

The Virtues for Moral Perfection, as Taught by Benjamin Franklin

While still a young lad, the great Benjamin Franklin sought moral perfection. Said he: "I wished to live without committing any fault at any time" (93). Moral perfection is only obtainable if a man resolves to adhere to that which will inspire moral perfection. Franklin lists thirteen virtues, numbered from *Temperance* to *Humility*.

From *The Autobiography and Other Writings* (edited by L. Jesse Lemisch) Franklin writes:

These names and virtues with their precepts were

1. Temperance

Eat not to dulness. Drink not to elevation.

2. Silence

Speak not but what may benefit others or yourself. Avoid trifling conversations.

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. Tranquility

Be not disturbed at trifles or at accidents common or unavoidable.

12. Chastity

Rarely use venery but for health or offspring—never to dulness, weakness, or the injury of your own or another's peace or reputation.

13. Humility

Imitate Jesus and Socrates (94-95).

Colometry:

These names and virtues with their precepts were

Temperance
Eat not to dulness
Drink not to elevation

2
Silence
Speak not but what may benefit others or yourself
Avoid trifling conversations

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

Moral perfection is not *Temperance* (or any other virtue) by itself. Rather, *Temperance* is *one* piece of a “moral perfection pie.” (See “The Moral Perfection Pie.”) Moral perfection is not any *one* virtue. Rather, moral perfection includes *all* thirteen virtues (and then some).

Believing each virtue to be equally important, I began asking questions concerning the connections between the virtues. I considered questions such as...

Can a man be humble without being temperate?

Can a man be ordered without being moderate, industrious, or frugal?

Can a man be chaste without being clean?

Generally speaking, *Humility* follows after *Temperance*; *Moderation*, *Industry*, and *Frugality* follow after *Order*; and *Chastity* follows after *Cleanliness*.

The humble man is often temperate (and the temperate man is often humble). The ordered man is often moderate, industrious, and frugal (although not necessarily in that order). And likewise, the chaste man is often clean (and the clean man is often chaste). So, in other words, virtue encourages virtue.

Virtue begets virtue.

Each virtue is *equally important* and each virtue is *connected* with every other virtue. I believe that Franklin’s list is numbered for the convenience of his readers.

Verb Usage:

In his list, Franklin uses the following verbs:

1. “Eat not.... Drink not....”
2. “Speak not.... Avoid....”
3. “Let.... Let....”
4. “Resolve.... Perform....”
5. “Make no.... ..waste nothing.”
6. “Lose no.... Be always employed.... Cut off....”
7. “Use no.... Think...speak....”
8. “Wrong....”
9. “Avoid.... Forbear....”
10. “Tolerate no....”
11. “Be not....”
12. “Rarely use....”
13. “Imitate....”

Most of these verbs are denominal verbs, such as “Resolve,” “Perform,” “Tolerate,” and “Imitate.” Every sentence, with the exception of one, begins with a verb. (The exception reads,

“Rarely use....”) (“Rarely” is an adverb, but it is followed by the verb “use.”)

Franklin used verbs because verbs are *actions*. Franklin’s list of virtues is therefore an *action* list. Those who read this list are encouraged to action (or, depending on the verb, discouraged from action).

Notice that Franklin did not simply write, “Be temperate,” “Be silent,” “Be ordered,” “Be resolved,” “Be frugal,” “Be industrious,” etc. Rather, Franklin used verbs that *encourage* his readers to become temperate, silent, ordered, resolved, frugal, industrious, etc. (He avoided “be” verbs.)

Also, notice that Franklin never *defined* the virtues. Rather, he *described* them. He numbered them, he named them, and then he provided one, two, or three clauses for each.

Consider *Humility*, the final virtue on the list:

Franklin numbered *Humility* as “13” and wrote, “Imitate Jesus and Socrates.” Again, notice that he did not define the virtue. (Notice he did not write, “Humility is the quality or condition of being humble....”) Perhaps Franklin assumed that his readers would understand the meaning of *Humility*, and decidedly, he did not define it. The words, “Imitate Jesus and Socrates” describe *Humility*, but do not necessarily define it.

Consider *Moderation*, the ninth virtue on the list:

Franklin simply wrote, “Avoid extremes.” He assumed that his readers would understand the meaning of *Moderation*, so he described it.

