



Harvard University Art Gallery



Earliest known portrait of Benjamin Franklin, ca. 1746; oil on canvas, by Robert Feke

Franklin commissioned this portrait of himself in his early forties as he ended his first career as a printer, from which he had built a small fortune. Wearing a dark green velvet coat, a silk shirt with ruffled sleeves, and a brown wig, he dresses in the fashion of a gentleman, understated yet conveying a clear aspiration to join the political and economic elite of Philadelphia.¹

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN_____

ON WEALTH, LUXURY, AND VIRTUE

SELECTIONS, 1727-1784

Benjamin Franklin is well-known for his aphorisms – usually printed in his almanacs and public essays — promoting frugality, hard work, and plain living as the road to success. This does not mean that Franklin was opposed to wealth, nor that his later acquisition of luxury goods was hypocritical. What mattered to Franklin was how one *achieved* wealth (honestly) and how one *displayed* it (unostentatiously). Indeed, the growing personal wealth of American colonists in the mid 1700s was taken by Franklin as a proud sign of the colonies' success within the empire and their future value to the world. Presented here are selections from his public and personal writings, spanning six decades, on economic success, wealth, luxury — and virtue. When do riches betray a lack of virtue? When does wealth signify the rewards of virtue?

Letter to His Sister, 1727

To Jane Franklin, 6 January 1726-27 [1727]

Dear Sister,

I am highly pleased with the account captain Freeman gives me of you. I always judged by your behaviour when a child that you would make a good, agreeable woman, and you know you were ever my peculiar favourite. I have been thinking what would be a suitable present for me to make, and for you to receive, as I hear you are grown a celebrated beauty. I had almost determined on a tea table, but when I considered that the character of a good housewife was far preferable to that of being only a pretty gentlewoman, I concluded to send you a *spinning wheel*, which I hope you will accept as a small token of my sincere love and affection.

Sister, farewell, and remember that modesty, as it makes the most homely virgin amiable and charming, so the want of it infallibly renders the most perfect beauty disagreeable and odious. But when that brightest of female virtues shines among other perfections of body and mind in the same person, it makes the woman more lovely than an angel. Excuse this freedom, and use the same with me.

I am, dear Jenny, your loving brother,

B. Franklin

National Humanities Center, 2009: nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/. Selections from *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin* (Yale University and the Philosophical Society, 1959-); selection online at www.franklinpapers.org/franklin/; permission pending. Some spelling modernized and paragraphing added by NHC for clarity. Feke portrait reproduced by permission of the Harvard University Art Gallery. Complete image credits at nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/becomingamer/imagecredits.htm.

¹ Gordon S. Wood, *The Americanization of Benjamin Franklin*, (Penguin, 2004), pp. 57-59.

Franklin's "Thirteen Virtues," formulated in the late 1720s

as described in his autobiography (written 1771, 1784-85, 1788)

In the various enumerations of the moral virtues I had met with in my reading, I found the catalogue more or less numerous, as different writers included more or fewer ideas under the same name. . . I propos'd to myself, for the sake of clearness, to use rather more names with fewer ideas annex'd to each, than a few names with more ideas; and I included under thirteen names of virtues all that at that time occur'd to me as necessary or desirable, and annexed to each a short precept, which fully express'd the extent I gave to its meaning.

These names of virtues, with their precepts, were:

1. **TEMPERANCE.** Eat not to dullness; drink not to elevation [drunkenness].
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.
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 employ'd 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. **TRANQUILLITY.** Be not disturbed at trifles, or at accidents common or unavoidable.
12. **CHASTITY.** Rarely use venery [sexual intercourse] but for health or offspring, never to dullness, weakness, or the injury of your own or another's peace or reputation.
13. **HUMILITY.** Imitate Jesus and Socrates.

On Acquiring a China Bowl & Silver Spoon, ca. 1730

as described in his autobiography (written 1771, 1784-85, 1788)

We have an English Proverb that says "He that would thrive / Must ask his Wife"; it was lucky for me that I had one as much dispos'd to Industry and Frugality as my self. She assisted me cheerfully in my Business, folding and stitching Pamphlets, tending Shop, purchasing old Linen Rags for the Paper-makers, &c. &c [etc.]. We kept no idle Servants, our Table was plain and simple, our Furniture of the cheapest. For instance my Breakfast was a long time Bread and Milk (no Tea), and I ate it out of a twopenny earthen Porringer with a Pewter Spoon.

