

Alan Noble

TO

**PRACTICAL
WISDOM
FOR MOVING
THROUGH
CHAOTIC
TIMES**

LIVE

WELL

FOREWORD BY *Justin Whitmel Earley*



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CHOOSING DECISIVELY

ONE OF THE MOST DIFFICULT aspects of life is making choices, and the modern world has given us endless choices. It seems like the first fourth of our life—roughly until the age of twenty-two—most life choices are made for us. We live on autopilot. Most of us, at least. We are forced to go to elementary, middle, and high school. We are compelled or guilted to go to college or trade schools. Then during those early twenties, most of us are presented with two massive, future-defining choices: What kind of career will we have and who, if anyone, will we live with?

The answers to these questions will determine the success, shape, and nature of the rest of our lives. And we are reminded of the weight of these choices, *repeatedly*. Yet neither choice is a simple matter of personal preferences. Both our career and the marriage and friend pools are fiercely competitive. Everyone is fighting for a limited number of jobs in rapidly changing fields, thanks in part to AI. Everyone is fighting over a limited number of available, eligible, and desirable spouses and friends. And time seems to be running out. The older you get, the less options you have available and the more pressure you feel from your family and friends to “get on” with life, which puts you into an impossible position. On the one hand *everything* apparently rides on you making the one right choice in trade or major or career or



spouse or friend. On the other hand, there are so many possibilities and so many variables to consider that you are frozen, unable to choose anything at all.

Perhaps you fear missing out on something or someone. You like the idea of going into nursing, but you also enjoy psychology. You are in love with someone, but you are also interested and attracted to someone else. If you marry someone tall, you'll never have the pleasure of being with someone short. If you marry someone, will their career goals conflict with yours? Is it worth giving up your career goals to be with them?

But there's another, more insidious pressure that people feel over making the Right Life Choice. These choices don't just shape our lives, they can come to *define our existence*. And this is where things get really intense. If finding the right career determines my career satisfaction, that's one thing. But if it determines whether my life has meaning? That's something else entirely. Now every major life decision is an existential decision. In a culture where meaning, value, and purpose are defined by the individual, each person is burdened with creating and sustaining an interesting, exciting, and enviable life. The burden of your existence has been placed on your shoulders by society. So you aren't just looking for the right spouse. You're looking for one who can save your life, who can redeem you. You aren't just looking for a job, you're looking for a calling that can justify your place in the world—a vocation that provides you purpose and significance. The goal of life is to become the Best Version of Yourself, and you do this by making the choices the Best Version of Yourself would make. You have to make the *optimal* choices, because you only get one shot at this!

And then choice paralysis sets in. The more choices we have and the higher the stakes of those choices, the harder it is for us to make any choice at all and the less satisfied we are when we do make a decision. When there are only a few options available to



us, our choices come easier. When those choices don't matter very much, we find it easier to choose. But when everything hinges on these choices among millions of options, well, don't mess up! As a result, we freeze, unable to make any decisions, big or small. The world is too overwhelming and the stakes are too high. This is what I mean when I reference T. S. Eliot's lines that we know only "A heap of broken images."¹

To navigate such a world, we need to cultivate the virtue of prudence.

PRUDENCE DEFINED

When Jesus turns water into wine in John 2:1-11, we can see him modeling prudence. The story begins with Jesus and his disciples attending a wedding feast and his mother coming up to him with a loaded comment: "They have no wine." Jesus recognizes the implicit request in this statement, but he responds with an objection: "Woman, what does this have to do with me? My hour has not yet come." Mary does not directly respond to him, and instead tells the servants to "do whatever he tells you." At this moment, Jesus has to use prudence to make a decision. As he has already stated, his "hour has not yet come." It's not time for him to start doing miracles in public. And yet that fact conflicts with the fifth commandment: Honor your father and your mother.

To navigate this moment, Jesus must assess the reality of the situation accurately, deliberate for an appropriate amount of time, make a decision, and act decisively. While we don't get to see Christ's internal process of deliberation and decision-making, we know that he was conflicted between his ministry schedule and his obligation to his mother, and he ultimately made a decision. His decision is that he is obligated to obey his mother, and so he orders the servants to fill jars with water which he then turns into wine. Notice that once Jesus makes up his mind, he



acts with singleness of purpose and without any comments about how he “really shouldn’t be doing this right now, since my hour has not yet come.” He makes a decision and he acts decisively. That’s prudence.

There are different ways of understanding the virtue of prudence, but at its essence prudence can be defined as making the right decision at the right time. Wheaton College philosophy professor W. Jay Wood defines *prudence* as “the act of thinking truthfully about the best means to appropriate ends.”² Notice the three qualifications in this definition: thinking *truthfully* about the *best* means to *appropriate* ends. To make prudent (and therefore virtuous) decisions in life, you must accurately assess situations, make a choice based on what is the good, and choose means to achieve that good end, which are themselves good.

