

Franklin and Friends

A Discussion of the Protestant Work Ethic

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BENJAMIN FRANKLIN: Hello, all! Welcome to today's *Franklin and Friends*! I have some fantastic guests joining me today to discuss the Protestant work ethic and industry. First, I have the influential Boston preacher, Cotton Mather! Also, we have, joining us, the nation's first treasury secretary, Alexander Hamilton. Next, the author of our Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson! And last but not least, a leader of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, John Winthrop! Welcome, Everybody!

COTTON MATHER: Hi, Benjamin. We're all so glad to be here to discuss an issue that is so crucial to our nation's well-being. Labor is an obligation that each man obtains. To better unify and strengthen our nation, we must work together under God to not only fulfill His wishes, but also to ensure the economic and general well-being of our population. "Every Christian hath a personal calling; or a certain particular employment by which his usefulness in his neighborhood is distinguished" (Mather, 1701, p. 53). Why not use these employments that God has graced us with? A man who is good at building should take upon himself the labor of construction; a man who is good at leading should take upon himself the labor of managing others; a man who is good at caring for others should take upon him the labor of medicine. God has given us these abilities. Why take them for granted?

ALEXANDER HAMILTON: Mr. Mather, I have to agree with you. Not only do people have natural skill but they also obtain "skill and dexterity naturally resulting from a constant and undivided application to a single object" (Hamilton, 1791, p. 313). A man generally finds a calling and maintains that throughout his life, learning new skills and improving old ones. Each

person has skills that he can either improve upon or learn. It is only just and morally right to utilize these skills in a manner that will improve our society as a whole.

FRANKLIN: It's important that, as a nation, we use our individual skillsets to obtain a presence in the workforce and in the political system. It does not matter what skills you have or what job you obtain, you should use those skills and work diligently within your job. "One might think himself more obliged to a Genealogist, who could prove for him that his Ancestors and Relations for ten generations had been Ploughmen, Smiths, Carpenters, Turners, Weavers, Tanners, or even Shoemakers, and consequently that they were useful Members of Society; than if he could only prove that they were Gentlemen, doing nothing of Value, but living idly on the Labour of others, mere *fruges consumer nati*, and otherwise *good for nothing*, till by their Death, their Estates like the Carcase of the Negro's Gentleman-Hog, come to be cut up" (Franklin, 1784, pp. 68-69). It is more important that you provide your skills to the workforce and to other laborers rather than using another's labor as way to remain idle and still survive. That is not how one ought to live.

MATHER: Our population must learn to use their God-given skills and talents to serve others and spread His word and glory. If God has given you the talent to harvest fruits and vegetables, you should go farm and feed the rest of the land. Every person's skill comes with a consequential good for the rest of society. How selfish would it be not to use them?

THOMAS JEFFERSON: "Those who labour in the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever had a chosen people, whose breasts he has made his peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue" (Jefferson, 1784, p. 347). Those members of our society who choose to labor not only for their own personal gain, but also to glorify God and for our communal gain as a nation, have a genuine morality that allows them to commit to selflessness and act in a way that should benefit

others. One should not live his life having people work *for* him and never having worked himself. This shows poor character and little virtue in the eyes of our God.

MATHER: In Second Thessalonians 3:10-12, we are instructed, “For when we were here with you, we would give you this command: If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat. For we hear that some among you walk in idleness, not busy at work, but busybodies. Now such persons we command and encourage in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living” (2 Thessalonians 3:10-12). We are encouraged to work for the Lord and not for man. But by working for the Lord we are, in turn, spreading His name and glory and working towards the betterment of our nation under Him. Those who do not work and do live in idleness are seen as undeserving. They are not working for Lord but are solely living for their own pleasure.

JOHN WINTHROP: “If we shall fall to embrace this present world and prosecute our carnall intencions, seekeing greate things for ourselves and our posterity, the Lord will surely breake out in wrathe against us be revenged of such a perjured people and make us knowe the price of breach of such a Covenant. Now the only way to avoyde this shipwracke and to provide for our posterity is to followe the Counsell of Micah, to do Justly, to love mercy, to walke humbly with our God, for this end, wee must be knitt together in this worke as one man, wee must entertaine each other in brotherly Affeccion, wee must be willing to abridge ourselves of our superfluities for the supply of other’s necessities, wee must uphold a familiar Commerce together in all meekenes, gentelnes, patience, and liberality, wee must delight in each other, make other Conditions our owne, rejoyce together, mourne together, labour, and suffer together, allwayes having before our eyes our Commission and Community in the worke, our Community as members of the same body, soe shall wee keepe the unitie of the spirit in the bond of peace, the Lord will be our God and delight to dwell upon us” (Winthrop, 1630, pp.15-16). We are simply

not doing the Lord's work if we are not working for Him, for ourselves, and for our community, We are all one. And as one soul, we must work together and utilize each person's strengths as a way to unite under and glorify God.