But mark how Luxury will enter Families, and make a Progress in Spite of Principle. Being call'd one Morning to Breakfast, I found it in a China Bowl with a Spoon of Silver. They had been bought for me without my Knowledge by my Wife, and had cost her the enormous Sum of three and twenty Shillings, for which she had no other Excuse or Apology to make but that she thought *her* Husband deserv'd a Silver Spoon and China Bowl as well as any of his Neighbours. This was the first Appearance of Plate and China in our House, which afterwards in a Course of Years as our Wealth increas'd augmented gradually to several Hundred Pounds in Value.

*"But mark how Luxury
will enter Families"*



silver spoon by Paul Revere, ca. 1770s
Metropolitan Museum of Art

On Accumulating Luxuries Too Soon, 1732

Franklin, writing as “Anthony Afterwit,” *The Pennsylvania Gazette*, 10 July 1732 (excerpt)

. . . I soon saw that with Care and Industry we might live tolerably easy, and in Credit with our Neighbours: But my Wife had a strong Inclination to be a *Gentlewoman*.² In Consequence of this, my old-fashioned Looking-Glass [mirror] was one Day broke, as she said, *No Mortal could tell which way*. However, since we could not be without a Glass in the Room, *My Dear*, says she, *we may as well buy a large fashionable One that Mr. Such-a-one has to sell; it will cost but little more than a common Glass, and will be much handsomer and more creditable*. Accordingly the Glass was bought, and hung against the Wall: But in a Week’s time, I was made sensible by little and little, *that the Table was by no Means suitable to such a Glass*. And a more proper Table being procur’d, my Spouse, who was an excellent Contriver, inform’d me where we might have very handsome Chairs *in the Way*; And thus, by Degrees, I found all my old Furniture stow’d up into the Garret, and every thing below alter’d for the better.

Had we stopp’d here, we might have done well enough; but my Wife being entertain’d with *Tea* by the Good Women she visited, we could do no less than the like when they visited us; and so we got a *Tea-Table* with all its Appurtenances of *China* and *Silver*. Then my Spouse unfortunately overwork’d herself in washing the House, so that we could do no longer without a *Maid*. Besides this, it happened frequently, that when I came home at *One*, the Dinner was but just put in the Pot; for, *My Dear thought really it had been but Eleven*: At other Times when I came at the same Hour, *She wondered I would stay so long, for Dinner was ready and had waited for me these two Hours*. These Irregularities, occasioned by mistaking the Time, convinced me, that it was absolutely necessary *to buy a Clock*; which my Spouse observ’d, *was a great Ornament to the Room!* And lastly, to my Grief, she was frequently troubled with some Ailment or other, and nothing did her so much Good as *Riding*; And *these Hackney Horses were such wretched ugly Creatures, that* — I bought a very fine pacing Mare, which cost £20 [English pounds, sterling]. And hereabouts Affairs have stood for some Months past.

Advice to a Young Tradesman, Written by an Old One, 1748

pamphlet written and published by Franklin; Philadelphia (excerpt)

In short, the Way to Wealth, if you desire it, is as plain as the Way to Market. It depends chiefly on two Words, Industry and Frugality; i.e. Waste neither Time nor Money, but make the best Use of both. He that gets all he can honestly, and saves all he gets (necessary Expenses excepted) will certainly become Rich.³

“How to Get Riches,” *Poor Richard’s Almanac, 1749*

written and published by Franklin; Philadelphia (excerpt)

The Art of getting Riches consists very much in Thrift. All Men are not equally qualified for getting Money, but it is in the Power of everyone alike to practice this Virtue.

He that would be beforehand [ahead of time] in the world, must be beforehand with his Business: It is not only ill Management, but discovers a slothful Disposition, to do that in the Afternoon, which should have been done in the Morning.

Useful Attainments in your Minority [youth] will procure Riches in Maturity, of which Writing and Accounts are not the meanest.⁴

Learning, whether Speculative or Practical, is, in Popular or Mixed Governments, the Natural Source of Wealth and Honour.