Consider another virtue, *Industry*, the sixth virtue on the list:

Franklin wrote, “Lose no time.” Again, he described the word, but did not define it.

Franklin used verbs in to describe *what* is virtuous (and what is *not* virtuous). Each sentence, including every verb, calls for action. (*Do this* (or, *do not do this*) in order to be humble, moderate, industrious, etc.)

Some verbs describe *negative* actions (i.e. *do not do this*). Consider these:

1. “Eat not.... Drink not....”
2. “Speak not....”
5. “Make no....”
6. “Lose no....”
7. “Use no....”
8. “Wrong none....”
10. “Tolerate no....”
11. “Be not....”

From these verbs, we may rightfully conclude that Franklin discouraged vice. Or, in other words, Franklin *encouraged* virtue by *discouraging* vice (the opposite of virtue). From these verbs, we may conclude that Franklin discouraged these vices:

- Eating to dullness
- Drinking to elevation
- Speaking what is not beneficial
- Wasting expenses
- Wasting (in general)
- Losing time
- Using hurtful deceit
- Speaking un-accordingly
- Wronging others through injury or omitting benefits
- Tolerating uncleanliness
- Being disturbed at trifles or accidents (which are “common or unavoidable”)

Other verbs describe *positive* actions (i.e. *do this*).

3. “Let.... Let....”
4. “Resolve.... Perform....”
9. “Avoid.... Forbear....”
12. “Rarely use....”
13. “Imitate....”

From these verbs, we may conclude that Franklin encouraged these virtues:

- Letting all things have their places
- Letting each part of business have its own time
- Resolving to perform “what you ought”
- Performing “what you resolve”
- Avoiding extremes
- Forbearing the resentment of injuries
- Using venery rarely for “health or offspring”
- Imitating Jesus and Socrates

All of these verbs are powerful, but never explicit or flagrant. Consider *Sincerity*, the seventh virtue: rather than “Be sincere, not deceitful,” Franklin wrote, “Use no hurtful deceit. Think innocently and justly; and, if you speak, speak accordingly.”

Did you notice an explicit definition or an obvious statement? (No.) Franklin described *Sincerity*. He used the verbs “use,” “think,” and “speak.” *How* will a man be *sincere*? He will watch his actions (or his uses), his thoughts (what he thinks), and his words (what he speaks).

Again, each verb is *powerful*. Each sentence calls for *action*. Each virtue is *described*, not defined. (A list of descriptions is more interesting than a list of definitions.)

Diction:

Franklin was a marvelous, epideictic rhetorician. His list of virtues and their precepts explains what is good, what is useful, what is beneficial, what is right, what is honorable, what is virtuous, and of course, the opposite of such. Franklin's prose is correct, complete, appropriate, and distinct.

Franklin's prose is brief, clear, common, and without hyperbole, metaphor, or excessive adornment. And because his words are brief and clear, most readers will understand the prose without reading the passage two or more times. In short, Franklin's prose teaches, inspires, and delights. Also important, Franklin's prose is charming and sublime.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines the following nouns accordingly:

Temperance is defined as "abstinence from alcoholic drink." (*Temperance* is an Old French word, "temperance," which is derived from the Latinate word, "temperare," meaning "restrain.")

Silence is defined as "complete absence of sound" or "the fact or state of abstaining from speech." (*Silence* is a Latinate word, "silentium.")

Order is defined in many ways:

- "The arrangement of people or things according to a particular sequence or method"
- "A state in which everything is in its correct place"
- "A state in which the laws and rules regulating public behaviour are observed"
- "An authoritative command or direction"
- "A request for something to be made, supplied, or served"
- "The prescribed procedure followed in a meeting, law court, or religious service"
- "Quality or nature"
- "A social class or system"
- "A rank in the Christian ministry"

Franklin's words apply to "a state in which everything is in its correct place." Also, "a request for something to be made, supplied, or served" applies to the phrase "each part of your business." (*Order* is a Latinate word, "ordo," meaning "row" or "series.")

Resolution is defined in many ways. Consider these four definitions:

- "A firm decision"
- "An expression of opinion or intention agreed on by a legislative body"
- "The quality of being resolute"
- "The resolving of a problem or dispute"

Franklin's phrase "Resolve to perform what you ought. Perform without fail what you resolve" applies to these four definitions. (Strangely, the O.E.D. does not reveal the etymology of

Resolution.)