FRANKLIN: So we shall all agree that each person in our society has an obligation to work and to employ her talents and skills in order to improve the general welfare?

JEFFERSON: I do believe that we have reached that agreement. Our Lord has given us special skills and we have acquired certain skills that we can utilize for greater good.

FRANKLIN: I think that another aspect of labor and of our society's obligations as Christians is that of using the time God has given you. "When there is so much to be done for yourself, your Family, your Country, and your gracious King, be up by Peep of Day; Let not the Sun look down and say, Inglorious here he lies" (Franklin, 1758, p. 55). We must not remain idle. We must be industrious and use the time we have to improve ourselves and improve our communities! We should all "lose no time; be always employed in something useful; cut off all unnecessary actions" (Franklin, 1784, p. 61).

WINTHROP: "The end is to improve our lives to doe more service to the Lord the comferte and increase of the body of christe whereof wee are members that our selves and posterity may be the better preserved from the Common corrupcions of this evill world to serve the Lord and worke out our Salvacion under the power and purity of his holy Ordinances" (Winthrop, 1630, p. 15). God has given us ample time to glorify Him and to do so by serving himself and our brothers and sisters in Christ before ourselves.

FRANKLIN: "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, if we reckon all that is spent in absolute Sloth, or doing of nothing, with that which is spent in idle

Employments or Amusements, that amount to nothing. Sloth, by bringing on Diseases, absolutely shortens Life. Sloth, like Rust, consumes faster than Labour wears, while the used Key is always bright. But does thou love Life, then do not squander Time, for that's the Stuff Life is made of. 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. If Time be of all Things the most precious, wasting Time must be the greatest Prodigality, since 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; Things difficult, but Industry all easy; and He that riseth 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" (Franklin, 1758, p. 54).

HAMILTON: Mr. Franklin, are you then saying that all men should partake in no leisurely activities, only to work for the rest of their days?

FRANKLIN: "Must a Man afford himself no Leisure? I will tell thee, my Friend, 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; so that a Life of Leisure and a Life of Laziness are two Things. Do you imagine that Sloth will afford you more Comfort than Labour? No, Trouble springs from Idleness, and grievous Toil from needless Ease. Many without Labour 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'll follow you. The diligent Spinner has a large Shift; and now I have a Sheep and a Cow, every Body bids me Good morrow" (Franklin, 1758, p. 55). Continuing

onto this point, we shall also discuss the benefits of labor to oneself and to one's community and our God.

HAMILTON: We should undoubtedly let those who wish to labor, do so without question or judgment. "Besides this advantage of occasional employment to classes having different occupations, there is another, of a nature allied to it, and of a similar tendency. This is the employment of persons who would otherwise be idle, and in many cases a burthen on the community, either from the bias of temper, habit, infirmity of body, or some other cause, indisposing or disqualifying them for the toils of the country" (Hamilton, 1791, p. 314).

MATHER: By employing those from all classes we are doing God's work by allowing their services and skills to be of aid to the rest of their community. "We expect Benefits from Humane Society. It is but equal, that Humane Society should Receive Benefits from Us. We are Beneficial to Humane Society by the Works of that Special occupation in which we are to be employed according to the Order of God" (Mather, 1701, p. 53).

FRANKLIN: Also, by letting everyone have an equal chance to labor if he wishes we are keeping our brothers and sisters fed and of good health. "If we are industrious we shall never starve; for at the working Man's House Hunger looks in, but dares not enter" (Franklin, 1758, p. 55). Yet, we should also be wary that we do not seek finery if we cannot afford to have it, because, at that point, there is no reason for your labor. "Many a one, for the Sake of Finery on the Back, have gone with hungry Belly, and half-starved their Families; Silks and Satins, Scarlet and Velvets, put out the Kitchen Fire. 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. The artificial Wants of mankind thus become more numerous than the natural; and for one poor Person, there are an hundred indigent. By these, and other Extravagancies, the Genteel 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 Gentlemen on his Knees” (Franklin, 1758, p. 57). So not only must we employ those of the lower classes in order to ensure they are not idle, but industrious, we must also educate them on the matters of Frugality. We must teach our society to “make no expense but to do good to others or yourself and to waste nothing” (Franklin, 1784, p. 61).

WINTHROP: In Ephesians 4:28, we are informed, “He who steals must steal no longer; but rather he must labor, performing with his own hands what is good, so that he will have something to share with one who has need” (Ephesians 4:28). If we are not frugal with our gains, we will be tempted then to take from others when we have no gains left. Instead, we must labor not for finery but instead for the improvement of ourselves under God, and our communities.

