

# What is a Vote?

A SERMON BY

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# WHAT IS A VOTE?

A Thanksgiving Sermon preached at the Old Pine Street  
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TEXT:—The wicked walk on every side, when the vilest men are exalted.

*Psalm 12 : 8.*

In the new version of the English Bible, we read : “The wicked walk on every side, when vileness is exalted among the sons of men.” This is a more poetic expression of the same thought. I use this text as it may be applied to civil rulers. It announces the sad fact, which has marked the course of history from the time of King David to the present day, that when unprincipled men become rulers, the powers of wickedness are let loose, and immorality prevails among the people. It is my purpose to speak of this fact, as it is determined by the suffrage of those who make our rulers. This may be done in answering the question, “What is a vote?” I shall speak first of the *ideal* vote, and then of the *actual* vote, and finally of *what the vote of our own city should become*.

The ideal vote includes three elements—intelligence, moral obligation, and patriotism.

An ideal vote represents a thought, an opinion, a judgment. It is the result of a careful weighing of facts. It advocates and announces adherence to well-defined principles. For example :— A vote may express adherence to the principle that men, who make laws for the government of a state or community, should represent and protect the interests of the people, and not the interests of private corporations. Or a vote may represent the principle that a director of public schools should be the intelligent, devoted friend of the homes and children of the community ; and not the immoral tool of a ward boss, who filches money from public funds, and receives bribes under the name of fees. Or a vote may express the judgment that it is perilous, both to the public treasury and to the public morality, to permit the political machine of a state to elect the mayor of a great city.

Or a vote may announce the conviction that all judges of civil courts should be men, not only of learning, but of probity also ; whose courage and fidelity insure the administration of justice. A vote may deal with still broader principles. It may express the conviction that the legislative, judicial, and executive departments of municipal government should be so constructed, and protected, that each shall do its work, and fulfil its obligations, free from the influence of the other departments. Can the intelligent voter fail to see the perils to good government and the public safety, when a political party is permitted to control, through its representatives, all the departments of a municipality ? What relation has the government of a city to state or national politics ? The inevitable result of thought upon a city's life—its needs, its perils, its safety—is intelligent voting. Such a vote gives meaning and effect to the truth that this is a government “of the people, by the people, for the people.” And does not such a vote dignify citizenship ? Indeed, what right has a man to possess the high privilege of suffrage, who does not express an intelligent thought by his vote ?

The ideal vote includes the element of moral obligation. Civil government is a divine ordinance. “The powers that be are ordained of God.” These powers of civil government exist for the preservation of human life, for the punishment of crime, for the promotion of public morality, for the encouragement of industry, for the protection of the weak, for the support of the helpless, and for the development of all the virtues of good citizenship. Now these high moral aims of civil government depend upon the men who make, and interpret, and execute our laws ; but these men are chosen by the vote of the people. To vote, therefore, is to discharge a high moral obligation. The ideal vote expresses this obligation to God and to our brother men. What is there in politics to release a man from the voice of conscience ? Upon what principle can a good man vote for a bad man to fill an office of honor and trust ?

The ideal vote includes the element of patriotism. It stands for the defence of country, of home, and of all our cherished institutions. The true patriot protects the ballot-box as the soldier protects the flag of his country. Let it never be forgotten that the votes of the people were back of the armies that saved the American Union. Men who put the spirit of patriotism into their votes are the strength and hope of this great nation.

Now, with this description of the ideal vote, we may compare the *actual vote*. What is the actual vote ? From the history which we have been making, we may gather the answer to this question ; and it may be more effective to select our illustrations from events not too far removed from the present.

A generation has not yet passed since the popular vote of the metropolis of this country exalted the vilest men, and the wicked walked on every side. Their leader emerged in one, Boss Tweed, of infamous memory. All are familiar with the history of his reign. Millions were stolen from the city treasury ; offices were sold to men skilled in crime ; perjury, blackmail, prostitution, Sabbath desecration, drunkenness, and every form of immorality prevailed in the community. From center to circumference the city government was paralyzed. The good citizens of New York joined their forces, and rose in their might. The power of Tweed and his partners in crime was broken, and for a time the principles of righteousness prevailed ; but the forces of evil, although hidden away, did not cease their activity. Greed was importunate, and her opportunities most tempting. Tammany was reorganized upon a grander scale. The men who undertook this work did not lack ability : they were masters in what base men call politics. They knew their material—saw clearly that the actual vote must be the foundation of all their hopes. For them, the actual was the number of votes that could be claimed, by any means, at each election. Almost every ward in that great city had its platoon of abandoned men, ready for any crime. Assessors' lists were padded, repeaters flourished, perjures were multiplied, election boards were constructed of the most unprincipled men—the majorities for the machine were perfectly certain. When the election was over, every soldier in each platoon got his pay, either in office or in cash. Office meant the opportunity to get money. The principle of payment was the fattest office for the most skilful villain. Thus was the city government of New York turned into an immense, complex, relentless, political machine for the rapid accumulation of private fortunes. In that center of commerce, crime became at once the most common and the most valuable commodity of barter and sale. The one principle of control in the army of Tammany is written in a single word—spoils. It is the same principle that gave life, and discipline, and power, and ferocity to the armies of the ages of barbarism. New York, under Tammany, was a Christian community returned to barbarism. The spoils system in our modern cities, under cover of professed devotion to party and under the control of political bosses, belongs to an age, long since passed, for the Saxon race. It is wholly antagonistic to every principle of Christian civilization. It contains just two elements : the cunning of the savage, and the greed of the brute. You may soften it by the name—politics ; you may dress it in fine clothes ; you may polish it with the amenities of society ; you may domicile it in a palace ; you may ride it in a carriage, and exalt it among the sons of men with all that money can secure ; but it remains the same relic of barbarism

