THE ESSENTIAL
BENJAMIN FRANKLIN

THE FEDERALIST PAPERS PROJECT
EDITED BY STEVE STRAUB
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BENJAMIN FRANKLIN QUOTES

Mankind naturally and generally love to be flatter'd: Whatever sooths our Pride, and tends to exalt our Species above the rest of the Creation, we are pleas'd with and easily believe, when ungrateful Truths shall be with the utmost Indignation rejected. "What! bring ourselves down to an Equality with the Beasts of the Field! with the meanest part of the Creation! 'Tis insufferable!" But, (to use a Piece of common Sense) our Geese are but Geese tho' we may think 'em Swans; and Truth will be Truth tho' it sometimes prove mortifying and distasteful. - "A Dissertation on Liberty and Necessity, Pleasure and Pain" (1725)

I believe there is one Supreme most perfect being. ... I believe He is pleased and delights in the happiness of those He has created; and since without virtue man can have no happiness in this world, I firmly believe He delights to see me virtuous. - "Articles of Belief and Acts of Religion" (1728)

Ambition has its disappointments to sour us, but never the good fortune to satisfy us. - "On True Happiness", Pennsylvania Gazette, 20 November 1735

I think opinions should be judged of by their influences and effects, and if a man holds none that tend to make him less virtuous or more vicious, it may be concluded that he holds none that are dangerous; which I hope is the case with me. - Letter to his father, 13 April 1738,

Let all Men know thee, but no man know thee thoroughly: Men freely ford that see the shallows. - Poor Richard's Almanack (1743)

Remember that time is money. - Advice to a Young Tradesman (1748)

History will also afford frequent Opportunities of showing the Necessity of a Publick Religion, from its Usefulness to the Publick; the Advantage of a Religious Character among private Persons; the Mischies of Superstition, &c. and the Excellency of the Christian Religion above all others antient or modern. - Proposals Relating to the Education of Youth in Pensilvania (1749)

Much less is it adviseable for a Person to go thither [to America], who has no other Quality to recommend him but his Birth. In Europe it has indeed its Value; but it is a Commodity that cannot be carried to a worse Market than that of America, where people do not inquire concerning a Stranger, What is he? but, What can he do? - Information to Those Who Would Remove to America

The Game of Chess is not merely an idle amusement; several very valuable qualities of the mind, useful in the course of human life, are to be acquired and strengthened by it, so as to become habits ready on all occasions; for life is a kind of Chess, in which we have often points to gain, and competitors or adversaries to contend with, and in which there is a vast variety of good and ill events, that are, in some degree, the effect of prudence, or the want of it. By playing at Chess then, we may learn: 1st, Foresight, which looks a little into futurity, and considers the consequences that may attend an action ... 2nd,
Circumspection, which surveys the whole Chess-board, or scene of action: — the relation of the several Pieces, and their situations; ... 3rd, Caution, not to make our moves too hastily... - "The Morals of Chess" (article) (1750)

But I must own that I am much in the Dark about Light. I am not satisfy'd with the doctrine that supposes particles of matter call'd light continually driven off from the Sun's Surface, with a Swiftness so prodigious! - Letter to Cadwallader Colden (April 23, 1752).

For my own Part, when I am employed in serving others, I do not look upon myself as conferring Favours, but as paying Debts. In my Travels, and since my Settlement, I have received much Kindness from Men, to whom I shall never have any Opportunity of making the least direct Return. And numberless Mercies from God, who is infinitely above being benefited by our Services. Those Kindnesses from Men, I can therefore only Return on their Fellow Men; and I can only shew my Gratitude for these mercies from God, by a readiness to help his other Children and my Brethren. For I do not think that Thanks and Compliments, tho’ repeated weekly, can discharge our real Obligations to each other, and much less those to our Creator. - Letter to Joseph Huey (6 June 1753)

