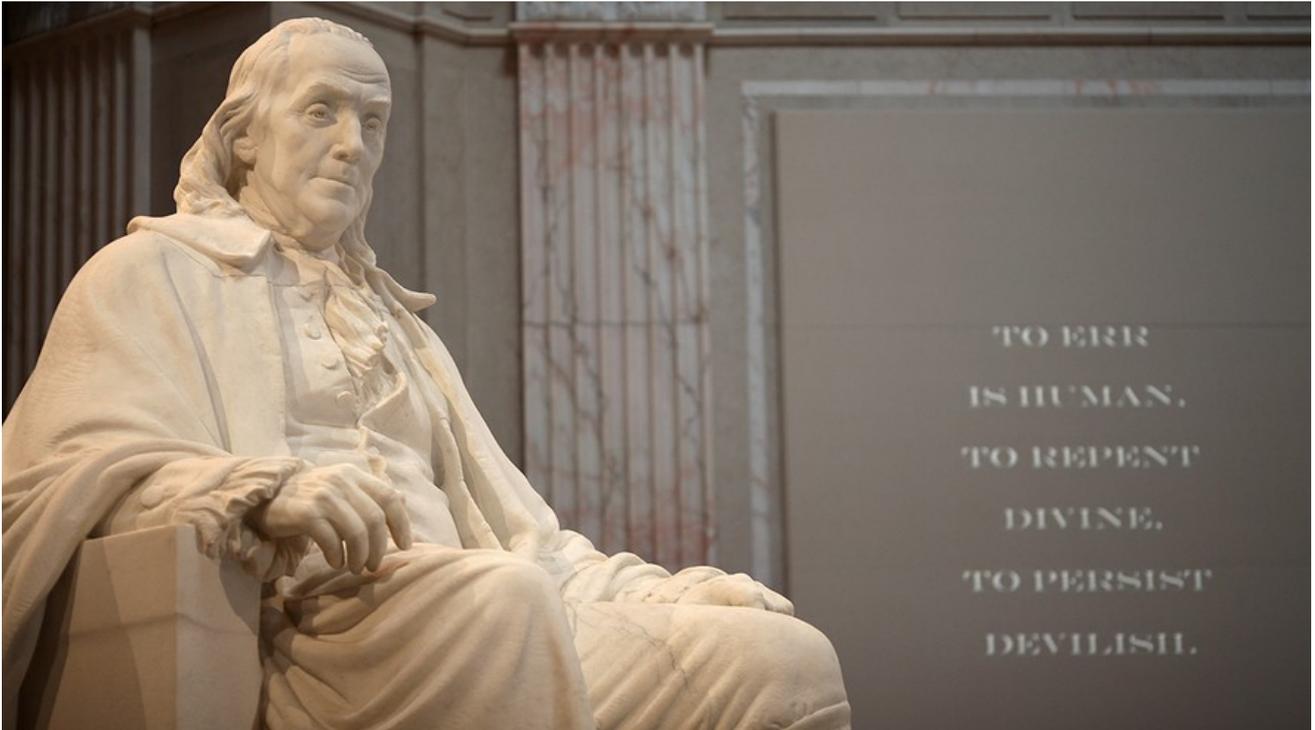


Primary Sources: Benjamin Franklin lists 13 virtues, tries to live by them

By Benjamin Franklin on 12.19.16

Word Count **1,432**



The Benjamin Franklin Memorial in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Terraxplorer

Editor's Note: Benjamin Franklin is one of the Founding Fathers of America. He is known for signing the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, as well as for his foreign service and many inventions. His autobiography, taken from his writings between 1771 and 1790, is commonly called "The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin." It includes details about his virtues for self-improvement. Franklin was in his early 20s when he first wrote about these virtues, but he was 78 when he wrote the following.

It was about this time, around 1728, I conceiv'd the bold and arduous project of arriving at moral perfection. I wish'd to live without committing any fault at any time; I would conquer all that either natural inclination, custom, or company might lead me into. As I knew, or thought I knew, what was right and wrong, I did not see why I might not always do the one and avoid the other.

