

The Conservation of Resources

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Of late there has been a great deal said about the conservation of our natural resources. We have been told that our forests have been so wantonly devastated by money-jacking maniacs of our time that unless we get some active and strenuous measures to protect them that we shall find ourselves, not only without forests, but without vegetation. The same devastation has been going on with our other natural resources, such as oil, mineral wealth, coal deposits. Men with no other interest than that of amassing the largest amount of commercial wealth, at any cost to the present and to future generations, have exploited our natural resources to such an extent that we have come to see the danger of this unrestrained exploitation.

But this aspect of the situation that has been produced by the industrial and commercial development of the past 50 years is not precisely what I am interested in this morning in speaking upon the subject of the conservation of resources. If I am not mistaken we have been guilty of a far more serious offense than that of the wanton devastation of forests for the sake of satisfying our perverted greed for wealth, and the degenerating luxury and idleness that it has brought in its train. Not only have we failed to conserve our natural resources as they are found in forests, mines, oil cells, but we have gone beyond that in the fact that we have actually failed to conserve our ultimate deposit of wealth in solid honest healthy human beings. I cannot go into detail; I simply state the fact that every interest of human life, the integrity of the moral honor of the individual, the integrity of the home, the integrity of the community, the integrity of the churches, the integrity of the municipal and national servants, the integrity of the national life itself, have all been assailed in the interests of this same money-making mania, and commercial prosperity that we have come to view with a feeling of suspicion. Not only have these

¹ This is from the bound collection that includes sermons from August 30, 1908 to November 26, 1908.

various interests of life been assailed, but, and we relate the fact with a deep sense of shame, in all too many cases they have surrendered their integrity to the alluring approaches of this insidious phantom of wealth. How many individuals, do you think, have sacrificed their personal honor and moral integrity on the altar of this god of gain in the last five years? How many families, do you think, have sacrificed all that makes the family life sweet and clean and noble upon this same altar during the same time? To what extent the municipalities of this country have sold themselves for this same mess of pottage has been disclosed to us to some extent during the last few years. We now enjoy the proud distinction of being the most corrupt nation of the western world, at least so far as our municipal politics are concerned. In our national life the extent to which this mischief has been going on can hardly be estimated. At least this much may be said, that the close relationship of national servants to the same commercial interests that have betrayed the honor of individuals and homes and municipalities, has been so obvious, that in many cases it has been very uncomfortable and embarrassing for both parties. The point which I wish to make is this, for the sake of making money, for the sake of amassing and accumulating, we have not hesitated to ride roughshod over the honorable and the legitimate rights of individuals and communities. We have trampled upon not only the physical but the moral wellbeing of individual citizens, of municipal groups, and the national honor and the national life. For our commercial strength, not for our honor, and nobility of life, are we famed the world over. Emerson once wrote these lines concerning Webster:²

Why did all manly gifts in Webster fail?

He wrote on nature's grandest brow, "For sale."³
All these facts you are more or less acquainted with. The results upon the physical, moral and spiritual conditions of life are so apparent to any man who, having eyes to see, dares to permit himself to see, or having ears to hear, dares to permit himself to hear.

² Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) American Transcendentalist and writer. Daniel Webster (1782-1852) American lawyer and statesman who served as Secretary of State for Presidents Harrison, Tyler and Fillmore.

³ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Poems*, Volume IX, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1918, p. 399.

