is good and advantageous for them:

not as regards a part of it, for example, about what sort of things further health or further strength, but about what sorts of things *further living well as a whole*.¹²

In the previous aide-mémoire on Character and Virtues we saw that Aristotle describes the moral virtues in terms of the mean between their two extremes, the vices of deficiency and of excess. Aristotle classified *practical reason* as one of the two intellectual virtues,¹³ which do not operate as the mean between extremes, but rather in terms of having it, and to which extent, or the opposite, not having it. (One might say that the unfortunate “winners” of the “Darwin Awards” of pop culture did not have any *practical reason*. Neither do conspiracy theorists.)

Comte-Sponville says: “*Practical reason* could be called *good sense, but in the service of goodwill*. Or intelligence, but of the virtuous kind.”¹⁴

(In Buddhism, such *practical reason* is called *mindfulness*.¹⁵)

¹¹ In Greek, *practical reason* is called φρόνησις (*phronēsis*); in Latin it is *prudentia*). English translated the Latin as “prudence.” However, the word “prudence” has changed its meaning over the centuries and lost its connection to the original meaning of “*practical reason*,” as we shall translate it, following Aristotle’s best translator, Sir David Ross.

¹² *Nicomachean Ethics* Book VI.5.1040a, in C.D. Reeve, tr., *Aristotle On Practical Reason: Nicomachean Ethics VI*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013, p.56.

¹³ The other is *theoretical reason* (*sophia*).

¹⁴ *Small Treatise*, p.32.

¹⁵ The best author on mindfulness is the Buddhist Thich Nhat Hanh. He was prominent in peace activism during the Vietnam War and is a great proponent of interfaith dialogue.

Thomas Aquinas said that “*practical reason* is the virtue which commands.”¹⁶

Practical reason is a virtue most necessary for human life.

For a good life consists in good deeds. Now in order to do good deeds, it matters not only what a man does, but also how he does it; to wit, that he do it from *right choice* and not merely from *impulse or passion*.¹⁷

Comte-Sponville notes:

Without it, *self-control, courage, and justice* could tell us neither what should be done nor how to do it; they would be blind virtues... just as *practical reason* alone, without the other virtues, would be either utterly empty or else merely shrewd.¹⁸

Practical reason deals with variable things. It presupposes uncertainty, risk, chance, and the unknown. *Practical reason* is not a science; rather, it replaces science where science is lacking. One uses *practical reason* only when one has a choice to make, in other words, when no proof is possible or adequate—that’s when one must want *not just good ends but also good means*, in order to achieve them.

Practical reason is wisdom of action, for action, in action. Yet it doesn’t take the place of theoretical reason (*sophia*¹⁹). It is not enough to act well in order to live well; we also need wisdom in full. It is also not enough to be virtuous in order to be happy; one also needs philosophical wisdom.

Wisdom (*sophia*) though, also needs *practical reason* (*phronēsis*):

¹⁶ “1st Part of the 2nd Part, Q.61”, *op. cit.*

¹⁷ “1st Part of the 2nd Part, Q.57”, *The Summa Theologiæ of St. Thomas Aquinas*, 2nd, Rev’d Ed., 1920, rev’d & ed. Kevin Knight, accessed at <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1401.htm>

¹⁸ *Small Treatise*, p.32.

¹⁹ This is a combination of intelligence (*nous*), the laws of thinking and fundamental truths, and knowledge (*theoria*) of their demonstrable consequences.

“For wisdom without *practical reason* would be unsound wisdom, and therefore wouldn’t be wisdom at all.”²⁰

Think, for example, of all the many political and spiritual leaders who were and are and will be caught up in sex or money scandals. They may have been “philosophically-wise” leaders, but they have little *practical reason* (and no *self-control*; and most assuredly they have no personal honour. Jesus though, had a lot to say about such leaders. Once he said:

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and of the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup, so that the outside also may become clean. (Matthew 23:25-26)²¹

The Greek philosopher Epicurus (d. 271 B.C.E.) said this to his friend Menoeceus about *practical reason*:

Of all this the beginning and the greatest good is *practical reason*. Wherefore *practical reason* is a more precious thing even than philosophy: for from *practical reason* are sprung all the other virtues, and it teaches us that it is not possible to live pleasantly without living prudently and honourably and justly, nor, again, to live a life of *practical reason*, honour, and justice without living pleasantly. For the virtues are by nature bound up with the pleasant life, and the pleasant life is inseparable from them.²²

In summary, Comte-Sponville says that *practical reason* is a “true *savoir-vivre*... central to the art of enjoyment.”²³

²⁰ *Small Treatise*, p.33.