Saint Augustine famously defined prudence as “love distinguishing with sagacity between what hinders it and what helps it.”³ For Augustine, prudence is a matter of recognizing and choosing those things that lead to a more righteous life. And Josef Pieper, drawing from Aquinas, argues that prudence is the mother of all moral virtue, the foundation for justice, fortitude, and temperance.⁴ Prudence should not be conflated with *wisdom*, which is a broader and richer concept in Scripture. Wisdom gives you understanding of Scripture and God (Proverbs 2:1-5), whereas prudence teaches us how to make day-to-day decisions.

For our purposes, I want you to think of prudence like this: Prudence involves (1) seeing the reality of a situation, (2) recognizing and desiring what is good, (3) deliberating, (4) making a judgment, and (5) resolutely acting on that judgment.

REALITY

The first step in making a prudent decision in life is making an honest, objective assessment of the situation, whether that be



choosing a major in college, selecting a roommate, or deciding whether to spend time scrolling on your phone (also a matter of *temperance*, which we will discuss in chapter four!). This process of seeing the reality of a situation includes practical things like researching, finding facts, seeking information, asking for clarification, and recalling accurately. If you cannot see a situation accurately, you cannot act. So we must see rightly before we can decide rightly before we can act rightly. But seeing rightly isn't as easy as it might seem.

For one thing, our pride and biases often hinder us from seeing reality as it is. We might imagine we are being objective when really we're allowing our preconceived notions to color our vision. No one can be perfectly objective, but we can cultivate attitudes and postures toward the world which bring us closer to reality. For example, Pieper warns, "A closed mind and know-it-allness are fundamentally forms of resistance to the truth of real things."⁵ If you come to a decision with a closed mind, you will not see "the truth of real things" and therefore you will not make a prudent decision.

The Christian philosopher Esther Lightcap Meek describes this posture in terms of respect: "Knowing never stops requiring our submission to and respect for the real."⁶ Practically this means that in the process of making a prudent decision, we should pray and ask God for clarity, for help to see the nuances of the issue with open eyes, for the humility to submit to reality whatever it may be. To choose prudently requires that we remember situations honestly, we consider the situation with an open mind, and when something unexpected happens, we don't jump to conclusions. It means setting aside our biases to see a situation for what it is, not what we anticipate or hope or expect. As with all aspects of virtues, this takes practice: the continual effort of choosing to set aside your ego and presumptions and fears to survey reality for what it truly is.



In her book *A Little Manual for Knowing*, Meek argues that we love to know. Loving someone or something is the way we know rightly, because in the process of knowing we pledge ourselves to the task of knowing and we trust ourselves to the process. Knowing, in Meek's account, is more than just the collection of data, although it includes information. Knowing is relational and intentional. It involves a particular posture of the whole person. It requires humility and openness before the object of knowledge. It requires the suspension of assumptions, which so easily limit our perception of the object.

In day-to-day life, an openness to the otherness of an object of knowledge involves humility. When you struggle to *know* where you ought to live, you stay open to the possibility that God will lead you to live in a strange place, a place well beyond what you have imagined as suitable for you. In our rush to know for sure, we close off possibilities, which prevents us from seeing reality as it is. Meek agrees with Pieper and Aquinas that prudence (in her language, knowledge), involves rightly seeing reality.⁷

While there is value in exercises like making a pro and con chart when making a difficult life decision, Meek's description of knowledge suggests that true knowledge is deeper and more intimate than a list of facts. It begins with a posture of our hearts.

Once we have determined what the reality of a situation truly is, by loving to know, then we can pursue the good. But what is "the good"?

DESIRING THE GOOD

Built into Pieper's conception of the virtue of prudence is that it is always oriented toward the good. Notice how similar this is to Solomon's words: "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge" (Proverbs 1:7). Unless we recognize God's sovereignty, we cannot begin to make prudent decisions. This is how



biblical wisdom (a knowledge and fear of God) is an essential prerequisite for true prudence.⁸

The assumption here is that there is a good, an external, authoritative standard by which we can evaluate our actions. This is a controversial claim for the contemporary world where it is assumed that individuals have their own, private, self-defined good. Christians identify this good in the great commandment: loving God and loving our neighbor (Matthew 22:36-40). Or put differently, as the Westminster Shorter Catechism does, the “chief end of man” is to “glorify God, and to enjoy him for ever.”⁹ The first thing to notice here is that this understanding of the good is expansive. There are an almost infinite number of ways to glorify God in our lives. There are an almost infinite number of ways we can love God and love our neighbor as ourselves. How does desiring the good bring us closer to making a decision about who to marry or what career to pursue?

The flaw in this line of reasoning is the idea that the good always refers to the One Right Choice, when in fact, once we understand the good as glorifying God and enjoying him, it turns out there are lots of *good* choices we can make in life. What’s key for prudential thinking is that we take the good into account—that we intentionally look for what will glorify God in our choices. Often that will leave us with *several* options, and there we have the freedom to select among those options.