—selfish, cruel, relentless, brutal. Why should we be surprised at the awful condition of society, so recently exposed, where this principle of barbarism has exerted a controlling influence for years? Why should we be surprised that Tammany methods should develop a John Y. McKane? It is true that he did get things sadly mixed, when he led the children of his community in songs of praise to God on Sunday, and his band of brutal men to beat the representatives of the civil court on Monday. But what was this but a vain attempt to harmonize Christianity and barbarism? Had not Tammany been trying to do this for years? McKane simply differed in the sharpness of the contrast which his originality revealed between things so totally different. He brought things to a head, evidently believing that the day for righteous judgment, in his state, was a thing of the past. He is an able, courageous man, and had many facts upon which to base his judgment; but he made the mistake that many a man has made in this republic. The righteous are long-suffering, but mighty to save that which is essential to the life of our free institutions.

But is it well for us to find all our examples so far from home? Many, who know Philadelphia, claim that we cannot afford to throw stones at other cities upon the score of political corruption, and its consequences to society. What has been accomplished by the actual vote in this city? We do not read far back into our history until chapters open that cause every honest citizen to blush. If every politician of Philadelphia, who has made his fortune suddenly; and every man of wealth, who has secured his money through the unfaithfulness of public servants, should be converted just one-fourth as thoroughly as was Zaccheus, what, think you, might be the bulk of the conscience fund to be added to our city treasury?

But take a glance at events that have just occurred. In how many districts of our city has money controlled the majority; electing men who, for a consideration, should vote just as the political boss should dictate? Who and what inspires the zeal of the political boss? Whom do their tools represent? What are we to say of the actual vote, which is so organized as to secure the nomination, and insure the election of men to be our law makers, whose reputation for ignorance and gross immorality would make it impossible for them to secure even a subordinate position in any respectable business firm in the city? And must we not believe that the men who organize this vote, so use the criminal as to disfranchise every good citizen in the community? And what are we to say when these men deliberately debauch our local school boards, year after year, using them as the first wheel in their machine for corruption; for it is the corruption of the community that insures

their reward. Just so soon as the community is *controlled* by the principles of intelligence and integrity, the occupation of the ward boss is gone, and he must find an honest occupation, or suffer the inconvenience of an empty pocket.

Here is a bit of history which is not ancient. I wish that every good man and woman in Philadelphia would compare it with the "Tammany method." A citizen, anxious for the education of his own children, and for the many children of the poor about him, appealed to the men of his ward claiming to be "leaders of the party." He simply asked for true men of intelligence and respectability to be put in nomination for school directors. The pledge was given that it should be done; and it was distinctly understood that the good men on the board, who were reforming abuses, should be supported. Three reputable men were nominated, and elected; but what followed? No sooner was the election over, than did "the leaders" undertake to continue the old methods. It is a matter of common fame that these men, holding offices of honor and trust, organized the school board with a mob of brutal men; one director, it is alleged, was beaten; and the members of the board who sought to protect our public schools were compelled to retire. These same "leaders of the party" deliberately attempted to corrupt one of the newly elected directors to their own base methods. When this failed, this director began to receive anonymous letters, threatening violence; and the guns of blackguard journalism were turned upon him, week after week. But he stands upright to-day; and, together with the six men on our school board who stand with him, deserves the respect of every decent man and woman in this community. What has brought this unspeakably disgraceful and humiliating condition of immorality into our very homes? *The actual vote* in the city of Philadelphia. Some one may say: "Oh! that district includes the slums." May I answer? The slums are not confined to this part of the city; there are respectable slums. They may be surrounding your home to-day. Read this word of the Master, and mark the first and last sentence: "And he called the multitude, and said unto them: Hear, and understand; not that which goeth into the mouth defileth a man; but that which cometh out of the mouth, this defileth a man. Then came his disciples, and said unto Him: Knowest Thou that the Pharisees were offended after they heard this saying?" In our free government the vote is in the hands of "the multitude." There is nothing more perilous to our institutions than phariseeism. Respectable iniquity is more perilous than open vice. The actual vote will express the opinions and moral tone of those who control it. It may be power for either righteousness or unrighteousness. The power of the popular vote for righteous-

ness has been often expressed. It is seen in the refusal of our own great commonwealth to permit one ambitious man to choose her governor. It is seen in the overthrow of such men as McKane, who have gone to their own company. It is seen in the recent splendid moral victory won under the leadership of one man in New York. It is seen in its domestic bearings, where the voice of woman was effective in the vote, in the Ashland district of Kentucky. Such victories as these suggest what may be said on the last point to which I have promised to speak.