²¹ *NRSV*, p.1817.

²² “Letter to Menoeceus,” para 130., Cyril Bailey, tr., *Epicurus – The Extant Remains*, Oxford, UK.: Oxford University Press, 1926, p. 91.

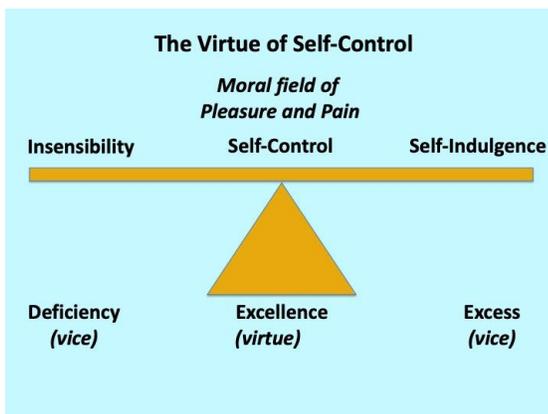
²³ *Small Treatise*, p.33.

2. SELF-CONTROL

The Greek word for self-control is *sōphrosynē*. In Latin it is called *temperantia*, from which comes the English word temperance. The daft 1920s American policy of prohibition ruined the meaning of the word temperance as *self-control* and *moderation*. Temperance now means “no alcohol.”

We shall translate *sōphrosynē* as *self-control* and please read it in the sense of *moderation*. There is a strong relationship between *practical reason* and *self-control*. Aristotle defines *self-control* as “*practical reason* applied to the desires of the senses, especially pleasure and pain.”²⁴

Self-control then is the virtue that deals with the desires most necessary to the individual, such as food and drink, and to the



species, in making love.

As these desires are the most necessary, they are also the strongest and most difficult to master.²⁵

Aristotle explained moral virtues as the mean (the midpoint relative to the person) between two extremes.

Vices are the opposite extremes of a given virtue: one of excess and one of deficiency.

Self-control is a moral preference to tend to the mean with regard to pleasure and pain, whose vice of excess is *self-indulgence*²⁶ and vice of deficiency is *insensibility*.²⁷

²⁴ Book II.7, *NE*: Ross, p.40.

²⁵ *Small Treatise*, p.42-3.

²⁶ The old English word for self-indulgence was “incontinence,” which has now sadly become reserved for urinary tract problems due to ubiquitous television advertisements for commercial solutions of varying quality.

²⁷ Book III.11, *NE*: Ross, p.74.

Self-control, is not about enjoying less but about enjoying better. It is moderation in sensual desires. It is taste that has been enlightened, mastered, cultivated. *Self-control* is that *moderation* that allows us to be masters of our pleasures instead of becoming its slaves.²⁸

Self-control is the key that unlocks the door to freedom in enjoyment of pleasure, because the spectre of *self-indulgence* (the vice of excess) is absent. The Greek word for self-indulgence is *akolasia*. It is the word used for children gone wrong. It literally means “the condition of not having been forcibly corrected.”²⁹ One enjoys a glass of wine better when the threat of a painful hangover is absent.

In a society of plenitude (even if unequal), divorced from physical work, self-indulgence is a big threat to virtue. Aristotle called self-indulgent people “belly-gods,” because they fill their bellies beyond what is right.³⁰ The apostle Paul had the same opinion:

“Their end is destruction; their god is the belly; and their glory is in their shame; their minds are set on earthly things.”³¹

Epicurus said this to his friend Menoeceus (c. 300 B.C.E.) about *self-control*:

And so plain savours bring us a pleasure equal to a luxurious diet, when all the pain due to want is removed; and bread and water produce the highest pleasure, when one who needs them puts them to his lips. To grow accustomed therefore to simple and not luxurious diet gives us health to the full, and makes a [person] alert for the needed employments of life, and when after long intervals we approach luxuries disposes us better towards them, and fits us to be fearless of fortune...

