You May Depend Upon My Exertions: Robert Morris, the Revolutionary War, and Self-Sacrifice

Full Lesson Plan

**COMPELLING QUESTION**

How can Robert Morris’ actions during the American Revolution inspire us to be willing to sacrifice on behalf of others?

**VIRTUE**

Self-Sacrifice

**DEFINITION**

Self-sacrifice is purposeful action exchanging personal loss for the good of others.

**LESSON OVERVIEW**

In this lesson, students will learn about the actions of Robert Morris and his sacrifices for the cause of independence during the American Revolutionary War. They will explore how his selfless actions with his finances helped to preserve that cause. Through his example, they will learn how they can act selflessly in their own lives.

**OBJECTIVES**

- Students will analyze Robert Morris’ actions during the American Revolution.
- Students will understand how acting selflessly can benefit those around them.
- Students will understand how they can act more selflessly in their own lives.

**BACKGROUND**

Robert Morris was born in England in 1734 and was the son of a merchant. Morris immigrated to America in 1747, and his father sent him to apprentice with a Philadelphia merchant to learn the business. Morris had a head for the business and an instinct for seizing business opportunities. Because of his financial genius, he was made a partner in Willing, Morris, and Company at only twenty-one years old.

Morris married a woman from a prominent Maryland family, built a grand estate, and fathered seven children. He built up an impressive array of business contacts in the American colonies, the
Caribbean, and Europe. He became the wealthiest man in the American colonies. When the Revolutionary War began, Morris dedicated himself to public service and was appointed to the Pennsylvania Assembly and the Continental Congress. He supported the Patriot cause of liberty and self-government but was a moderate in politics who initially opposed the movement for independence. He abstained from voting on the Declaration of Independence and only signed it after it was adopted.

During the war, Morris served on a variety of committees in Congress, including the critical Committee of Secret Correspondence. This committee was responsible for reaching out to potential allies such as France for a military alliance as well as supplies, funds, and arms for the Continental Army. More significantly, Morris acted as a merchant in a private-public venture in which he routinely used his contacts to procure supplies for the army.

Have students read the background and narrative, keeping the Compelling Question in mind as they read. Then have them answer the remaining questions below.

As you read, imagine you are the protagonist.
  - What challenges are you facing?
  - What fears or concerns might you have?
  - What may prevent you from acting in the way you ought?

Who was Robert Morris?
What was Robert Morris’ contribution to the American Revolution?
How did the selfless acts of Robert Morris help to shape his identity?
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Discuss the following questions with your students.

- What is the historical context of the narrative?
- What historical circumstances presented a challenge to the protagonist?
- How and why did the individual exhibit a moral and/or civic virtue in facing and overcoming the challenge?
- How did the exercise of the virtue benefit civil society?
- How might exercise of the virtue benefit the protagonist?
- What might the exercise of the virtue cost the protagonist?
- Would you react the same under similar circumstances? Why or why not?
- How can you act similarly in your own life? What obstacles must you overcome in order to do so?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

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On Christmas Eve, George Washington faced one of his greatest crises while serving as General of the Continental Army during the Revolutionary War. He was planning a desperate attack against the enemy that was encamped across the Delaware River in Trenton. However, there was snow and ice on the ground, and many of his soldiers were hungry and wore rags instead of shoes. As a result, Washington sent a desperate message to John Hancock and the Continental Congress for supplies.

Congress immediately authorized Philadelphia merchant and delegate to Congress, Robert Morris, and a few other merchants to procure supplies for the Continental Army. Morris sprang into action and quickly reached out to all of his business contacts. He secured 1,000 muskets and 856 blankets for the soldiers and then hired wagon drivers to transport the supplies to the army. When another ship sailed into Philadelphia, Morris quickly dispatched its cargo of 463 more blankets, 300 pairs of stockings, muskets, pistols, gunpowder, and lead to Washington. Properly armed, equipped, and fed, the Americans won a stunning victory at the Battle of Trenton, and Robert Morris deserved some of the credit.
General Washington wanted to follow up his audacious attack on Trenton with another bold attack on the British at Princeton. Besides the fact that supplies were still short, many of the soldiers’ enlistments were expiring at the end of the month. Washington somewhat rashly offered them a ten-dollar bonus if they would stay for another month. On December 31, Washington naturally turned to Morris to help him with the situation. “The greatest impediment to our [attack] is, the want of provisions,” Washington stated. He also told Morris about the promised bounty and complained that his pay chest was empty. “A new difficulty presents itself. We have not the money,” he lamented.

Morris received the message and contacted every wealthy person and merchant he knew in the city. Provisions flowed to the army on a train of wagons. Moreover, Morris persuaded affluent citizens to donate money to pay the bounty. He may have even convinced one wealthy Quaker to dig up a chest full of saved gold and silver. Morris collected and sent the money that day not only for the bounty but also to pay the network of spies that Washington kept on a secret payroll to keep track of British movements. Morris had again contributed to a grand American victory that preserved the Patriot cause. He promised Washington, “If further occasional supplies of money are necessary, you may depend upon my exertions either in a public or private capacity.”

Indeed, throughout the rest of the war, Morris followed through on his promise and dedicated his efforts to securing supplies and arms for the army. In addition to fundraising and recruiting other supporters, he also contributed significant personal resources to the war effort. After the signing of a Franco-American alliance in 1778, a French fleet arrived in the colonies. Morris supplied the ships during their time in America. In the brutally cold winter of 1780, the American army was suffering from desperately low supplies, and the soldiers had not been paid in months. Morris secured thousands of barrels of flour so that the troops could have bread and pledged his personal credit. Morris also appealed to several friends who together were responsible for supplying the army throughout the summer and fall of 1781.

Morris sent his own money to fund the army to help propel it to victory in 1781. He sent much-needed funds to Nathaniel Greene’s poorly-clad and underfed army fighting in the Carolinas during the key victories at Cowpens and Guilford Courthouse. More significantly, Morris paid for Washington’s troops to travel from New York to Virginia and then funded the Yorktown siege. The Battle of Yorktown ended with the surrender of 5,000 redcoats and led to an American victory in the war. Still, the war was not officially over for two more years, and the condition of American finances and the state of the army collapsed.

The Continental dollar was not worth the paper it was printed on because of rampant inflation. Morris was now the Superintendent of Finance and depreciated the currency by a ratio of 40 to 1. Some soldiers and officers of the army had not been paid in years. Their discontent was rising, and there were several mutinies. Morris was outraged by the injustice towards the Patriots who served in the army. In the spring of 1783, he agreed to pay the troops for three months out of his own pocket. He paid out what would be $750,000 in today’s money and was nearly bankrupted by the generosity. “My personal credit, which thank Heaven I have preserved through all the tempests of the war, has been substituted for that which the Country has lost.”
Morris sacrificed for the country and the cause of liberty by spending his fortune.

Morris was firmly committed to honoring financial obligations with honesty and good character. “I will never be the Minister of Injustice,” he stated. Morris believed that happiness was rooted in virtue, character, and principle, stating, “happy is that man who has judgment and fortitude to preserve a proper medium of conduct throughout the eternal conflict between passion, prejudice, and principle.” Morris lived up to his words by sacrificing his wealth so that Americans would win their independence and liberty.