

## *Between Law and Lawlessness*

This Short Talk Bulletin is an address delivered at the 154th Annual Communication of the Grand Lodge of Louisiana on February 1, 1965, by Past Grand Master Morris Sharpiro, who has graciously consented to its publication as a Short Talk. For those who are concerned about Freemasonry's influence, it emphasizes that the Fraternity's "image" depends on every Mason's demonstration of the maxim that "morality must be our most important product."

We are aware of the quotation, "Blessed is the man that endureth temptation, for when he is tried, he shall receive the crown of life." How many of the citizens of this country successfully endure temptation? And of greater importance to the question: how many Masons successfully resist temptation? This question is of vital importance, because the strength of our Fraternity depends upon the degree of morality practiced by its members.

In a large city where officials take payoffs for awarding contracts, a certain resident of the community said, "They all do it." His cynicism could just as well have been directed at congressional influence peddlers, big business price fixers, gamblers, dealers in narcotics, or whatever type of corruption that appears in the daily newspapers. His next comment was, "So what?", the implication being that this is accepted standard behavior and there is nothing anyone can do to change or relieve the situation.

Like millions of his fellow men this individual was probably a decent hu-

man being: he had never stolen anything broken any laws wilfully, or deliberately injured another. Somewhere a knowledge of what was right had kept him from committing what was clearly wrong. But that knowledge had not kept a thin grey line that separates the two from becoming daily dimmer and thinner, to the point, almost, of imperceptibility.

On one side of this line are "they": the bribers, the cheaters, the chisellers, the swindlers. On the other side are "we", both partners and victims. They and we are now so perilously close that the only distinguishing mark is that in many instances they get caught and we do not.

The same citizen who expresses outrage at police corruption will slip the traffic cop on his beat a present in the belief that this automobile will not be ticketed for traffic violations. The son of the nice woman who lives next door has a habit of stealing money from her purse. Students admit cheating at exams because in too many instances it has become a common occurrence.

Without this connivance of moral passivity, the cancer which is demoralizing our society could not be spreading as swiftly as it is. Slowly but surely, the resistance to and impunity against wrong that a healthy society builks up by ethics and law and by the dictates of conscience have broken down. And instead of the proper indignation of a citizenry outraged by those who prey upon them, we hear only the usual admission of impotence, "They all do it."

Failure to uphold the law is no less corrupt than violation of the law. The increasing shame of this country is the growing number of Americans who fail to uphold and assist enforcement of the law simply out of fear. Fear of involvement, fear of reprisal, fear of trouble. A city official is aware of a colleague's bribe but does not report it. A pedestrian observes an automobile strike a citizen but leaves the scene of the accident to avoid an appearance in court. Such instances occur each day.

What is the cause of such behavior? What started this blurring of what was once a thick black line between the lawful and the lawless? We have become conditioned to headline exposures of massive corruption in private endeavors and in governmental affairs. Whatever capacity for indignation still exists ought surely be aroused by the picture of competitive sports corrupted by bribetaking and the involvement with criminal elements. Yet, when it is all exposed, only the bribers and the fixers are condemned. The athletes who took the bribes are first deplored and then pitied. Statements, such as "He's a nice boy. It's a shame," are commonly uttered. Let us consider the activities of such young people, the core and the reason for the fading of the thin grey line between right and wrong. How did they sink to such a level? You may find that the young individual attended Sunday School and his teachers gave him lessons in basic morality. More than likely, morality and righteous sentiment against criminal elements were expressed by his parents. But then, we consider a most important question, "What was his father like?"

His father crosses the thin grey line himself day in and day out. Maybe he pads his expense account as a mat-

ter of course. When his son failed his driver's test, he gave him a cash gift to slip to the inspector on his next test. The son knows that his dad is like most other fathers. He says, "They all do it." The young people of today seldom believe in heroes. To be a hero you have to stand out, to excel, to take risks, and above all, not only make a choice between right and wrong, but defend the right and oppose the wrong. This involves responsibility, and who needs responsibility?

Today, few people want to assume any responsibility. The psychiatrists, the sociologists, and others have adopted a procedure for avoiding responsibility. Nobody is really to blame for what he does. It's society. It's environment. It may be a broken home or an underprivileged area. But it is hardly ever the fault of the individual. In several large cities major police corruption has been exposed. Such corruption was exposed in the City of New Orleans some time ago. In Chicago, a newspaper reported that a judge granted probation to two policemen who admitted looting an appliance store. He said that he did not think policemen made enough money to properly support their families. The judge also said that the policemen were engaged in free enterprise because they were off duty when the theft occurred. If a high officer of our legal system finds such extenuating circumstances in a case of admitted thievery, surely it is natural to assume that a less critical multitude condoned the leniency of the judge.

Now we have an arsenal of excuses to absolve the individual from responsibility for his actions. A person commits a crime because he is basically insecure. A boy takes a bribe because it is said his mother did not love him or his brother was a bully. A police-

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man loots a store because his salary is not sufficient. A city official accepts a bribe because it is the customary thing to do. Members of minority groups, racial or otherwise, commit crimes because they are socially estranged or economically underprivileged. The words, right and wrong, are foreign to such language. So is the definition of ethics as a moral philosophy or responsibility. So is conscience as an inward monitor of our actions. In today's type of behavior *conscience* is outmoded or archaic.

This indifference to morality is a very serious matter. It concerns the welfare and future of our nation. It involves all of those previously mentioned, the examination cheater, the expense account padder, the undercover lobbyist, the delinquent who steals, the seller of pornography, and many others. They may be a minority. But when the majority of our citizens exempt themselves from responsibility by accepting graft and corruption as something natural to society, our nation is bordering on chaos.

If the line between right and wrong is finally obliterated, there can be no defense against the anarchy of evil. Before this occurs, it might be well for the schools of our nation to require a daily lesson in ethics and responsibility that would fortify the conscience of our children. It is essential that every Master Mason advocate the principles of our Order in every daily endeavor. We must realize that corrup-

is not something to be read about in the papers and left to the courts of our land. Every citizen is a defendant.

The usual definition of a "hypocrite" is a person who pretends to be better than he really is. But there is another kind: persons who are better than they pretend to be. They are people who dislike to be observed with their virtues showing. As a consequence, they pretend to agree with the thinking of those with whom they associate. They let themselves be influenced, instead of attempting to do some influencing themselves. It has been truthfully said that men are more often bribed by their loyalties and ambitions than by money.

To show your true colors, it is not necessary to be unkind or to create dissension. But we find that there is tremendous strength in decency, fairness and honesty. It sometimes requires backbone and tact to take advantage of this strength, but people who recognize and utilize this power can truly be themselves. They can look their consciences and fellow citizens in the face without lowering their lids.

What makes you a Master Mason?  
What did you obligate yourself to do?

We are the agents of Freemasonry. Our Order can show true strength and influence only in proportion to the efforts we exert to practice morality. Our greatest challenge is to actually practice Freemasonry. Morality is our most important business.     △



### THE RULE THREE FOR MASONRY

**Three things to govern: Temper, tongue, conduct.**

**Three things to love: Courage, affection, gentleness.**

**Three things to hate: Cruelty, ingratitude, intolerance.**

**Three things to wish for: Health, friends, a cheerful spirit.**

**Three things to fight for: Honor, home, country.**

— H. G. Paterson, Jr.