

# “Thou Shalt Not Steal”

*By Henry George*

DR. M'GLYNN, in Chickering Hall, last Sunday night, said it was a historic occasion. He was right. That a priest of Christ, standing on Sunday night on a public platform and addressing a great audience—an audience embracing men and women of all creeds and beliefs—should proclaim a crusade for the abolition of poverty, and call on men to join together and work together, to bring the Kingdom of God on earth, did mark a most important event. Great social transformations, said Mazzini, never have been and never will be other than the application of great religious movements. The day on which democracy shall elevate itself to the position of a religious party, that day will its victory begin. And the deep significance of the meeting last Sunday night, the meaning of this Anti-Poverty Society that we have joined together to inaugurate, is the bringing into the struggle of democracy the religious sentiment—the sentiment alone of all sentiments powerful enough to regenerate the world.

The comments made on that meeting and on the institution of this Society are suggestive. We are told, in the first place, by the newspapers, that you cannot abolish poverty because there is not wealth enough to go around. We are told that if all the wealth of the United States were divided up there would only be some eight hundred dollars apiece. Well, if that is the case, all the more monstrous then is the injustice which today gives single men millions and tens of millions, and even hundreds of millions. If there really is so little, then the more injustice in these great fortunes. But we do not propose to abolish poverty by dividing up what wealth there is, so much as by creating more wealth. We propose to abolish poverty by setting at work that vast army of men—estimated last year to amount in this country alone to one million—that vast army of men only anxious to create wealth, but who are now, by a system which permits dogs in the manger to monopolize God's bounty, deprived of the opportunity to toil.

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Then, again, they tell us you cannot abolish poverty, because poverty always has existed. Well, if poverty always has existed, all the more need for our moving for its abolition. It has existed long enough. We ought to be tired of it; let us get rid of it. But I deny that poverty, such poverty as we see on earth today, always has existed. Never before in the history of the world was there such an abundance of wealth, such power of producing wealth. So marked is this that the very people who tell us that we cannot abolish poverty, attribute it in almost the next breath to over-production. They virtually tell us it is because mankind produces so much wealth that so many are poor; that it is because there is so much of the things that satisfy human desires already produced, that men cannot find work, and that women must stint and strain. Poverty attributed to over-production; poverty in the midst of wealth poverty in the midst of enlightenment; poverty when steam and electricity and a thousand labor-saving inventions that never

existed in the world before have been called to the aid of man. There is manifestly no good reason for its existence, and it is time that we should do something to abolish it.

There are not charitable institutions enough to supply the demand for charity; that seems incapable of being supplied. But there are enough, at least, to show every thinking woman and every thinking man that it is utterly impossible to eradicate poverty by charity, to show everyone who will trace to its root the cause of the disease that what is needed is not charity, but justice—the conforming of human institutions to the eternal laws of right. But when we propose this, when we say that poverty exists because of the violation of God’s laws, we are taunted with pretending to know more than men ought to know about the designs of Omnipotence. They have set up for themselves a god who rather likes poverty, since it affords the rich a chance to show their goodness and benevolence; and they point to the existence of poverty as a proof that God wills it. Our reply is that poverty exists not because of God’s will, but because of man’s disobedience. We say that we do know that it is God’s will that there should be no poverty on earth, and that we know it as we may know any other natural fact. The laws of this universe are the laws of

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God, the social laws as well as the physical laws, and He, the Creator of all, has given us room for all, work for all, plenty for all. If today people are in places so crowded that it seems as though there were too many people in the world; if today thousands of men who would gladly be at work do not find the opportunity to go to work; if today the competition for employment crowds wages down to starvation rates; if today, amidst abounding wealth, there are in the centers of our civilization human beings who are worse off than savages in any normal times, it is not because the Creator has been niggardly; it is simply because of our own injustice—simply because we have not carried the idea of doing to others as we would have them do unto us into the making of our statutes,

The Anti-Poverty Society has no patent remedy for poverty. We propose no new thing. What we propose is simply to do justice. The principle that we propose to carry into our laws is neither more nor less than the principle of the golden rule. We propose to abolish poverty by the sovereign remedy of doing to others as we would have others do to us, by giving to all their just rights. And we propose to begin by assuring to every child of God who, in our country, comes into this world, his full and equal share of the common heritage. Crowded! Is it any wonder that men are crowded together as they are in this city, when we see men taking up far more land than they can by any possibility use, and holding it for enormous prices? Why, what would have happened if, when these doors were opened, the first people who came in had claimed all the seats around them, and demanded a price of others who afterwards came in by the same equal right? Yet that is precisely the way we are treating this continent. That is the reason why people are huddled together in tenement houses; that is the reason why work is difficult to get; the reason that there seems even in good times, a surplus of labor, and that in those times that we call bad, the times of industrial depression, there are all over the

country thousands and hundreds of thousands of men tramping from place to place, unable to find employment.

