



Robert Burton – Declaration Masterclass Video Transcript

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If we know anything about the Declaration of Independence, it's usually its proclamation that we are each endowed with certain natural rights and that among these are life, liberty, and the

pursuit of happiness. If we happen to remember one additional thing, it's usually that the primary purpose of government is to secure these rights.

While the principle of natural rights contained in the Declaration is essential, we sometimes forget that the Declaration also teaches us that in addition to our natural rights, we also have natural duties, that self-government requires self-discipline, and that in order to be free, we must sometimes set aside our own good for the common good.

Put another way, the Declaration teaches us that to be free, we need to be good, and that goodness is called civic virtue, and that's what we're going to talk about today.

Let me begin by sharing a story. During the winter of 1777–78, General George Washington found himself encamped with his troops near Valley Forge, Pennsylvania. Rain, snow, and freezing temperatures plagued his soldiers, many of whom were already hungry, sick, and tired.

For three years, Washington had led the Continental Army, and while he had gained some victories, things were not looking good. Just that September, his troops had been defeated at the crucial Battle of the Brandywine, resulting in the British occupation of the city of Philadelphia. Although he could not have known it, this was the lowest point of the Revolutionary War.

As that winter came to a close and spring began, George Washington did something extraordinary. He ignored a congressional ban on theatrical performances and consented to put on a play for his troops. Of all possible entertainments in these darkest times, what play did he choose? Joseph Addison's *Cato, A Tragedy*. A tragedy? Really? I mean, comedy anyone?

Of all the choices you had to pick a tragedy and one that ends in crushing defeat and death? But the truth is Washington chose *Cato* for a specific reason. *Cato* tells the story of

Marcus Cato, a virtuous Roman senator who led his troops who were loyal to the Roman Senate against the rising tyranny of Julius Caesar. While Cato was defeated and died for his country, His example of moral courage and self-sacrifice inspired both Washington and his troops. Washington understood that the cause of liberty requires civic virtue, the moral character, self-discipline, and willingness to set aside one's own good for the common good.

So, what is virtue? The word *virtue* comes from the Latin word *virtutum*, which means moral strength, high character, or goodness. A simple definition would be moral excellence. For classical thinkers like the ancient Greeks and Romans, moral excellence was manifest in persons who developed specific habits of right action called virtues. These virtues include habits like courage, prudence, justice, and moderation.

Later Christian thinkers would add additional virtues to the list, like humility, hope, and charity. To be virtuous, it's not enough to occasionally act virtuously. It needs to become a habit. As we consistently act as a courageous person would, we develop the virtue or habit of courage. Then, even when things get tough, our habits kick in and we still act courageously. The same goes for other virtues.

Through reason and experience, these thinkers argued, we can understand that moral excellence is the road to lasting happiness and that all of our passions or desires should be governed by virtues. If we develop unvirtuous or vicious habits, we become slaves to our passions. Thus, freedom and happiness require virtue. The development of these virtues is what makes someone a good person.

In republics like Rome, or the newly independent American colonies, these virtues are also what make someone a good citizen. When we speak of the virtues necessary for good citizens, we call them civic virtues. By putting on the play *Cato*, Washington sought to inspire his men to develop the civic virtues that Roman senator represented: courage, duty, honor, and a willingness to sacrifice one's own good for the common good.

Just before his death, Cato, in the play, comforts his friends, saying, "Why mourn ye thus? Let not private loss afflict your hearts, 'Tis Rome that requires our tears, That humbled proud tyrants of the earth, And set nations free, Rome is no more, O liberty, O virtue, O my country." For Cato, for Washington, And for the brave soldiers of the Continental Army camped at Valley Forge, private loss or individual suffering was a worthy sacrifice for the goods of liberty, virtue, and country.

When teachers like me teach the Declaration, we almost exclusively focus on the Declaration of Independence as a declaration of rights, and it is. But all throughout the Declaration is language that reminds us that the framework of virtue is necessary for rights to even make sense.

By just focusing on rights, we fail to see the broader moral framework of the Declaration and what's required of us as citizens. It's like a tapestry with a bright thread. but we forget

to zoom out and see the full picture. It's like focusing on the star receiver in a football game and forgetting that the whole team makes the touchdown possible. It's like a blind man

feeling an elephant's slinky trunk and thinking that an elephant is a snake. You get the idea.

So, let's dig a little deeper into how rights are connected to moral duties. When I say I have a *right* to something, such as I have a right to that banana because I bought it. I'm not just describing what is, I'm also describing what ought to be or what should be. Because I own the banana, I have a right to it, and therefore you ought not to take my banana. My right, my banana, creates a duty, for you ought not to take my banana.

