

FIVE FORKS BRETHREN IN CHRIST CHURCH

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SERMON: *The Prudent Give Thought*

SERIES: *Practicing Virtue*

SCRIPTURES:

SPEAKER: *Shaun Kipe*

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**Credit to Gary Thomas, John Ortberg,*

Well good morning and welcome to Five Forks Church. It is so good to worship with you today, everybody here in the room and also to those of you tuning into the livestream.

Hey, last week we started our first sermon series of the year, called **“Practicing Virtue.” (Series Graphic)** Many of us begin the year, thinking about the kinds of changes we’d like to see in our lives. Financially, relationally, with our diets, with our physical health. But I’ll remind you of this quote from 18 century Anglican writer William Law...He once remarked that people should **“earnestly pursue humility, patience, generosity, faith, compassion, courage, kindness and forgiveness with the same intensity that those in the world pursue wealth, fame, worldly achievement, and physical beauty.”**

I thought, that’s a powerful statement. What if our primary focus in life was chasing humility over wealth or courage over physical beauty, love over personal achievement.

He’s talking about a life of practicing virtue. And if you were with us last week, you’ll know this is not just about being virtuous for the sake of virtue. We’ve defined virtue as “morphing into the character of Jesus.” That’s what a disciple is, “a person who

does what Jesus would do if he were you.” So, this series is exploring five virtues that we can practice that will help us to live like Jesus.

Last week we said the foundation for practicing a virtuous life is **surrender**. You must surrender your will to Jesus. Surrender is learning to pray as Jesus did: **Your will be done**.

Today, let’s talk about practicing a virtue called:

I. Prudence

That sounds exciting, doesn’t it?

Probably not a word many of us are familiar with. Sounds a little bit too ancient or churchy. When I hear the word prudence, as with many of the virtues, my initial reaction is: Prudence probably has something to with God trying to take away all of my fun in life.

There’s American historian, Allen Guelzo who once said this,

“Say the word prudence to the ancients, and you would have named a virtue. Say it to the faculties of American colleges in the nineteenth century, and you would have described part of the philosophy curriculum. Say it today, and you’ve made a joke.

Prudence carries with it today the connotation of a “prude”, a person of overexaggerated caution, hesitation, a lack of imagination and will, a person who walks with tentative steps.

This would have surprised the classical philosophers, who thought of prudence as one of the four cardinal virtues, and who linked it to shrewdness, exceptionally good

judgement...a person who could take the whole of a situation at once and knew almost automatically how to proceed.” (Allen Guelzo...Ortberg Become New)

In fact, I was re-reading recently a portion of C.S. Lewis’s book Mere Christianity where he talks about this and he says, “**Prudence means practical common sense, taking the trouble to think out what you are doing and what is likely to come of it.**”

So, what we mean by prudence is simply the ability to make good decisions...to be wise and thoughtful about life and faith. The idea here is not some sort of magical, mysterious intuition, we’re talking practical common sense!

I thought, you know that’s just really helpful. That’s really helpful for me, in my own life. And that’s actually really helpful for the Christian church today. We need to do better at practical common sense.

So if you have your Bible with you go ahead and open up, I want to show you how this theme show’s up all throughout your Bible.

A. Scripture encourages the people of God to have thoughtful, common sense.

Let’s start in the Hebrew Scriptures. OT...God is regularly encouraging his people to be thoughtful and reflective about how they are living.

Deuteronomy 4:9 - “⁹ Only be careful, and watch yourselves closely so that you do not forget the things your eyes have seen or let them fade from your heart as long as you live.

1 Kings 2:4 - 'If your descendants watch how they live, and if they walk faithfully before me with all their heart and soul, you will never fail to have a successor on the throne of Israel.'

Proverbs 14:15 - ¹⁵ The simple believe anything, but the prudent give thought to their steps.

Over and over again, God encouraging his people to be thoughtful.

But not just in the Hebrew Scriptures, we find this same theme throughout the New Testament as well.

For example, on one occasion, Jesus is sending out his disciples to do ministry he says, ¹⁶ **"I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore, be as shrewd as snakes**

He's saying, be thoughtful...be prudent...be wise about how you live your life and make decisions in this world.

On another occasion, Luke 12 Jesus says, **"Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed..."**

He's saying, when it comes to your money be prudent...be thoughtful.

Later on in that same chapter he actually tells a story about his followers being good stewards of their resources and he ends his parable by saying... **From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked.**

Jesus is saying, "you have a responsibility to be thoughtful with your resources and with the life that I have given you."

Even the apostle Paul, caught on to this emphasis of living a thoughtful life...to young Timothy Paul writes,

1 Timothy 4:16 - ¹⁶ Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers.

Philippians 1:10 - “I pray that you will abound in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you will be able to discern what is best...”