Not work enough! Why, what is work? Productive work is simply the application of human labor to land; it is simply

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the transforming into shapes adapted to gratify human desires, the raw material that the Creator has placed here. Is there not opportunity enough for work in this country? Supposing that, when thousands of men are unemployed and there are hard times everywhere, we could send a committee up to the High Court of Heaven to represent the misery and the poverty of the people, consequent on their not being able to find employment. What answer would we get? “Are your lands all in use? Are your mines all worked out? Are there no natural opportunities for the employment of labor?” What could we ask the Creator to furnish us with that is not already here in abundance? He has given us the globe amply stocked with raw material for our needs. He has given us the power of working up this raw material. If there seems scarcity, if there is want, if there are men who cannot find employment, if there are people starving in the midst of plenty, is it not simply because what the Creator intended for all has been made the property of the few?

In moving against this giant wrong which denies to labor access to the natural opportunities for the employment of labor, we move against the cause of poverty. We propose to abolish it, to tear it up by the roots, to open free and abundant employment for every man. We propose to disturb no just right of property. We are defenders and upholders of the sacred right of property—that right of property which justly attaches to everything that is produced by labor; that right which gives to everyone a just right of property in what he has produced—that makes it his to give, to sell, to bequeath, to do whatever he pleases with, so long as in using it he does not injure any one else. That right of property we insist upon, that we would uphold against all the world. To a house, a coat, a book—anything produced by labor—there is a clear individual title, which goes back to the man who made it. That is the foundation of the just, the sacred right of property. It rests on the right of the individual to the use of his own powers, on his right to profit by the exertion of his own labor; but who can carry the right of property in land that far? Who can claim a title of absolute ownership in land coming from the man who made it? And until the man who claims the exclusive ownership of a piece of this planet can show a title originating with

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the Maker of this planet; until he can produce a decree from the Creator declaring that his city lot, or that great tract of agricultural land, or that coal mine, or that gas well, was made for him—until then we have a right to hold that land was intended for all of us.

Natural religion and revealed religion alike tell us that God is no respecter of persons; that He did not make this planet for a few individuals; that He did not give it to one generation in preference to other generations, but that He made it for the use during their lives of all the people that His providence brings into the world. If this be true, the child that is born tonight in the humblest tenement in the most squalid quarter of New York, comes into life with as good a title to the land of this city as any Astor or Rhinelander.

How do we know that the Almighty is against poverty? That it is not in accordance with His decree that poverty exists? We know it because we know this, that the Almighty has declared, "Thou shalt not steal." And we know for a truth that the poverty that exists today in the midst of abounding wealth is the result of a system that legalizes theft.

The women who by the thousands are bending over their needles or sewing machine, thirteen, fourteen, sixteen hours a day; these widows straining and striving to bring up the little ones deprived of their natural bread-winner; the children that are growing up in squalor and wretchedness, under-clothed, under-fed, under-educated, even in this city, without any place to play—growing up under conditions in which only a miracle can keep them pure—under conditions which condemn them in advance to the penitentiary or the brothel—they suffer, they die, because we permit them to be robbed, robbed of their birthright, robbed by a system which disinherits the vast majority of the children that come into the world. There is enough and to spare for them. Had they the equal rights in the estate which their Creator has given them there would be no young girls forced to unwomanly toil to eke out a mere existence, no widows finding it such a bitter, bitter struggle to put bread in the mouths of their little children; no such misery and squalor as we may see here in the greatest of American cities; misery and squalor that are deepest in the largest, and richest centers

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of our civilization today.

