

THE PENALTY OF SURRENDER

The remarks of Leonard E. Read, presented at the Sunday Evening Club of the First Congregational Church, Los Angeles, California, January Fourth, Nineteen Forty Eight.

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THESE remarks, hardly more than a personal confession of faith, have their origin in an attitude or behavior commonly referred to as "compromising."

The compromising attitude is exalted by many and deplored by only a few.

As an example of the way this attitude is exalted, a certain business leader, perhaps the most publicized one in the country, once severely lectured me on my unswerving or uncompromising behaviors. He charged that I saw things only in blacks and whites; that practical life was lived in shades of grays, actually in the shadows of these two extremes; that I had a nice chance of "going far" in the world if only I would become more agreeable to the thoughts and actions of my fellows.

This criticism by so popular a person left me somewhat dumbfounded. While it is true that I felt no sense of guilt whatever, nor even any unfaithfulness to those who thought differently than I, nonetheless, I found myself unable to do more than stammer in my own defense. Did you ever experience a feeling of rightness in the face of criticism but were unable to explain your feeling? If so, you know how I felt on this occasion four or five years ago.

“The Futility of Compromise”

· But there came to pass, only a few weeks ago, an example of the way this compromising attitude is deplored. Dr. Fifield, one with whom I have this uncompromising reputation, phoned and asked that I appear here and talk about “The Futility of Compromise.” I readily agreed. Here was an opportunity to think this thing through, to give expression to something that had too long remained in the vague area of feeling. What more degrading influence is there than this spirit of compromise! Here was the chance to say what I mean, to explain to myself -- and not, as you shall see, to impose my ideas on any other person.

Compromise, like many other words, has different meanings for different persons. After some reflection I concluded that it was a confusion in the meaning of words that was largely responsible for so much misunderstanding; that maybe it wasn't compromise after all which deserved condemnation.

Physical Compromise is Possible

I want to use the term in this definition by Webster, one of several, “The result or embodiment of concession or adjustment.” I want to show that compromise is potentially good when applied in a physical sense and that it has no application whatever in a moral sense.

For example, you and your wife are spending what is hoped will be a happy evening at home. She chooses to listen to the radio and you elect to figure out what Toynbee is driving at in his Study of History. The scene looks good, for you are sitting side by side near this beautiful piece of furniture. But the scene doesn't sound good. The furniture is making a lot of noise.

Now, here are all the elements for conflict. Present are the possibilities for turning a cheerful evening into one of disharmony. But compromise can come to your aid. Your lady can decrease the noise to the point where she can still hear, and you can move to some remote corner where you can comprehend Toynbee just as well as in any other position. Harmony can be preserved by compromise.

Compromise in this sense is an adjustment of physical situations. It is the process by which seemingly conflicting interests are reduced to the point most satisfactory to all parties concerned. Thought of in this way, compromise is the great harmonizer, the attitude that makes living together -- social life -- possible and, in many instances, even a pleasure.

Indeed, the market place, where tens of millions of transactions go on daily, is one vast area of compromise. Buyers aim at low prices. Their economic heaven is zero. Sellers aim at high prices. Their economic heaven is infinity. In a free market there is

an adjustment of these diverse desires. Compromise establishes a mean of these two extremes, the point at which general satisfaction is at its highest level.

It is in this physical realm that much of life is lived. In this realm compromise is good and it is practical. It begets harmony and peace.

Moral Compromise is Impossible

How easy it would seem, then, finding compromise so useful in such a vast segment of life to conclude, unthoughtfully, that it has an equal place, a comparable value, in that phase of life which occupies most of us so little: moral life.

But this is precisely the point where I believe many of us are the victims of a confusion in terms. What is compromise in physical affairs, that is, in an adjustment of physical positions, is something entirely different when applied to principles and morality.

For example, let us make the reckless assumption that most of us are committed to the Biblical injunction, "Thou shalt not steal." This is a moral principle. The point I want to make -- my major point -- is that this principle defies compromising. You either take someone else's property without his consent, or you do not. If you steal just a teensy weensy bit you do not compromise the principle. You abandon it. You surrender your principle.