But this only pushes the problem back one step further: If the good is loving God and neighbor or glorifying God and enjoying him forever, what does it mean to do those things? How do I know what is loving to God and my neighbor? How do I know what glorifies him? This is where the daily practice of dwelling in the Word is so important. It is in the work of the Holy Spirit ministering to us, especially through the reading and interpreting of the Word of God, that we come to understand what it means

to love him. Through the practice of reading and meditating on Scripture, particularly in a local community of saints, we come to know how to love God and our neighbor. We learn more about his character and how to glorify that character. The prudent person has immersed themselves in the Word and in a local church community, which helps them interpret that Word in order to know the good in any particular situation.

It is not enough to merely consider the good; we must desire it. According to Pieper, “Only one who previously and simultaneously *loves* and *wants* the good can be prudent.”¹⁰ Just as we must pray for humility and clarity of sight to see reality rightly, we must also pray for a heart that desires what is good. And because God is a loving Father who cares for his children, he will grant that request, giving us, over time, a love for what is good through the process of sanctification.

Pieper goes on to note that the more we practice prudence, the more our love for the good will grow, which in turn better enables us to be prudent. Love of the good is positively reinforced by prudence.¹¹ In this life we are going to get habituated to something. Society calls us to be habituated to our passions, to what our flesh defines as “good”: lust, distracting entertainment, excessive material possessions, political animus. The reality is that whatever habits we cultivate become easier, more desirable, and more important in our lives. They shape our identity. The only question is whether you will cultivate habits of imprudence and ignore reality and the good, or prudence and come to accept reality and love the good.

DELIBERATION

Once you have assessed the reality of a situation and cultivated a desire for the good, the next step is to deliberate carefully on what end you ought to work toward and what means you ought



to use to reach that end. According to Aristotle, deliberation must focus on what we can actually *do*.¹² So in situations where there is no action for us to take, where there is no decision for us to make, we must learn to trust God and his providence.

Deliberation is where many of us get stuck. We spin our wheels deliberating and never come to a final judgment on a matter. In a hectic and frantic world, we are often urged to make rapid decisions without contemplating reality or the good. And sometimes we must make rapid decisions, but too often in our society we make hasty decisions because of sales pressure or peer pressure or impulsivity. The basis of deliberation is careful contemplation of the reality of a situation and the goods involved. Paul talks about this in Romans when he calls us to discernment: “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect” (Romans 12:2). Although Paul doesn’t use the word “prudence,” he is describing it. The problem is, who can know the will of God? How can we deliberate properly? Part of the answer is that we don’t do it alone.

According to W. Jay Wood, “The first ‘phase’ of prudential reasoning requires that we seek the wise counsel of others.”¹³ This of course is a biblical concept: “Where there is no guidance, a people falls, but in an abundance of counselors there is safety” (Proverbs 11:14). This is especially important, as Aquinas points out, because life is so complex; there are so many different situations each of us will face that having a variety of prudent elders to counsel you can be invaluable.¹⁴ But Pieper makes the point that the ultimate decision is always up to the individual. There is no way you can deputize someone to make a choice for your career or marriage or any life decision for you. In the final analysis, you are the one responsible. And the reason for that, argues Pieper,



is that no one else can see the reality of your situation exactly like you can.

Pieper does have an exception to this rule, however. He argues that when you have a prudent friend who loves you, they can help shape your decision from inside your ethical dilemma by imagining themselves in that situation.¹⁵ This is one of the most comforting passages in all of Pieper's writings to me. It's true that no one can step into my shoes, but a true prudent friend who knows me deeply can help shape my decision by putting themselves in my situation. This speaks to the need we have to make deep, lasting, meaningful friendships with virtuous people. There have been many times in my life when my own mind has led me astray and I have had to rely on the prudence of a friend to shape my thinking. Such are moments of God's grace to me, and I don't take those relationships for granted.

But this kind of relationship requires a certain posture of the heart, a humility and even a submission to someone wiser than yourself. In her *Little Book of Knowing*, Meek describes the relationship this way:

A guide is only as effective as our decision to trust and to submit to that guide. We make a responsible choice to trust what they say even when we do not understand or agree. We cannot be suspicious or noncommittal about this. We have to be willing wholeheartedly to try out what they recommend. Apart from this that guide cannot help, and our investment does not pay off. Submission and trust are not the same as mindless compliance. They don't actually even require agreement. They involve another critically important, sophisticatedly human, covenantal "let there be." They involve free personal consent. Submission and trust aren't always comfortable. But they are necessary to knowing.¹⁶



In addition to receiving the prudent guidance of a trusted friend, we must have our own humility to accept their wisdom. And as Meek points out, this isn't always comfortable, but it is good.

