

MARYLAND GAZETTE.

T H U R S D A Y, APRIL 26, 1787.

A POLITICAL SERMON.

"HONESTY IS THE BEST POLICY."

THE universal assent which this maxim has obtained, seems to shew that it has the experience of mankind for its basis, and that however we may be led astray by the prevalence of opposite principles, or allured, by the prospects of present advantage, into the paths of duplicity and deceit, the way of honesty will in the end be the most easy, safe and

pointed. In this view of the subject, we are led to admire the wisdom of providence, which has added this powerful incentive to rectitude, and in aid of our religious and moral obligations, has used the more forcible ties of interest to urge us to our duty.

The divine who points out to us the means of obtaining eternal happiness, will describe honesty as a necessary virtue, and expatiate on the future punishments which a violation of its precepts will draw upon us. The legislator who enacts his laws for the security of our lives and properties, arms them with the more obvious terrors of temporal penalties;—Both, too often, without effect;—The impious unbeliever will deride the threats denounced from the pulpit, and the violator of worldly statutes hopes to elude their vigilance by the secrecy of his crimes.—Then only, when it is the interest of men to be honest, can we expect to find them truly so;—And then only will mankind be wholly free from knavery when they are thoroughly convinced, that *Honesty is the best Policy.*

This persuasion however, so necessary to be adopted and so conformable to every principle of reason and equity, does not immediately take possession of the mind; and it may perhaps be difficult to reconcile a belief in the necessity of honesty, with the small share of it which we observe in the commerce of the world; the truth is that our professions and practice are too often at variance, and that we seldom even think right, till the occurrence of some sensible inconvenience tells us, that we have both thought and acted wrong:—Hence it is that the policy of honesty is too often neglected till every other expedient has been tried, and that our sentiments on it and our belief in its efficacy are more the result of necessity than inclination.

Pope tells us that an honest man's the noblest work of God; the sentiment is short, but comprehensive, and it is to be lamented that so noble a work is so seldom found amongst us, for if it be true that honesty is the best policy, that which we possess will be found weak indeed.

How, or wherefore, a quality so necessary for the purpose of mutual intercourse, so dignifying to our nature, and so consonant with our ideas of perfection, should in almost every breast meet with so many contravening passions, may be a fit subject for speculative researches to determine on.

It may perhaps be more useful for us to inquire by what means honesty has vanished from amongst us;—by what possibility it can be restored, and (in order to assist our inquiries) to determine first of all in what it consists; that we may not flatter ourselves that we possess the substance, when even the shadow of it is discountenanced and neglected.

The rules of honesty are simple and plain, and however widely our dealings and connexions are extended, the regulation of our conduct by those rules will keep us in the right path.

The scripture precept—Do as you would be done by—may be styled the parent of honesty.

Human laws have more particularly defined our obligations—Give every man his own—and, Do hurt to no man.

Compared with these injunctions, how will our actions stand the test? Can we appeal to our own hearts and impartially inquire—whether we have done these things?—Few, I fear could answer to their own satisfaction.—Few indeed, though exempt from the more open breaches of honesty; could acquit themselves of those imperceptible innovations which our passions and inclinations daily urge us to give way to.

Dishonesty has taken deep root amongst us.—In some we find it triumphantly raised above the reach of punishment or censure, and extended beyond the interference of sensibility or shame;—In others by gradual advances, bidding fair to attain the same distinguished summit, and weed out every virtuous sentiment that is still remaining in our breasts.—That small, and almost imperceptible deviations have been made by men of the most honest and upright intentions, must be admitted, and perhaps there may be some difficulty in ascertaining the pre-

cise boundaries between the measures adopted in the pursuit of a necessary occupation, and those which the strictness of honesty will not warrant.

In every case of this doubtful nature, let us have recourse to the above infallible precepts; and if we fail in the observance of them, however our conduct may be sanctioned by weak, improvident or unjust laws, we may then pronounce that we have strayed from the paths of honesty and fair dealing.

In the regular and ordinary intercourse of men, we shall find few professions exempt from a species of dishonesty, so closely connected with the proper extent of a necessary industry:—The merchant who thrives on the general wants of his neighbours.—The lawyer who procures his own peace by the dissensions of the rest of the community.—The physician who lives by the influence of sickness and death.—Nay, even the divine, who is happy in this world, by teaching others to be so in the next.—All of these will find temptations, (difficult to be resisted,) continually urging them to swerve from the rule of right.

Yet is honesty the best Policy.—The merchant will find his business increase, in proportion to the reputation he has maintained for honesty in his dealings, while the visionary schemes of fraud will terminate in poverty and ruin:—the lawyer who exerts his talents in the cause of justice only, will even in this world find his recompense superior to that of the dealer in knavery and chicanery;—the physician who makes the welfare of his patients the chief object of his assiduity and attention, will meet with honour and profit for his reward;—and the divine will obtain the most sedulous disciples in learning the way to Heaven, who seems most likely by his practice to arrive there himself.

The more open and daring violations of honesty are generally brought about by some causes that disturb the ordinary course of things.

Thus a state of war, by unsettling the common round of commercial transactions and exhibiting new objects of pursuit, generally calls forth a spirit of enterprise, adventure, and dishonesty.

Would to Heaven that our transactions during the late war did not so fully justify this observation.—Let us call forth a few prevailing examples, and see how they and honesty will reckon.