²⁸ *Small Treatise.*, p.39.

²⁹ See Sarah Broadie & Christopher Rowe, *Aristotle Nicomachean Ethics: Translation, introduction, and commentary*, New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2002, p.327.

³⁰ Book III.11, *ibid.*, p.75.

³¹ *Letter to the Philippians* 3:19. In *NRSV*, p.2103.

For it is not continuous drinking and reveling, nor the satisfaction of lusts, nor the enjoyment of fish and other luxuries of the wealthy table, which produce a pleasant life, but sober reasoning, searching out the motives for all choice and avoidance, and banishing mere opinions, to which are due the greatest disturbance of the spirit.³²

The other extreme of self-control, its vice of deficiency, is *insensibility*. It refers firstly to the small number of people who are insensible in the physical sense due to birth defects or accidents.

However, consider this. There are some people who are puritans. Puritanism is different from “simplicity,” as in the acquired ability to live a simple life as just described by Epicurus: puritanism is an ideology. As an example, some puritans may deny themselves the pleasure of ever tasting a glass of wine, for a variety of reasons. Note we are not talking about abstaining because of the disease of addiction, alcoholism. I mean a person who specifically denies themselves something for a mental reason. This becomes problematic when it is motivated by a fear of a loss of *self-control*. An awful lot of puritan influencing is motivated, not by the welfare of others, but by this fear of loss of control in oneself, which then feeds the need to control others. It is depressingly common to see it dressed up in the garb of religious moralizing.

Comte-Sponville emphasizes the advantages of *independence* and *self-sufficiency* which practicing *self-control* brings. He says:

Self-control is a means to independence, and independence is a means to happiness. Being temperate is being able to content oneself with little; the *little* is not what is important: what matters is the *ability* and the *contentment*.³³

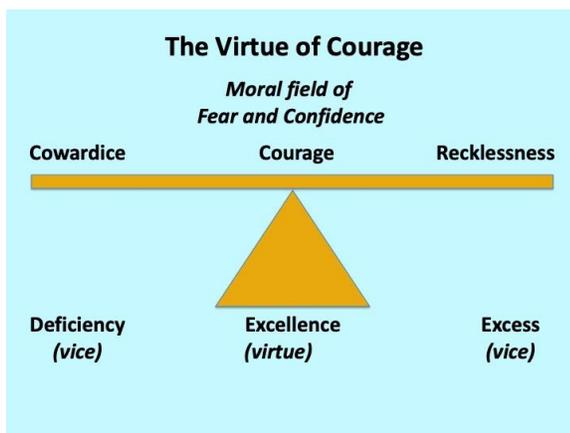
³² “Letter to Menoeceus,” *ibid.*, p.89-91.

³³ *Small Treatise.*, p.40.

3. COURAGE

In Greek, the word for *courage* is *andreia*, which means “manliness.” It stems from the primary meaning of “courage in battle”; in antiquity combat was mostly done by men.³⁴ In Latin it is called *fortitudo*, from which comes the English word “fortitude.”

This section will be focused on Aristotle’s explanation of the moral virtue of *courage*.³⁵ Frankly, no one has done better since. The previous ethics primer on Character and Virtue used courage to illustrate the virtues. Let’s revisit that to get up to speed.



In the moral field of fear and confidence, the virtue of *courage* is the mean for a given person with regard to feelings of fear and confidence. *Courage* is that “excellence” that lies in between the deficiency of *cowardice*, i.e., a lack of *courage*, and the excess of *recklessness*, i.e., too much *courage*.

Courage and Fear

The things we fear are those that hold terror for us, which we call evil. The definition of fear is the expectation of terror.

