

## **The Way to Wealth (1758)**

Benjamin Franklin [n.b. how many proverbial phrases]

Courteous Reader, I have heard that nothing gives an author so great pleasure as to find his works respectfully quoted by others. Judge then, how much I must have been gratified by an incident I am going to relate to you.

I stopped my horse lately where a great number of people were collected at an auction of merchants' goods. The hour of the sale not being come, they were conversing on the badness of the times, and one of the company called to a plain, clean, old man, with white locks, "Pray Father Abraham, what think you of the times? Will not these heavy taxes quite ruin the country? How shall we ever be able to pay them? What would you advise us to?"

Father Abraham stood up and replied, "If you would have my advice, I will give it you in short, for *A word to the wise is enough*, as Poor Richard says."

They joined in desiring him to speak his mind, and gathering round him, he proceeded as follows:

"Friends," said he, "the taxes are indeed very heavy, and if those laid on by the government were the only ones we had to pay, we might more easily discharge them. But we have many others, and much more grievous to some of us. We are taxed twice as much by our idleness, three times as much by our pride, and four times as much by our folly. And from these taxes the commissioners cannot ease or deliver us, by allowing an abatement. However, let us hearken<sup>1</sup> to good advice, and something may be done for us:

*God helps them that help themselves*, as Poor Richard says.

[1]. It would be thought a hard government that should tax its people one-tenth part of their time to be employed in its service, but idleness taxes many of us much more. Sloth, by bringing on diseases, absolutely shortens life.

*Sloth, like rust, consumes faster than labor wears, while the used key is always bright*, as Poor Richard says.

*But dost thou love life, then do not squander time, for that is the stuff life is made of, as Poor Richard says.*

How much more than is necessary do we spend in sleep, forgetting that *The sleeping fox catches no poultry, and that There will be sleeping enough in the grave, as Poor Richard says?*

*If time be of all things the most precious, wasting time must be (as Poor Richard says) the greatest prodigality<sup>2</sup>, since as he elsewhere tells us:*

*Lost time is never found again, and what we call time enough, always proves little enough.*

Let us then up and be doing, and doing to the purpose, so by diligence shall we do more with less perplexity.

*Sloth makes all things difficult, but industry all easy; and*

*He that riseth<sup>3</sup> late must trot all day, and shall scarce overtake his business at night; while*

*Laziness travels so slowly, that Poverty soon overtakes him;*

*Drive thy business, let not that drive thee; and*

*Early to bed, and early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise;*

...as Poor Richard says.

So what signifies wishing and hoping for better times? We may make these times better, if we bestir ourselves!

*Industry<sup>4</sup> need not wish, and he that lives upon hopes will die fasting.*

*There are no gains without pains, then help, hands, for I have no lands; or, if I have, they are smartly taxed.*

*He that hath a trade hath an estate, and he that hath a calling, hath an office of profit and honor, as Poor Richard says. But then the trade must be worked at, and the calling followed, or neither the estate nor the office will enable us to pay our taxes.*

If we are industrious, we shall never starve, for:

*At the working man's house hunger looks in, but dares not enter.*

Nor will the bailiff or the constable enter, for:

*Industry pays debts while despair increaseth<sup>5</sup> them.*

What though you have found no treasure, nor has any rich relation left you a legacy? *Diligence is the mother of good luck, and God gives all things to industry. Then plough deep while sluggards<sup>6</sup> sleep, and you shall have corn to sell and to keep.*

Work while it is called today, for you know not how much you may be hindered tomorrow. *One today is worth two tomorrows*, as Poor Richard says.

And further: *Never leave that till tomorrow which you can do today.*

If you were a servant, would you not be ashamed that a good master should catch you idle?

Are you then your own master? Be ashamed to catch yourself idle when there is so much to be done for yourself, your family, your country, and your king.

Handle your tools without mittens; remember that *The cat in gloves catches no mice*, as Poor Richard says.

It is true there is much to be done, and perhaps you are weak-handed, but stick to it steadily and you will see great effects. For:

*Constant dropping wears away stones; and*

*By diligence and patience the mouse ate in two the cable; and*

*Little strokes fell great oaks.*

Methinks I hear some of you say, 'Must a man afford himself no leisure?'

I will tell thee, my friend, what Poor Richard says:

*Employ thy time well, if thou meanest to gain leisure, and, since thou art not sure of a minute, throw not away an hour.*

Leisure is time for doing something useful. This leisure the diligent man will obtain, but the lazy man never, for:

*A life of leisure and a life of laziness are two things;*

*Many, without labor, would live by their wits only, but they break for want of stock; whereas industry gives comfort, and plenty, and respect.*

*Fly pleasures, and they will follow you;*

*The diligent spinner has a large shift; and*

*Now I have a sheep and a cow, everybody bids me good morrow.*

[II] But with our industry we must likewise be steady, settled and careful, and oversee our own affairs with our own eyes, and not trust too much to others; for, as Poor Richard says:

*I never saw an oft-removed<sup>7</sup> tree,  
Nor yet an oft-removed family,  
That throve so well as those that settled be.*

And again: *Three removes are as bad as a fire.*

And again: *Keep thy shop, and thy shop will keep thee.*

And again: *If you would have your business done, go. If not, send.*

And again:

*He that by the plough would thrive,  
Himself must either hold or drive.*

And again: *The eye of a master will do more work than both his hands.*

And again: *Want of care does us more damage than want of knowledge.*

And again: *Not to oversee workmen, is to leave them your purse open.*

Trusting too much to others' care is the ruin of many, for:

*In the affairs of this world men are saved not by faith, but by the want of it.*

But a man's own care is profitable, for:

*If you would have a faithful servant, and one that you like, serve yourself.*

A little neglect may breed great mischief:

*For want of a nail the shoe was lost; for want of a shoe the horse was lost; and for want of a horse the rider was lost, being overtaken and slain by the enemy; all for want of a little care about a horseshoe nail.*

[III]. So much for industry, my friends, and attention to one's own business. But to these we must add frugality, if we would make our industry more certainly successful.

A man may, if he knows not how to save as he gets, keep his nose all his life to the grindstone, and die not worth a groat<sup>8</sup> at last.

*A fat kitchen makes a lean will; and*

*Many estates are spent in the getting,  
Since women for tea forsook<sup>9</sup> spinning and knitting,  
And men for punch forsook hewing<sup>10</sup> and splitting.*

If you would be wealthy, think of saving as well as of getting. The Indies have not made Spain rich because her outgoes are greater than her incomes.

Away then with your expensive follies, and you will not then have so much cause to complain of hard times, heavy taxes, and chargeable families, for:

*Women and wine, game and deceit,  
Make the wealth small and the want great.*

And further, *What maintains one vice would bring up two children.*

You may think, perhaps, that a little tea or a little punch now and then, diet a little more costly, clothes a little finer, and a little entertainment now and then, can be no great matter; but remember:

*Many a little makes a mickle<sup>11</sup>.*

Beware of little expenses. *A small leak will sink a great ship*, as Poor Richard says.

And again: *Who dainties love, shall beggars prove;*

And moreover: *Fools make feasts, and wise men eat them.*

Here you are all got together at this sale of fineries and knick-knacks. You call them *goods*, but if you do not take care, they will prove evils to some of you.

You expect they will be sold cheap (and perhaps they may for less than they cost) but if you have no occasion for them, they must be dear to you.

Remember what Poor Richard says:

*Buy what thou<sup>12</sup> hast no need of, and ere<sup>13</sup> long thou shall sell thy necessities.*

And again: *At a great pennyworth pause a while.*

He means that perhaps the cheapness is apparent only, and not real. Or the bargain, by straitening thee<sup>14</sup> in thy business, may do thee more harm than good. For in another place he says:

*Many have been ruined by buying good pennyworths.*

Again: *It is foolish to lay out money in a purchase of repentance.*

And yet this folly is practiced every day at auctions, for want of minding the Almanac. 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, put out the kitchen fire*, as Poor Richard says.

These are not the necessaries of life. They can scarcely be called the Conveniences, and yet, only because they look pretty, how many want to have them!

By these (and other extravagances) the genteel<sup>15</sup> 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 on his legs is higher than a gentleman on his knees*, as Poor Richard says.

Perhaps they have had a small estate left them which they knew not the getting of? They think, *It is day, and will never be night*. That a little to be spent out of so much is not worth minding. But:

*Always taking out of the meal-tub, and never putting in, soon comes to the bottom*, as Poor Richard says.

And then: *When the well is 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*, as Poor Richard says. And indeed so does he that lends to such people, when he goes to get it in again. Poor Dick further advises, and says:

*Fond pride of dress is sure a very curse;  
Ere fancy you consult, consult your purse.*

And again: *Pride is as loud a beggar as Want, and a great deal more saucy*.

When you have bought one fine thing, you must buy ten more, so that your appearance may be all of a piece. But Poor Dick says: *It is easier to suppress the first desire, than to satisfy all that follow it*. And it is as truly folly for the poor to ape<sup>16</sup> the rich, as for the frog to swell in order to equal the ox.

*Vessels large may venture more,  
But little boats should keep near shore.*

It is, however, a folly soon punished; for (as Poor Richard says): *Pride that dines on Vanity, sups<sup>17</sup> on Contempt*.

*Pride breakfasted with Plenty, dined with Poverty, and supped with Infamy.*

And, after all, of what use is this pride of appearance, for which so much is risked, so much is suffered? It cannot promote health, nor ease pain. It makes no increase of merit in the person. It creates envy. It hastens misfortune.

But what madness must it be to *run in debt* for these superfluities?

We are offered by the terms of this sale, six months' credit, and that, perhaps, has induced some of us to attend it because we cannot spare the ready money, and hope now to be fine without it. But, ah! think what you do when you run in debt:

You give to another power over your liberty.

