

The Good Republican

A DISCOURSE,

DELIVERED IN THE

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, NEWARK, N. J.

ON

THANKSGIVING DAY, DEC. 12, 1850.

BY

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PASTOR OF THE CHURCH.

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NEWARK, December 12, 1850.

REV. J. F. STEARNS, D. D.:

Dear Sir :—The Session and Trustees of the First Presbyterian Church, participating in the general gratification of the Congregation with the Discourse delivered by you on the 12th inst., and believing that the more extensive diffusion of the sentiments therein expressed will greatly subserve the interests of Religion and Law, respectfully request a copy of the same for publication.

With affection and esteem,

Yours, &c.,

ISAAC NICHOLS,
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JOHN TAYLOR,
AARON NICHOLS,
ARCH'D WOODRUFF,
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NEWARK, Dec. 18, 1850.

MESSRS. ISAAC NICHOLS, &c.:

Gentlemen :—The Discourse, a copy of which you have done me the honor to request for publication, was prepared, in the course of official duty, without the remotest view to any use to be made of it, beyond the immediate occasion; yet believing the sentiments it contains are true and important, however feebly expressed or inadequately conceived, I cheerfully surrender it to your wishes.

With respect, yours sincerely,

J. F. STEARNS.

DISCOURSE

“I dwell among mine own people.”—2 Kings iv. 14.

IN these words of the noble woman of Shunem, we have a beautiful picture of contented independence and unassuming dignity. She has no favors to ask, no distinction to attain, no jealousies to be allayed. She dwells among her own people, not as a lord among subjects, but as one of their own number, and is content to share their sympathy, and enjoy the common lot.

It has struck me, that this sentence affords an apt illustration of the true character of a republican citizen; and following up the hint thus afforded, I propose, on the present occasion, to bring to your notice some of the traits which best distinguish that character.

1. In the first place, the good republican is one who has confidence in republican institutions.

I do not mean that he regards them as perfect, the one sovereign and infallible remedy for all the ills to which nations are subject. Much foolish boasting has been vented in this matter. We have

lauded our happy institutions in terms applicable to no human arrangements. We have promised one another and the world results far beyond the limits of human imperfection, and the consequence has been, in many instances, a disappointment and disgust, as severe as the expectations which gave occasion to them were extravagant.

The good republican takes sober views. He indulges in no dreams of paradise to be secured by any outward arrangements or forms of society. But he does claim that his own political institutions are good and practicable, and adapted to promote, in a high degree, the common welfare; that for *his own people*, at least, whatever may be the case abstractly, they are safer and better than any for which it were possible to exchange them. In this conviction he rests satisfied, discovers no disposition to encourage revolution, bears cheerfully his part in the public burdens, submits with good will to the inconveniences incident to the course of affairs, and with sincere patriotism loves his country, and is prepared to defend it, if need be, *with his fortune and life*.

I cannot regard him as a good republican, who is continually calling in question the first principles on which his government is founded; who is ever ready to attribute all the evils that arise under it to the institution itself; and at every token of its disordered or imperfect working, every public embarrassment, shakes his head ominously, and declares we never can be safe till we go back to the

old, worn-out, and abandoned monarchies of the old world. Such persons may be very good men, and as far as good intentions can make them so, very good citizens; but they are not good American republicans. The good republican regards popular government as a good thing. If there are evils incident to it, the same or greater are incident to all human institutions. He contrasts these with those far more enormous evils which belong to other systems, and instead of murmuring or desponding, addresses himself with zeal and confidence to the duty of countervailing or removing them. If he finds the people too ignorant to understand their best interests, he seeks to have them taught and enlightened,—if too vicious and unprincipled to govern themselves, he aims, by the dissemination of a reforming gospel, to produce the required reformation. At all events, he is determined to make the best of his own institutions, and, refusing even to “meddle with them that are given to change,” never does and *never will despair of the republic*.

2. In the second place, the good republican is one who respects the *laws*. Believing fully in the necessity of law, he believes likewise in the corresponding duty of obedience on the part of those for whom the laws were intended.

