

## Document 2: Benjamin Franklin and the Thirteen Virtues



Ben Franklin once said that “only a virtuous people are capable of freedom.”

He grew up as one of 17 children in a poor family in Boston and worked in his older brother's printing shop as an apprentice. At the age of 17, he left Boston to make his own way in Philadelphia, becoming a successful printer and leading citizen through hard work, intelligence, thrift, and skill.

As a civic activist, Franklin played a central role in establishing essential services such as the fire department, postal service (forerunner to the modern US Postal Service), a hospital, a library, and an academy (which later became the University of Pennsylvania). Franklin was known as the "first American" because he exemplified the virtues that were admired and shared by his contemporaries. He lived his life consistently with these values, contributing to the advancement of society and the well-being of his fellow citizens.

Franklin laid out these virtues in his autobiography, which he started writing in 1771, recommending that readers try to master one virtue at a time in pursuit of becoming a better American:

*In the various enumerations of the moral virtues I met 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 every other pleasure, appetite, inclination, or passion, bodily or mental, even to our avarice and ambition. I proposed to myself, for the sake of clearness, to use rather more names, with fewer ideas annexed to each, than a few names with more ideas; and I included under thirteen names of virtues all that at that time occurred to me as necessary or desirable, and annexed to each a short precept, which expressed 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 employed 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 extremes; forbear resenting injuries so much as you think they deserve.*
10. *Cleanliness*  
*Tolerate no uncleanness in body, clothes, or habitation.*
11. *Tranquillity*  
*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 judged 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 arranged 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 acquired and established, Silence would be more easy; and my desire being to gain knowledge at the same time that I improved in virtue, and considering that in conversation it was obtained rather by the use of the ears than of the tongue, and therefore wishing to break a habit I was getting into 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 because 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., Conceiving, then, that, agreeably to the advice of Pythagoras in his Garden Verses, daily examination would be necessary, I contrived the following method for conducting that examination...*

Adapted from: <https://www.gcu.edu/blog/criminal-justice-government-and-public-administration/benjamin-franklin-and-civic-virtues>  
and the Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin

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