Wise guidance can be explicit or it can be imitative: "Prudence on our part sometimes shows itself in having the good judgment to identify and imitate the morally wise among us."¹⁷ Either way, the prudent person should cultivate a group of friends and wise elders who they trust to give counsel and act as models of prudence. This entails knowing people for an extended period of time, watching them navigate life with wisdom and prudence, making godly choices in a variety of difficult situations so that you have reason to trust their counsel. Of course, even wise counselors can give bad advice, so it is sometimes prudent to seek a few different voices. In our American society, we tend to rely exclusively on our own intuition and opinions, but prudence calls us to trust in the wisdom of others as we deliberate a serious decision.

Whether we rely on wise guidance from others or not, we need to spend time deliberating ourselves. This means a quiet time of contemplation and reflection, thinking through the reality of the situation and what the good is. The ultimate guide for our deliberations is the Holy Spirit, and so in any situation we should pray to God for wisdom, for the clarity of mind to think through the issue at hand in a way that glorifies him.

JUDGMENT

At the end of the day, whatever ethical decision we face, we have an obligation to come to a judgment about what the prudent course of action is. Life is infinitely complex, and while some people would like you to believe that there are nice, tidy answers to all of life's problems, that is not reality. The decisions we have to make are nuanced and specific, which is one reason why cultivating the virtue of prudence is so important. If the Bible were



simply a clear guidebook on how to respond in every situation, then we could just turn to the right chapter and verse, get our answer, and move on. Instead, the Bible mostly gives us the foundational principles that we must apply with the aid of the Holy Spirit. And that is the practice of prudence.

The more we practice prudence, the more we discover that it requires flexibility. This is rooted in the fact that prudence, at its core, is about seeing the world as it really is. And the world “as it really is” is a mess—a profoundly complex living system that defies our ability to create simple legalistic boundaries. We have to be agile and nuanced in our thinking to make prudent decisions, recognizing the complexity of the world. In the case of a career, it would be nice if I would just tell you the five steps to discovering and achieving your goals. But there are no nice simple steps. There is only a mess of individual experiences, talents, skills, constraints, economies, technologies, and so on. We wrestle with reality, keeping the good in mind, and trust in God’s providence.

We also need to accept that God has grace for our mistakes, because we are going to make wrong choices in life, and some of those mistakes will cost us and others greatly. This is an unavoidable part of living in a fallen world. We make judgments about how to act and people suffer as a consequence. And while we should do what is reasonable to right the mistakes we have made, ultimately we cannot fix all the mistakes we make in this life. At some point we have to accept God’s mercy and grace. We have to accept that he is sovereign and caring for everyone involved in our decisions. Our duty is to practice prudence as best we can with the aid of the Holy Spirit and rest in God’s providence. But the key is that we must come to a decision. We cannot allow timidity to keep us stuck. We must leave the stage of deliberation and decide what to do.



RESOLUTE ACTION

Aside from getting stuck in deliberation, many of us get stuck in following through with our decisions. We decide to move to a new state, and then never follow through with the plans. We decide to exercise, but never go to the gym. We decide to make new friends, but never make human contact with anyone. Prudence is not a virtue if it is not executed with resolute commitment. Recall the model of Jesus when Mary asked for his help at the wedding feast. He acted resolutely.

As Wood states, “To know what to do, and to fail to act, whether due to fear, weakness of will, or some other cause, is to fail in in [sic] the most important part of prudence.”¹⁸ Notice how similar this is to the warning in James 4:17: “Whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin.” When we come to a prudent decision, we have a moral obligation to follow through with unwavering action. And according to Pieper, the decision to act comes *before* we have “absolute certainty.”¹⁹ In our risk-adverse society, making mistakes is viewed as a mark against our personhood rather than a normal part of living. We want that absolute certainty that we are marrying the right person or choosing the right career. But that kind of certainty doesn’t exist. We each make the best judgments we can, and then we act with resoluteness, committing to our decision with our whole hearts and accepting the consequences of our actions, whatever they may be.

The prudent person is known not only for their wisdom, but for their *actions*. Prudence is something you *do*. You make an unwavering commitment to follow through with your judgment, trusting in God’s sovereignty and the Holy Spirit-guided deliberation you made. This requires another virtue, fortitude, or courage, to act with confidence in your decision. Not haughtily or pridefully, but with full knowledge that you carefully considered



the reality of the situation, desired the good, deliberated with wise counselors, came to a judgment, and now are acting resolutely. This is what it means to be a prudent person: “The virtuous agent must act in full knowledge of the end being sought, must choose to act for the sake of the end and not from impulse, and do so from a firm and unchanging character.”²⁰

PRUDENCE APPLIED

Careers. When we begin to consider what career to have, we typically weigh three questions: Am I good at it? Can I support myself? Do I enjoy the work? These are all appropriate questions that help us get to what the “good” is. It is good to find a career you are skilled at, that can pay you enough to live on, and that you take some joy in.