A man before the commencement of the war owed a sum of money which he had borrowed of a friend to purchase land, to pay his debts or to set him up in trade;—when the paper currency had depreciated sixty, eighty, or an hundred fold, he paid off his debt with the product of a few bushels of wheat, or a hoghead of tobacco;—Was that man honest?—Yes.—For he had the laws of the land to countenance and sanctify his conduct.—But can the law make that right which is in itself wrong?—Try it by the rules of honesty.—Has he done as he would be done by?—Surely, no!—It would be adding dissimulation to injustice to assert it.—Has he given every man his own?—The very fact proves that he has not.—Has he complied with the precept, by doing hurt to no man?—Let the creditor who has so deeply suffered by the payment, answer the question.

This class of men may possibly think their policy superior to that of honesty;—time may perhaps shew them the contrary.

A number of men who had goods for sale at that period of the war when our necessities were pressing, and our abilities small, sold them on credit for tobacco at the most enormous and immoderate rate, and by the subsequent increase in the value of that article have raised immense fortunes for a few inconsiderable articles, to the ruin of many who have unfortunately dealt with them.

This point will be disputed—I ask for information.—Are these men honest?—Surely so.—They were in the exercise of a lawful occupation.—There was no obligation or necessity for the buyer to take the goods, or to stipulate for that kind of payment.—Contracts are of a sacred nature, and must not be interfered with.

The law has, and will so determine.

Yet these principles may perhaps deceive us, and to the unerring rules of honesty we must again have recourse;—Have the sellers in this instance done as they would be done by?—Let them answer.—Have they given every man his own?—A comparison of the triflingness of the commodity with the enormity of the price, will answer the spirit of this question.

Have they done hurt to no man?—To many, many indeed, they have done an irretrievable hurt, if poverty and ruin are attended with that effect.

We will however try them a little further, by comparing their conduct with that of the man who has paid depreciated paper; and although the principles,

of the one will meet with immediate condemnation, while those of the others will be excused and even applauded, yet will they, on examination, be found to have equal justice for their support.

A man agreed to pay, for the merchandise which he purchased, a certain quantity of a specific article—Tobacco;—But will it be concluded that the seller expected to receive, or the buyer to pay twenty or thirty times more than the real and actual value of the goods in question.—Surely not.—But this view of the subject is set aside, and it is said that tobacco was promised, and tobacco must be paid.—And although the real and reasonable worth of a commodity is generally acknowledged to be the equitable consideration for the purchase of it, yet shall I be told in the words of the Jew, that it is not so written in their bonds, and that until I can rail the seals from off them, arguments will be used in vain.

How will the other case stand?—A man bound himself to pay a sum of money—he did pay it; but in so depreciated a state as to be little or no real satisfaction for the debt—but his contract was for money, and literally he has complied with it, by discharging it in money.—The reasoning on the cases must be exactly the same.—The money grew worse and the tobacco grew better, and in both there was the same departure though in different directions from the equitable rule of actual worth at the time of the contract.—To illustrate.—A was indebted to B. in a sum of money before the war, and paid it in paper when depreciated to the rate of twenty for one, B. afterwards in the course of the war, sells goods to A. on credit for tobacco, which becomes at the time of payment, equal to twenty times the value of the goods.—How will their accounts stand?

Says B. you paid me a guinea for a pound;—Says A. you made me pay you a pound for a guinea;—Says B. my claim was just;—You promised to pay me in tobacco;—Says A. my payment was just, for I contracted to pay you in money;—Says B. you deceived me by the tender law;—Says A. you deceived me without any law at all;—Says B. I was a sufferer by the war;—And says A. I was a sufferer by the peace.

Thus are their accounts fairly balanced, and happy would it be for the community if such only were interred in the subject.

A word more on tobacco debts.—A bill was brought in and passed by the house of delegates, for the relief of debtors, but rejected by the senate; this honesty and justice of this bill, I shall not inquire into.—It had many advocates and opposers;—b, the latter it was treated with many epithets of derision; among the rest *the truck bill* and *the trash bill*, taking this denomination for a just one, I will venture to assert that it would have proved an equitable discharge of the greater part of our tobacco contracts;—For they originated in trash, and by trash should they be completed.—To be serious, the man who murmurs at any mode which the legislature can devise for the discharge of such debts, must have suffered the dictates of self-interest, to blind him to the welfare of all others with whom he is concerned.

Let us proceed with our inquiries.

A number of men who have large possessions are pathetically lamenting our distressed situation, and enlarging on the burthens of the people; they are living in affluence and luxury, but their taxes are unpaid; by their own remissness they bring on the evils of which they complain.

Are these men honest?

A number of men who have regularly paid up their taxes, have the satisfaction of seeing that they have been honest than their neighbours, and have comparatively been losers by their honesty, while those who have been neglectful of this duty, are allowed to speculate upon the public.

Is this honest?

A number of men who complain that they can neither pay their taxes or their debts, are still living with dissipation and extravagance, are supporting their families in the highest style, and contracting new obligations instead of paying off their old ones.

Are these men honest?

There is yet another species of dishonesty that seems to be gaining ground amongst us, and that of the most detestable kind; it is that dishonesty which attempts to rob a man of his good name, and in the prosecution of so laudable a design less truth and honour at defiance. It is a dishonesty that calls for the abhorrence of all good men, and merits a severer retriue than it has yet met with.—Is the man who has done this honest?—Most certainly not.—But he shall find that honesty would have been the best policy;—for in attempting to injure the fame of others, he has effectually lost his own, and even