One of the favorite principles of republicanism is *liberty*. But nothing is more certain than that true liberty is based upon, and stands only by, the upholding agency of law. Take law away, or im-

pair its authority, and your dearest interests are at once exposed to imminent peril. Violence tramples down right with iron heel. The will of the strong carries captive that of the weak, and subjects it to its own arbitrary dictates. You are not safe from interference in your most innocent and praiseworthy pursuits.

Law is sometimes regarded by the ignorant as at best an exception, though they are ready perhaps to acknowledge it as a *necessary* exception, to the great principle of popular liberty. But no conception could be more false and injurious. Law furnishes to liberty its only adequate security. It is not so much the people's restriction as the people's protection and guarantee. It comes around us like the fostering arms of a kind parent, to defend and uphold rather than restrain us. Despotism readily dispenses with law; so does anarchy; and for this reason it is that anarchy so readily slides into despotism. It is in free countries, and those only, that law reigns in its full majesty. Often the first token of relaxation, on the part of arbitrary power, the first acknowledgment that there are rights and privileges belonging to the people and not to be violated by the ruler, is the enactment of laws, and the establishment of fixed constitutions. The question never is, properly speaking, between law and liberty; it is between law and misrule, law and violence, law and arbitrary compulsion, law and despotism.

Respect for law, therefore, forms a fundamental article in the republican creed. The very last thing which the good republican will do, is to disregard or despise a law of his government. It may be a defective law. It may be, in his esteem, exceedingly unwise; it may be even unjust in some of its provisions; but being law, bearing upon it the image and superscription of legitimate authority, he respects it *as such*, and will continue to respect it, until by lawful means that seal can be removed.

The principles of the New Testament, as well as of all right reason, on this subject, need to be more carefully studied than they have been hitherto. We talk of popular government as having its foundation in the *will* of the governed. The notion is false utterly. Government is founded in the very nature and circumstances of man; and the authority on which it rests is the declared will of the Infinite Lawgiver. Under republican forms of government the people have a voice in making the laws. But what is it which they make? Why laws, and not mere expressions of opinion — laws which bind the legislator himself just as truly as an oath binds the man who takes it, with the awful sanctions of divine authority. A man has no more control over the law, so as to take upon himself to say whether it ought to be obeyed or not, after it is once passed, than he has over his own sign-manual when he has given it to a bond or deed of conveyance; and no more under a republican than under

the most despotic form of government. He may strive to change it in a legal way, but except in those extreme cases which are exceptions to all ordinary rules, he may not refuse to subject himself to its control.

It may be asked here, Is there not a higher law than the very highest human authority? Indeed there is, and well it is that we should all learn to reverence it! And what is its command? "Submit to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake." That law, which is higher than all the enactments of legislators, higher than the very constitution itself under whose guarantees we live, requires us, by its own awful authority, to submit to the established government of our country. And though there may be, and doubtless are, cases where that higher law is in conflict with the particular requisition of the inferior legislature, and requires us therefore to resist the latter; yet those cases must be very clearly established, and the presumption is always strongly against them. That man assumes an awful responsibility who takes it upon him to say, "I cannot conscientiously obey, but have been called upon in the name of high Heaven to *resist* the powers that be." He must have something more to support him, than the mere belief that the particular enactment which he resists is an unwise or oppressive one; something more than the conviction that he could not have given his own sanction to the making of it. He must be able to show, that the evil involved in it is

so great and *inevitable*, that it justifies the suspension of a most important positive injunction of the New Testament!

The good republican will be very slow to perceive that the cause of truth and righteousness can be better subserved by setting at naught, than by submitting to the supreme authority of the nation. He will watch sedulously for some other method of avoiding moral wrong, before he allows himself, in the name of right, to commit what in all ordinary circumstances is itself one of the greatest wrongs of which a citizen can be guilty. As he loves republicanism, as he respects the rights of the people, as he desires to see oppression restrained, and the weak defended, he will take care not to weaken the law, on which the security of all these precious interests depends.

3. In the third place, the good republican is one who attends faithfully to his own proper business, public or private. The social system under which we live is one which, in an eminent degree, depends upon the joint efforts of all that belong to it; a system of many members in one body, and where all the members have not the same office; and yet the eye cannot say to the hand, I have no need of thee; nor again the head to the feet, I have no need of you.

