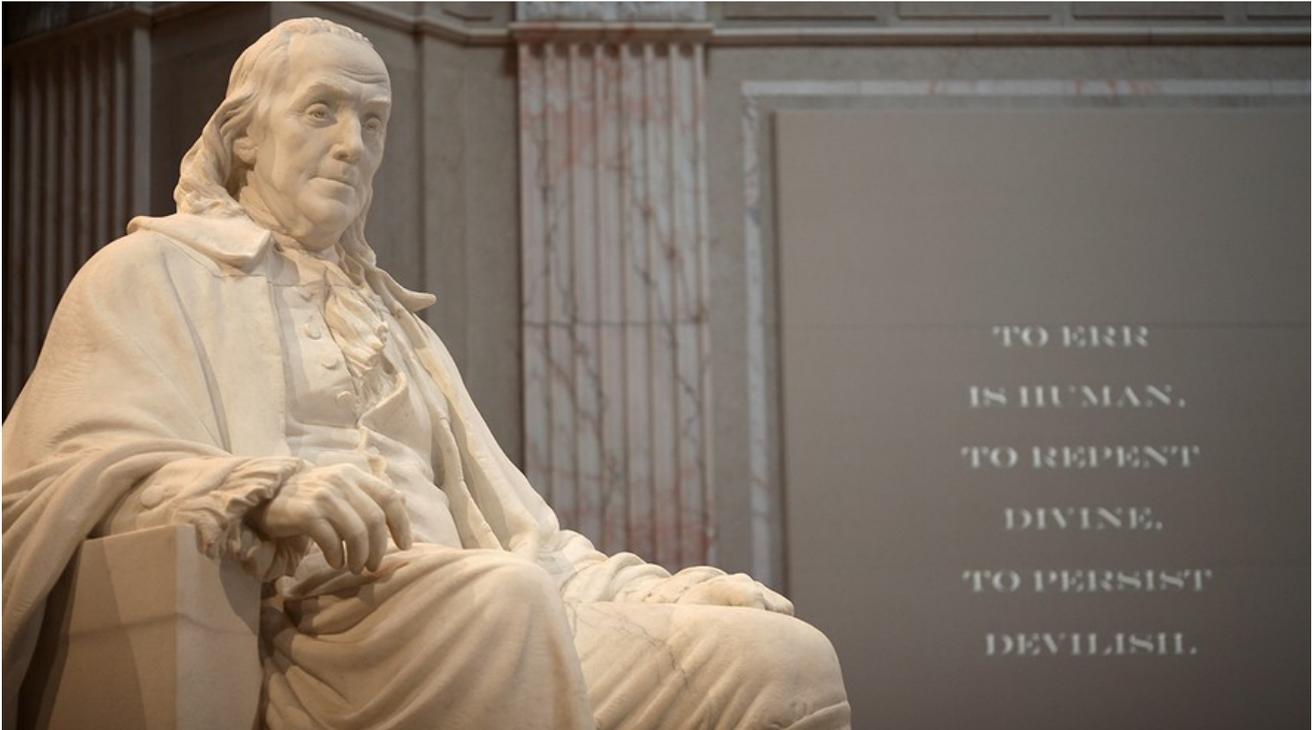


# Primary Sources: Benjamin Franklin lists 13 virtues, tries to live by them

By Benjamin Franklin, adapted by Newsela staff on 12.19.16

Word Count **980**



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. A virtue is a personal quality that is considered good and moral by most. Franklin was in his early 20s when he first wrote about these virtues, but he was 78 when he wrote the following.*

## **"Project To Becoming Morally Perfect"**

It was around the year 1728 when I thought up the bold and difficult project to becoming morally perfect. I wanted to live without committing any fault at any time. Since I knew, or thought I knew, what was right and wrong, I did not see why I might not always choose to do the right thing, and not the other.

But I soon found I had undertaken a task of more difficulty than I had imagined. As I carefully guarded against one mistake, I was often surprised by another, and I realized that wanting to be completely good was not enough. My old habits had to be broken and new ones created in order to create good conduct. For this reason, I developed the following method, writing a list of the moral virtues I wished to achieve.

## **"I Was Considered too Proud"**

I thought my list of virtues was complete, until a friend kindly informed me that I was considered too proud by many, and that my pride revealed itself frequently in conversation. He added that I was not content to merely be right in discussing a point, but was often rather bossy and rude. I decided to cure myself of this vice, as well, if I could, so I added the virtue Humility to my list. But it is hard to suppress pride. You may try to disguise it, struggle with it, or beat it down, but it is still alive and it will every now and then show itself. Perhaps you will see it in this history.