But I soon found I had undertaken a task of more difficulty than I had imagined. While my care was employ'd in guarding against one fault, I was often surprised by another; habit took the advantage of inattention; inclination was sometimes too strong for reason. I concluded, at length, that the mere speculative conviction that it was our interest to be

completely virtuous, was not sufficient to prevent our slipping; and that the contrary habits must be broken, and good ones acquired and established, before we can have any dependence on a steady, uniform rectitude of conduct. For this purpose I therefore contrived the following method.

In the various enumerations of the moral virtues I had met with in my reading, I found the catalogue more or less numerous, as different writers included more or fewer ideas under the same name. Temperance, for example, was by some confined to eating and drinking, while by others it was extended to mean the moderating of every other pleasure, appetite, inclination, or passion, bodily or mental, even to our avarice and ambition. I propos'd to myself, for the sake of clearness, to use rather more names, with fewer ideas annex'd to each, than a few names with more ideas....

My list of virtues contain'd at first but twelve; but a Quaker friend having kindly informed me that I was generally thought proud; that my pride show'd itself frequently in conversation; that I was not content with being in the right when discussing any point, but was overbearing, and rather insolent, of which he convinc'd me by mentioning several instances; I determin'd endeavouring to cure myself, if I could, of this vice or folly among the rest, and I added Humility to my list, giving an extensive meaning to the word.... In reality, there is, perhaps, no one of our natural passions so hard to subdue as pride. Disguise it, struggle with it, beat it down, stifle it, mortify it as much as one pleases, it is still alive, and will every now and then peep out and show itself; you will see it, perhaps, often in this history....

I included under thirteen names of virtues all that at that time occur'd to me as necessary or desirable, and annexed to each a short precept, which fully express'd the extent I gave to its meaning. These names of virtues, with their precepts, were

1. Temperance. Eat not to dullness; drink not to elevation.
2. Silence. Speak not but what may benefit others or yourself; avoid trifling conversation.
3. Order. Let all your things have their places; let each part of your business have its time.
4. Resolution. Resolve to perform what you ought; perform without fail what you resolve.
5. Frugality. Make no expense but to do good to others or yourself; i.e., waste nothing.
6. Industry. Lose no time; be always employ'd in something useful; cut off all unnecessary actions.
7. Sincerity. Use no hurtful deceit; think innocently and justly, and, if you speak, speak accordingly.
8. Justice. Wrong none by doing injuries, or omitting the benefits that are your duty.
9. Moderation. Avoid extreams; forbear resenting injuries so much as you think they deserve.

10. Cleanliness. Tolerate no uncleanliness in body, cloaths, or habitation.
11. Tranquility. Be not disturbed at trifles, or at accidents common or unavoidable.
12. Chastity. Rarely use venery but for health or offspring, never to dullness, weakness, or the injury of your own or another's peace or reputation.
13. Humility. Imitate Jesus and Socrates.

My intention being to acquire the Habitude of all these virtues, I judg'd it would be well not to distract my attention by attempting the whole at once, but to fix it on one of them at a time; and, when I should be master of that, then to proceed to another, and so on, till I should have gone thro' the thirteen; and, as the previous acquisition of some might facilitate the acquisition of certain others, I arrang'd them with that view, as they stand above.

Temperance first, as it tends to procure that coolness and clearness of head, which is so necessary where constant vigilance was to be kept up, and guard maintained against the unremitting attraction of ancient habits, and the force of perpetual temptations. This being acquir'd and establish'd, Silence would be more easy; and my desire being to gain knowledge at the same time that I improv'd in virtue, and considering that in conversation it was obtain'd rather by the use of the ears than of the tongue, and therefore wishing to break a habit I was getting into of prattling, punning, and joking, which only made me acceptable to trifling company, I gave Silence the second place.

This and the next, Order, I expected would allow me more time for attending to my project and my studies.