When the Declaration declares that we have a natural right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, it necessarily means that we also have a natural duty to not infringe the life or liberty of others. The Declaration says, "After a long train of abuses, it is our right, it is our duty, to throw off tyrannical governments." The Declaration is a declaration of obligations as much as a declaration of rights.

But the possession of natural rights also creates duties in a second way. You and I have a natural right to liberty just by being human beings. We are or ought to be free. But ultimately, for freedom to actually last, we the people need to not only respect the rights of others, but we actually need to cultivate virtues in ourselves.

And here's why: Freedom requires that we obey the unenforceable, that at some level we must do what's right even when no one is watching. In a free society, we can't have the government always watching and always enforcing. We must learn to govern ourselves. Our passions must be governed by virtues, by habits of moral excellence that we choose to follow day in and day out. Put another way, freedom requires self-discipline, self-control, self-government.

Sir Edmund Burke, a member of the British House of Commons at the time of the Revolution and one who sympathized with the colonists' complaints against Britain, said this: "Men are qualified for civil liberty in exact proportion to their disposition to put moral chains upon their own appetites. Society cannot exist unless a controlling power upon will and appetite be placed somewhere, and the less of it there is within, the more there must be without. We cannot live in community with others unless some restraints are placed on our selfish desires."

Thus, freedom is not the absence of laws. It is the presence of good laws. In a free society, good laws will include a constitution, criminal laws, and even traffic laws. But it also must include laws we place on ourselves. We need to develop habits of virtue. Those who fought the revolution, founded our country, and drafted our constitution were in near unanimous agreement on the necessity of some level of civic virtue for liberty.

George Washington said, “There is no truth more thoroughly established than that there exists an indissoluble union between virtue and happiness. John Adams observed that “we have no government armed with power capable of contending with human passions

unbridled by morality and religion. Our vices, like avarice, ambition, and revenge, would break the strongest cords of our constitution as a whale goes through a net.”

Even James Madison, who sought to create a constitution that need not always rely on virtue, that would supply by opposite and rival interests the defect of better motives, still rhetorically asked, “Is there no virtue among us? If there be not, we are in a wretched situation. No theoretical checks, no form of government can render us secure.”

Natural rights create natural duties, and the perpetuation of free government requires citizens with civic virtues. As we've discussed, the language of civic virtues is the broader tapestry within which the brightly colored thread of natural rights makes sense and stands out.

A careful reading of the text of the Declaration will reveal at least 12 virtues that form this moral framework. The next time you, your family, or your class reads the Declaration, do a hunt for them and see how many you can find.

In the Declaration we read—

- **Decency:** “A decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.”
- **Truthfulness:** “We hold these truths to be self-evident.”
- **Justice:** “Governments derive their just powers from the consent of the governed. And he has obstructed the administration of justice by refusing his assent to laws for the establishing judiciary powers. And they too have been deaf to the voice of justice.”
- **Prudence or Wise Decision-making:** “Prudence indeed,” says the declaration, “will dictate that governments long established should not be changed for light or transient causes.”
- **Dutifulness:** “It is their right, it is their duty to throw off such government.”
- **Patience:** “Such has been the patient sufferance of these colonies.”
- **Courage:** “He has dissolved representative houses repeatedly for opposing with manly firmness his invasions on the rights of the people.”
- **Humility:** “In every stage of these oppressions we have petitioned for redress in the most humble terms.”

- **Magnanimity** or **Generosity of Spirit**: “We have appealed to their native justice and magnanimity, and we have conjured them by the ties of our common kindred to disavow these usurpations.”
- And finally, **Faith**: “With a firm reliance in the protection of divine providence.”

Decency, respect, truthfulness, justice, prudence, dutifulness, patience, courage, humility, magnanimity, and faith.

Now, if you're like me, you may look around today and be just a little concerned. Examples of civic virtue in our fellow citizens, in our elected officials, and perhaps most importantly in ourselves, appear sorely lacking. We relish rage and contempt while forgetting patience and prudence. So what are we to do?

The challenge and blessing of liberty is that the decision to pursue the habits of virtue are up to each citizen:

- Do I seek to understand these virtues and make them into habits?
- Do I choose leaders that have also done so?
- Do I set an example for others to follow?

The final sentence of the Declaration provides an inspiring and timely example. When the 56 delegates appended their signatures to the document, they knew that they were not only putting their lives and fortunes on the line, they were staking their honor, their reputation for virtue.

As we seek for models of civic virtue to emulate, we can join them and say, “And for the support of this declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of divine providence, we mutually pledge to each other our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor.”