The adjective “frugal” is defined as “sparing” or “economical [regarding] money or food.” *Frugality* is therefore the “sparing” of “money or food.” (*Frugal* is a Latinate word, “frugalis,” which is derived from, “frux,” meaning “fruit.”)

Industry is defined in these three ways:

- “Economic activity concerned with the processing of raw materials and manufacture of goods in factories”
- “A particular branch of economic or commercial activity”
- “Hard work”

Comparatively, Franklin wrote three phrases concerning *Industry*: (1) “Lose no time,” (2) “Be always employed in something useful,” and (3) “Cut off all unnecessary actions.” I believe that Franklin’s phrases apply to these three definitions. (*Industry* is a Latinate word, “industria,” meaning “diligence.”)

The adjective “sincere” is defined as “proceeding from or characterized by genuine feelings” and “free from deceit.” Therefore, *Sincerity* is that which proceeds from “genuine feelings,” which is also “free from deceit.” (Notice Franklin’s phrase: “Use no hurtful deceit.”) (*Sincere* is a Latinate word, “sincerus,” meaning “clean” or “pure.”)

Justice is defined in these three ways:

- “Just behaviour or treatment”
- “The quality of being just”
- “The administration of law or some other authority according to the principles of just behaviour and treatment”

The phrase “Wrong none by doing injuries or omitting the benefits that are your duty” may apply to all three definitions. (*Justice* is an Old French word, “justise,” meaning “administration of the law,” which is derived from the Latinate word, “jus,” meaning “law” or “right.”)

Moderation is defined as “the avoidance of extremes in one’s actions or opinions” and “the process of moderating.” (Notice Franklin’s brevity and clarity: “Avoid extremes.”) (The O.E.D. does not reveal the etymology of *Moderation*.)

The adverb “cleanly” describes that which is “in a clean manner.” The adjective “cleanly” is defined as “habitually clean.” Therefore, *Cleanliness* is that which is “in [a] clean manner” or “habitually clean.” (Notice Franklin’s strict denouncement of uncleanness: “Tolerate no uncleanness in body, clothes or habitation.”) (The O.E.D. does not reveal the etymology of *cleanly*.)

The adjective “tranquil” is defined as that which is “free from disturbance” or “calm.” Therefore, *Tranquility* is that which is “free from disturbance” or “calm.” (Notice Franklin’s phrase: “Be

not disturbed....”) (*Tranquil* is a Latinate word, “tranquillus.”)

Chastity is defined as “the practice of refraining from sexual intercourse.” In describing *Chastity*, Franklin used the word “venery” (“Rarely use venery....”) “Venery” is defined as “sexual indulgence.” (The O.E.D. does not reveal the etymology of *Chastity*, but *venery* is a Latinate word, “veneria,” which is derived from “venus,” meaning “sexual love.”)

Franklin used *venery* as a euphemism for “sexual intercourse.”

Also, “venery” may be defined as “hunting.” (*Venery*, in this sense, is a Latinate word, “venari,” meaning “to hunt.”)

Humility is defined as “a humble view of one’s own importance.” (The O.E.D. does not reveal the etymology of *Humility*.)

Not satisfied with the O.E.D.’s definition or treatment of *Humility*, I logged onto scriptures.lds.org in order to better understand this word. I typed “humility” into the search field and learned the following concerning *Humility*:

The online “Guide to the Scriptures” defines *Humility* as the “condition of being meek and teachable. Humility includes recognizing our dependence upon God and desiring to submit to His will.”

The word “humility” appears in...

6 verses in the King James Version of *The Holy Bible* (3 verses in each Testament)

13 verses in *The Book of Mormon*

5 verses in *The Doctrine and Covenants*

Consider these Biblical proverbs:

- “The fear of the LORD is the instruction of wisdom; and before honour is humility.” (See *Proverbs* 15: 33.)
- “Before destruction the heart of man is haughty, and before honour is humility.” (See *Proverbs* 18: 12.)
- “By humility and the fear of the LORD are riches, and honour, and life.” (See *Proverbs* 22: 4.)

(According to these proverbs, *Honour* follows after *Humility*.)