What should the vote of our own city become? It should become the instrument through which the intelligent and virtuous should speak with one voice upon the great questions of our municipality. It should claim the separation of our city government from state and national politics. It should declare adherence to the best principles of support and protection for the people. It should exalt to public office only men of pure life, of capability, of integrity. It should rebuke promptly every attempt at official corruption. It should make fidelity to the people the essential condition of continuance in office. It should secure the suppression of crime in all its forms. In a word, the vote of this city of homes, where civil liberty was born, should be the voice and power of righteousness against unrighteousness. But can this be realized? Can the actual vote be made to express the intelligence, the moral sentiment, the patriotism of Philadelphia? Many earnest conversations upon this subject with my fellow citizens, and much inductive study during the twelve years of my pastorate in this church, has put in my possession two answers to this question.

There is a discouraging majority who answer it in the negative. This majority may be classified. First, there are many good people who say: "What can you do?" This generally means nothing can be done. These persons, moral, comfortable, respectable, have given little or no thought to the question of the government of modern cities. I find that but few of them know anything of what is being done to save the city; nor do they seem to realize the perils to which society is exposed, or feel any personal responsibility for existing evils. Again, there are not a few who estimate their relation to society purely upon a dollar and cent basis. These say: "I cannot afford to oppose these politicians; it will cost me the loss of trade," Some say: "If I should oppose these law breakers, my life would not be safe in my own house; they are desperate characters." Many, even among the respectable, are under financial obligations to "the leaders." They hold positions. These, I find strangely blind to the actual condition of their neighborhood. They are optimists, indeed. "They, seeing, see not; and hearing, hear not; neither do they understand."

They hide the bad reputation of men elected to office behind some single jewel. Their charity covers a multitude of sins. But the case of some is serious, indeed. Their vote is under perpetual lease, on the ground of the influence of some boss over their employer. To refuse "to receive orders" might mean to lose rent, and clothes, and bread for themselves and families. By this indirect power the political boss controls many men who would spurn to be counted among his henchmen. All these classes have been generalized from actual cases, where men have, in confidence, opened their mind to me.

You perceive that this whole system of political corruption, and moral degradation of citizenship, and cruel tyranny over even good men, centers in that species of debased humanity that controls the vote, and which we call the "boss." This boss is a relic of the old feudal system. He exists by the exercise of power which tramples under foot every principle of morality. The fundamental fact of his moral horizon is "Might is Right." The attempt which some of these bosses have made, to maintain their position in good society by endeavoring to live one code of morals in their private life, and another code in their public life, has proved a signal failure. Morality is perfectly comprehensive. It must include a man's whole life, with all his relations to God and to his brother men. Whoever he be, wherever he be, the political boss is an enemy to every great interest of the community. He corrupts our young men. He imperils the purity of our homes. He debases the public conscience. He clogs the wheels of progress in every moral enterprise. He imperils the foundations of society. Yes, I mean every word, and press these facts upon those who, for any reason whatever, claim that the actual vote of our city cannot be made to express the intelligence, morality, and patriotism of the people.

The minority has always been a saving power, when found upon the side of righteousness against unrighteousness. This is true because power resides not in numbers, but in the direction and control of numbers. See Japan and China to-day. It is the element of intelligence, not of numbers, that wins the battle; and when intelligence is inspired with the spirit of obedience to God and love for man it is irresistible. That is what gave New Jersey her recent splendid moral victory over organized cupidity. There is in Philadelphia a rapidly increasing minority, who believe that our city can be governed by the spirit of wisdom and righteousness. These are engaged in organized effort to reform the ballot; to secure wise, pure, upright rulers; to protect the public treasury; to purify and strengthen the civil service; and to enforce existing laws. When all the good men and women of the city can be persuaded to think upon these things, and give moral and financial support to the organizations that are laboring for them, there will be a

mighty overturning of the evils which have taken strong hold of our municipality, and the immoral abominations that are now protected, and that flaunt themselves upon our streets, shall hide away.

And now, as we are here assembled to render thanks to the Father of lights, the giver of every good and perfect gift, for the mercy and the plenty with which he has crowned the year for us, as individuals and families and communities and commonwealths and a nation, let it be determined that this, our beloved city, which has been the home of our fathers, and is to be the home of our children, shall feel the might of our united effort for truth and purity, for righteous laws and good rulers, and for the suppression of crime wherever its head shall be lifted against good citizenship.