Resolution, once become habitual, would keep me firm in my endeavors to obtain all the subsequent virtues;

Frugality and Industry freeing me from my remaining debt, and producing affluence and independence, would make more easy the practice of Sincerity and Justice, etc., etc.

Conceiving then, that, agreeably to the advice of Pythagoras in his Golden Verses, 40-44, daily examination would be necessary, I contrived the following method for conducting that examination.

I made a little book, in which I allotted a page for each of the virtues. I rul'd each page with red ink, so as to have seven columns, one for each day of the week, marking each column with a letter for the day. I cross'd these columns with thirteen red lines, marking the beginning of each line with the first letter of one of the virtues, on which line, and in its proper column, I might mark, by a little black spot, every fault I found upon examination to have been committed respecting that virtue upon that day.

I determined to give a week's strict attention to each of the virtues successively. Thus, in the first week, my great guard was to avoid every offence against Temperance, leaving the other virtues to their ordinary chance, only marking every evening the faults of the day.

Thus, if in the first week I could keep my first line, marked T, clear of spots, I suppos'd the habit of that virtue so much strengthen'd and its opposite weaken'd, that I might venture extending my attention to include the next, and for the following week keep both lines clear of spots.

Proceeding thus to the last, I could go thro' a course compleat in thirteen weeks, and four courses in a year....I should be happy in viewing a clean book, after a thirteen weeks' daily examination....

My scheme of Order gave me the most trouble; and I found that, tho' it might be practicable where a man's business was such as to leave him the disposition of his time, that of a journeyman printer, for instance, it was not possible to be exactly observed by a master, who must mix with the world, and often receive people of business at their own hours. Order, too, with regard to places for things, papers, etc., I found extremely difficult to acquire....In truth, I myself incorrigible with respect to Order; and now I am grown old, and my memory bad, I feel very sensibly the want of it. But, on the whole, tho' I never arrived at the perfection I had been so ambitious of obtaining, but fell far short of it, yet I was, by the endeavor, a better and a happier man than I otherwise should have been if I had not attempted it....

[Thus far written at Passy, 1784.]

Quiz

- 1 Which of these matters is left uncertain in the article?
- (A) which of the moral virtues listed by Ben Franklin proved the most difficult for him to achieve
 - (B) whether Ben Franklin eventually achieved his goal of moral perfection
 - (C) why Ben Franklin thought it was important to live without committing any fault at any time
 - (D) how Ben Franklin attempted to assess his progress in achieving moral perfection

- 2 Read the excerpt below from the article.

My list of virtues contain'd at first but twelve; but a Quaker friend having kindly informed me that I was generally thought proud; that my pride show'd itself frequently in conversation; that I was not content with being in the right when discussing any point, but was overbearing, and rather insolent, of which he convinc'd me by mentioning several instances; I determined endeavouring to cure myself, if I could, of this vice or folly among the rest, and I added Humility to my list, giving an extensive meaning to the word....

Which conclusion is BEST supported by the excerpt?

- (A) Franklin requested that others inform him of his faults.
- (B) Franklin was initially angry that his friend viewed him as proud.
- (C) Franklin was open to hearing about his faults from others.
- (D) Franklin objected at first to the criticism he got from his friend.

- 3 Read the sentence below from the third paragraph of the article.

In the various enumerations of the moral virtues I had met with in my reading, I found the catalogue more or less numerous, as different writers included more or fewer ideas under the same name.

Which word could replace "catalogue" without altering the meaning of the sentence?

- (A) list
 - (B) publication
 - (C) requirement
 - (D) examination
- 4 Which of the following BEST expresses the tone in the last sentence? What evidence supports this?
- (A) instructive: I otherwise should have been if I had not attempted it
 - (B) contented: I was, by the endeavor, a better and a happier man
 - (C) obsessed: I never arrived at the perfection I had been so ambitious of obtaining
 - (D) regretful: I never arrived at the perfection I had been so ambitious of obtaining, but fell far short of it

Answer Key

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