I told you this concept shows up over and over again in Scripture. Followers of Jesus, encouraged to live a life of thoughtfulness. To have good ‘ol common sense.

Ignorance, unawareness, obliviousness, thoughtlessness, childish thinking...not ok for followers of Jesus. You must practice prudence.

I’ll just give you a more recent historical example related to theology and the importance of prudence...common sense for followers of Jesus. If I say, **the mark of the beast**, what comes to your mind? Have you heard people talk about this before? Do you know what it is, where it comes from or what it means?

It’s a phrase that shows up in the book of **Revelation 13 - ¹¹ Then I saw a second beast, coming out of the earth. It had two horns like a lamb, but it spoke like a dragon...¹⁶ It also forced all people, great and small, rich and poor, free and slave, to receive a mark on their right hands or on their foreheads...which is the name of the beast or the number of its name. ¹⁸ This calls for wisdom. Let the person who has insight calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a man.^[e] That number is 666.**

By the way, somewhat humorous. Many of you are probably aware, when I write my sermons, I write them out basically word for word. And you know how your

computer keeps a word count for you. So, most of my sermons end up between **3,500 words and 4,000 words**. Somewhere in that range. So, no joke, the first draft of this sermon, a few weeks ago, where I'm talking about the mysterious mark of the beast. I get done writing and I check my word count. **3,666 words**.

Ok, so this passage of Scripture has been misunderstood, used, misused and often because of a lack of thoughtfulness on the part of Christians. Many Christians take this passage in Revelation and start pointing to all kinds of things and saying, "Careful, that's the mark of the beast." Folks this no joke.

For example, when **social security** was rolled out in the **1930's**, some Christians claimed that social security numbers were the sign of the mark of the beast. In the **1950's and 60's**, some Christians were suspicious of giant urban based telephone companies and began claiming that the newly assigned **three digit area codes** were the sign of the mark of the beast. The same thing happened in the **70's** and suspicion of large financial institutions and the roll-out of **credit card numbers**. Then in the **80's** with **bar codes** and the **90's** with **IP Internet addresses**. (Credit to Curtis Chang)

And see what happens is, every time we make those kinds of "unthoughtful" statements, we end up looking naive and unaware.

In context, when book of Revelation was written, the first century Christians were under enormous pressure to join the widespread practice of worshipping the Roman Emperor. And it was common for Scripture to use the metaphor of a beast to represent the dehumanizing nature of pagan rulers. Revelation says that 666 is the number of a name, the name of a man. And there was a common code in first century Hebrew literature that identified letters to numbers. And in that Hebrew code, the number **666** translates precisely to **Nero**, the Roman Emperor of the first century. Revelation 13 was a metaphorical warning to first century Christians about not being "branded" as a worshipper of the pagan Emperor Nero. And so applying

this to our day, the practical application is not mostly about avoiding the number 666 showing up somewhere in your life. It's more about, not branding yourself with a certain secular or pagan political movement. Why? Because you belong first to the Kingdom of Jesus. Do you see how thoughtfulness is so important for followers of Jesus?

Sadly sometimes as followers of Jesus we justify our naivete or ignorance in the name of just having faith or just believing. I've even heard people reference certain passages of Scripture.

For example, in 1 Corinthians when Paul says, **we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles,**

Paul is saying that calling a crucified Messiah the savior of the world, seems foolish to some people. But sometimes Christians take that out of context and say, "See Paul says, it's ok for Christians to believe foolish kinds of things."

Or another passage I hear referenced is when Jesus says that, **"unless you become like little children you will never enter the Kingdom of heaven."** And that somehow, Jesus is saying "We need think about life like little children do and this will seem foolish to people."

But in both cases that's a misunderstanding of the those passages. Neither of these passages is encouraging Christians to be unthoughtful people.

C.S. Lewis writes about this, he says...**"too many Christians have the idea that, provided you are good, it does not matter being a fool. But that is a misunderstanding. The first place, most children show plenty of "prudence" about doing the things they are really interested in, and think them out quite sensibly. (Don't believe me, my kids can probably sort out most computer problems you have.) In the second place, as St. Paul point out, Christ never meant that**

we were to remain children in intelligence: on the contrary. He wants a child's heart, but a grown-ups head. The fact, that what you are thinking about is God Himself, does not mean that you can be content with the same babyish ideas which you had when you were a five-year-old. God is no fonder of intellectual slackers than of any other slackers."

So, we don't get any excuses on this. The consistent theme we find in Scripture is be thoughtful, use your brain, be wise. The virtue of prudence teaches us, that following Jesus holds us to a higher standard of thoughtfulness and responsibility in thinking about our lives and our Christian faith.