Under a system like this, every man needs to have some fixed occupation,—some department of labor or skill, to which his time and energies should

be steadily devoted. For want of this, the powers of many are wasted in unprofitable experiments, or they become busybodies in other men's matters, and in the end are a burden, rather than a support, to the community. The prosperity of society is an aggregate. It results from the combined services of individuals, each in his own proper sphere. In every flourishing community there must be a great variety of contributors—merchants, mechanics, manufacturers, farmers, laborers, and men of professional skill. The functions of these different departments cannot well be performed by the same persons; therefore they need to be distributed, as we now find them, among different individuals; and each individual, selecting his own department, must devote himself sedulously to it.

In these days, we find schemes afloat for the reorganization of society on a new plan. The independent enterprises, in virtue of which every man takes care of himself, while he contributes, even without specially intending it, to the good of the whole community, must give place to a system in which each labors specially for the whole, and accepts, as his portion of the common stock, what the whole collectively are disposed to accord to him. In carrying out this system, shops must everywhere be abandoned for gigantic manufactories, and homes for vast refectories and interminable ranges of dormitories. Private interest must be proscribed, as an offensive thing, and all private and domestic obligations absorbed into the one relation of a universal brotherhood.

It is enough for our present purpose to say of these schemes, that they are totally anti-republican. True republicanism interferes as little as possible with private and individual liberty; whereas this merges all individual interests, as far as possible, in a common stock. According to the republican idea, the common welfare is best promoted when each, without encroaching upon the rights of his neighbor, follows the bent of his own taste and circumstances, and, having an eye to his own affairs, takes care of himself and those united to him by natural ties. In other words, its reliance for the support of society and the public good is chiefly upon private interest, guided and checked by moral and religious obligations.

Under such a system, the man who is industrious and faithful in his own private business, is, by that very fact, a public benefactor. Without leaving his own shop, counting-house or farm; by simply tilling his land well, and getting a good crop from it to put into his own granary, or supplying his customers with a good article and taking the price which they can well afford to pay, for his own support and that of his family and dependents, he becomes, however obscure his condition, a public benefactor.

It will be the aim therefore of every good republican, to conduct his own private affairs in the most prudent and faithful manner. Having selected some department of business, he will hold himself a debtor to his occupation, and strive to excel in it. It will be his endeavor—his ambition, if I may use such a

word in such a connection—that at least in the community in which he lives the public shall be well served *in his line*. If he builds houses, they will be among the most commodious, substantial, economical and workmanlike. If he makes garments, tools, furniture, or any other articles of utility, he will use his utmost care and skill to make them of the most satisfactory quality. The man who makes a shoe, which rips the first time you wear it; or builds a ship which, from some fault in the construction, goes to pieces in the first storm which it encounters, is not entitled in my judgment to the name of a good republican. He is a grave offender against the great republican principle of allowing private interests to operate uncontrolled by authority. Then and there only can this principle be carried out, when each man feels the importance of doing well his own business.

The same remarks, with suitable modifications, may be applied to the affairs of domestic life. Republicanism guards the sanctity of home against the intrusion of all external authority. It is in despotisms that we hear of curfew bells, and the annoying interference of impertinent officials. Republicanism makes each man's house his strong castle, and leaves the family a little kingdom in itself, to the regulation of its own internal affairs. And yet the family circle is the true fountain of public character. There it is that men are trained for public life; there it is that the elements of social order are

produced and fostered. The good republican matron is not she who forms and manages the most conspicuous associations for the reformation of communities, or procures the largest list of signatures to petitions to Congress; but who educates her own children best, and makes her own domestic circle the best specimen of a well-regulated Christian family.

And yet the responsibility of the good republican does not end with private and domestic life. He is a man of public spirit. He bears cheerfully his portion of the public burdens, and is ready, to the extent of his ability, to contribute to the establishment and support of all useful public institutions.