These things are the results of legalized thefts, the fruits of a denial of that commandment that says, "Thou shalt not steal." How is this great commandment interpreted today, even by the men who pretend to preach the Gospel? "Thou shalt not steal." Well, according to them, it means: "Thou shalt not get into the penitentiary." Not much more than that with any of them. You may steal, provided you steal enough, and you do not get caught, and you may have a front seat in the churches. Do not steal a few dollars—that may be dangerous, but if you steal millions and get away with it, you become one of our first citizens. "Thou Shalt Not Steal"; that is the law of God. What does it mean? Well, it does not merely mean that you shall not pick pockets! It does not merely mean that you shall not commit burglary or highway robbery! There are other forms of stealing which it prohibits as well. It certainly means (if it has any meaning) that we shall not take that to which we are not entitled, to the detriment of others.

Now, here is a desert. Here is a caravan going along over the desert. Here are a gang of robbers. They say, "Look! There is a rich caravan; let us go and rob it, kill the men if necessary, take their goods from them, their camels and horses and walk off." But one of the robbers says, "Oh, no; that is dangerous; besides that would be stealing! Let us, instead of doing that, go ahead to where there is a spring, the only spring at which this caravan can get water in this desert. Let us put a wall around it and call it ours, and when they come up we won't let them have any water until they have given us all the goods they have." That would be more gentlemanly, more polite, and more respectable; but would it not be theft all the same?

And is it not theft of the same kind when men go ahead in advance of population and get land they have no use whatever for, and then, as people come into the world and population increases, will not let this increasing population use the land until they pay an exorbitant price? That is the sort of theft on which our first families are founded. Do that under the false code of morality which exists here today and people will

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praise your forethought and your enterprise, and will say you have made money because you are a very superior man, and that anybody can make money if he will only work and be industrious! But is it not as clearly a violation of the command, "Thou shalt not steal," as taking the money out of a man's pocket?

"Thou shalt not steal." That means, of course, that we ourselves must not steal. But does it not also mean that we must not suffer anybody else to steal if we can help it? "Thou shalt not steal." Does it not also mean, "Thou shalt not suffer thyself or anybody else to be stolen from?" If it does, then we, all of us, rich and poor alike, are responsible for this social crime that produces poverty. Not merely the men who monopolize land—they are not to blame above anyone else, but we who permit them to monopolize land are also parties to the theft. The Christianity that ignores this social responsibility has really forgotten the teachings of Christ. Where He in the Gospels speaks of the judgment, the question which is put to men is never, "Did you praise me?" "Did you pray to me?" "Did you believe this or did you believe that?" It is only this: "What did you do to relieve distress; to abolish poverty?" To those who are condemned, the judge is represented as saying: "I was an hungered and ye gave me no meat, I was athirst and ye gave me no drink, I was sick and in prison and ye visited me not." Then they say, "Lord, Lord, when did we fail to do these things to thee?" The answer is, "Inasmuch as ye failed to do it to the least of these, so also did you fail to do it unto me; depart into the place prepared for the devil and his angels." On the other hand, what is said to the blessed is, "I was an hungered and ye gave me meat, I was thirsty and ye gave me drink, I was naked and ye clothed me, I was sick and in prison and ye visited me." And when they say, "Lord, Lord, when did we do these things to thee?" the answer is, "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto the least of these ye have done it unto me."

Here is the essential spirit of Christianity. The essence of its teaching is not, "Provide for your own body and save your own soul!" but, "Do what you can to make this a better

world for all!" It was a protest against the doctrine of "each for himself and the devil take the hindermost!" It was the

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proclamation of a common Fatherhood of God and a common Brotherhood of Men. This was why the rich and the powerful, the high priests and the rulers, persecuted Christianity with fire and sword. It was not what in so many of our churches today is called religion that pagan Rome sought to tear out—it was what in so many of the churches of today is called "socialism," and "communism," the doctrine of the equality of human rights!