I do not care to pass any comments upon this situation that you are more or less familiar. But I would like to call to your attention the fact that we of this nation who have become famous for our wild pursuit of money, who have trampled under the war chariots of our industrial conquests, all the true and valuable characteristics of human life, have at the same time clung with a death grip to the mantle of the name of Christianity. In words beyond measure we have called, "Lord, Lord." We have clung to our religious forms with a remarkable tenacity, we have done much that is valuable in the way of scholarly study and investigation, but we have not done the will of God, we have not tried to develop and train the spirit of Good Will that is in us. I wish to call to your memory the teaching of the religion of Jesus concerning these very selfsame wealth, and human beings that we have been speaking of. In regard to wealth in all its forms: "Love not the world, neither the things that are of the world."⁴ "Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you."⁵ Jesus does not tell us that we should not love life, but rather that life should be placed above the interests in wealth. What we should eat and what we should drink should be thought of only in so far as they minister to the complete fulfillment of the human life. To put the things in other language, one should so prize the very functions of the noble life that all these things should naturally be brought into their proper place and become the servants and not the masters of our personality. Wealth is not bad in itself, but on the contrary, wealth in some degree is very desirable, and indeed necessary to the decent human life. It becomes bad only when it drags the human being down into the mire of dishonor and ignominy, only when it becomes the master that leads into the dirt and filth of selfish greed, and inhuman thoughtlessness. The pleasure that is to be obtained by wealth is not in itself bad, indeed, pleasure, carefree joy and pure delight in play, in nonproductive activity, in a whole-souled relaxation from all the responsibilities of life, is as essential to life as it is to breath. We must have our fun. The divine life demands it. The evil comes in when we are greedy, and take more than our share, or make a business out of our pleasures, or purchase them at the sacrifice of our own honor, or the happiness and honor of another. The complete fulfillment of life that is the end and the aim, to love God with all thy

⁴ 1 John 2:15.

⁵ Matthew 6:33.

soul and all thy mind,⁶ to know the deepest and the richest truth of human life, to satisfy its pure affections, to nourish and nurture its highest aspirations, and to realize its grandest hopes. This is one side of the teaching of Jesus concerning human life.

But the teaching of Jesus embraces another side, placed by him on equal footing with the first. "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself."⁷ This life of ours is to be lived in common with all those around us. Their hopes, their honor, their aspirations are to be cherished as our own, no more, no less. We must not sacrifice in one least respect, the honor, the integrity, the possibility of development in that neighbor of ours. Neighbor does not mean simply that person who lives next door, with whom we gossip, and talk over our little affairs, nor does it mean that friend of ours to whom we are so devoted, but it does mean every blessed human being with whom we directly or indirectly come into contact. It means that man who works for us, it means that fellow who has not had a fair chance, it means that outcast who has been forced by our selfishness into shame. It means every human being in whom there breathes the spirit of the living God. Their interests shall be equal to yours. You shall not take advantage of their weakness, their incapacity, their misfortune, to make use of them for your own wealth or pleasure, however desirable and satisfying that wealth and pleasure may be to you. Such is the second principle of the teaching of Jesus.

Now, mind you, I do not say that this teaching of Jesus is true. I am merely stating it as best as I can, so that you can compare it with what we have been actually doing. You know as well as I do that there is a vast yawning chasm between the moral and the religious ideal of the teaching of Jesus, and the actual practice of the Christian church, and the practice of this nation that likes to regard itself as Christian. More than that, when we recall the fact to which I referred to a moment ago, that in the interests of the accumulation of wealth, we have deliberately crushed the personality of millions of people, have trampled upon the honor of the family life, have befouled and defiled children, to whom Jesus likened the kingdom of heaven, we must go still further and say that our ideal of life is not even Christian, to say nothing of our practice.

⁶ Matthew 22:37.

⁷ Matthew 22:39.

In fact the Christian church has always seen this wide difference between the teachings of Jesus and its practices in fact and its actual theories. In the Catholic Church this embarrassing chasm has been bridged by the fiction of the rewards and the compensations in the life hereafter. But it must not be overlooked that upon the points in which we are now interested, Jesus was speaking of the everyday life of men in this life, and in the affairs of this world. The Protestant church has been a little more frank in recognizing this chasm, and has tried to bridge it by its horrible doctrine of election.⁸ A few are to be saved, but the many are to be damned that a loving God might show his hatred and loathing for sin and moral evil. But as one thinks it over, the doctrine of election is only another salve to heal over the wounded piety as it thinks of the fact that its ease and comfort rests upon the misery and degradation of thousands upon thousands of human beings. If they are to be damned hereafter that they might satisfy the egoistic whims of a peacock God, certainly it is all right for them to be damned here also, to satisfy the selfish desires of well-to-do piety.

But with the advent of modern thought into our ways of thinking, with its fearlessness and its searching inquires we are again called upon to explain the reason for this yawning chasm between the teachings of him whose religion we call ours, and the horrible facts of our actual practice.