Note, however, that not all fears are about evils. Aristotle says: “for to fear some things is even right and noble, and it is base not to

³⁴ In these more egalitarian times, war now welcomes female participation, whereas in the future, soldiering, like fast food work, will be reserved for robots. The consequences of war will however continue to be reserved for the poor, the elderly, the disabled, women, and children. *Plus ça change* and all that.

³⁵ In Book III:6-9 of *The Nicomachean Ethics*.

fear them - e.g., disgrace; he who fears this is good and modest, and he who does not is shameless.”³⁶

Also, we should not fear poverty and disease: “nor in general the things that do not proceed from vice and are not due to a specific person.”³⁷ This thought became foundational for the later Stoics, which had many affinities with the ethics of Hellenic Christianity.

Those who are brave are concerned mainly with the greatest, most awe-inspiring of terrible things, such as death. Those who are brave are those who are fearless in face of a noble death, and of all emergencies that involve death.

Courage and Confidence

Aristotle says that the motivator of *courage* is honour. The brave person feels fears yet will face them as one should and as the rule directs, “for honour’s sake; for this is the end of virtue.”

The man, then, who faces and who fears the right things and from the right motive, in the right way and from the right time, and who feels confidence under the corresponding conditions, is brave; for the brave man feels and acts according to the merits of the case and in whatever way the rule directs.

Now the end of every activity is conformity to the corresponding state of character. This is true, therefore, of the brave man as well as of others. But *courage is noble*. Therefore, the end [the goal and outcome of courage] also is noble; for each thing is defined by its end. Therefore, it is for a noble end that the brave man endures and acts as courage directs.³⁸

³⁶ Book III.6, *NE*: Ross, p.64.

³⁷ *op. cit.*, p.63.

³⁸ *Ibid.* p.65-6.

Aristotle then summarizes:

As we have said, then, *courage* is a mean with respect to things that inspire confidence or fear, in the circumstances that have been stated; and it chooses or endures things because it is noble to do so, or because it is base not to do so.

But to die to escape from poverty or love or anything painful is not the mark of a brave man, but rather of a coward; for it is softness to fly from what is troublesome, and such a man endures death not because it is noble but to fly from evil.³⁹

He concludes by saying that *courage*, then, “is something of this sort, but the name is also applied to five other kinds.” In these five cases, people also display *courage*, but something in their cases is lacking from his primary definition of *physical courage in the face of death for a noble cause*. They are:

- (1) The “semi-courage” of the *citizen-soldier*. Their courage, in general, is only “improper” when a case fails the primary definition;
- (2) The “semi-courage” of knowledge and *the pursuit of knowledge*. Such courage generally does not incur physical danger.
- (3) The “semi-courage” of *passion*. The courage displayed under the influence of strong emotions, such as anger or desire, is not true.
- (4) The “semi-courage” of *sanguineness* is not real courage, because the person did not understand what they were facing.
- (5) The “semi-courage” of people who are *ignorant of the dangers* they are facing do not then display true courage, because again they did not understand what they were facing.⁴⁰

The key takeaway is that courage is indispensable to virtue: it is not possible to be virtuous without *courage*.

³⁹ Book III:7, *NE: Ross*, p.67.

⁴⁰ Book III:8, *ibid.*, p.67-71.

4. JUSTICE

For our purposes, *justice* is best seen from a bird’s eye view. Again, Aristotle is our best guide. He says there are two types of *justice*:⁴¹

(1) <i>General justice</i> is concerned with respecting laws.		
(2) <i>Particular justice</i> is concerned with fairness.		
It also has two types:		
(2.1) <i>Distributive Justice</i>		(2.2) <i>Corrective Justice</i>
Society	<i>Level</i>	Interpersonal
Political economy	<i>Field</i>	Moral field of loss and gain
Proportionality: “according to merit,”* i.e., what each person deserves based on their contribution to society. ⁴²	<i>Principle</i>	Correction: “restores the equilibrium,” ⁴³ i.e., what restores the balance between two or more parties.
the person	<i>Focus</i>	the damages
good government	<i>Guarantor</i>	good judges
*Capitalism’s roots lie in ancient societies’ division of war loot. Modern societies also account for people’s needs.	Corrective justice also has two types:	
	(2.2.2.) <i>Voluntary transactions</i>	(2.2.3.) <i>Involuntary transactions</i> Again, two types:
	transactions in business and social relations: e.g., sales and purchases, loans, pledging, depositing, letting, etc.	(2.2.3.a) <i>clandestine</i> : e.g., theft, adultery, poisoning, procuring, enticement of slaves, assassination, false witness; (2.2.3.b) <i>violent</i> : e.g., assault, imprisonment, murder, robbery with violence, mutilation, abuse, insult, etc.