It should not be forgotten, that, in republican communities, every citizen has a part in the government. The people are the fountain of power; they elect public officers, and control, by their suffrages, public measures. The good republican, therefore, is a conscientious voter. In the performance of this part of his duty, he is not afraid to jostle with the crowd, nor to meet, face to face, the fiercest of the so-called democracy. He never pleads indifference to the result as an excuse for neglecting the service. On the contrary, he is ashamed to be indifferent in a matter which concerns his country's welfare. Endeavoring first to form just opinions, and ascertain who are the best men for posts of office, he proceeds, without fear or favor, not from party spirit, but in the fear of God, to deposit his vote in favor of the

best measures, and the most faithful and capable candidates.

In all departments of his duty, public or private, the good republican is prompt, faithful, and conscientious. Without encroaching upon the rights of others, without taking upon himself more than belongs to him, his chief care is to keep his own particular link in the great chain which binds society together, strong and burnished.

4. In the fourth place, the good republican is one who entertains a just and becoming regard for the people. By the very theory of popular institutions, they are the origin and the object of all public arrangements. The government is made by them and for them, and the distribution of place and power lies ultimately in their hands.

Hence, a strong temptation exists on the part of those who would enjoy public influence, to flatter and cajole the people. To hear the speeches of the aspirants for popular favor, you would suppose all the wisdom, all the intelligence, all the honesty and nobleness in the community were to be found, not in those who are most distinguished for their virtues and abilities, but in those undistinguished and undistinguishable masses, to which each individual really adds nothing, except to swell by one the numbers that compose them. We have heard, and bow with reverence, to the admonition of an apostle, "Honor all men." Wherever we find a human soul made in God's image, there we acknowledge the

presence of a sacred thing, which, however degenerate, is not to be contemned. We would treat all the members of the human family with a becoming deference, and shrink from the very thought of trampling on the interests or the sensibilities of the meanest among them. But really, when we see men capable of distinguishing true worth, and by their education and reputation in society bound to speak honestly what they mean, standing up in the presence of a drunken, swearing, filthy, law-defying mob, and for the sake of an empty shout of applause, or the pitiful price of a few votes, comparing them to the best specimens of assembled patriots and sages, we cannot but pity the poltroonery.

The good republican is no aristocrat; but equally true is it, on the other hand, that he is no demagogue. Making just distinctions between man and man, he despises no virtues because they appear in humble guise, and flatters the vices of none because they have the power either to depress or advance him. He treats his honest and virtuous fellow-citizens, without regard to adventitious circumstances, as equals and brethren; and he loves and respects them as such, too sincerely, either to flatter their vanity or despise their disadvantages.

The good republican never humors popular prejudices, or takes advantage, for his own purposes, of transient and unreasonable impulses. The mean artifice of riding into power and influence on the breath of some popular delusion, fanned, it may be,

if not first raised, by his own agency, he utterly despises.

He is not afraid to oppose popular opinion, and when he sees the popular current setting strongly in a wrong direction, he will plainly speak out his remonstrances. This will require, in many instances, a considerable share of moral courage. Popular opinion is often the severest and most unreasonable of tyrants. Changing with every moon, it still insists, against all former opinions, that its present judgment is the eternal and infallible truth. No matter how great a favorite a man may have been in times past—however great his acknowledged excellence, however reliable his judgment, the moment he comes into collision with this haughty power, down he goes, amidst clamors that allow him no chance to defend himself. But the good republican is an enemy to all tyrants—a tyrant public, no less than a tyrant individual. He recognizes truth as truth, and cannot consent to shape his creed in accordance with the caprices of an excited multitude. He dares to be singular; he dares to be unpopular; he dares to be hated and ridiculed. The crowd must be made to understand, that he claims to have just as good a right to his own opinion as the most reckless and clamorous of them all. The consciousness of honest purposes sustains him, when no voice whispers sympathy; and he has too much confidence in the sober judgment even of the opposing multitude, not to believe, that when the illusion passes

by, he shall have even them on his side, in respect and approbation.