The Faith you mention has doubtless its use in the World. I do not desire to see it diminished, nor would I endeavour to lessen it in any Man. But I wish it were more productive of good Works, than I have generally seen it: I mean real good Works, Works of Kindness, Charity, Mercy, and Publick Spirit; not Holiday-keeping, Sermon-Reading or Hearing; performing Church Ceremonies, or making long Prayers, filled with Flatteries and Compliments, despis’d even by wise Men, and much less capable of pleasing the Deity. The worship of God is a Duty; the hearing and reading of Sermons may be useful; but, if Men rest in Hearing and Praying, as too many do, it is as if a Tree should Value itself on being water’d and putting forth Leaves, tho’ it never produc’d any Fruit. - Letter to Joseph Huey (6 June 1753)

Every Body cries, a Union is absolutely necessary, but when they come to the Manner and Form of the Union, their weak Noddles are perfectly distracted. - Letter to Peter Collinson (29 December 1754)

Love your Enemies, for they tell you your Faults. - Poor Richard's Almanack (1756)

I have read your Manuscript with some Attention. By the Arguments it contains against the Doctrine of a particular Providence, tho’ you allow a general Providence, you strike at the Foundation of all Religion: For without the Belief of a Providence that takes Cognizance of, guards and guides and may favour particular Persons, there is no Motive to Worship a Deity, to fear its Displeasure, or to pray for its Protection. I will not enter into any Discussion of your Principles, tho’ you seem to desire it; At present I shall only give you my Opinion that tho’ your Reasonings are subtle, and may prevail with some Readers, you will not succeed so as to change the general Sentiments of Mankind on that Subject, and the Consequence of printing this Piece will be a great deal of Odium drawn upon your self, Mischief to you and no Benefit to others. He that spits against the Wind, spits in his own Face. But were you to succeed,
do you imagine any Good would be done by it? You yourself may find it easy to live a virtuous Life without the Assistance afforded by Religion; you having a clear Perception of the Advantages of Virtue and the Disadvantages of Vice, and possessing a Strength of Resolution sufficient to enable you to resist common Temptations. But think how great a Proportion of Mankind consists of weak and ignorant Men and Women, and of inexperienc’d and inconsiderate Youth of both Sexes, who have need of the Motives of Religion to restrain them from Vice, to support their Virtue, and retain them in the Practice of it till it becomes habitual, which is the great Point for its Security; And perhaps you are indebted to her originally that is to your Religious Education, for the Habits of Virtue upon which you now justly value yourself. You might easily display your excellent Talents of reasoning on a less hazardous Subject, and thereby obtain Rank with our most distinguish’d Authors. For among us, it is not necessary, as among the Hottentots that a Youth to be receiv’d into the Company of Men, should prove his Manhood by beating his Mother. I would advise you therefore not to attempt unchaining the Tyger, but to burn this Piece before it is seen by any other Person, whereby you will save yourself a great deal of Mortification from the Enemies it may raise against you, and perhaps a good deal of Regret and Repentance. If Men are so wicked as we now see them with Religion what would they be if without it? - Letter to unknown recipient (13 December 1757)

That Being, who gave me existence, and through almost threescore years has been continually showering his favors upon me, whose very chastisements have been blessings to me; can I doubt that he loves me? And, if he loves me, can I doubt that he will go on to take care of me, not only here but hereafter? This to some may seem presumption; to me it appears the best grounded hope; hope of the future built on experience of the past. - Letter to George Whitefield (19 June 1764)

Idleness and Pride Tax with a heavier Hand than Kings and Parliaments; If we can get rid of the former we may easily bear the Latter. - Letter to Charles Thomson, 11 July 1765

I am for doing good to the poor, but I differ in opinion of the means. I think the best way of doing good to the poor, is not making them easy in poverty, but leading or driving them out of it. In my youth I travelled much, and I observed in different countries, that the more public provisions were made for the poor, the less they provided for themselves, and of course became poorer. And, on the contrary, the less was done for them, the more they did for themselves, and became richer. - On the Price of Corn and Management of the Poor (29 November 1766)

But your Squabbles about a Bishop I wish to see speedily ended. ... Each Party abuses the other, the Profane and the Infidel believe both sides, and enjoy the Fray; the Reputation of Religion in general suffers, and its enemies are ready to say, not what was said in the primitive Times, Behold how these Christians love one another, but, Mark how these Christians hate one another! Indeed when religious
People quarrel about Religion, or hungry People about their Victuals, it looks as if they had not much of either among them. - Letter to Jane Mecom, 23 February 1769