⁴¹ In Book V, *Nicomachean Ethics*.

⁴² Book V:3, *ibid.*, p.112.

⁴³ Book V:4, *ibid.*, p.115. Ross: “the judge tries to equalize things by means of the penalty.”

In Greek, *justice* is known as *dikaiosynē*; in Latin it is *iustitia*, hence we get “justice” in English. The Greek word also has the meaning of *righteousness*, as the Bible calls it.

Justice is the greatest of virtues. Aristotle says:

‘neither evening nor morning star’ is so wonderful;
and proverbially ‘in justice is every virtue comprehended.’⁴⁴

Justice, he says, is the actual exercise of complete virtue:

It is complete because he who possesses it can exercise his virtue not only in himself but towards his neighbour also; for many men can exercise virtue in their own affairs, but not in their relations to their neighbour.⁴⁵

Aristotle says *corrective justice* works like the other moral virtues; it is the mean between two extremes in the moral field of gain and loss.



Autrement dit, this is Aristotle’s version of the golden rule.

Remember, Jesus said: “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets.” (Matthew 7:12)

⁴⁴ Book V:1, *NE*: Ross, p.108.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p.108.

SUMMARY

Here's the *tl;dr* (too long; didn't read :=) summary, taken from Cicero's description of the four cardinal virtues, which we saw in the introduction:

- *courage* is discernible in cases of great effort or danger,
- *self-control* in the foregoing of pleasure,
- *practical reason* in one's choice of goods and evils, and
- *justice* in allocating each person their due.

CONCLUSION

We become more “salty” followers of Jesus when we live out his teachings in walking on his Way of Life. Jesus says, “Have salt in yourselves” (Mark 9:50). Our question is generally, “Yes, Lord, but how?” The answers are all found within our Anglican Way. We have a method, our “three-legged stool,” to help us learn how to have salt in ourselves: we use scripture, tradition and reason to understand and incorporate the divine will into our being (body, mind, soul, and shadow).

The Book of Common Prayer uses this lovely prayer on the 2nd Sunday in Advent:

Blessed Lord, who hast caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning; Grant that we may in such wise **hear** them, **read, mark, learn,** and **inwardly digest** them, that by patience and comfort of thy holy Word, we may embrace, and ever hold fast, the blessed hope of everlasting life, which thou hast given us in our Saviour Jesus Christ. *Amen.*

We hear and read scripture, and then we work on ourselves using our reason and our tradition. Over time, we become able to learn

and inwardly digest the divine will revealed in Jesus in our scriptures.

The Christian theologians of our tradition show us how important is the classical ethics of character and virtue. The best way to move from hearing and reading scripture to learning and inwardly digesting it is to work on our own personal character and virtues. The work we do on our character aligns us with divine grace so that we can cooperate with grace. One becomes “saltier” by becoming more skilled in the virtues; by becoming the kind of person that can “inwardly digest” the divine will for ourselves. That is what it means to walk on the Way of Life as personified and taught by Jesus of Nazareth. There lies salvation in Jesus; that is how he becomes our Messiah, the anointed one of God.

This aide-mémoire hopefully provided an introduction and a brief overview of the cardinal virtues.

In future, I hope to provide an aide-mémoire on each of the cardinal virtues, in which we could explore more practically how to “download and install” them, how to operationalize the virtues within our hearts.

My hope is also to compile some notes in future on the three theological virtues mentioned by the apostle Paul: *faith, hope, and love*. The Lord willing and the creek don't rise, of course :=)

Thank you for reading.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Compiled for the Anglican Parish of St. Mary's, Russell by Gerrit Botha, January 2021.