² *Gentleman/woman* designating a person of leisure who would not have to work for a living; a person among the social elite. [Wood, p. 55]

³ On “Advice to a Young Tradesman,” historian Gordon Wood comments that “[o]nly someone who had been as successful as he could write with such confidence. Of course, Franklin left out of his advice the most important ingredient involved in his success—his genius.” [Wood, p. 57]

⁴ I.e., of which writing and accounting (financial recordkeeping) are not the lowliest.

Notice of Items Stolen from Franklin's House, 1750⁵

The Pennsylvania Gazette, 1 November 1750

Whereas on Saturday night last, the house of Benjamin Franklin, of this city, printer, was broken open, and the following things feloniously taken away, viz. [which are] a double necklace of gold beads, a woman's long scarlet cloak, almost new, with a double cape, a woman's gown, of printed cotton, of the sort called brocade print, very remarkable, the ground dark, with large red roses, and other large red and yellow flowers, with blue in some of the flowers, and smaller blue and white flowers, with many green leaves; a pair of woman's stays, covered with white tabby before, and dove-colour'd tabby behind, with two large steel hooks, and sundry other goods. Whoever discovers the thief or thieves, either in this or any of the neighbouring provinces, so that they may be brought to justice, shall receive Ten Pounds reward; and for recovering any of the goods, a reward in proportion to their value, paid by

Benjamin Franklin

Advice on Saving Money in Hard Times, 1756

Poor Richard Improved: Being an Almanack . . . for the Year of our Lord 1756

As I spent some Weeks last Winter in visiting my old Acquaintance in the Jerseys, great Complaints I heard for Want [lack] of Money, and that Leave to make more Paper Bills [permission to print more paper money] could not be obtained. *Friends and Countrymen*, my Advice on this Head shall cost you nothing, and if you will not be angry with me for giving it, I promise you not to be offended if you do not take it.

You spend yearly at least *Two Hundred Thousand Pounds*, 'tis said, in European, East-Indian, and West-Indian Commodities: Supposing one Half of this Expense to be in *Things absolutely necessary*, the other Half may be call'd *Superfluties*, or at best, Conveniences, which however you might live without for one little Year, and not suffer exceedingly. Now to save this Half, observe these few Directions.



1. When you incline to have new Clothes, look first well over the old Ones, and see if you cannot shift with them another Year, either by Scouring, Mending, or even Patching if necessary. . . .
 2. When you incline to buy China Ware, Chintzes, India Silks, or any other of their flimsey slight Manufacturers, I would not be so hard with you, as to insist on your absolutely *resolving against it*; all I advise, is, to *put it off* (as you do your Repentance) *till another Year*; and this, in some Respects, may prevent an Occasion of Repentance.
 3. If you are now a Drinker of Punch, Wine or Tea, twice a Day; for the ensuing Year drink them but *once* a Day. If you now drink them but once a Day, do it but every other Day. If you do it now but once a Week, reduce the Practice to once a Fortnight. And if you do not exceed in Quantity as you lessen the Times, half your Expense in these Articles will be saved.
- 4thly and lastly, When you incline to drink Rum, fill the Glass *half* with Water.

Thus at the Year's End, there will be *An Hundred Thousand Pounds* more Money in your Country.

⁵ By 1750, at age 44, Franklin had acquired an ample fortune, due to his "industry and frugality," he would say, and was purchasing luxury goods.

Listing of Items Shipped Home from England, 1758

Letter to his wife, Deborah Franklin, written from London, 19 February 1758 (excerpts)