Now imagine when we men and women of today go before that awful bar that there we should behold the spirits of those who in our time under this accursed social system were driven into crime, of those who were starved in body and mind, of those little children that in this city of New York are being sent out of the world by thousands when they have scarcely entered it—because they do not get food enough, nor air enough, nor light enough, because they are crowded together in these tenement districts under conditions in which all diseases rage and destroy. Supposing we are confronted with those souls, what will it avail us to say that we individually were not responsible for their earthly conditions? What, in the spirit of the parable of Matthew, would be the reply from the judgment seat? Would it not be, "I provided for them all. The earth that I made was broad enough to give them room. The materials that are placed in it were abundant enough for all their needs. Did you or did you not lift up your voice against the wrong that robbed them of their fair share in what I provided for all? "

"Thou shalt not steal!" It is theft, it is robbery that is producing poverty and disease and vice and crime among us. It is by virtue of laws that we uphold; and he who does not raise his voice against that crime, he is an accessory. The standard has now been raised, the Cross of the New Crusade at last is lifted. Some of us, aye, many of us, have sworn in our hearts that we will never rest so long as we have life and strength until we expose and abolish that wrong. We have declared war upon it. Those who are not with us, let us count them against us. For us there will be no faltering, no compromise, no turning back until the end. There is no need for poverty in this world, and in our civilization. There is a provision made by the laws of the Creator which would secure

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to the helpless all that they require, which would give enough and more than enough for all social purposes. These little children that are dying in our crowded districts for want of room and fresh air, they are the disinherited heirs of a great estate.

Did you ever consider the full meaning of the significant fact that as progress goes on, as population increases and civilization develops, the one thing that ever increases in value is land? Speculators all over the country appreciate that. Wherever there is a chance for population coming; wherever railroads meet or a great city seems destined

to grow; wherever some new evidence of the bounty of the Creator is discovered, in a rich coal or iron mine, or an oil well, or a gas deposit, there the speculator jumps in, land rises in value and a great boom takes place, and men find themselves enormously rich without ever having done a single thing to produce wealth.

Now, it is by virtue of a natural law that land steadily increases in value, that population adds to it; that invention adds to it; that the discovery of every fresh evidence of the Creator's goodness in the stores that He has implanted in the earth for our use adds to the value of land, not to the value of anything else. This natural fact is by virtue of a natural law—a law that is as much a law of the Creator as the law of gravitation. What is the intent of this law? Is there not in it a provision for social needs? That land values grow greater and greater as the community grows and common needs increase, is there not a manifest provision for social needs— a fund belonging to society as a whole, with which we may take care of the widow and the orphan and those who fall by the wayside—with which we may provide for public education, meet public expenses, and do all the things that an advancing civilization makes more and more necessary for society to do on behalf of its members?

Today the value of land in New York City is over a hundred millions annually. Who has created that value? Is it because a few landowners are here that that land is worth a hundred millions a year? Is it not because the whole population of New York is here? Is it not because this great city is the center of exchanges for a large portion of the continent?

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Does not every child that is born, every one that comes to settle in New York, does he not add to the value of this land? Ought he not, therefore, to get some portion of the benefit? And is he not wronged when, instead of being used for that purpose, certain favored individuals are allowed to appropriate it?

We might take this vast fund for common needs, we might with it make a city here such as the world has never seen before—a city spacious, clean, wholesome, beautiful—a city that should be full of parks; a city without tenement houses; a city that should own its own means of communication, railways that should carry people thirty or forty miles from the city hall in half-an-hour, and that could be run free, just as are the elevators in our large buildings; a city with great museums, and public libraries, and gymnasiums, and public halls, paid for out of this common fund, and not from the donations of rich citizens. We could out of this vast fund provide as a matter of right for the widow and the orphan, and assure to every citizen of this great city that if he happened to die his wife and his children should not come to want, should not be degraded with charity, but as a matter of right, as citizens of a rich community, as co-heirs to a vast estate, should have enough to live on. And we could do all this, not merely without imposing any tax upon production; not merely without interfering with the just rights of property, but while at the same time securing far better than they are now the rights of property and abolishing the taxes that now weigh on production. We have but to throw off our taxes upon things

of human production; to cease to fine a man that puts up a house or makes anything that adds to the wealth of the community; to cease collecting taxes from people who bring goods from abroad, or make goods at home, and put all our taxes upon the value of land—to collect that enormous revenue due to the growth of the community for the benefit of the community that produced it.