God has created each of us with skills, talents, and aptitudes and given us opportunities to develop them so that we can flourish as we work, whatever that work may be. As we practice *seeing reality for what it is*, it’s important that we take honest account of our skills. Some people flatter themselves and imagine they have skills they do not really possess. Others hide behind false humility or low self-esteem so that they don’t recognize their skills. Here we should rely on the insight from trusted counselors about what our abilities are, and if we discover that we don’t have marketable abilities, we must do the practical work to cultivate them. Just because you can’t easily identify a marketable skill does not mean that you are hopeless. It just means you need to devote more time to evaluating yourself, choosing a skill, and developing it.

One critical mistake people make is in adopting the standards of the world in regard to what is a respectable career. As a result, we can come to look down on some skills, talents, and aptitudes as less significant and others as overly significant. For example,



it's not uncommon for young Christians to see ministry or missions as the *ideal* vocations. As if a formal career in ministry would sanctify your life in ways that "secular" vocations could not. We forget that God is the one who sanctifies us, not our career choices. Seeing *reality* for what it is means seeing *beyond* society's expectations.

Another aspect of seeing reality is taking into account the potential to pay your bills and give generously to others. While the love of money is the root of all kinds of evils (1 Timothy 6:10), it's also true that money can be used to bless others. So it's not even inherently selfish to desire a well-paying career. At the very least, you ought to take an honest look at the economy and evaluate which careers will pay enough for you to provide for yourself and others.

Finally, it's good to find work that brings you pleasure. All work is laborious by definition, but not all work is *drudgery*. A good job will fill you with a sense of the purposefulness of your labor and satisfaction at a job well done. Those feelings can carry you through the times of drudgery. The key is that your labor must have some definite, meaningful end. Jobs which require you to work without a clear, obtainable goal that helps someone in some way tend to drain us. We can work them for a time, but only a time. This standard means that you can do what is referred to as "menial" labor and find great fulfillment or do highly technical labor and feel empty. What matters is the purposefulness of the work. That's what will give you long-term satisfaction.

For example, knowing that your work in a grocery store is helping to feed families with healthy foods while treating them with respect and dignity as full human beings can be deeply satisfying work. Your labor *does* something meaningful. Whereas realistically, some occupations just ask us to produce meaningless objects that don't serve the good of our neighbors and end up in



a landfill somewhere. I can think of many mobile phone games, for example, that are incredibly mindless, addictive distractions designed to get people to spend money they don't have. There is nothing redemptive or loving about such careers, there is no deeper purpose, and therefore nothing deeply satisfying about working these jobs.

As important as these three questions are, we need to add a fourth: Is this work *good* for my neighbor and honoring to God? The theologian Richard Baxter made this point when he declared: “The *publick welfare*, or the good of many, is to be valued above our own. Every man therefore is bound to do all the good he can to others, especially for the Church and Commonwealth: And this is not done by *Idleness*, but by *Labour!*”²¹ You may be particularly skilled at the designing of video gambling machines—a career that I’m sure pays well and which brings you deep satisfaction as you invent, design, and build new machines—but since your work will only be a drain on the lives of others, this is not a worthy pursuit. It’s neither honoring to God nor is it edifying to your fellow image bearers. On the contrary, it preys on their addictions and ruins lives.

The rest of the world is going to fervently insist that the main goal of a career is to bring personal pleasure. Sometimes this pleasure takes the form of the satisfaction that your labor will “change the world.” But too often “changing the world” is just a corporate slogan to justify greed. After all, social media “changed the world” and that came with profound global mental health consequences. Personal pleasure can’t be the ultimate good for Christians who are pursuing work. We are called to love our neighbor with our labor, and anything less than that standard is unacceptable. This goes beyond a “do no harm” ethic, where we choose a career that suits us and then ask if it harms our neighbor in some measurable way. Instead, the effect of a career on our



neighbors should be the *first* question we ask as we survey reality. And doing so will mean that we have to reject jobs and careers that otherwise we might embrace.

These four questions make up the good of work, but not all of these questions have equal importance. There may be times in your life where you need to work a job that brings you no immediate joy but which pays your bills, blesses your neighbor, and is one at which you have some skill. Understanding these priorities is the definition of prudence. Or you might work a job that barely pays your bills but gives you great personal satisfaction and is a significant benefit to your community. When considering a job, ask the questions in this order:

1. Is this good for my neighbor and honoring to God?
2. Can I support myself on this salary?
3. Am I gifted in the skills necessary for this job?
4. Will this job bring me deep, meaningful satisfaction?²²

Once you answer these questions, you can successfully weed out many potential careers, and the problem of choice paralysis is reduced somewhat. But realistically, in the West, most of us are still going to have many career options available. You have surveyed the reality of your career options, you have identified the good of work, and now this is where the real work of choosing shows up.

You must learn to accept that you have many good options, and you can't choose them all. There might be three great careers open to you, or within one career you might get five great job offers. More likely, you'll receive two job offers that involve considerable tradeoffs and one graduate school acceptance letter. Both jobs meet all four criteria, but they require you to move away from friends and family, or to take a pay cut, or accept new, daunting responsibilities. It's not uncommon to experience having many



potentially good options for life choices and yet none of them are without significant tradeoffs. Remember that Jesus had to use prudence to decide between the good of his ministry schedule and the good of honoring his mother. He made a judgment and acted resolutely.