The good republican seeks the best interest and improvement of the people. He is the friend of schools,—common schools,—schools in which the children of the poorest may secure, free of pecuniary burden, the best education which the money of the wealthiest can secure for them. He is the friend of all true and rational reforms,—the friend of virtue, the friend of good order, the friend of religion, that highest solace and security both of the poor and the rich. He aims, by all practicable means, to make all the people—what a few only, as the case now is, actually become—virtuous, cultivated and intelligent, and so in the highest degree useful and happy.

In short, he never tramples on the people's rights, never disregards their true interest or even their wishes, never treats their opinions or their persons with contempt, never pretends to *serve them* when his only purpose is to make them serve *him*, and never admits for a moment that he has not as good a right as they to the control of his own judgment and actions. In other words, the good republican respects the people, loves the people, has a sincere sympathy for the people, and does not *fear* the people. No, the good republican *does not fear the people*.

5. But I will bring to your notice only one further specification. The good republican is one who

fears God and keeps his commandments. Morality and religion are among the foundation stones on which rest the peace and welfare of states; and his patriotism must necessarily be defective who has not true loyalty to the King of kings, and a profound regard for the great laws and principles of his kingdom.

This is especially true in those states in which popular institutions are to be maintained. We all know that such institutions are as yet to be regarded only as an experiment. History affords no example suited to determine, whether, in a great and widely extended nation, the people can be permanently intrusted with the supreme power.

The question, as it seems to me, turns upon a single point. There is an element at work in our community which did not operate under former experiments. The ancient republics had a pagan religion. The meteor-like republic of modern France had no religion whatsoever. Other small republican states, if they had Christianity at all, had it only under a mass of corruptions. But in our own land, Christian institutions were early planted, and Christian principles and sentiments early disseminated. Under the favor of liberty, there has grown up in the hearts of large numbers a sober, strong, and intelligent piety. It has enlightened the public conscience, chastened the public impulses, and inspired a wish for true public improvement. Now the question is, Can the hearts of the people gen-

erally be imbued with the principles of the Gospel? Can Christian prudence, Christian morality, and Christian piety, be made to govern the measures and direct the judgment of the community? If they can, we are safe; if not, we fall in a few years.

Education, in the common acceptance of the word, is a good thing—a necessary thing. But education alone will not serve the purpose; and besides, education requires for itself the fostering arm of religion. It was religion, to which our fathers chiefly trusted, when they first ventured on the great experiment. The most skeptical among them, even those who were themselves but too destitute of Christian faith, saw the need of it as a promoter of right action among the people at large, and hoped for success in their great enterprise chiefly from this, that the people, among whom they were setting up this new species of institutions, were, in an eminent degree, virtuous and religious.

What then must be the character of him, who is a true friend to these institutions? He is a man, doubtless, who fears to offend against the great law of Christian morality and piety. If he is a politician, he is an honest, conscientious, God-fearing politician. If he is a man of business, he conducts that business on the soundest principles, taking no more than is his rightful due, giving, whether law and popular opinion require it or not, all that is due; and desiring, more than all riches, to be approved in the

sight of God and men, as a fair, honorable, and trustworthy dealer. He values religion, sustains its institutions, and bows to its precepts. He reveres God's name, observes with reverence those things which he has hallowed, and acknowledges his agency in all events, public and private. God's blessing will not fail to rest upon that nation whose citizens generally thus respect his authority.

Most of us, my friends, can do but little, it may be, directly, for the benefit of our country. Our sphere is narrow, our abilities humble. But there is one thing which we all may do. We may be, in our own narrow sphere, and to the extent of the abilities which God has given us, good republican citizens. We can love our country, obey the laws, attend to our own proper business, treat our fellow-citizens of whatever class as brethren and fellow-men, and, as the crown of all, fear God and keep his commandments. Do this, and we shall earn for ourselves the respect and love of all true patriots. Do this, and the rejoicing land shall bless our memory, long after we are dead.