Dr. Nulty, Bishop of Meath, has said in a letter addressed to the clergy and laity of his diocese that it is this provision of the Creator, the provision by which the value of land increases as the community grows, that seems to him the most beautiful of all the social adjustments; and it is to me that which most clearly shows the beneficence as well as the intelligence

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of the creative mind; for here is a provision by virtue of which the advance of civilization would, under the law of equal justice, be an advance toward equality, instead, as it now is, an advance toward a more and more monstrous inequality. The same good Catholic Bishop in that same letter says: “Now, therefore, the land of every country is the common property of the people of that country, because its real owner, the Creator, who made it, hath given it as a voluntary gift unto them. ‘The earth has He given to the children of men.’ And as every human being is a creature and a child of God, and as all His creatures are equal in His sight, any settlement of the land of this or any other country that would exclude the humblest from his equal share in the common heritage is not only an injury and a wrong done to that man, but an impious violation of the benevolent intention of his Creator.” And then Bishop Nulty goes on to show that the way to secure equal rights to land is not by cutting land up into equal pieces, but by taking for public use the values attaching to land. That is the method this Society proposes. I wish we could get that through the heads of the editors of this city. We do not propose to divide up land. What we do propose to do is to divide up the rent that comes from land; and that is a very easy thing.

We need not disturb anybody in possession, we need not interfere with anybody’s building or anybody’s improvement. We only need to remit taxes on all improvements, on all forms of wealth, and put the tax on the value of the land, exclusive of the improvements, so that the dog in the manger who is holding a piece of vacant land will have to pay the same for it as though there were a building upon it. In that way we would treat the whole land of such a community as this as the common estate of the whole people of the community. And as the Sailors’ Snug Harbor, for instance, out of the revenues of comparatively a little piece of land in New York, can maintain that fine establishment on Staten Island keeping in comfort a number of old seamen, so we might make a greater Snug Harbor of the whole of New York.

The people of New York could manage their estate just as well as any corporation, or any private family, for that matter. But for the people of New York to resume their estate and to



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treat it as their own, it is not necessary for them to go to any bother of management. It is not necessary for them to say to any landholder, this particular piece of land is ours, and no longer yours. We can leave land titles just as they are. We can leave the owners of the land to call themselves its owners; all we want is the annual value of the land. Not, mark you, that value which the owner has created, that value which has been given to it by improvements, but simply that value which is given to the bare land by the fact that we are all here—that has attached to the land because of the growth of this great community. And, when we take that, then all inducement to monopolize the land will be gone; then these very worthy gentlemen who are holding one-half of the area of this city idle and vacant will find the taxes upon them so high that they either will have to go to work and build houses or sell the land, or, if they cannot sell it, give it away to somebody who will build houses.

And so all over the country. Go into Pennsylvania, and there you will see great stretches of land, containing enormous deposits of the finest coal, held by corporations and individuals who are working but a little part of it. On these great estates the common American citizens who mine the coal are not allowed even to rent a piece of land, let alone buy it. They can only live in company houses; and they are permitted to stay in them only on condition (and they have to sign a paper, to that effect) that they can be evicted at any time on five days' notice. The companies combine and make coal artificially dear here, and make employment artificially scarce in Pennsylvania. Now, why should not those miners, who work on it half the time, why shouldn't they dig down in the earth and get up coal for themselves? Who made that coal? There is only one answer—God made that coal. Whom did He make it for? Any child or any fool would say that God made it for the people that would be one day called into being on this earth. But the laws of Pennsylvania, like the laws of New York, say God made it for this corporation and that individual; and thus a few men are permitted to deprive miners of work and make coal artificially dear.

A few weeks ago, when I was traveling in Illinois, a young

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fellow got in the car at one of the mining towns, and I entered into conversation with him. He said he was going to another place to try and get work. He told me of the condition of the miners, that they could scarcely make a living, getting very small wages, and only working about half the time. I said to him, “There is plenty of coal in the ground; why don't you employ yourself in digging coal?” He replied, “We did get up a co-operative company, and we went to see the owner of the land to ask what he would let us sink a shaft and get out some coal for. He wanted \$7,500 a year. We could not raise that much.” Tax land up to its full value, and how long can such dogs in the manger afford to hold that coal land away from these men? And when any man who wants work can go and employ himself, then there will be no million or no thousand unemployed men in all the United States.