. . . In the large Case is another small Box, containing some English China; viz. [specifically] Melons and Leaves for a Desert of Fruit and Cream, or the like; a Bowl remarkable for the Neatness of the Figures, made at Bow, near this City; some Coffee Cups of the same; a Worcester Bowl, ordinary. To show the Difference of Workmanship there is something from all the China Works in England; and one old true China Bason mended, of an odd Colour. The same Box contains 4 Silver Salt Ladles, newest, but ugliest, Fashion. . . Also 7 Yards of printed Cotton, blue Ground, to make you a Gown; I bought it by Candlelight, and lik'd it then, but not so well afterwards: if you do not fancy it, send it as a Present from me to Sister Jenny. There is a better Gown for you of flower'd Tissue, 16 Yards, of Mrs. Stevenson's Fancy, cost 9 Guineas; and I think it a great Beauty; there was no more of the Sort, or you should have had enough for a Negligée or Suit. There is also a Snuffers, Snuff Stand and Extinguisher, of Steel, which I send for the Beauty of the Work . . . There are also two Sets of Books a Present from me to Sally [his daughter], *the World* and *the Connoisseur*; my Love to her. I forgot to mention another of my Fancyings, viz. a Pair of Silk Blankets, very fine. They are of a new kind, were just taken in a French Prize, and such were never seen in England before: they are called Blankets; but I think will be very neat to cover a Summer Bed instead of a Quilt or Counterpain. . . I also forgot, among the China, to mention a large fine Jugg for Beer, to stand in the Cooler. I fell in Love with it at first Sight; for I thought it look'd like a fat jolly Dame, clean and tidy, with a neat blue and white Calico Gown on, good natur'd and lovely, and put me in mind of—Somebody. It has the Coffee Cups in its Belly, pack'd in best Crystal Salt, of a peculiar nice Flavour, for the Table, not to be powder'd. . . I am about [in the process of] buying a complete Set of Table China, 2 Cases of silver handled Knives and Forks, and 2 pair Silver Candlesticks; but these shall keep to use here till my Return, as I am obliged sometimes to entertain polite Company.



On Unaffordable Luxuries, 1758

“To the Courteous Reader,” *Poor Richard's Almanac*, 1758 (excerpts)

Many a one, for the Sake of Finery on the Back, have gone with a hungry Belly and half starved their Families; *Silks and Satins, Scarlet and Velvets*, as Poor Richard says, *put out the Kitchen Fire*. These are not the *Necessaries* of Life; they can scarcely be called the *Conveniencies*, and yet only because they look pretty, how many *want to have* them. The *artificial* Wants of Mankind thus become more numerous than the *natural*; and, as Poor Dick says, *For one poor Person, there are an hundred indigent*.⁶ By these, and other Extravagancies, the Genteel [well-off, elite] are reduced to Poverty, and forced to borrow of those whom they formerly despised, but who through *Industry* and *Frugality* have maintained their Standing; in which Case it appears plainly that a *Ploughman*⁷ *on his Legs is higher than a Gentleman on his Knees*, as Poor Richard says. Perhaps they have had a small Estate left them [in a will], which they knew not the Getting of; they think *'tis Day, and will never be*

“a Ploughman on his Legs is higher than a Gentleman on his knees”

⁶ i.e., for each person poor by circumstance, there are a hundred who lack money due to their own actions.

⁷ Ploughman: farmer, i.e., not a rich man. A person of moderate income who is frugal stands taller (is more virtuous) than a rich man in great debt.

Night; that a little to be spent out of *so much*, is not worth minding; (*a Child and a Fool*, as Poor Richard says, *imagine Twenty Shillings and Twenty Years can never be spent*) but *always taking out of the Mealtub, and never putting in, soon comes to the Bottom*; then, as Poor Dick says, *When the Well's dry, they know the Worth of Water*. But this they might have known before, if they had taken his Advice; *If you would know the Value of Money, go and try to borrow some; for, he that goes a borrowing goes a sorrowing*; and indeed so does he that lends to such People, when he goes *to get it in again*. Poor Dick farther advises, and says,

Fond Pride of Dress, is sure a very Curse;
E'er Fancy you consult, consult your Purse.⁸

On “the pride of the Americans,” 1766

Franklin’s testimony before a committee of the British Parliament considering the repeal of the 1765 Stamp Act (excerpt)

Question: What used to be the pride of the Americans?