A great Empire, like a great Cake, is most easily diminished at the Edges. - "Rules By Which A Great Empire May Be Reduced To A Small One"; The Public Advertiser (September 11, 1773)

We hear of the conversion of water into wine at the marriage in Cana as of a miracle. But this conversion is, through the goodness of God, made every day before our eyes. Behold the rain which descends from heaven upon our vineyards; there it enters the roots of the vines, to be changed into wine; a constant proof that God loves us, and loves to see us happy. The miracle in question was only performed to hasten the operation, under circumstances of present necessity, which required it. - Letter to Abbé Morellet (1779)

All Wars are Follies, very expensive, and very mischievous ones. When will Mankind be convinced of this, and agree to settle their Differences by Arbitration? Were they to do it, even by the Cast of a Dye, it would be better than by Fighting and destroying each other. - Letter to Mary Hewson[6], Jan. 27. 1783

There never was a good war or a bad peace. - Letter to Josiah Quincy (11 September 1783)

I wish the Bald Eagle had not been chosen as the representative of our country; he is a bird of bad moral character; like those among men who live by sharping and robbing, he is generally poor, and often very lousy. The turkey is a much more respectable bird. - Letter to Sarah Bache (January 26, 1784).

I've lived, Sir, a long time, and the longer I live, the more convincing Proofs I see of this Truth — That God governs in the Affairs of Men. And if a sparrow cannot fall to the ground without his Notice, is it probable that an Empire can rise without his Aid? We have been assured, Sir, in the Sacred Writings, that except the Lord build the House they labor in vain who build it. I firmly believe this, — and I also believe that without his concurring Aid, we shall succeed in this political Building no better than the Builders of Babel: We shall be divided by our little partial local interests; our Projects will be confounded, and we ourselves shall become a Reproach and Bye word down to future Ages. - Speech to the Constitutional Convention (28 June 1787)

In these sentiments, Sir, I agree to this Constitution, with all its faults, — if they are such; because I think a general Government necessary for us, and there is no form of government but what may be a blessing to the people, if well administered; and I believe, farther, that this is likely to be well administered for a course of years, and can only end in despotism, as other forms have done before it, when the people shall become so corrupted as to need despotic government, being incapable of any other. - Speech to the Constitutional Convention (28 June 1787)
Whilst the last members were signing it Doctor Franklin looking towards the President's Chair, at the back of which a rising sun happened to be painted, observed to a few members near him, that Painters had found it difficult to distinguish in their art a rising from a setting sun. “I have,” said he, “often and often in the course of the Session, and the vicissitudes of my hopes and fears as to its issue, looked at that behind the President without being able to tell whether it was rising or setting: But now at length I have the happiness to know that it is a rising and not a setting Sun.” - At the signing of the United States Constitution, Journal of the Constitutional Convention (17 September 1787)

Remember me affectionately to good Dr. Price and to the honest heretic Dr. Priestly. I do not call him honest by way of distinction; for I think all the heretics I have known have been virtuous men. They have the virtue of fortitude or they would not venture to own their heresy; and they cannot afford to be deficient in any of the other virtues, as that would give advantage to their many enemies; and they have not like orthodox sinners, such a number of friends to excuse or justify them. Do not, however mistake me. It is not to my good friend's heresy that I impute his honesty. On the contrary, 'tis his honesty that has brought upon him the character of heretic. - Letter to Benjamin Vaughan (24 October 1788)

Our new Constitution is now established, and has an appearance that promises permanency; but in this world nothing can be said to be certain, except death and taxes. - Letter to Jean-Baptiste Leroy (13 November 1789)

The art of concluding from experience and observation consists in evaluating probabilities, in estimating if they are high or numerous enough to constitute proof. This type of calculation is more complicated and more difficult than one might think. It demands a great sagacity generally above the power of common people. The success of charlatans, sorcerors, and alchemists — and all those who abuse public credulity — is founded on errors in this type of calculation. - Benjamin Franklin and Antoine Lavoisier, Rapport des commissaires chargés par le roi de l'examen du magnétisme animal (1784)