The relation of employer and employed is a relation of convenience. It is not one imposed by the natural order. Men are brought into the world with the power to employ themselves, and they can employ themselves wherever the natural opportunities for employment are not shut up from them. No man has a natural right to demand employment of another, but each man has a natural right, an inalienable right, a right given by his Creator, to demand opportunity to employ himself. And whenever that right is acknowledged, whenever the men who want to go to work can find natural opportunities to work upon, then there will be as much competition among employers who are anxious to get men to work for them, as there will be among men who are anxious to get work. Wages will rise in every vocation to the true rate of wages, the full, honest earnings of labor. That done, with this ever increasing social fund to draw upon, poverty will be abolished, and in a little while will come to be looked upon as we are now beginning to look upon slavery—as the relic of a darker and more ignorant age.

Property in human flesh and blood was defended just as private property in land is now defended; the same charges were hurled upon the men who protested against human slavery, as are now made against the men who are intending to abolish industrial slavery. The dignitaries of the churches,

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and the opinion of the rich members of the churches, branded as a disturber, almost as a reviler of religion, any priest or any minister who dared to get up and assert God’s truth—that there never was and there never could be rightful property in human flesh and blood.

So it is now said that men who protest against this system, which is simply another form of slavery, are men who propose robbery. Thus the commandment, “Thou shalt not steal,” they have made, “Thou shalt not object to stealing.” When we propose to resume our own again, when we propose to secure its natural right to every child that comes into being, such people talk of us as advocating confiscation—charge us with being deniers of the rights of property. The real truth is that we wish to assert the just rights of property, that we wish to prevent theft. Chattel slavery was incarnate theft of the worst kind. That system which made property of human beings, which allowed one man to sell another, which allowed one man to take away the proceeds of another’s toil, which permitted the tearing of the child from the mother, and which permitted the so-called owner to hunt with bloodhounds the man who escaped from his tyranny—that form of slavery is abolished.

So far as that goes, the command, “Thou shalt not steal,” has been vindicated; but *there is another form of slavery.*

We are selling land now in large quantities to certain English lords and capitalists, who are coming over here and buying greater estates than the greatest in Great Britain or Ireland; we are selling them land, and they are buying land. Did it ever occur to you that

they do not want that land? They have no use whatever for American land; they do not propose to come over here and live on it. They cannot carry it over there to where they do live. It is not the land that they want. What they want is the income from it. They are buying it not that they themselves want to use it, but because by and by, as population increases, numbers of American citizens will want to use it, and then they can say to these American citizens, "You can use this land provided you pay us one-half of all you make upon it." What we are selling those foreign lords and capitalists is not really land; we are selling them the labor of American citizens; we are selling them the privilege

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of taking, without giving any return for it, the proceeds of the toil of our children.

So here in New York you will read in the papers every day that the price of land is going up. John Jones or Robert Brown has made a hundred thousand dollars within a year in the increase in the value of land in New York. What does that mean? It means he has the power of getting so many more coats, so many more cigars, so much more wine, dry goods, horses and carriages, houses or food. He has gained the power of taking for his own so much more of these products of human labor. But what has he done? He has not done anything. He may have been off in Europe or out West, or he may have been sitting at home taking it easy. If he has done nothing to get this increased income, where does it come from? The things I speak of are all products of human labor—someone has to work for them. When the man who does no work can get them, necessarily the men who do work to produce them must have less than they ought to have.

This is the system that the Anti-Poverty Society has banded together to war against, and it invites you to come and swell its ranks. It is the noblest cause in which any human being can possibly engage. What, after all, is there in life as compared with a struggle like this? One thing, and only one thing, is absolutely certain for every man and woman in this hall, as it is to all else of human kind—that is death. What will it profit us in a few years how much we have left? Is not the noblest and the best use we can make of life to do something to make better and happier the condition of those who come after us—by warring against injustice, by the enlightenment of public opinion, by the doing all that we possibly can to break up the accursed system that degrades and embitters the lot of so many?

We have a long fight and a hard fight before us. Possibly, probably, for many of us, we may never see it come to success. But what of that? It is a privilege to be engaged in such a struggle. This we may know, that it is but a part of that great, world-wide long-continued struggle in which the just and the good of every age have been engaged; and that we, in taking part in it, are doing something in, our humble way to

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bring on earth the Kingdom of God, to make the conditions of life for those who come afterward, those which we trust will prevail in heaven.