According to the doctrine of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, *Humility* is a qualification for water baptism. *The Doctrine and Covenants* reads: “And again, by way of commandment to the Church concerning the manner of baptism—All those who humble themselves before God, and desire to be baptized, and come forth with broken hearts and contrite spirits...shall be received by baptism into His Church.” (See “Section 20,” verse 37.)

This scripture—along with the foregoing definition—is *profound*. (Or perhaps I’m biased when

pulling information from the Standard Works of said Church, my Church.)

Franklin's treatment of *Humility* is also profound...but simple: "Imitate Jesus and Socrates." (Was Jesus baptized?)

Figures of Style and Speech:

Franklin used regressio (or merism). His list is numbered, named, and explained. Or, in other words, Franklin presented his ideas, and then broke them down into parts.

Each phrase is a proverb. (Each precept offers common wisdom.)

The phrase "Resolve to perform what you ought. Perform without fail what you resolve" is an example of epanalepsis. (The word "resolve" is used twice, once at the beginning and again at the end of the sentence.)

The phrase "...and, if you speak, speak accordingly" is an example of anadiplosis. (The word "speak" is placed at the end of the first clause and at the beginning of the next clause.)

The phrases "Eat not to dulness," "Avoid trifling conversations," "waste nothing," "Lose no time," "Use no hurtful deceit," "Avoid extremes," and "Imitate Jesus and Socrates" are all examples of aphorisms. (These phrases are laconic and memorable statements of opinion.)

The phrase "Imitate Jesus and Socrates" is an example of meiosis. (This phrase is understated, but climactically important.)

Franklin's list builds to a climax: "Imitate Jesus and Socrates." This climax encourages readers to look beyond the list, toward Jesus...and toward Socrates. The verb "imitate" means to "follow as a model" or to "copy (a person's speech or mannerisms), especially for comic effect." (*Imitate* is a Latinate word, "imitari," which is related to "imago," meaning "image.")

I doubt Franklin wished his readers to copy the speech of either Jesus or Socrates merely "for comic effect." (That would be blasphemy and mockery.) Rather, I believe that Franklin is suggesting that his readers *follow* Jesus and Socrates as *models* of *Humility*.

Not only is Jesus the *Model of Humility*, He is *Humility*. And what about Socrates? Is he also a personification of *Humility*?

In order to answer these questions, I approached my pal, David Badger, and asked: "What do you know about Socrates?"

David answered thusly: "I'm not really sure. I took a philosophy class about two years ago. I think he was Greek. And a philosopher."

I continued asking questions: "Yeah, but what'd he do?"

David answered: “He started teaching. He taught Plato. But the government didn’t like that he was teaching the younger people of Athens, so they threw him in prison. Then they killed him.”

I then explained Franklin’s phrase “Imitate Jesus and Socrates,” and asked, “But was he humble? Was Socrates a *model of Humility*?”

David responded with, “Oh, yeah. Definitely. He was wise, but he claimed that he possessed no wisdom at all. He saw this in others too. They claimed wisdom, but they really didn’t know much at all. Then he was wrongfully imprisoned and tried. And that was humbling. And then he was executed.”

David’s information checked out: Socrates was a *model of Humility*.

Franklin acknowledged two *models of Humility*: Jesus, the *spiritual* Man, and Socrates, the *secular* man. Indeed, the moral man will imitate Jesus...oh, and hey...don’t forget about Socrates. The moral man will imitate him too.

Conclusions:

Franklin’s prose is correct, complete, appropriate, distinct, brief, clear, common, instructive, inspiring, delightful, charming, and sublime, without hyperbole, metaphor, or excessive adornment.

Franklin’s prose is strong, not weak.

Now, will a man achieve and maintain a state of moral perfection?

Yes, a man can achieve and maintain moral perfection if he adheres to the virtues of *Temperance, Silence, Order, Resolution, Frugality, Industry, Sincerity, Justice, Moderation, Cleanliness, Tranquility, Chastity, and Humility*.

These virtues are heavenly, even godly. Is God temperate? Is God just? Is God chaste?

Yes, yes, and yes (or virtue and vice must be compounded into one).

God *is* *Temperance*. God *is* *Justice*. God *is* *Chastity*.

All thirteen virtues are the essence of heaven...and also the essence of God.