In this modern inquiry we are working from a somewhat different point of view. Our fundamental principle is to work from practice to principle, from man to God, from the past to the future. Even the worm that the Christian church, and a nominally Christian people, has trod under its feet has turned,

⁸ The doctrine of "election," from the Calvinism that came to the New World with the Pilgrims and Puritans, held that God had predetermined at the beginning who were "elected" to go to heaven and salvation. Davis wrote fairly extensively about the history of the early church in New England. On this specific topic see his "V. The Pilgrim Church at Plymouth" (<https://wordpress.clarku.edu/dbaird/lecture-v-the-pilgrim-church-at-plymouth/>) and his "VII. The Forces Without the Theocracy" (<https://wordpress.clarku.edu/dbaird/lecture-vii-the-forces-without-the-theocracy/>).

and has dared today that if you are to get all the rewards in the next world, we are going to get some of them in this, even if we have to fight for it. From this spark in the clod has come a new force into our social and religious plans. It is indeed true that its first awakening was terrible. Dickens' tale of two cities⁹ gives you a vivid picture of how the half-blind mob of Paris gave vent to the pent-up sufferings of centuries. It may be that this wonderful and awe-inspiring scene of the streets of Paris flowing with the blood of an arrogant nobility was the first fruits of that seed planted by Christ in the human heart when he drove the money changers from the temple because they had made the temple a den of thieves.¹⁰ From the day of the French revolution to this, the Church and the Christian nations have not been free from the strong and vigorous protest of the proletariat against the inequities of our selfishness. With a small beginning, almost blind in its ignorance, but terribly determined and unswerving in its purpose, the self-assertion of the workman has been going on until today with a constantly increasing force. Experience has trained, disciplined and educated the movement, its demands have increased and they are recognized, and are coming to be recognized; more and more it is being seen that, in spite of the many mistakes and blunders, the essential purpose is right. Beneath all the so-called warfare between labor and capital, is the demand that personality shall have a proper and just recognition, that man shall be treated as man. Just what proportions this movement has assumed may be inferred from the fact that in one way or another this is the one question that is behind all the questions involved in the political campaign that is going on now in our midst. Whatever may be the planks in the platforms of the various parties, that are presenting their claims before the voters for the coming election, the fact remains that the framework upon which these planks rest is this great moral question of whether or not we are to recognize the worth of the human personality as superior to, or subservient to, our present ideals of wealth and industrial prosperity. Are we to conserve our wealth at the expense of men and human life, or are we to conserve our resources of men and human life as the supreme and important function of our individual and civic life? That is the question that we are facing today.

⁹ Charles Dickens (1812-1870), *A Tale of Two Cities*, first published 1859.

¹⁰ See Matthew 21:12.

I wish to refer to one consideration from the point of view of the church. The time was when the representatives of the churches would say to man, "Ye cannot serve God and Mammon."¹¹ "Choose this day whom ye will serve." This has changed now. The churches are being asked with a pertinence that to many seems an impertinence, whom they are going to serve. Is it that the churches are to continue to see not and to hear not this voice of the living God that is speaking through the living Christ of today in the souls of men asking for a chance to live decently and honorably, as it saw not and heard not the voice of God as it spoke through the souls of the carpenter and the fishermen of Palestine some two thousand years ago? Are we still so sordid that we are willing to condemn to unrelieved and unrewarded toil thousands of men and women and children that we may enjoy the fragrance of the violets of ease and luxury grown on the hotbed of their sweltering misery and degradation? I look for the day when we shall cherish human life for its own sake; I look for the day when we shall go forth with joy, not to bear alms and a pittance of charity to the poor, but when we shall find it [the] meat and drink of life to minister unto the great noble interests of man with a whole-souled devotion. I look for the day when we shall approach seriously with a high and noble purpose the task of removing from our lives and casting into the darkness of oblivion these cursed conditions and ideals that produce such tremendous proportions of poverty and want and inhuman degradation in our life today. I look for the day when we shall put as much energy and labor into the development of men and decent human life as we do now into the industrial and commercial development. I look upon such a life not alone as the duty but as the highest joy and satisfying fulfillment of the function of the human soul. The day is coming when we shall see this truth with all its ravishing beauty. Moreover, I think that the churches of the land will yet respond to the spirit that was in Jesus and will make a powerful contribution towards the realizing of this ideal. I know that you, who are connected with this church, are already feeling the power of a new life that is coming to you in the presence of this great purpose. Did I not feel that we were going to do something of value through this church to the life of man more than we could do in any other way, I should be compelled to leave this church and all churches at once. I appeal to you as connected either directly