Weigh the tradeoffs, count the costs, deliberate with wise counsel, but *make a judgment and rest in it*. Don't worry about missing out on other opportunities or closing doors by opening a door. If you are not your own but belong to God—and you do—then your life is not validated and vindicated by making the Right Life Choices. You aren't looking for the One Right Career to justify you. So you have the freedom to make a choice, follow through with it, and see where it leads. Be resolute. Choose something that honors God, blesses your neighbor, pays your bills, involves your skills, and brings you satisfaction, if you can, and go with it. Realistically, you won't know whether it will bring you real satisfaction until you've worked a job for a few years. You won't even know how skilled you are at it until you have time to develop those skills. In other words, you can't be certain. You can never be certain, but you don't have to be. Remember what Pieper said, you must act *before* you have “absolute certainty.”²³ You just need to look at the real-world information (as opposed to what we imagine) and make a resolute decision.

Maybe you'll get it wrong. That's okay too. This needs to be stressed. It's okay to choose the wrong job or to get stuck in the wrong career path for a while. You'll survive it. Many people try a career for a while and shift into a new field when it doesn't work out for them. In fact, you're not going to be good at your career when you first start out. That's normal. Keep at it. But if it doesn't work for you after a reasonable amount of time, it's okay to move on.



This kind of flexibility is especially important in a fast-changing economy. If you can start a career and stay in it for forty years, that's wonderful, but most of us will have to change careers at some point. Accepting that makes it easier for us to choose a career in the first place. Yes, you will never get the time back if you start a career in marketing and have to restart for a career in medical billing, but you are never starting from square one. The experiences you had in your first career will be valuable for your growth as a person and specifically as an employee even if the new career field is radically different.

Hold your career loosely. Devote yourself to your work. Work heartily unto the Lord, but accept that a career is not a covenant. We'll consider when it's prudent to move on from a commitment at the end of this chapter.

One of the most meaningful and fulfilling career choices you can make is to not pursue a traditional career at all, but to be a stay-at-home parent. Or maybe you stay at home to care for your aging parents or grandparents or an ill relative. If the world's career standards are correct, then sacrificing your prime working years to care for another human being is a massive waste of potential, and what we really should do is devote ourselves even more intensely to our careers and pay someone else to care for our children, parents, or our sick family members. But the world's standards aren't oriented toward the good, so they are not prudent. Instead of caring for someone else being a waste of opportunity, it is the fulfillment of some of our most human drives and capabilities. We have the ability to sacrifice our desires and preferences for the good of others. We can do that in a career or by opting out of a traditional career altogether.

I don't bring this up to guilt anyone who chooses to use childcare or assisted living for the elderly. Instead, I want to open up the possibility of not using those services. In most cases



this practically means living on a single income, lowering your standard of living, and devoting most of your time to caring for humans. I think that our culture has swung so far in the direction of independence and self-achievement that for many people the idea of staying home with children, the elderly, or the sick is unimaginable. Collectively, we need to make these basic human practices imaginable again. And that starts with normalizing these choices and honoring those who make them. There are many subtle ways in which we tend to minimize or denigrate those who choose, or are required, to stay at home. We expect a certain standard of living for everyone and are surprised when those living on a single income fail to meet that standard. We subtly shame those who can't participate in the solidly middle-class lifestyle.

In the evangelical church it's fairly common to praise stay-at-home mothers as the model of motherhood while also treating stay-at-home mothers as socially boring. This is, after all, the impression society gives us—what is interesting is the workplace. What is interesting is making money. How much money you make tends to define how prestigious your job is, which tends to define how interesting you are. This is deeply ingrained in our culture. But this ought not be so.

Particularly within the church, the choice to forgo a career and financial gain in order to care for another human being ought to not just be praised as virtuous in the abstract, but as *interesting*. People who make this choice should be perceived as compelling, fascinating, vibrant contributors to a community, because they are. But that is often not the case. I want to do something difficult here. I want to advocate on the one hand for being a full-time caregiver and admonish all of us to elevate our estimation of caregivers, while on the other hand I want to acknowledge that those who choose this path will almost certainly be treated

unfairly. Your work will be minimized. Your perspectives will be trivialized. You will be perceived as boring and unimportant by a significant part of our community. On top of all this, you will suffer a loss of income. I'm sorry. This will be the burden some of you must bear for a time. But know that your work is important, that you are interesting and worthwhile. And do the good work before you anyway, in devotion to God. Do it resolutely. And do what you can to surround yourself with people who see your value and the value of your labor. Support and encourage each other in your works.