Franklin: *To indulge in the fashions and manufactures of Great Britain.*

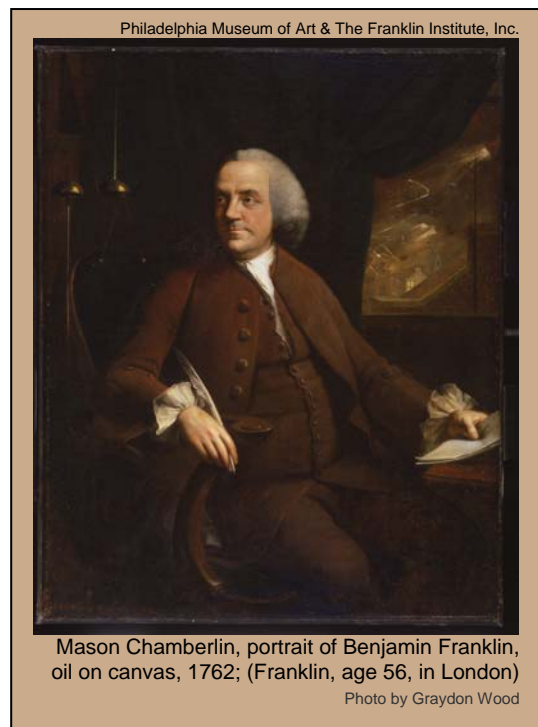
Question: What is now their pride?

Franklin: *To wear their old clothes over again, till they can make new ones.*

On the Disparity of Rich & Poor, 1768

“On the Laboring Poor,” *Gentleman’s Magazine*,
London, 1768 (excerpt)

Much malignant censure [harsh criticism] have some writers bestowed upon the rich for their luxury and expensive living, while the poor are starving, &c., not considering that what the rich expend, the labouring poor receive in payment for their labour. It may seem a paradox if I should assert that our labouring poor do in every year receive *the whole revenue of the nation*; I mean not only the public revenue, but also the revenue, or clear income, of all private estates, or a sum equivalent to the whole. In support of this position I reason thus. The rich do not work for one another. Their habitations, furniture, clothing, carriages, food, ornaments, and every thing, in short, that they or their families use and consume, is the work or produce of the labouring poor, who are, and must be continually, paid for their labour in producing the same.



Luxury: A “Spur to Labor and Industry,” 1784

Letter to Benjamin Vaughn, from France, 26 July 1784 (excerpts)

. . . I have not indeed yet thought of a Remedy for Luxury. I am not sure that in a great State [nation] it is capable of a Remedy. Nor that the Evil is in itself always so great as it is represented. Suppose we include in the Definition of Luxury all unnecessary Expense, and then let us consider whether Laws to prevent such Expense are possible to be executed in a great Country; and whether if they could be

⁸ I.e., for every luxury you consider buying, first determine how much money you have.

executed, our People generally would be happier or even richer. Is not the Hope of one day being able to purchase and enjoy Luxuries a great Spur to Labour and Industry? May not Luxury therefore produce more than it consumes, if without such a Spur People would be, as they are naturally enough inclined to be, lazy and indolent?

“Is not the Hope of one day being able to purchase and enjoy Luxuries a great Spur to Labour and Industry?”

To this purpose I remember a Circumstance. The Skipper of a Shallop employed between Cape May and Philadelphia had done us some small Service for which he refused Pay. My Wife, understanding that he had a Daughter, sent her as a Present a new-fashioned Cap. Three Years After, this Skipper, being at my House with an old Farmer of Cape May, his Passenger, he mentioned the Cap and how much his Daughter had been pleased with it; but, says he, it proved a dear Cap to our Congregation — How so? When my Daughter appeared in it at Meeting, it was so much admired that all the Girls resolved to get such Caps from Philadelphia; and my Wife and I computed that the whole could not have cost less than a hundred Pound.

True, says the Farmer, but you do not tell all the Story; I think the Cap was nevertheless an Advantage to us; for it was the first thing that put our Girls upon Knitting worsted Mittens for Sale at Philadelphia, that they might have wherewithal to buy Caps and Ribbons there; and you know that that Industry has continued and is likely to continue and increase to a much greater Value, and answers better Purposes. Upon the whole I was more reconciled to this little Piece of Luxury; since not only the Girls were made happier by having fine Caps, but the Philadelphians by the Supply of warm Mittens.

“Some of those who grow rich will be prudent, live within Bounds, and preserve what they have gained for their Posterity.

Others, fond of showing their Wealth, will be extravagant and ruin themselves.”