By the way, if you're following along on our Bible Project weekly video series. The current series is on understanding **the nature of Biblical poetry** and there is lesson coming up on **understanding apocalyptic literature**. If you're interested in becoming more thoughtful about passages of Scripture that are filled with imagery and metaphors and can be confusing and easily misinterpreted...then I would encourage you to watch some of these videos. It's a great way to practice prudence about theology.

The other reason why this is such an important virtue to put into practice is because,

B. We are all decision-makers.

What am I going to eat today? What am I going to wear today? Why do I keep rooting for the Dallas Cowboys? How do I know if he/she is "the one"? Which college should I go to? What should I major in? Which job should I take? Which church should we attend? How should we spend our money? How much screen time is appropriate for my kids? Should I change careers? Now that the kids are grown, should we downsize? Is now the right time to retire? Is now the time to speak up or remain silent?

And you see every decision we make...wise or foolish...is having an impact on the kind of person we are becoming?

A Columbia Researcher, Sheena Iyengar did a study and found that the average person makes about **70 conscious decisions** a day. That **25,550 decisions a year**. And over 70 years that's **1,788,500 decisions**. And your life is a sum of the choices you make. In other words, add up all of those decisions, and that's who you are.

Prudence has everything to do with the character formation that is taking place in you as you make your 70 decisions each day.

Some of the wisest theological concepts are found in the most unlikely of places. One of my favorite children's stories is Dr. Seuss... **"Oh the Places to Go!"** One of the lines he says is:

"You have brains in your head. You have feet in your shoes. You can steer yourself any direction you choose. You're on your own. And you know what you know. And YOU are the one who'll decide where to go..."

You have brains in your head...choose wisely...be prudent.

So,

II. How do you practice prudence?

How do we train ourselves to make thoughtful decisions?

I told you we'd come back to the Proverbs passage I mentioned earlier. And want to highlight two important concepts from that passage that I think are really valuable.

Proverbs 14:15 - ¹⁵ The simple believe anything, but the prudent give thought to their steps.

First,

A. Prudence encourages us to deal in reality.

¹⁵ The simple believe anything...

You know how sometimes we like to make decisions, based on what we would like to be reality, rather than what actually is reality. We call this wishful thinking or sometimes we use the phrase ignorance is bliss.

About 6 weeks or so ago, beginning of December, I went for what has now become an annual physical with my family doctor. I went 5 years ago when I was 35. And when we were finishing up he said, "See ya in 5 years." Which meant this past year, when I turned 40 it was time to go again. And when we were finishing up, I was hoping he would say the same...and instead he said, "Ok, let's get you scheduled for next year and let's go have you get some blood work done." I was thinking wait, what happened in those 5 years.

I had this sense of hesitation and uncertainty, almost defiance about going to get my bloodwork done because, in my head I'm thinking: What if they find something? I'm not sure I want to know if I have high blood pressure, or high cholesterol or whatever it is. Ignorance is bliss. The simple believe anything...wishful thinking...I'm not sure the full reality about myself.

But, the reality of my physical body is what it is, whether I go and get the bloodwork done or not. And see, only when I know and acknowledge the reality about my physical body, can I make good and thoughtful...prudent decisions about my physical health.

If I have high blood pressure, I can choose my diet or my exercise habits more prudently.

Folks the same is true in every area of our lives. I need to know the full reality about my character.

“I’m not sure I want to know that I have a greed problem. I’m not sure I want to know that I have a self-control problem. I’m not sure I want to know I have an anger problem. I’m not sure I want to know I have a generosity problem. I’m not sure I want to know...go ahead you fill in the blank for you. You see part of the reason, many of us don’t continue on this path of morphing into the character of Jesus is because...

The simple believe anything...tell me what I want to hear, tell me what I want to believe...never leads to prudence. Prudence deals in truth and reality.

And then look at the second half of the verse... **but the prudent give thought to their steps.**

And so second,

B. Prudence means considering the outcomes.

We tend to live in a world that makes decisions based on what we call instant gratification. I choose a certain way, because of how it makes me feel in the moment. But I do not consider the long-term effects.

Giving thought to your steps means thinking through...if I make this choice, where will it lead me.

Proverbs 22:3 – ³ The prudent see danger and take refuge, but the simple keep going and pay the penalty.

Folks this is about as practical as your Christian faith gets.

I use my financial resources the way I do, because I want whatever it is that I want...that house, that car, that vacation...right here right now, whether I can truly afford it or not.

I so often make choices about my relationships or entertainment because of how it makes me feel in the moment, not the long term.