A similar thing could be said for many careers. There are many careers in the modern world that are valuable, meaningful, and important but are denigrated or dismissed as trivial. Choosing to work as an elementary school teacher in a public school does not come with much prestige, but the work you are doing is so important. The same can be said for electricians and plumbers, mail carriers and lawn care professionals. There is great dignity in your labor if you labor unto the Lord and to the edification of your neighbor. If we practice our faith rightly, churches should be alternative spaces where occupations are not honored based on the cultural prestige or income they generate, but on how they honor God and love our neighbors. If the prudent career for you is one the world denigrates, do not take that into account. Make the prudent decision and you will be rewarded.

Marriage. Choosing a spouse is not like choosing a career. Marriage is a covenant for life, whereas careers can change multiple times. But some of the same pitfalls face us in choosing a marriage partner. We experience the same pressure to find The Right One and the same idea that through it we can find existential justification. Some of this we will deal with in the seventh chapter, which focuses on love as a virtue. There we will consider



the nature of love and how to love well. But here I want to focus on the *prudent choice* to love someone specific for life.

Since there is so much confusion about what marriage *is*, I think it's helpful to begin by establishing what we are talking about before we begin seeing the reality of a romantic situation. Instead of first asking what the reality of any specific relationship is, we can ask, What is the *good* of marriage? What was it created for? Part of the answer is that it is “not good that the man should be alone” (Genesis 2:18). We were created for community, and while some people will choose to fulfill that need for community through friendship and singleness (which is a God-honoring choice!), the primary means God created to meet this need is through marriage between a man and a woman. God also says that Eve was created to “help” Adam. So part of the purpose of marriage is mutual aid through this difficult life. Everything from practical help managing a household to emotional support and spiritual encouragement—we all need these things from someone, whether it is a close friend or a spouse.

In marriage we enact a living metaphor for the relationship between Christ and his church, this is another part of its *good*. Through marriage we learn in an embodied way about Christ's love for his church. We learn what it means to sacrifice for one another, to care for the spiritual life of another. Of course it is not necessary to be married in order to understand this metaphor, but I do think that there is a level of embodied understanding that comes through marriage, just as farmers better understand farming parables in the Bible.

In marriage God has provided for the continuation of his creation through procreation. Children should be seen as one of the main purposes of marriage. This is part of the *good* of marriage. Not an incidental personal preference that you use to decorate your life or marriage, but at the core of married life. This doesn't



mean that all married couples will have children. For medical reasons and other extenuating circumstances there are situations when it is not wise or possible. But it does mean that those in the church should view parenting as a central purpose of marriage. It is one of the ways we are “not our own” in this life. We belong to our children and our spouse. As with getting married, there is no “right time” to begin having children. You’ll never be “ready” for the reasonability, the burden, and the joy. It is a miracle which you accept as a gift from God, and you shepherd that gift with prudence.

Marriage between a man and a woman is also the one place where sex finds a proper expression. Here both spouses care for each other and are drawn into a closer one-flesh union with each other.

Now that we see what the good of marriage is, we are ready to look at the reality of a romantic situation. Our goal here is to look for a fitness for marriage. When I say “fitness for marriage,” I don’t mean that you must be *certain* that you are “ready” for marriage. Most of the best things in life you have to jump into without being fully ready. You can’t be truly ready until you jump. This is true for having children, for example. Instead, I mean that you have sought wise counsel from elders and friends who have encouraged you that you have the character to be in a lifelong, committed relationship right now.

Remember, the key to prudence is seeing reality as it is and making a committed decision based on that. There are several aspects of a potential marriage that you should examine before you make a commitment. It may be that there are major areas of maturity you need to work on. Take an honest assessment of your spiritual maturity, your responsibility, your ability to deal with conflict, your readiness to apologize and admit mistakes—these are elements of personal maturity that you should survey



in yourself with the help of close friends and loved ones. After you have checked the reality of your own fitness, you ought to consider your potential spouse. What are their weaknesses? How do they respond to criticism? Are they willing to apologize and admit their mistakes? Are they committed to the Lord? How do they handle adversity? These are important questions to ask. Your goal is not to find *perfection*, but to see reality as it is. Recognize their faults and flaws and sins, not out of spite or condescension, but out of prudence. You are not marrying to save someone, but to form a union.

Once you have assessed the fitness of you and your potential spouse, you need to consider the reality of living together. Can you afford it? Where will you live? If you can afford to pay your bills and find housing, then money should not hold you back. Often people allow a middle-class standard of living to define what is acceptable, which prevents them from getting married or having children for fear of “missing out.” As a result, they miss out on marriage or having children. Be prudent, but don’t be held back by demanding middle-class standards of living. School should also not prevent you from getting married in most situations. Getting married while in college is quite doable. It may be hard, but it’s doable. Waiting for the “optimal” time to get married (or have children) may mean you hesitate indefinitely.

