

IN THE MARGINS: Benjamin Franklin's little book

By Tony Martin
Editor

Benjamin Franklin was one fascinating guy. Like many of our Founding Fathers, he left behind a significant paper trail displaying his brilliance. He was also badly flawed (aren't we all?).

I'm intrigued by his "little book."

Franklin's "little book," also known as his *Virtue Chart*, was a self-improvement tool he designed to cultivate personal character and discipline. Franklin identified 13 virtues he believed essential for moral perfection, including temperance, silence, order, and humility. Each week, he would focus on practicing one virtue, tracking his daily progress by marking failures in a grid-like table within the book. His goal was to systematically eliminate faults and develop habits of virtue through deliberate and consistent effort. Franklin knew he could never achieve absolute perfection but believed the process would make him a better, wiser, and more effective person. This pragmatic approach to self-improvement reflected Franklin's Enlightenment-era values of reason, discipline, and the pursuit of excellence.

The complete quote from Benjamin Franklin about making his "little book" is from his *Autobiography*, where he writes:

"I made a little book, in which I allotted a page for each of the virtues. I ruled each page with red ink, so as to have seven columns, one for each day of the week, marking each column with a letter for the day. I crossed these columns with thirteen red lines, marking the beginning of each line with the first letter of one of the virtues, on which line, and in

its proper column, I might mark, by a little black spot, every fault I found upon examination to have been committed respecting that virtue upon that day.”

This got me to thinking – what would my own personal “little book” look like? What virtues are important to me? And most importantly, are the virtues I seek in alignment with what God desires of me? Franklin was, at best, a Deist. I don’t see much evidence that he was a Christian. Nevertheless, I think he was onto something in having virtues he wanted to absorb into his life.

So, over the Thanksgiving holidays, I came up with my own list of virtues that are meaningful to me, and selected scripture to support each statement.

This is such a “Tony thing,” as my wife would say, because I’m forever making lists, setting goals, journaling excessively, all that. And I sure don’t claim to have done much more than scratch the surface of each one. I’m not sharing this because “hey, why don’t you be more like me? Look at how smart I am!” What a repulsive thought. Rather, I’m sharing this because it might be a helpful exercise for you to determine, by God’s grace and guidance, what virtues you’d like to see expressed in your life.

Self-examination, as the Holy Spirit guides, is not a bad thing, as long as you don’t become self-absorbed and start feeling all superior. Here’s my list, and it makes for some really good self-talk. I even read them aloud if no one can hear me:

13 Virtues

1. Faith

I am a person of faith and belief, and because of that I trust God completely and without hesitation.

“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” – Hebrews 11:1 (ESV)

2. Humility

I am humble, recognizing my strengths and weaknesses, and I seek to serve others without the need for recognition.

“Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.” – James 4:10

3. Grace

I am gentle with myself, showing the same grace to myself that I offer others, acknowledging my imperfections without being harsh.

“But he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’ Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.” – 2 Corinthians 12:9

4. Resilience

I am resilient and bounce back from setbacks with strength, knowing that God’s grace sustains me through every challenge.

“I can do all things through him who strengthens me.” – Philippians 4:13

5. Perseverance

I persevere through difficult tasks, trusting that every effort is worth it and that God strengthens me to keep going, no matter the obstacle.

“And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up.” – Galatians 6:9

6. Patience

I am patient with myself, others, and the process, trusting that God's timing is perfect, even when things take longer than I expect.

"Be still before the Lord and wait patiently for him; fret not yourself over the one who prospers in his way, over the man who carries out evil devices!" – Psalm 37:7

7. Focus

I prioritize the important tasks in my life and give them my full attention, setting aside distractions and working with purpose.

"Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth." – Colossians 3:2

8. Discipline

I practice self-discipline daily, making choices that align with my goals and values, especially in caring for my health and well-being.

"For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it." – Hebrews 12:11

9. Diligence

I am diligent in my work, using my time wisely and making steady progress in everything I do, knowing that every small step leads to big results.

"Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men." – Colossians 3:23

10. Stewardship

I am a wise steward of the resources God has given me, managing my finances with care and intentionality, knowing

that everything belongs to Him.

“Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found faithful.” – 1 Corinthians 4:2

11. Generosity

I am generous with my time, resources, and love, knowing that giving enriches my spirit and reflects God’s heart for others.

“Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.” – 2 Corinthians 9:7

12. Contentment

I am content with what I have, appreciating the blessings in my life, and resisting the urge to compare myself to others.

“But godliness with contentment is great gain, for we brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world.” – 1 Timothy 6:6-7

13. Joy

I am filled with joy, finding delight in the simple moments, my family, and my faith, knowing that true happiness comes from God.

“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice.” – Philippians 4:4

What virtues would you like to see manifest in your life? That might be a question worth pondering.