

BEECHER HENRY WARD

TWELVE CAUSES OF
DISHONESTY

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Twelve Causes of Dishonesty

TWELVE CAUSES OF DISHONESTY

Only extraordinary circumstances can give the appearance of dishonesty to an honest man. Usually, not to *seem* honest, is not to *be* so. The quality must not be doubtful like twilight, lingering between night and day and taking hues from both; it must be day-light, clear, and effulgent. This is the doctrine of the Bible: *Providing for honest things, not only in the sight of the Lord, but also in the sight of men.* In general it may be said that no one has honesty without dross, until he has honesty without suspicion.

We are passing through times upon which the seeds of dishonesty have been sown broadcast, and they have brought forth a hundred-fold. These times will pass away; but like ones will come again. As physicians study the causes and record the phenomena of plagues and pestilences, to draw from them an antidote against their recurrence, so should we leave to another generation a history of moral plagues, as the best antidote to their recurring malignity.

Upon a land, – capacious beyond measure, whose prodigal soil rewards labor with an unharvestable abundance of exuberant fruits, occupied by a people signalized by enterprise and industry – there came a summer of prosperity which lingered so long and shone so brightly, that men forgot that winter could ever come. Each day grew brighter. No reins were put upon the imagination. Its dreams passed for realities. Even sober men, touched with wildness, seemed to expect a realization of oriental tales. Upon this bright day came sudden frosts, storms, and blight. Men awoke from gorgeous dreams in the midst of desolation. The harvests of years were swept away in a day. The strongest firms were rent as easily as the oak by lightning. Speculating companies were dispersed as seared leaves from a tree in autumn. Merchants were ruined by thousands; clerks turned adrift by ten thousands. Mechanics were left in idleness. Farmers sighed over flocks and wheat as useless as the stones and dirt. The wide sea of commerce was stagnant; upon the realm of Industry settled down a sullen lethargy.

Out of this reverse swarmed an unnumbered host of dishonest men, like vermin from a carcass. Banks were exploded, – or robbed, – or fleeced by astounding forgeries. Mighty companies, without cohesion, went to pieces, and hordes of wretches snatched up every bale that came ashore. Cities were ransacked by troops of villains. The unparalleled frauds, which sprung like mines on every hand, set every man to trembling lest the next explosion should be under his own feet. Fidelity seemed to have forsaken men. Many that had earned a reputation for sterling honesty were cast so suddenly headlong into wickedness, that man shrank from man. Suspicion overgrew confidence, and the heart bristled with the nettles and thorns of fear and jealousy. Then had almost come to pass the divine delineation of ancient wickedness: *The good man is perished out of the earth: and there is none upright among men: they all lie in wait for blood; they hunt every man his brother with a net. That they may do evil with both hands earnestly, the prince and the judge ask for a reward: and the great man uttereth his mischievous desire; so they wrap it up. The best of them is a brier; the most upright is sharper than a thorn hedge.* The world looked upon a continent of inexhaustible fertility, (whose harvest had glutted the markets, and rotted in disuse,) filled with lamentation, and its inhabitants wandering like bereaved citizens among the ruins of an earthquake, mourning for children, for houses crushed, and property buried forever.

That no measure might be put to the calamity, the Church of God, which rises a stately tower of refuge to desponding men, seemed now to have lost its power of protection. When the solemn voice of Religion should have gone over the land, as the call of God to guilty man to seek in him their

strength; in this time when Religion should have restored sight to the blind, made the lame to walk, and bound up the broken-hearted, she was herself mourning in sackcloth. Out of her courts came the noise of warring sects; some contending against others with bitter warfare; and some, possessed of a demon, wallowed upon the ground foaming and rending themselves. In a time of panic, and disaster, and distress, and crime, the fountain which should have been for the healing of men, cast up its sediments, and gave out a bitter stream of pollution.