As to Jesus of Nazareth, my Opinion of whom you particularly desire, I think the System of Morals and his Religion, as he left them to us, the best the world ever saw or is likely to see; but I apprehend it has received various corrupt changes, and I have, with most of the present Dissenters in England, some Doubts as to his divinity; tho' it is a question I do not dogmatize upon, having never studied it, and I think it needless to busy myself with it now, when I expect soon an Opportunity of knowing the Truth with less Trouble. - As quoted in Benjamin Franklin: An Exploration of a Life of Science and Service (1938) by Carl Van Doren, p. 777
The Autobiography (1817)

Indeed I scarce ever heard or saw the introductory Words, Without Vanity I may say, etc. but some vain thing immediately follow'd. Most People dislike Vanity in others whatever Share they have of it themselves, but I give it fair Quarter wherever I meet with it, being persuaded that it is often productive of Good to the Possessor and to others that are within his Sphere of Action: And therefore in many Cases it would not be quite absurd if a Man were to thank God for his Vanity among the other - Comforts of Life. [Part I, p. 2]

From a Child I was fond of Reading, and all the little Money that came into my Hands was ever laid out in Books. - [Part I, p. 9]

I believe I have omitted mentioning that in my first Voyage from Boston, being becalm'd off Block Island, our People set about catching Cod and haul'd up a great many. Hitherto I had stuck to my Resolution of not eating animal Food' and on this Occasion, I consider'd with my Master Tryon, the taking every Fish as a kind of unprovok'd Murder, since none of them had or ever could do us any Injury that might justify the Slaughter. All this seem'd very reasonable. But I had formerly been a great Lover of Fish, and when this came hot out of the Frying Pan, it smelt admirably well. I balanc'd some time between Principle and Inclination: till I recollected, that when the Fish were opened, I saw smaller Fish taken out of their Stomachs: Then, thought I, if you eat one another, I don't see why we mayn't eat you. So I din'd upon Cod very heartily and continu'd to eat with other People, returning only now and then occasionally to a vegetable Diet. So convenient a thing it is to be a reasonable Creature, since it enables one to find or make a Reason for everything one has a mind to do. - [Part I, p. 28]

My Parents had early given me religious Impressions, and brought me through my Childhood piously in the Dissenting Way. But I was scarce 15 when, after doubting by turns of several Points as I found them disputed in the different Books I read, I began to doubt of Revelation itself. Some Books against Deism fell into my Hands; they were said to be the Substance of Sermons preached at Boyle's Lectures. It happened that they wrought an Effect on me quite contrary to what was intended by them: For the Arguments of the Deists which were quoted to be refuted, appeared to me much Stronger than the Refutations. In short I soon became a thorough Deist. - [Part I, p. 45]

This Library afforded me the Means of Improvement by constant Study, for which I set apart an Hour or two each Day; and thus repair'd in some Degree the Loss of the Learned Education my Father once intended for me. Reading was the only Amusement I allow'd myself. I spent no time in Taverns, Games, or Frolics of any kind. And my Industry in my Business continu'd as indefatigable as it was necessary. - [Part II, p. 64]
These Names of 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 your self. 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.


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 Uncleanliness 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 Dulness, Weakness, or the Injury of your own or another's Peace or Reputation.

13. HUMILITY. Imitate Jesus and Socrates. [Part II, pp. 67-68]

The last of Franklin's chart of 13 virtues: "My List of Virtues contain'd at first but twelve; but a Quaker Friend having kindly inform'd me that I was generally thought proud; ... I determined endeavouring to cure myself if I could of this Vice or Folly among the rest, and I added Humility to my List..." [Part II, p. 75]

In reality there is perhaps no one of our natural Passions so hard to subdue as Pride. Disguise it, struggle with it, beat it down, stifle it, mortify it as much as one pleases, it is still alive, and will every now and then peep out and show itself. You will see it perhaps often in this History. For even if I could conceive that I had completely overcome it, I should probably be proud of my Humility. - [Part II, p. 76]

Human Felicity is produc'd not so much by great Pieces of good Fortune that seldom happen, as by little Advantages that occur every Day. - [Part III, p. 108]