¹¹ Matthew 6:24.

or indirectly with this church to consider your ideals of life in view of this question that is brought to our minds today. Do you think that you have the right to prey upon the life and the weaknesses of men that you may gain something to your advantage thereby and their disadvantage? I do not say that you are wrong in thus viewing life, but if you do think that you have that right in a merciless struggle for existence and wealth, I beg of you that for the sake of common honesty, you cease from this time forth to wear the cloak of the Christian name. If you believe in the life of piracy upon the high seas of life, then, in the name of your trade, fly the flag of your craft.

But if your purpose is right, do not despair because you do not find the world made to your liking. By the very strength of your purpose you will mold the world into the image of that picture which is forever before your mind in the form of your moral purpose in life.

But I wish also to say one more thing concerning this problem, and to say it from the point of view of citizenship in the community in which we live, not merely in the smaller community of the city, but also in the larger community of the nation. I do not express my own ideas alone, but the ideas of the men who have devoted their lives to the serious and disinterested study of this problem, when I say that we are not only approaching, but are in the midst of the most serious problem that has faced our national life. It involves not only the question of the personnel of government, but it involves the very character of the government itself. Now, what I want to ask you as citizens of the government that afford you that protection in the affairs that you call your inalienable rights, I want to ask you what you know about this problem of the rights of the personality as against the rights of things? Do you know anything more about it than what you pick up in the daily papers, or by your own petty experiences, or in the talk of the street? Have you, as good citizens should, gone at the question and really studied it with an unbiased mind that you might know just what problems are involved? If your child were ill, you would not be such an idiot as to go to the medicine closet in the dark and pick out the first bottle that you could put your hand on, and give the child a dose of its contents. Yet this is what thousands of men are doing so far as the question of making the nation in which their children are to live. I appeal to you to make the effort to find out just what is going on in the making of the national life. It

is not easy. It is a hard and a complicated problem, but it is that tax that you owe the common life not by virtue of an assessment, but by virtue of the moral obligation to the commonweal. Again I appeal to you to seriously study this problem which we are half-blindly trying to solve. Upon the extent to which the citizens of the nation understand this work that is being done today depends the efficiency of the future.

But I submit to you as the one essential thought of what I have said, and as the thought that symbolizes what this day is coming to stand for in the moral ideals of our common life, that it is vastly more important that we should concern ourselves with the purpose of making men than with making money, that we should cherish as far more precious than the fame that we have thus far achieved, the name of being the land of noble men and beautiful homes, and a land in which the interests in human life determine the conduct of the nation.

In closing let me quote from an address delivered before the first central labor union in this country assembled in New York City in 1833, a statement of the purposes of the organization.

...[t]o guard against the encroachments of aristocracy, to preserve our natural and political rights, to elevate our moral and intellectual condition, to promote our pecuniary interests, to narrow the line of distinction between journeyman and employer, to establish the honor and safety of our respective vocations upon a more secure and permanent basis, and to alleviate the distress of those suffering from the want of employment.¹²

That, I submit, is a high moral purpose.

¹² Ely Moore, Address delivered before the General Trades' Union of the City of New York at the Chatham-street Chapel, December 2, 1833. The address is quoted in full in the *Annual Reports of Department Bureaus for the New York State Department of Labor*, 1911, pp. 165-175. This particular passage is on page 167. See https://www.google.com/books/edition/Annual_Report_of_the_Bureau_of_Labor_Sta/4ARbAAAAYAAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1&dq=%22To+guard+against+the+encroachments+of+aristocracy%22&pg=PA167&printsec=frontcover.