

The Law of Tooth and Nail

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The instinct and capacity for cooperation among workmates is one form of the great social instinct of love in man. The same pervasive force which draws man to woman, friend to friend, and countryman to countryman expresses itself in economic labor by the pleasure and stimulus of combined work. Wherever men work out a smooth and effective system of cooperating in their labor, ... the capacity for mutual understanding and good will is strengthened. ...

Cooperation is not only morally beautiful, but economically effective. The great achievements of modern life are almost wholly due to the application of this principle. Progress consisted in learning to expand the size of our cooperating groups and to make all the parts interlock more smoothly. The triumphs of applied science are due to the sharing of intellectual results and methods. The modern means of traffic and communication have turned entire nations and groups of nations into semiorganized cooperating groups. Individually we are neither stronger nor wiser than our fathers, but we have learned to work together... .

The old saying that "competition is the life of trade" is a lie. Competition may be a stimulant of sales, but cooperation is the life of the whole economic process. Capitalism itself gets its strength and value not from its competitive element, but from the fact that it furnishes the means of combining many units of capital in the financing of an industrial undertaking, and many units of labor in the operation of it. ...

Cooperative action calls out instincts of good will and solidarity; competition represses good will, and calls out selfishness and jealousy. Men who are doing the same kind of work and who ought to be workmates are set into an antagonism which makes Christian love heroic instead of natural and spontaneous....

The moral instinct of men has always condemned competitive selfishness, just as it has always admired the moral beauty of teamwork. Our hearts thrill when we see anyone throwing himself heart and soul into a common task and risking his own safety to insure the common success. By the same token we fail to thrill when any one haggles for himself and seeks to get the better of his fellows. The child that "won't play," the soldier that deserts in time of danger, the workman that helps to break a strike, the boy that "snitches" on his pals, are not objects of

admiration to their mates, nor to wise outsiders. The trader has always been the outstanding case of the man who plays his own hand and sacrifices social solidarity for private gain. Consequently the trading class has never ranked high among the social classes in older civilizations... .

On the other hand, in our modern era the trading class has become the ruling class, and consequently the selfishness of trade has been exalted to the dignity of an ethical principle. Every man is taught to seek his own advantage, and then we wonder that there is so little public spirit.

The reign of competition is a reign of fear. ... In competition the worst man sets the pace, and good men follow because they are afraid. A capable mind with no [feeling] of mercy to hinder, who can wring the last ounce of strength from his men, and who puts women and children to work wherever men can be displaced, can outbid a morally sensitive man... .

In a cooperating group the efficiency and courage of the best ... hold the rest up to their level; in commercial competition the greed and inhumanity of the worst infect the rest through the medium of fear. For this reason considerations of humanity have often had so little response from communities of businessmen composed largely of Christian persons. Individually they are kind-hearted men; but as members of a competitive social order they are driven by fear and forgetful of mercy. Workmen complain when their employers speed up the machinery, which compels them to keep up with its pace or be hurt. But their employers are also slaves of a huger machine, and many of them are seeking with laboring breath to keep up with a treadmill that will mangle them if they do not.

The objection will be raised that the instinct of competition is inherent in human life and that its free play is a necessary factor in the evolution of the race. That is quite true. Life would lose much of its zest and of its educational value if competition were eliminated from it. But there is no danger whatever that it will be. [S]tudents will compete for educational honors; workmen will compete for leadership within their group; statesmen will compete for popularity and power. When the ablest are honored and promoted, it benefits all. A superior type is thereby placed in a conspicuous position, and the rest are more or less modeled after it.

The unsuccessful competitors may suffer all the pangs of disappointed ambition, but they are not usually impoverished or disgraced. A college boy who fails to win a prize is not on that account reduced to high school rank. A workman who fails to be promoted to the position of foreman does not lose his old job. Such emulation advances some without ruining the rest. ...

But commercial competition differs in important ways from these salutary forms of human competition [T]he stakes are too large for safety. Any blessing may become a curse by growing excessive. A baby is a benediction; triplets are a calamity. We are glad when the temperature of a room rises from 40 to 70 degrees, but we object to 170. A pinch of salt and pepper is pleasant..., but a handful makes wry faces. So there is no great harm when boys play marbles "for keeps" or old ladies play piquet for small stakes, but when clerks stake a week's wages on roulette or the races, it creates a moral situation about which great States enact laws. In business the stakes are enormous. They are larger . . . than ever before, because business is done on a larger scale. . . .

The terrible game of competition always involves the possibility of business failure Therewith a man drops from the position of an independent man to that of a subordinate, from participation in profits to a mere salary, from large hopes to a contracted outlook. If he is past his youth, the drop may be final. It involves the social standing of his family, the prospects of his children, even their health and length of life. If men gambled at faro for their fortunes, or bartered away their wives and children into peonage, the police would intervene. Yet any stringency of the market witnesses situations which are morally much like that.

No human character ought to be submitted to such cruel tension and strain. Is it strange that men under such conditions cut wages in order to be able to lower prices, and submerge the men dependent on them in poverty and the women in prostitution?

. . . [I]n commercial competition money dominates the situation; honor is secondary; in many cases self-respect and the sense of honor have to be drugged temporarily in order to put a deal through. Success wins notoriety, but not honor. Are there any admiring plaudits in a city when two department stores put a third out of business and the old sign is taken down? Do men feel that they have witnessed a big, splendid human event when a large corporation swallows a smaller one? Unusual business success in our country actually seems to cloud a man's reputation and put him on the defensive for his honor. Surely it is possible to conceive of a situation where men of organizing ability would be the captains of great industrial teams comprising all the workers of a given industry in the community, and where they would be rewarded for their achievements with little money and great honor, instead of big money and little honor. . . .

Our economic system is based on a mass of special privilege. Private property in mines and real estate locations have institutionalized inequality. And then we invite men to play the game

on the theory that it is fair competition between equals. Some have been through the pack and have taken all the cards that looked good to them, and then invite the rest to play the great game for the prizes of life with strict regard to the rules. In honorable athletics the man who has shown speed in one race is ... put into another class where he will once more be pitted against equals only. That system favors the young and seeks to develop new ability. On the other hand, in commercial competition it is the beginner who is handicapped in every way, and the star racers are furnished with motorcycles to make sure that they will henceforth always distance the crowd that runs on foot. Where is the educational value and the moral stimulus of that sort of sport?

For a century the doctrine of salvation by competition was the fundamental article in the working creed of the capitalistic nations. It was the "natural theology" of industry In theory it is still in effect in our country. Businessmen are indignant when workingmen refuse to permit unrestrained competition among themselves. Government is supposed to punish combinations "in restraint of trade." But in practice competition is being hemmed in and tied up on all hands. ...

The only valid defense for the wastefulness and inefficiency of the competitive system is that it protects the consumer against the voracity of the monopolist. That end is wholly laudable, but we shall have to find more effective means of attaining it than moving back the clock-hands that destiny is driving forward. ...

... Competition as a principle is a denial of fraternity. Insofar as it is allowed to do its unrestrained work, it establishes the law of tooth and nail, and brings back the age of savage warfare where every man's hand is against every man. It dechristianizes the social order. Whatever progress was achieved under the competitive system was secured, not by the competitive element in it, but by the fact that it allowed so large an application of the forces of association and teamwork. It behooves us to find forms of organization that will expand the present narrow areas of cooperation and make them nationwide. ... Commercial competition has developed in our commercial communities the lower instincts of selfishness, covetousness, and craft. A Christian social order must be such that it will develop and educate mutual interest and good will, and equip workmates with that sense of comradeship and solidarity to which they are entitled.