In our Commercial Towns upon the Seacoast, Fortunes will occasionally be made. Some of those who grow rich will be prudent, live within Bounds, and preserve what they have gained for their Posterity. Others, fond of showing their Wealth, will be extravagant and ruin themselves. Laws cannot prevent this, and perhaps it is not always an Evil to the Publick. A Shilling spent idly by a Fool, may be picked up by a Wiser Person who knows better what to do with it. It is therefore not lost. A vain silly Fellow builds a fine House, furnishes it richly, lives in it expensively, and in a few Years ruins himself, but the Masons, Carpenters, Smiths and other honest Tradesmen have been by his Employ assisted in maintaining and raising their Families, the Farmer has been paid for his Labour and encouraged, and the Estate is now in better Hands. . . .

The vast Quantity of Forest Lands we yet have to clear and put in order for Cultivation, will for a long time keep the Body of our Nation laborious and frugal. Forming an Opinion of our People and their Manners by what is seen among the Inhabitants of the Seaports is judging from an improper Sample. The People of the Trading Towns may be rich and luxurious, while the Country possesses all the Virtues that tend to private Happiness and publick Prosperity. . . It has been computed by some Political Arithmetician that if every Man and Woman would work four Hours each Day on something useful, that Labour would produce sufficient to procure all the Necessaries and Comforts of Life. Want and Misery would be banished out of the World, and the rest of the 24 Hours might be Leisure and Pleasure. What occasions then so much Want and Misery? It is the Employment of Men and Women in Works that produce neither the Necessaries nor Conveniences of Life, who, with those who do nothing, consume the Necessaries raised by the Laborious—To explain this—

The first Elements of Wealth are obtained by Labour from the Earth and Waters. I have Land and raise Corn. With this if I feed a Family that does nothing, my Corn will be consum'd and at the End of the Year I shall be no richer than I was at the Beginning. But if while I feed them I employ them, some in Spinning

others in hewing Timber and sawing Boards, others in making Bricks &c for Building; the Value of my Corn will be arrested, and remain with me, and at the End of the Year we may all be better clothed and better lodged. And if instead of employing a Man I feed in making Bricks, I employ him in fiddling for me, the Corn he eats is gone, and no Part of his Manufacture remains to augment the Wealth and the Conveniencies of the Family. I shall therefore be the poorer for this fiddling Man, unless the rest of My Family work more or eat less to make up for the Deficiency he occasions.

Look round the World and see the Millions employ'd in doing nothing, or in something that amounts to nothing when the Necessaries and Conveniencies of Life are in Question. What is the Bulk of Commerce, for which we fight and destroy each other but the Toil of Millions for Superfluities to the great Hazard and Loss of many Lives by the constant Dangers of the Sea. How much Labour Spent in Building and Fitting great Ships to go to China and Arabia for Tea and for Coffee, to the West Indies for Sugar, to America for Tobacco! These

Things cannot be called the Necessaries of Life, for our Ancestors lived very comfortably without them.

'Tis however some Comfort to reflect that upon the whole the Quantity of Industry and Prudence among Mankind

exceeds the Quantity of Idleness and Folly. Hence the Increase of good Buildings, Farms cultivated, and populous Cities filled with Wealth all over Europe, which a few Ages since were only to be found on the Coasts of the Mediterranean. And this notwithstanding the mad Wars continually raging, by which are often destroyed in one Year the Works of many Years Peace. So that we may hope the Luxury of a few Merchants on the Sea Coast will not be the Ruin of America.

One Reflection more, and I will end this long rambling Letter. Almost all the Parts of our Bodies require some Expense. The Feet demand Shoes, the Legs Stockings, the rest of the Body Clothing, and the Belly a good deal of Victuals. *Our* Eyes, tho' exceedingly useful, ask when reasonable, only the cheap Assistance of *Spectacles*, which could not much impair our Finances. But *the Eyes of other People* are the Eyes that ruin us. If all but myself were blind, I should want neither fine Clothes, fine Houses nor Fine Furniture.

Adieu, my Dear Friend. I am Yours ever

B Franklin



“If all but myself were blind, I should want neither fine Clothes, fine Houses nor Fine Furniture.”

Miniature portrait of Franklin by an unidentified artist, ca. 1780-1805

American Philosophical Society