And now, my friends, what occasion have we to bless God, that there is still left in our degenerate land so much of sound republican virtue; so much of true and honest patriotism in the midst of all the selfishness and mad passion of multitudes! These States are bound together by very frail outward bonds. Destroy the spirit of patriotism; let the blindness which selfish passion always generates

prevail in all walks of the community; let our sacred constitution, the fruit of the combined wisdom and mutual conciliation of our revered fathers be considered as a thing of nought, and the oath to maintain it on the part of our public men bind their consciences only so long as may suit their own interests or consist with their own changing opinions; let the North and the South insist on carrying into effect their sectional schemes regardless of each other, and whig and democrat scramble only for the possession of the power and the patronage; and how long think you we shall hold together as a people? Not long, depend upon it, my fellow-citizens, *not long*.

We may talk of the bonds of interest, of frequent intercourse, of domestic ties; those considerations will arise after the deed is done, and rather to embitter the consequences than to prevent the catastrophe. But the spirit of true patriotism, of honest regard for the general interests, of mutual concession and conciliation, we have reason to thank God, died not wholly with our revered fathers. Dark clouds are indeed lowering in our horizon. The ignorant are here, the neglected are here, and the oppressed and enslaved are here. The cry of afflicted and wronged millions ascends up into the ear of Jehovah. But we will strive to redress their wrongs. Already a strong feeling has been awakened in the breasts of thousands, in the South as well as the North, urging to strenuous methods for the instruction of the slave.

the alleviation of his bonds, the preparation for his final deliverance. And will the anger of God fall upon us because we dare not, in hot haste, seeking to accomplish in a day the work of a generation, pull down the pillars of society, and bury both ourselves and the poor slave in a common ruin? I cannot believe it. If our politicians will but act in this matter as honest, prudent patriots, avoiding all violence, and our Christian men watch and pray for opportunities, relying on God's providence, deliverance will come ere long from the right quarter. God will go before us, as he has gone before our missionaries in foreign lands, open our paths, guide our procedure, and give our endeavors the desired success. How he will do it, I know not. When he will do it, I know not. But meanwhile, let us not do evil that good may come.

It becomes us, on this day of public thanksgiving, to give praise to God for our institutions and our country. Setting all boasting aside, we have enough left to animate our gratitude. Looking abroad, east, west, north, and south, where shall we find the land to be exchanged for our own dear, native America? where shall we find the government to be compared for a moment with that of these States and this flourishing Union? I know not any. And shall we allow even the crying evils which unquestionably exist, and call for strenuous efforts of reform, to interfere with our praises, as we call to mind our distinguishing favors? No, my brethren, let us praise

God for our country to-day, and not forget that he is the author of our liberties.

In the review of the past year, how many mercies have we to recount gratefully before God! He has chastised us as a people, and he has chastised many of us as families and individuals. The tears of a mourning nation have mingled with the tears of bereaved parents and children, bereaved husbands and wives, bereaved brothers and sisters. But in the midst of all, O how gracious has he been, how compassionate, how forbearing! He has spared our lives, he has preserved to many of us our health, he has continued to us our comforts and our privileges. And while with grateful hearts we would not forget the poor, who claim a special place in our kindness on such a day as this, we would not fail likewise to come before His presence with thanksgiving, and make a joyful noise unto the Rock of our salvation.

Come, O ye favored of the Lord, and at his footstool now pour forth from glad hearts the praises of your Benefactor. Praise him for public peace and tranquillity. Praise him that no wasting pestilence has invaded your dwellings. Praise him for a fruitful season and an abundant harvest. Praise him for your intellectual privileges. Praise him for your social and domestic enjoyments. Praise him for the precious means of grace, and the offers of eternal salvation. Ye that have been negligent of his mercies, praise him that his long-suffering has still spared you; and ye that, during the year, have

been born again by his Spirit, praise the grace that has brought you out of darkness into marvellous light. Praise him, ye disciples of the blessed Jesus ; for he has given you another year in his good service. Praise him, thou Church of God ; for he has shown to thee some special tokens of his faithfulness, and still thy name is graven in love upon his hands. Praise him, ye youthful hearts, for in the joy of the Lord is your strength. Praise him, ye aged men, for he it is that still holdeth you in life. Praise God in the sanctuary. Praise him in the secret places of devotion. Praise him in the domestic circle, and at the family altar. Praise him at the social festive board. Let every thing that hath breath praise the Lord. Praise ye the Lord.

AMEN.