Don’t get married just because you want to have sex and you feel like you can’t control yourself. Even within marriage you must learn to live chastely. You don’t get to have sex whenever and however you want in marriage. And there will be stretches, maybe even long stretches, when you can’t have sex within marriage, even healthy marriages. Due to stress, health, travel, housing, children, and life in general, you’ll have to learn chastity within marriage (we’ll talk more about this in chapter four). You’ll have to learn to live with burning passion, which means that the habits

and practices you develop *before* marriage will be important for a healthy, righteous sexual relationship within marriage. And while I believe there is a great beauty in marrying young, I don't think marrying for the sake of sex is wise or loving. I have known more than a few marriages that ended badly because they were begun badly.

In marriage, as with all prudent decisions, resoluteness is a key. The prudent person sees a situation clearly (or as clearly as it can be seen) and makes a resolute decision, which means that they are not tossed about by every doubt. They make a choice, and they walk that choice out, facing the consequences of their decision, both good and bad. Resoluteness does not exclude the possibility of divorce in some tragic situations, but neither does it needlessly seek it. In a society that constantly reminds us that we have outside options, resoluteness is a sign of deep maturity and commitment, and it requires a profound faith in God and his providential guidance. Not a faith that we will only make the right decisions, but that God works all things together for our good, because we love him. Our task is to be people of our word, faithful to the choices we've made. Not quick to doubt or slow to commit.

Once you have done all this, will you have found the One Right Person for you? No. At least, not necessarily. Lord willing, you will have discovered someone you can build a beautiful, godly marriage with, but in all statistical likelihood, a better match exists for you somewhere out there in the world. And that doesn't matter. If you continue looking for the ideal option, you will choose nothing and you will grow bitter at the opposite sex. And after you get married, you will have to accept that you will meet interesting, beautiful people who could be wonderful spouses and you'll have to deny the urge to pursue them and remain committed to your vows. There's beauty in obeying the vows you

have sworn before God to be faithful to your spouse. And there's beauty in the imperfection of your spouse.

Yes, you can imagine a better spouse, and maybe you even know of someone who embodies those desirable qualities (although I suspect they aren't as ideal as you believe!), but the spouse before you is beautiful in their uniqueness. This is one of the lessons of contentedness—that the frailness of the person or thing or situation before us is an opportunity for us to delight in its uniqueness. This is especially true of people. So, no. At the end of this process of prudent discernment, you probably won't find your One True Love (who is Jesus anyway), but Lord willing you will find a beautiful, imperfect spouse to spend your life with.

THE SUNK COST FALLACY

While prudence calls us to be resolute with our judgments, we still must be wary of what's called the "sunk cost fallacy." Being resolute does not necessarily require you to stay committed to a bad decision. That is not prudence. That is folly. Let's say you make a decision based on your best understanding of a situation, and you act resolutely to follow that decision through, but over time you come to see reality more clearly. And what you thought you knew no longer holds true. Prudence demands that you act on that new information rather than stay committed to a misguided decision.

The sunk cost fallacy is the belief that since you have already invested in a choice, it's better to stay committed to that choice even if you have evidence that it's a bad investment. For example, you may begin a relationship with someone and over time it becomes clear that the other person is not mature enough for marriage or children or a serious relationship, but since you have been with this person for six months or a year, you feel compelled to stick it out. That's the sunk cost fallacy. Or perhaps you choose a



major in college and take several classes in that major only to discover that you lack any talent in that field and find no joy in your studies. The sunk cost fallacy is the belief that you must stay with that major and invest *more* time and effort into something that you are not good at and brings you no joy. Prudence asks us to reevaluate our beliefs when significant new information becomes available. That doesn't mean that we are constantly reevaluating our choices. But when significant new information becomes available, we weigh it against our decision and in community.

For most of us, the temptation will not be to stay committed to bad decisions, but to constantly doubt all our decisions, because we live in a society that constantly pulls us toward inconsistency, dissatisfaction, and doubt. We live in a society in which alternatives are always prized over contentedness, in which contentedness is equated with laziness, apathy, and a failure to pursue your dreams. Such an environment invites us to second-guess ourselves, to always be expanding, adapting, evolving, maximizing, and optimizing. The same spirit that drives corporate expansion drives our wills, if we allow it.

Prudence, in such a world, means balancing several competing values. Once again, it first of all involves an accurate, honest view of a situation. Second, it requires us to make a decision and act on the basis of that accurate view. Third, we must be resolute in our decision, not constantly wavering or flagging, but confident and oath-keeping. Fourth, we must be willing to reevaluate a decision if we come to understand that our view of a situation was not actually accurate. And all of this must be done with a view toward the good.

As we have seen in the examples of careers and marriage, the habitual practice of prudence can help us make difficult and important life decisions in a way that glorifies God and brings us joy. It can also help us make day-to-day life decisions that we might



have been deciding on instinct, passion, or habit. We don't need to be stuck in the trap of choice paralysis. We have the freedom to act resolutely with the aid of the Holy Spirit. We just need to devote the time and have the courage to deliberate, desire the good, make a judgment, and act resolutely.



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