By taking only a little of someone else's property without his consent, as distinguished from taking a lot of someone else's property without his consent, you do compromise in the physical sense. You compromise the physical amount you steal. But the moral principle, whatever the amount of the theft, is surrendered, utterly abandoned.

If all the rest of mankind are in favor of passing a law that would take the property, honestly acquired, of only one person without due compensation, even though the purpose be allegedly for the so-called social good, you cannot adjust yourself both to the moral principle, "Thou shalt not steal," and to the demand of the millions. Principle does not lend itself to bending or to compromising. It stands impregnable. I must either abide by it or, in all fairness, I must, on this point, regard myself, not as a rational, a reasonable person, but rather as an unprincipled person.

What are Moral Principles?

Of course, the question immediately arises as to what constitutes principle. Here again is a term with many meanings. I cannot derive the exact satisfaction I want from reading the several definitions; therefore, it seems necessary to define what I mean.

The Ten Commandments are principles, moral principles. They were principles at least to the ones who wrote them, and they

have been adopted and held as principles by countless millions. They receive their validity as principles through the deductions of the wiser among us and through centuries of observations and experience. Actually, they are principles only insofar as they are revealed truth to particular persons.

What may be a principle to one is not necessarily a principle to another. It is a matter of revealed truth, that is, revelation, "the disclosing or discovering ... of what was before unknown ..."

To me, "Thou shalt not steal," is a principle not because some sage of antiquity said so but because, in my own experience, it has been revealed as a principle which must be adhered to if we are not to perish from the earth.

To the ones who have not been graced with this revelation; to the ones who hold that they should gratify their personal charitable feelings, not with their own goods, but by using the police force to take goods from others; to those who would indulge in legal thievery and honestly think the practice right and honorable; to those I say, "Thou shalt not steal," is no principle at all. It is only the principle of someone else.

A principle, then, is what one holds to be a fact of life, of nature, or, as some of us would put it, of God. If this is correct, it follows that a principle is a matter of personal individual judgment. Judgment is fallible. Therefore,

there are wrong principles as well as right principles. Aristotle said there were a million ways to be wrong, only one way to be right. That suggests, in a way, the measure of fallibility among us.

Moral Principles Require Understanding

Now, then, if principle is a matter of personal judgment, and judgment is conceded to be fallible, on what is right principle dependent?

Right principle is dependent on the evolution of judgment. When judgments deteriorate we have what history refers to as the "Dark Ages." When judgments evolve or improve, reference is made to "The Renaissance." The question that grows out of this reasoning is, how do judgments evolve? My answer is, by revelation.

Parenthetically, I maintain that no person is capable of rising above his best judgment. To live in strict accordance with it is to live as good as one can, as humble or as mean as that may be. Hope for personal betterment lies in raising the level of one's judgment; judgment is a limiting factor.

If the evolution of judgment rests on revelation how is revelation to be achieved? I can think of no answer superior to that suggested by Goethe:

Nature understands no jesting; she is always true, always serious, always

severe; she is always right, and the errors and faults are always those of man. The man incapable of appreciating her she despises; and only to the apt, the pure, and the true, does she resign herself, and reveal her secrets.

The sole way to revelation, to ultimate truth, to nature, as Goethe puts it, or to God, as I put it, lies through one's own person. It is my faith that the individual is God's manifestation so far as any given individual is concerned. My way to God is through my own person. He will reveal Himself to me, I will be His manifestation, only to the extent that I am "apt, pure and true."

Understanding Requires Effort

But the revelation of truth and of principles does not come automatically, without effort, like "manna from Heaven." Revelation is the product of a diligent stewardship of an individual's mental resources. Truth must be sought, and its revelation is most likely in an active mind.

It is rather easy to observe that to some very little, if anything, is ever revealed. To others there come revelations far beyond anything I now possess or have any right seriously to expect.

Anyway, with this as a faith, based, as it is, on such revelation as is mine, God is as

intimate to me as my own person. He exists for each of us only insofar as we achieve our own conception of His likeness.