In every age, an universal pestilence has hushed the clamor of contention, and cooled the heats of parties; but the greatness of our national calamity seemed only to enkindle the fury of political parties. Contentions never ran with such deep streams and impetuous currents, as amidst the ruin of our industry and prosperity. States were greater debtors to foreign nations, than their citizens were to each other. Both states and citizens shrunk back from their debts, and yet more dishonestly from the taxes necessary to discharge them. The General Government did not escape, but lay becalmed, or pursued its course, like a ship, at every furlong touching the rocks, or beating against the sands. The Capitol trembled with the first waves of a question which is yet to shake the whole land. New questions of exciting qualities perplexed the realm of legislation, and of morals. To all this must be added a manifest decline of family government; an increase of the ratio of popular ignorance; a decrease of reverence for law, and an effeminate administration of it. Popular tumults have been as frequent as freshets in our rivers; and like them, have swept over the land with desolation, and left their filthy slime in the highest places: – upon the press; – upon the legislature; – in the halls of our courts; – and even upon the sacred bench of Justice. If unsettled times foster dishonesty, it should have flourished among us. And it has.

Our nation must expect a periodical return of such convulsions; but experience should steadily curtail their ravages, and remedy their immoral tendencies. Young men have before them lessons of manifold wisdom taught by the severest of masters – experience. They should be studied; and that they may be, I shall, from this general survey, turn to a specific enumeration of the causes of dishonesty.

1. Some men find in their bosom from the first, a vehement inclination to dishonest ways. Knavish propensities are inherent: born with the child and transmissible from parent to son. The children of a sturdy thief, if taken from him at birth and reared by honest men, would, doubtless, have to contend against a strongly dishonest inclination. Foundlings and orphans under public charitable charge, are more apt to become vicious than other children. They are usually born of low and vicious parents, and inherit their parents' propensities. Only the most thorough moral training can overrule this innate depravity.

2. A child naturally fair-minded, may become dishonest by parental example. He is early taught to be sharp in bargains, and vigilant for every advantage. Little is said about honesty, and much upon shrewd traffic. A dexterous trick, becomes a family anecdote; visitors are regaled with the boy's precocious keenness. Hearing the praise of his exploits, he studies craft, and seeks parental admiration by adroit knaveries. He is taught, for his safety, that he must not range beyond the law: that would be unprofitable. He calculates his morality thus: *Legal honesty is the best policy*, – dishonesty, then, is a bad bargain – and therefore wrong – everything is wrong which is unthrifty. Whatever profit breaks no legal statute – though it is gained by falsehood, by unfairness, by gloss; through dishonor, unkindness, and an unscrupulous conscience – he considers fair, and says: *The law allows it*. Men may spend a long life without an indictable action, and without an honest one. No law can reach the insidious ways of subtle craft. The law allows, and religion forbids men, to profit by others' misfortunes, to prowl for prey among the ignorant, to over-reach the simple, to suck the last life-drops from the bleeding; to hover over men as a vulture over herds, swooping down upon the weak, the straggling, and the weary. The infernal craft of cunning men, turns the law itself to piracy, and works outrageous fraud in the hall of Courts, by the decision of judges, and under the seal of Justice.

3. Dishonesty is learned from one's employers. The boy of honest parents and honestly bred, goes to a trade, or a store, where the employer practises *legal* frauds. The plain honesty of the boy

excites roars of laughter among the better taught clerks. The master tells them that such blundering truthfulness must be pitied; the boy evidently has been neglected, and is not to be ridiculed for what he could not help. At first, it verily pains the youth's scruples, and tinges his face to frame a deliberate dishonesty, to finish, and to polish it. His tongue stammers at a lie; but the example of a rich master, the jeers and gibes of shopmates, with gradual practice, cure all this. He becomes adroit in fleecing customers for his master's sake, and equally dexterous in fleecing his master for his own sake.

4. Extravagance is a prolific source of dishonesty. Extravagance, – which is foolish expense, or expense disproportionate to one's means, – may be found in all grades of society; but it is chiefly apparent among the rich, those aspiring to wealth, and those wishing to be *thought*

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