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The Eighth and Ninth Commandments in Politics

THE two commandments which are specially applicable in public life are the eighth and the ninth. Not only every politician, high or low, but every citizen interested in politics, and especially every man who, in a newspaper or on the stump, advocates or condemns any public policy or any public man, should remember always that the two cardinal points in his doctrine ought to be, "Thou shalt not steal," and "Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor." He should also, of course, remember that the multitude of men who break the moral law expressed in these two commandments are not to be justified because they keep out of the clutches of the human law. Robbery and theft, perjury and subornation of perjury, are crimes punishable by the courts; but many a man who technically never commits any one of these crimes is yet morally quite as guilty as is his less adroit but not more wicked, and possibly infinitely less dangerous, brother who gets into the penitentiary.

As regards the eighth commandment, while the remark of one of the founders of our government, that the whole art of politics consists in being honest, is an overstatement, it remains true that absolute honesty is what Cromwell would have called a "fundamental" of healthy political life. We can afford to differ on the currency, the tariff, and foreign policy; but we cannot afford to differ on the question of honesty if we expect our republic permanently to endure. No community is healthy where it is ever necessary to distinguish one politician among his fellows because "he is honest." Honesty is not so much a credit as an absolute prerequisite to efficient service to the public. Unless a man is honest we have no right to keep him in public life, it matters not how brilliant his capacity, it hardly matters how great his power of doing good service on certain lines may be. Probably very few men will disagree with this statement in the abstract, yet in the concrete there is much wavering about it. The number of public servants who actually take bribes is not very numerous outside of certain well-known centers of festering corruption. But the temptation to be dishonest often comes in insidious ways. There are not a few public men who, though they would repel with indignation an offer of a bribe, will give certain corporations special legislative and executive privileges because they have contributed heavily to campaign funds; will permit loose and extravagant work because a contractor has political influence; or, at any rate, will permit a public servant to take public money without rendering an adequate return, by conniving at inefficient service on the part of men who are protected by prominent party leaders. Various degrees of moral guilt are involved in the multitudinous actions of this kind; but, after all, directly or indirectly, every such case comes dangerously near the border-line of the commandment which, in forbidding theft, certainly by implication forbids the connivance at theft, or the failure to punish it. One of the favorite schemes of reformers is to devise some method by which big corporations can be prevented from making heavy subscriptions to campaign funds, and thereby acquiring improper influence. But the best way to prevent them from making contributions for improper purposes is simply to elect as public

servants, not professional denouncers of corporations,—for such men are in practice usually their most servile tools,—but men who say, and mean, that they will neither be for nor against corporations; that, on the one hand, they will not be frightened from doing them justice by popular clamor, or, on the other hand, led by any interest whatsoever into doing them more than justice. At the Anti-Trust Conference last summer Mr. Bryan commented, with a sneer, on the fact that "of course" New York would not pass a law prohibiting contributions by corporations. He was right in thinking that New York, while it retains rational civic habits, will not pass ridiculous legislation which cannot be made effective, and which is merely intended to deceive during the campaign the voters least capable of thought. But there will not be the slightest need for such legislation if only the public spirit is sufficiently healthy, sufficiently removed alike from corruption and from demagoguery, to see that each corporation receives its exact rights and nothing more; and this is exactly what is now being done in New York by men whom dishonest corporations dread a hundred times more than they dread the demagogic agitators who are a terror merely to honest corporations.

It is, of course, not enough that a public official should be honest. No amount of honesty will avail if he is not also brave and wise. The weakling and the coward cannot be saved by honesty alone; but without honesty the brave and able man is merely a civic wild beast who should be hunted down by every lover of righteousness. No man who is corrupt, no man who condones corruption in others, can possibly do his duty by the community. When this truth is accepted as axiomatic in our politics, then, and not till then, shall we see such a moral uplifting of the people as will render, for instance, Tammany rule in New York, as Tammany rule now is, no more possible than it would be possible to revive the robber baronage of the middle ages.

Great is the danger to our country from the failure among our public men to live up to the eighth commandment, from the callousness in the public which permits such shortcomings. Yet it is not exaggeration to say that the danger is quite as great from those who year in and year out violate the ninth commandment by bearing false witness against the honest man, and who thereby degrade him and elevate the dishonest man until they are both on the same level. The public is quite as much harmed in the one case as in the other, by the one set of wrong-doers as by the other. "Liar" is just as ugly a word as "thief," because it implies the presence of just as ugly a sin in one case as in the other. If a man lies under oath or procures the lie of another under oath, if he perjures himself or suborns perjury, he is guilty under the statute law. Under the higher law, under the great law of morality and righteousness, he is precisely as guilty if, instead of lying in a court, he lies in a newspaper or on the stump; and in all probability the evil effects of his conduct are infinitely more wide-spread and more pernicious. The difference between perjury and mendacity is not in the least one of morals or ethics. It is simply one of legal forms.

The same man may break both commandments, or one group of men may be tempted to break one and another group of men the other. In our civic life the worst offenders against the law of honesty owe no small part of their immunity to those who sin against the law by bearing false witness against their honest neighbors. The sin is, of course, peculiarly revolting when coupled with hypocrisy, when it is committed in the name of morality. Few politicians do as much harm as the newspaper editor, the clergyman, or the lay reformer who, day in and day out, by virulent and untruthful invective aimed at the upholders of honesty, weakens them for the benefit of the frankly vicious. We need fearless criticism of dishonest men, and of honest men on any point where they go wrong; but even more do we need criticism which shall be truthful both in what it says and in what it leaves unsaid—truthful in words and truthful in the impression it designs to leave upon the readers' or hearers' minds.

We need absolute honesty in public life; and we shall not get it until we remember that truth-telling must go hand in hand with it, and that it is quite as important not to tell an untruth about a decent man as it is to tell the truth about one who is not decent.