God and Individual Liberty are One

This is why I believe, so fervently, in the sanctity and dignity of the individual. This is why I subscribe to the philosophy that each person has inalienable rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. For me to deny this philosophy by violating the life, liberty, happiness or property of another, by inflicting my ways on other persons, is for me to assert myself as a god over God, to interfere with another person's relationship with God. For me to use compulsion in any manner whatsoever to cast others in my image is for me to rebuke God in his several manifestations.

If one accepts the individual in this light, a rule of conduct emerges with crystal clarity: reflect in word and in deed, always and accurately, that which one's best judgment dictates. This is you in such Godliness as you possess. To do less, to deviate one iota, is to sin against yourself, that is, against your Maker as He has manifested Himself in you. To do less is not to compromise. To do less is to surrender!

Certainly, there is nothing new about the efficacy of accurately reflecting one's best judgment. This principle of conduct has been known throughout the ages. Now and then it has been expressed beautifully and epigrammatically.

Shakespeare enunciated this principle when he had Polonius say:

This above all: To thine own self be true,
And it must follow, as the night the day,
Thou canst not then be false to any man.

Edmond Rostand meant nothing different when he wrote this line for Cyrano:

Never to make a line I have not heard in
my own heart;

American folklore counselled intellectual integrity with,

Honesty is the best policy.

The Price of Untruth

The Bible announces the penalty of surrender, what it means to abandon principle. It says simply,

The wages of sin is death.

One needs to make no further inquiry to verify this Biblical pronouncement. Abundant testimony has been provided all of us in our lifetime. Nor is the end in sight. All the world is filled with examples of warped judgments and principles abandoned: men ruling over man; the glamour of popularity rather than the strictness of judgment directing policy; expediency substituting for such truth as is

known; business men employing experts to help them seem right, often at the expense of rightness itself; labor leaders justifying any action that gratifies their lust for power; political parties asserting that the end justifies the means; clergymen preaching expropriation of property without consent in the name of the "common good"; American teachers advocating collectivism and denying the sanctity and the dignity of the individual; politicians building platforms from public-opinion polls; farmers and miners joining other plunderbundists in demands for other peoples' property; arrogance replacing humility; in short, if we do not assume an almost abysmal ignorance we must conclude that we are sinking into a new dark age, an age darkened with persons who have abandoned intellectual integrity.

If we were suddenly to become aware of foreign vandals invading our shores, vandals that would kill our children, rape our women and pilfer our industry, every last man of us would rise in arms that we might sweep them from our land.

Yet, these bad ideas, these ideas based on the abandonment of absolute integrity, are the most depraved and dangerous vandals known to man. Is the Bible right that the wages of sin is death? I give you the last two wars, wars born of unreason and lies. And in peace, if we can call it peace? I give you Russia in the summer of 1934 where millions died of starvation and, in other years, where other millions died in this

and other ways. I give you almost any place in the world today.

Is Honesty Dangerous?

Does it take courage to be honest, that is, does one have to be brave to state accurately one's highest opinion? Indeed, not. A part of revealed truth is: It is not dangerous to be honest. One who possesses this revelation is to that extent intelligent. Being honest, not surrendering principle, rests only upon intelligence, not at all upon courage.

Perhaps the reason that so many fear stating accurately what they believe is that they are not aware that it is safe to do so. Relying, erroneously, on courage, many persons become blustering with their opinions; they get cantankerous when they are honest. But, in this case, the villain is their cantankerousness, not their honesty.

Some may contend that even if everyone were a model of intellectual integrity, that by reason of the great variety of judgments, differences and antagonisms would still maintain. This is true. But differences lend themselves to a change toward the truth in an atmosphere of honesty. Under these circumstances they can be lived with. For, after all, life, in a physical sense is, and for ages to come, will be a compromise. But if principle is abandoned even compromise will not be possible. Nothing but chaos!

Given honesty -- each person true to himself at his best -- and there will exist the condition from which revelation springs; from which knowledge expands; from which intelligence grows; and from which judgments improve.

Honesty and intelligence are Godly or God-like and, therefore, primary virtues. Anyone is capable of being true to himself. That is the one advantage we were all born with, and, consequently, its abandonment is the greatest sin of all.

If there be no falseness there will then be as much intelligence as we are capable of. How nearer God can we get?