If you cannot pay at the time, you will be ashamed to see your creditor. You will be in fear when you speak to him. You will make poor, pitiful, sneaking excuses, and, by degrees, come to lose your veracity and sink into base, downright lying. For:

*The second vice is lying, the first is running in debt*, as Poor Richard says.

And again to the same purpose: *Lying rides upon Debt's back*;

...whereas a free-born Englishman ought not to be ashamed nor afraid to see or speak to any man living. But poverty often deprives a man of all spirit and virtue.

*It is hard for an empty bag to stand upright.*

What would you think of that prince or of that government, who should issue an edict forbidding you to dress like a gentleman or gentlewoman, on pain of imprisonment or servitude?

Would you not say that you were free, have a right to dress as you please, and that such an edict would be a breach of your privileges, and such a government tyrannical?

And yet you are about to put yourself under such tyranny when you run in debt for such dress!



Your creditor has authority, at his pleasure, to deprive you of your liberty by confining you in gaol<sup>18</sup> till you shall be able to pay him. When you have got your bargain, you may, perhaps, think little of payment; but, as Poor Richard says:

*Creditors have better memories than debtor;*

*Creditors are a superstitious sect, great observers of set days and times.*

The day comes round before you are aware, and the demand is made before you are prepared to satisfy it. Or, if you bear your debt in mind, the term (which at first seemed so long) will, as it lessens, appear extremely short. Time will seem to have added wings to his heels as well as his shoulders.

*Those have a short Lent who owe money to be paid at Easter.*

At present, perhaps, you may think yourselves in thriving circumstances, and that you can bear a little extravagance without injury; but:

*For age and want save while you may;  
No morning sun lasts a whole day.*

Gain may be temporary and uncertain, but ever while you live, expense is constant and certain; and *It is easier to build two chimneys, than to keep one in fuel*, as Poor Richard says. So: *Rather go to bed supperless, than rise in debt.*

*Get what you can, and what you get hold;  
'Tis the stone that will turn all your lead into gold.*

And, when you have got the Philosopher's stone, sure you will no longer complain of bad times or the difficulty of paying taxes.

[IV]. This doctrine, my friends, is reason and wisdom. But, after all, do not depend too much upon your own industry, and frugality, and prudence (though excellent things), for they may all be blasted without the blessing of Heaven. And therefore, ask that blessing humbly, and be not uncharitable to those that at present seem to want it, but comfort and help them. Remember: Job suffered, and was afterwards prosperous.

And now, to conclude:

*Experience keeps a dear school, but fools will learn in no other, as Poor Richard says, and scarce in that; for it is true, We may give advice, but we cannot give conduct.*

However, remember this: *They that will not be counseled, cannot be helped.*

And further, that: *If you will not hear Reason, she will surely rap your knuckles,* as Poor Richard says.

Thus the old gentleman ended his harangue. The people heard it and approved the doctrine, and immediately practiced the contrary just as if it had been a common sermon; for the auction opened and they began to buy extravagantly!

I found the good man had thoroughly studied my Almanacs, and digested all I had dropped on these topics during the course of twenty-five years. The frequent mention he made of me must have tired anyone else, but my vanity was wonderfully delighted with it, though I was conscious that not a tenth part of the wisdom was my own which he ascribed to me, but rather the gleanings that I had made of the sense of all ages and nations. However, I resolved to be the better for the echo of it, and though I had at first determined to buy stuff for a new coat, I went away resolved to wear my old one a little longer.

Reader, if thou wilt<sup>19</sup> do the same, thy profit will be as great as mine.

I am, as ever, thine<sup>20</sup> to serve thee,

RICHARD SAUNDERS.

(cited from *The Works of Benjamin Franklin*, ed. by Jared Sparks. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Childs & Peterson, 1840, vol. 2, pp. 94–103; italics in original)

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- <sup>1</sup> *Hearken* = listen  
<sup>2</sup> *Prodigality* = extravagance  
<sup>3</sup> *Riseth* = rises  
<sup>4</sup> *Industry* = hard work and diligence  
<sup>5</sup> *Increaseth* = increases  
<sup>6</sup> *Sluggard* = a lazy person  
<sup>7</sup> *Oft* = often  
<sup>8</sup> *Groat* = former English coin worth fourpence  
<sup>9</sup> *Forsook* = abandoned  
<sup>10</sup> *Hewing* is a method of cutting wood  
<sup>11</sup> *Mickle* = a great amount  
<sup>12</sup> *Thou* = you. Used when addressing a friend or someone you know or of similar status.  
<sup>13</sup> *Ere* = before  
<sup>14</sup> *Thee* = like thou, thee is a familiar way of saying “you”.  
<sup>15</sup> *Genteel* = gentlemen and gentlewomen – i.e. wealthy folk  
<sup>16</sup> *Ape* = to imitate  
<sup>17</sup> *Sups* = to eat supper (an evening meal)  
<sup>18</sup> *Gaol* = jail  
<sup>19</sup> *Wilt* = will  
<sup>20</sup> *Thy / Thine* = your / yours