Benjamin Franklin’s 13 Virtues
Benjamin Franklin 1706 - 1790

You probably know him as one of the Fathers of the United States, a great leader and diplomat. He signed the major documents of the founding of the U.S. including the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. Maybe you know him as an inventor, or as a scientist who flew kites in lightning storms, or as a writer and printing press operator.

But did you know that in 1726, at the age of 20, while on an 80-day ocean voyage from London back to Philadelphia, Benjamin Franklin developed a "Plan" for regulating his future conduct? He was partially motivated by Philippians 4:8 "Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable--if anything is excellent or praiseworthy--think about such things." He followed the plan he created "pretty faithfully" even to the age of 79 (when he wrote about it), and he was even more determined to stick with it for his remaining days because of the happiness he had enjoyed so far by following it.

His "Plan" was made up of 13 virtues, each with short descriptions:

1. Temperance: Eat not to dullness and 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.
5. Frugality: Make no expense but to do good to others or yourself: i.e. Waste nothing.
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.
10. Cleanliness: Tolerate no uncleanness in body, clothes or habitation.
11. 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.
12. Tranquility: Be not disturbed at trifles, or at accidents common or unavoidable.


He committed to giving strict attention to one virtue each week so after 13 weeks he moved through all 13. After 13 weeks he would start the process over again so in one year he would complete the course a total of 4 times.

He tracked his progress by using a little book of 13 charts. At the top of each chart was one of the virtues. The charts had a column for each day of the week and thirteen rows marked with the first letter of each of the 13 virtues. Every evening he would review the day and put a mark (dot) next to each virtue for each fault committed with respect to that virtue for that day.

Naturally, his goal was to live his days and weeks without having to put any marks on his chart. Initially he found himself putting more marks on these pages than he ever imagined, but in time he enjoyed seeing them diminish.

After awhile he went through the series only once per year and then only once in several years until finally omitting them entirely. But he always carried the little book with him as a reminder.

Benjamin Franklin’s 13 virtues are unique and obviously served him well since he is one of the most respected and most accomplished men in the history of the United States.