I included on my list those virtues which seemed most desirable to me, and added to each a short idea that fully expressed its meaning. The virtues were:

## **"Resolve To Do What You Should"**

Temperance. Do not eat so much that you become sluggish, and do not drink too much, either.

Silence. Only speak when what you are going to say will benefit others or yourself. Avoid trivial, silly conversations.

Order. Put everything in its place, and give each part of your business its proper time in your day.

Resolution. Resolve to do what you should, and always do what you resolve.

Frugality. Only spend money on things that will benefit you or others. Waste nothing.

## **"Think Fairly And Justly"**

Industry. Waste no time, and always be working on something useful. Cut off all unnecessary actions.

Sincerity. Do not use hurtful lies or tricks. Think fairly and justly and, when you speak, speak with this in mind.

Justice. Do no injury to others, and do not avoid your responsibilities to others.

Moderation. Avoid extremes, and don't overreact.

Cleanliness. Keep your body, clothes, and home clean.

## **"Do Not Be Upset By The Little Things"**

Tranquility. Do not be upset by the little things in life, or by common or unavoidable accidents.

Humility. Try to be less proud and more like Jesus and Socrates.

My intention was to develop all of these virtues, but I decided it would not be best to work on them all at once, but rather to focus on one of them at a time. Then, after I had achieved one, I could move on to the next, and so on until I had achieved them all.

Temperance is first because it tends to result in coolness and clearness of head, which is so necessary in putting an end to old habits. This being done, Silence would be easier to achieve.

Silence and the next, Order, I expected would allow me more time for working on my projects and studies.

## **"I Made A Little Book"**

Resolution, once it became a habit, would keep me focused as I practiced the next set of virtues.

Frugality and Industry would eventually free me from my debts and help me earn more money, which would make it even easier to practice Sincerity and Justice, and so on.

I decided that daily record keeping would be necessary for evaluating my progress.

So, I made a little book, in which I set up a page for each of the virtues. I drew seven columns on each page, one for each day of the week, so that I might mark the proper column with a little black spot if I failed to achieve that virtue on that day.

## **"Order Gave Me The Most Trouble"**

I decided to focus on one virtue a week at first. In the first week, I worked only on Temperance. If I could keep my first line, marked T, clear of spots, I would be ready to turn my attention to Silence next.

In the end, Order gave me the most trouble; and I also found that, as a man of business, it was not possible to be exactly observing all the virtues and still be mixing with the world of business.

In truth, I could not change myself when it came to the virtue Order, and now that I am older and my memory is bad, I very sensibly desire to be better at this virtue.

But, though I never did achieve perfection, and in fact fell far short of it, still I was a better and a happier man than I would have been if I had not attempted this project.

[Thus far written at Passy, 1784.]

## Quiz

- 1 Which of these sections of the article explains why Franklin chose to give his attention to only one virtue at a time?
- (A) "Project To Becoming Morally Perfect"
  - (B) "I Was Considered Too Proud"
  - (C) "Do Not Be Upset By The Little Things"
  - (D) "I Made A Little Book"

- 2 Select the paragraph from the section "Order Gave Me The Most Trouble" that explains how Franklin personally benefited from trying to be virtuous, even though he sometimes failed.

- 3 Read the selection below from the section "Think Fairly And Justly."

*Industry. Waste no time, and always be working on something useful. Cut off all unnecessary actions.*

Based on the selection, what does Franklin mean by "industry"?

- (A) being helpful
  - (B) working productively
  - (C) owning a business
  - (D) making a lot of money
- 4 Read the selection below from the section "Think Fairly And Justly."

*Sincerity. Do not use hurtful lies or tricks. Think fairly and justly and, when you speak, speak with this in mind.*

Based on the section, what is another word that means the same as "sincerity"?

- (A) simplicity
- (B) remembrance
- (C) truthfulness
- (D) generosity

## Answer Key

- 1 Which of these sections of the article explains why Franklin chose to give his attention to only one virtue at a time?
- (A) "Project To Becoming Morally Perfect"
  - (B) "I Was Considered Too Proud"
  - (C) "Do Not Be Upset By The Little Things"**
  - (D) "I Made A Little Book"

- 2 Select the paragraph from the section "Order Gave Me The Most Trouble" that explains how Franklin personally benefited from trying to be virtuous, even though he sometimes failed.

**Paragraph 27:**

**But, though I never did achieve perfection, and in fact fell far short of it, still I was a better and a happier man than I would have been if I had not attempted this project.**

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