And, do you see, this same principle applies to your character development as well.

If you choose to harbor bitterness towards someone who has hurt you. Because, it feels good now. Over time, you start to become a bitter person.

If you choose to give in to greed now, in the long run, you're choosing to become a greedy person.

If you choose to spread that rumor, now, in this moment...you are taking a step in the direction of being that kind of person.

And so prudence means, considering where the choices you are making are leading you.

Ok, third,

C. Prudence means listening to God's Holy Spirit.

So, this is really important to for us to consider as we think about prudence.

There's a very telling story about this in the Old Testament of your Bible. Book of Joshua. And if you've read the book of Joshua before, it's the story of Israel entering

into the Promised Land. And, in this one story, there is a group trying to deceive and outsmart the Hebrews. And we find these words...

Joshua 9:14 – ¹⁴ The Israelites sampled their provisions but did not inquire of the LORD.

Boy, that's a really powerful statement, isn't it? They made their decision, but didn't include God in the process. You can be certain, if you leave God out of the decision-making processes of your life, you will most certainly miss out on the abundant life He intends for you to have.

Sometimes the word we use here is **discernment** or we might talk about being in tune with the Holy Spirit. The best possible decisions are not always the most practical or beneficial according to the world's standards. The best choice to make is not always the choice that the world around you is choosing.

If Jesus would have defined prudence like that, he would have avoided death on a cross. Or think about some of the things Jesus taught his followers...that would not necessarily be considered prudent according to the world's standards. Jesus said...

If someone slaps you on one cheek, turn the other cheek also.

If someone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your cloak as well.

If someone forces you to carry their pack one mile, carry it two miles.

Whoever wants to be first must be last.

It is better to give than to receive.

Love your enemies and do good to those who persecute you.

There's a devotional series I follow, and the speaker was talking about a famous photograph that I had never seen before but that some of you may be familiar with. But I just found it so incredibly powerful.

Have you seen this **photo?**

This picture was taken in 1936, in a German dockyard, where there was shipbuilding going on and a ship had been constructed and it was being dedicated by Adolf Hitler. And in this picture, you can see hundreds of workers all giving the Nazi salute, except one man who is standing there with his arms folded across his chest deliberately not giving it. And that has become an iconic image, one man who would not give in to influence of the world's standards in his decision making.

It's not known for certain who he is. Many believe it's a gentleman named Gustav. His family had documentation of him working at that shipyard at that time and they said he refused to give the Nazi salute because of his religious convictions. The verse he would talk about was in the book of Acts where the disciples say, **we must obey God rather than men.**

That's what discernment is. Thoughtfulness in God's Kingdom is a person willing to step outside of what "the world" is doing or choosing because of a commitment to Jesus' way of life.

And so true prudence as a follower of Jesus, doesn't always mean the most practical decision based on the world's standards...the most prudent decision is the decision Jesus would make.

This week as you go about making decisions...inquire of Jesus. Jesus, what would you have me choose?

Finally, prudence is very much connected to our theme for the year.

4. Practice prudence with humility.

Remember our keyword for 2024? Humility. Two weeks ago, when we talked about what humility was...we said that humility involves “**looking out for the interests of others.**” One of the ways, that we practice humility is in our decision making. Jesus said it pretty plainly...it’s often called the Golden rule. Do unto others as you would have them do to you!”

I’ll confess to you, that when I go about my daily decision-making processes, I’m often thinking mostly about how the decision is going to affect me first. In Bible language we call this **favoritism** in decision making. I choose what is best for me or my group or my family.

I remember many years ago, I was at a soccer camp and my dad was the coach at the camp. And at the end of the week they were going to be handing out various awards. And I remember the night before the last day, Dad coming to me and saying, “*Shaun, I just want you to know I can’t give you this award. Not because I don’t think you deserve it but because if I give you this award it will seem like favoritism.*” That conversation has stuck with me. It was an incredibly teachable moment. Dad was right. He couldn’t just make a decision based on what he wanted. As a follower of Jesus, he had to think about the best interest of others.

When humility begins to impact our decision making, we begin to think about how our decisions are going to impact not only ourselves but other people as well.

At your place of work, you have to make decisions, based not only what you want, but is what is best for the group.

On a team, you have to make decisions that are best, not just for you, but for the success of the team.

Parents, you have to make decision that are not just good for you but also for your family.

Of course Jesus is once again the best example of this. When Jesus chose to enter this world, he did it because he knew it would be in your best interest. When Jesus chose to go to the cross, he did it because he knew it would be in your best interest. If your desire this year is to be a person who follows the example of Jesus, then when it comes to decision making you must also look to the interests of the others. It's the most prudent decision you can make.