THE GOOD LIFE
Lessons from Ben Franklin’s 13 Virtues

WHY THIS TOPIC?

- Ben Franklin created these 13 virtues at the age of 20 (!) and practiced them most of his life. He focused on one per week
- I love the diversity and simplicity of his virtues. They cover large and small aspects of the good life :)

WHO’S THE AUTHOR?

Franklin is a fascinating historical figure: a Founding Father and Renaissance Man (scientist, journalist, businessman, statesman), he was well-respected and enormously influential in his time; his writings, teachings, and discoveries deeply improved our lives.

WHAT’S IT ABOUT?

Franklin always carried a booklet with these 13 virtues. Each time he disobeyed a virtue, he’d mark it in his booklet. Since he focused on one virtue per week, he’d complete 4 cycles each year (13 virtues, 52 weeks). Here’s my (loose) interpretation of his virtues:

1. Temperance. Don't overeat or overdrink
2. Silence. Speak only when you have something good to say
3. Order. Organize your life; pay attention to ALL aspects of your work
4. Resolution. Always do what you say you'll do
5. Frugality. Spend little and spend wisely
6. Industry. Use your time wisely; stop doing wasteful things
7. Sincerity. Don't lie; be honest and fair
8. Justice. Don't harm others or ignore your obligations to them
9. Moderation. Avoid extremes; don't hold grudges
10. Cleanliness. Regularly clean your body, your clothes, and your home
11. Tranquility. Don’t get upset at small or unavoidable things
12. Chastity. Only have sex for health or babies, and never hurt others
13. Humility. Be super humble

Here’s a version with Ben’s original wording.

WHAT ARE THE IMPORTANT LESSONS?

Lesson #1: Focus on one thing at a time
Franklin spent each week focused on ONE of his 13 virtues, "leaving all others to ordinary chance." He understood his limits.

QUESTION: What is the one thing you should focus on? How can you remove distractions?

Lesson #2: The details matter
You may think that a wrinkled shirt or messy desk are less important than a project deadline or second date, but they’re all related.

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In professional kitchens the phrase “mise en place” (everything in place) refers to the same principle. A clean and organized office = a clean and organized mind.

QUESTION: If you don’t regularly clean your house or office, how do you feel when it’s finally clean and organized? How can you maintain that feeling?

Lesson #3: Moderation in all things (including moderation!)
We all want to finish that pack of cheetos or hit that 10-minute snooze one more time. But moderation in all things is key to the good life.

This includes moderation itself! Hence the popularity of “binge days” for dieters, or the “Feast of Fools” for clergy and in the Middle Ages (a personal favorite). Having a chance to release yourself - especially in areas that require a lot of discipline - can help you turn a temporary habit into a permanent one.

QUESTION: In what areas do you need more moderation? How/when can you experience release?

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR ME?

- Like Rick Warren’s Purpose-Driven Life (my guide), similar themes are emerging: spend less money and spend it wisely; do and say less (and focus more); be a good person through your words, actions, and thoughts
- Some of this stuff may sound obvious - but it’s incredible reinforcement. Like playing tennis or learning piano, focused repetition is key to building strong habits
- Consistently do small stuff around the house - make my bed, wash the dishes, do my laundry before the basket overflows
- Try not to gossip or spread information I’ve heard which could hurt others, even if its true

GREAT BEN FRANKLIN QUOTES

“We are all born ignorant, but one must work hard to remain stupid.”

“Wine is constant proof that God loves us and loves to see us happy”

“Money has never made man happy, nor will it, there is nothing in its nature to produce happiness. The more of it one has the more one wants.”

“Energy and persistence conquer all things.”

“It is the working man who is the happy man. It is the idle man who is the miserable man.”

RELATED AND INSPIRING CONTENT

- Ben Franklin’s Autobiography, which he himself called Memoirs (link). Snippet: Tricks and treachery are the practice of fools, that don’t have brains enough to be honest.

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• D.H. Lawrence poking fun of Ben Franklin and his too-rigid virtues (link). Snippet: I admire him. I admire his sturdy courage first of all, then his sagacity, then his glimpsing into the thunders of electricity, then his common-sense humour. All the qualities of a great man, and never more than a great citizen. Middle-sized, sturdy, snuff-coloured Doctor Franklin, one of the soundest citizens that ever trod or 'used venery'.

• Walter Isaacson (the leading Franklin biographer and author of Benjamin Franklin: An American Life) talks about Ben (29-min YouTube clip). Snippet: “He was such a spunky, self-made guy”