HAMILTON: You make good points in regards to the benefit of labor that it will keep our communities in good health and away from famine and also that it will teach frugality. On a larger scale, labor can ultimately improve our governmental system as well. “It is a primary object of the policy of nations, to be able to supply themselves with subsistence from their own soils; and manufacturing nations, as far as circumstances permit, endeavor to procure from the same source the raw materials necessary for their own fabrics. To secure such a market there is no other expedient than to promote manufacturing establishments. Manufacturers, who constitute the most numerous classes, after the cultivators of land, are for that reason the principal consumers of the surplus of their labor” (Hamilton, 1791, p. 316). If we all go through with our obligations to work as ordained by God, then we will not only help ourselves and our local communities, but also our national community. By joining together in labor we can become self-

reliant and establish a flourishing and proficient economy that will not be dependent on another country, as we were before. This helps establish our independence and power and also keeps us out of debt. By giving into our superfluities and unnecessary desires we are, at some point, going to require extra money that we might not have. Therefore, if we establish a manufacturing independence, we will be reliant on ourselves for our fineries and goods instead of having to borrow from elsewhere. Also, if we can make these goods ourselves, we can hire plenty of men for labor, therefore keeping them out of debt.

FRANKLIN: “But what Madness must it be to run in Debt for these Superfluities! We are offered, by the Terms of this Vendue, 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. And again, to the same Purpose, Lying rides upon Debt’s Back. Whereas a freeborn Englishman ought not to be ashamed or afraid to see or speak to any man living. but Poverty often deprives a Man of all Spirit and Virtue: ‘Tis hard for an empty Bag to stand upright” (Franklin, 1758, p. 58). Also “Nor will the Bailiff or the Constable enter, for Industry pays Debts, while Despair increaseth them. What though you have found no Treasure, not has and rich Relation left you a Legacy, Diligence is the Mother of Good luck, and God give all Things to Industry (Franklin, 1758, p. 55).

HAMILTON: Exactly as I was saying. There are sundry benefits to labor, and a large one is that of staying out of debt on both a smaller and larger scale.

WINTHROP: Labor undoubtedly also teaches one morality and what is right under God. “There are two rules whereby wee are to walke with one another: Justice and Mercy. To apply this to the works of mercy this lawe requires two things first that every man afford his help to another in every want or distresse. Secondly, that hee performe this out of the same affeccion, which makes him careful of his owne good according to that of our Saviour (Winthrop, 1630, p.13). We will learn to “abridge ourselves of our superfluities” (Winthrop, 1630, p. 15), and also to serve God and work for others rather than ourselves.

MATHER: For we all should know that our general calling is “to Serve the Lord Jesus Christ and Save our own Souls in the Services of Religion that are incumbent on all the children of men” (Mather, 1701, p. 53). Our time on Earth is to be spent working towards a greater good, whether it be that of our own, our peers, or our God. Labor is undoubtedly a tool that we all should use for to improve the general welfare.

JEFFERSON: As a nation, we should be one unit under God and we shall utilize our God-given skills and talents and the ones we might acquire to further our advancement as a country, so that we might become self-reliant, industrious, moral and, most of all, independent.

FRANKLIN: “Industry need not wish, and He that lives upon Hope, will die fasting” (Franklin, 1758, p. 54). Our discussion today on work ethic and our obligation to work for the betterment of our society has been both informative and entertaining. I am delighted that I have gotten the opportunity to speak with each of you on an issue that I believe is crucial to the success of our nation. Each of your ideas and opinions has been persuasive and eye-opening. I hope that our audience today has taken away from this topic how they can also help themselves and others by

participating and joining together in labor. Thank you so much, Mr. Mather, Mr. Winthrop, Mr. Jefferson, and Mr. Hamilton for your insightfulness into this topic.

HAMILTON: I, like you, believe that labor is an obligation to each person in our nation. We will undoubtedly prosper if we work as one unit and utilize each other's strengths to improve our communities.

MATHER: It is known that God has wanted us to work for Him and to spread His word and glory. By partaking in labor that benefits our society as a whole, we are indisputably doing His work and what He would have us do.

JEFFERSON: Mr. Franklin, thank you so much for having us on today. It was a pleasure to discuss this topic with each of you. I think we all reached a similar agreement that labor is ultimately beneficial to the general welfare.

WINTHROP: Yes, indeed, thank you. As Mr. Mather said, God wishes us to work so that we might help others and so that others might help us.

FRANKLIN: Thank you all so much for being here today. I would like to leave my audience with these words: "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 to good Advice, and something may be done for us; God helps them that help themselves" (Franklin, 1758, p. 54).

Thank you all for listening and have a great day!

References

Kramnick, Isaac., & Lowi, Theodore. J., 1st Edition (2009). *American Political Theory: A Norton Anthology*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc.