BBC LEARNING ENGLISH
6 Minute English
Is being thrifty a virtue?
This is not a word-for-word transcript

Neil
Hello. This is 6 Minute English from BBC Learning English. I'm Neil.

Sam
And I'm Sam.

Neil
Are you a saver or a spender, Sam?

Sam
Well, I'm trying to limit my spending right now because I'm saving up for a deposit to buy a house.

Neil
Saving money is not always easy - as we'll find out in today's programme, which is all about 'thrift'. 'Thrift' is not a simple idea to define. It's to do with living a simple life free from the need to constantly buy the latest products.

Sam
Today's consumer culture encourages us to 'spend, spend, spend', but it hasn't always been that way. The Victorians for example told people to 'save up for a rainy day', meaning to keep some money back in case of unforeseen emergencies.

Neil
But before we discover more about that, it's time for today's quiz question. If you're trying to save money you probably know how hard it can be. So my question is: what percentage of people in the UK, do you think, have less than £1000 in savings? Is it:
a) 5%,
b) 15 %, or
c) 30%?

Sam

Well, if I'm anything to go by I'd say c) 30%.

Neil

OK. Well, we'll find the correct answer out later. I mentioned before that 'thrift' is a difficult idea to define, so here's Alison Hulme, a lecturer at the University of Northampton, explaining more to BBC Radio 4's programme *Thinking Allowed*:

Alison Hulme

There are two dictionary definitions of thrift. The older of the two comes from the word 'thrive' etymologically, and described thrift as the ability to live well and to **flourish**, so it's that sense of human flourishing. The more recent definition is the one we're probably more familiar with which is about **frugality**. All of that said, it's been used historically of course by various people in various moments in various different places in very different ways and they've often had a social or religious **agenda**.

Neil

It seems the oldest definition of 'thrift' has nothing to do with saving money and is connected to the verbs 'thrive' and '**flourish**' - meaning to grow or develop successfully.

Sam

It was only later with the Puritans - 16th century English Christians with a reputation for strict discipline - that the meaning of thrift changed and became associated with **frugality** - being careful not to spend too much money or eat too much food.

Neil

The Puritans believed that being frugal was a religious virtue and that people ought to save money in order to give to others in need.

Sam

Later on the meaning of 'thrift' changed again. During the Victorian era, it was connected to the idea of managing your own money in order to be a responsible citizen.

Neil

Throughout history then, there have been different versions of 'thrift', and this may be because different religious or social groups had their own **agenda** - a specific aim or reason for a particular group to do something. For example, the Victorian definition of thrift was based on a social **agenda** about being a respectable member of society.

Sam
Ideas about frugality and thrift changed again during the Second World War when the public was encouraged to avoid waste so that every material resource could go into the war effort.

Neil
And in the post-war period, it changed again as people's wealth and standard of living increased. Here's Alison Hulme again:

Alison Hulme
It's the idea that once people had enough to meet their kind of **basic needs** there was this kind of **moral slide** into consumerism. It's not a view that I subscribe to in a simplistic sense myself - I think there's a very fine line to tread here. There's no point denying that, certainly in the developed world, there's been a rise in consumer capitalism, that's just a **truism**, but thrift hasn't declined.

Neil
In modern times, people's motivation to save up and be thrifty declined once they had enough to meet their **basic needs** - the basic necessities needed to survive, like food, clothes and shelter and nothing extra.

Sam
Alison mentions that once these **basic needs** were satisfied, people moved away from thrift into consumerism, the desire to buy 'luxury' products which were not absolutely necessary. According to some, this created a **moral slide** – a decrease in the standards of behaving in good, fair and honest ways.

Neil
The rise in consumer capitalism we have seen around the world is an example of a **truism** - something that is so obviously true it is not worth repeating.

Sam
What *is* worth repeating is the quiz question, Neil.

Neil
Yes, I asked you how many British people had savings of under £1000.

Sam
And I said, c) 30%

Neil
But in fact, Sam, it's b) 15%.

Sam
So I guess I'm not such a bad saver after all!

Neil
OK. Well, today we've been talking about the changing meanings of 'thrift', an idea connected to **frugality** - being careful not to spend too much money.

Sam
The original meaning of 'thrift' was to **flourish** - grow or develop successfully - but that definition changed as different religious groups, like the Puritans, promoted their own **agenda** - aim or reason for a particular group to do something.

Neil
In recent times, people's ability to meet their **basic needs** – the necessities for survival like food and shelter, have reduced the importance of 'thrift', which some believe has created a **moral slide** – a reduction in standards of moral behaviour.

Sam
And the associated rise of consumer capitalism is an example of a **truism** - something that is obviously true and generally accepted by all.

Neil
That's all for now. Join us again next time for more topical discussion and vocabulary. Bye for now!

Sam
Bye bye!

VOCABULARY

flourish
grow or develop successfully

frugality
being careful not to spend too much money or eat too much food

agenda
specific aim or reason for a particular group to do something

basic needs
the basic necessities needed to survive, like food, clothes and shelter, and
nothing extra

moral slide
decline in standards of moral (good, fair and honest) behaviour

truism
something that is so obviously true it is not worth saying