

To Washington Bank Clerks

[At a banquet given by the Washington chapter of the American Institute of Banking on February 20, 1915, Mr. Bryan delivered the following address]:

Mr. Toastmaster and Gentlemen, I feel like apologizing to you for speaking at all at this late hour in the evening, and especially since, after we have heard so much, we might well consider the evening as profitably spent. And then, too, I feel a little embarrassed in speaking before an audience of this kind. I feel "like a poor boy at a frolic," as one present "without the wedding garment on;" for I am not only not a banker, but I have not even had the high esteem of the banking fraternity. Not only do I belong to the crowd that has been so universally condemned by bankers, but I am one of the worst of the crowd, for if there ever was a demagogue in the United States, according to the bankers' view, you have him here tonight.

I suppose no part of the community has ever been more firmly convinced than the banking fraternity that I am a dangerous character; and yet I have lived to see the day when men of my kind have done, in spite of the bankers, the best thing that was ever done for the bankers in this country. I have lived to see the time when an American congress, and a president who was not afraid of bankers, compelled a change in the financial system that set free the bankers who did not dare to help the president and congress to do the work.

You think this is a strange thing for me to say? I use it for a purpose. One of the gentlemen here tonight has spoken of the larger vision, and has invited you to entertain that larger vision. I was glad to hear it from a banker. It comes better from a banker than from me, but it would not have come from a banker two years ago; for even down in Wilson, N. C., the power of Wall street could be felt, and the smallest banker in the country was at that time under dread suppression, because there was but one banking center to which he could go in time of need. It was not the bankers themselves who freed the country. When the bill was under consideration the banking organizations met and condemned the attempt to take from Wall street the power that had been used not only to dominate the business of the country, but to determine the politics of the country. For there has not been a time in twenty years when one hundred men in New York could not, in the last two weeks of the campaign, control enough votes to determine the election, and they never hesitated to use the power they had.

Gentlemen who can speak as experts on this subject have told you what this law has done. But one thing that it has done, and not the least important, is that it has broken the political bondage in which this country was held, as well as overthrown the business despotism under which our nation lived.

I am glad to be here tonight, because I am glad to speak to men who can now think, and who need not fear the lash that has been held over them. I call your attention to this in order to emphasize this fact, namely, that no man is a good judge when he has a financial bias that clouds his vision. If we had not had a president, a senate, and a house with a majority free from financial bias, we could not have had this monumental piece of legislation which is not only to bring blessings to our country, but is to bring blessings to the world through our country, for the distinguished senator (Mr. Owen) will not go further than I do in calculating the far-reaching influence of this great financial measure.

But, my friends, I am not here to speak on banking. I was warned in advance that all the rest of the speakers would talk on that subject, and I was asked to select something else; and so my subject is "Temptations."

You will pardon me if I begin to exercise the right that comes with age. When I entered politics they called me young; but that charge has long since ceased to be made. I have outgrown it, and with the burdens that age brings I claim its advantages; one of the greatest advantages that comes with age is the privilege of giving advice, and I feel that here is a place where advice can be given. I intend to lay aside those questions so ably discussed by the speakers who have preceded me, and say a word especially to these younger men.

Young men, you are engaged in one of the greatest occupations that the world now knows. The banking business is not only a great business, but it grows greater every day. You are engaged in a respectable business, and one that can be made more respectable than it now is, and I urge you to help to increase the respectability of your business. Every business that has advantages has disadvantages; every occupation has its two sides, and the greater the benefits we derive, the greater are the dangers which we incur. It is one of God's laws, the law of compensations. When I was a college boy I remember reading an essay by Emerson on compensations. The ideas set forth in that essay have clung to my memory, and I frequently had occasion to use them. One of the best remembered occasions was at the White house. Coming back from South America, in 1910, and passing through Washington, I called on President Taft. In greeting me he said, "I understand you are just back from South America?" I replied "Yes." He said, "I envy you, I have been wanting for years to visit South America, but have not had time." I said, "Mr. President, did you ever read Emerson's essay on compensations?" He replied, "Yes, and I was very much impressed by it." I said, "Here is an illustration. You were elected president, but I had time to visit South America;" and I might have told him I had had three opportunities for travel.

Now you have these great advantages that come with a great business, but you have certain temptations against which you must fortify yourselves. If I compliment you upon the splendid opportunities that open before you, may I not warn you against the dangers that beset your path?

The first one is the temptation to live beyond your means. No men are more tempted to do this than those in the banking business. Why? In the first place the salary of the bank clerk is small, and the bank clerk moves in the best society. The desire to keep up appearances is strong, and no other persons can so easily add to their income without it being known. When you put before a man a great temptation, a social pressure, and then put within his reach money that he can take, not intending, of course, to keep it, but with the intention of paying it back—when this is the situation he should be cautioned against yielding to the temptation. I warn you, young men; remember that the man who lives beyond his means lives a lie. Actions speak louder than words, and therefore a man can lie more vociferously by living beyond his means than he can by word of mouth. Remember, too, that you deceive nobody, and remember, also, that it is dishonest for a man to try to deceive anybody. If the banking business is what it ought to be, there should be a sense of honor and a strength of integrity that will be shown in the life. Let me urge you, young men, to form the habit of living within your means, no matter how small your income may be. By doing so you will not only lay the foundation for a larger income, and, therefore, a more extended prosperity, but you will enjoy your later prosperity the more as you look back to the time when you were "passing through the narrows."

The second thing against which I warn you is speculation. Read the number of banker suicides recorded. A banker has been led to take money that did not belong to him, in order to speculate; a fortune seemed certain, and then, having lost, he tried to win it back, and lost again, and finally he was exposed and, his honor being gone, he saw nothing left in life worth living for—that is the oft-repeated story. I have tried to secure legislation that would fortify young men. I am not willing to wait until a man's embezzlement is found out; I am not willing to wait until his gambling has led him into crime. I want to stop it before it becomes a crime. And if I had my way about it, there would be a law in every state and in this nation MAKING IT A CRIMINAL OFFENSE FOR ANY MAN CONNECTED WITH A BANK TO SPECULATE UPON THE STOCK MARKET OR THE BOARD OF TRADE. A man who works in a powder house has no right to carry matches, and by the same logic the community has a right to prescribe by law the things that can or can not be done by those who occupy positions of trust. It is in the interest of young men, not against them, that the law should be passed that would

put up a warning in every bank that no officer or clerk or employee should acquire a habit that would lead him into these temptations which become irresistible if the mania for speculation takes possession of one. That is the second thing against which I warn you.

But let us assume that you have passed by the temptation to live beyond your means, and that you have resisted the temptation to speculate.

Let me suggest another danger connected with your business, namely, that you may become hard-hearted. The very man who needs money most is the man to whom you can not loan. The fact that he needs it most is proof that he has not the security that is ordinarily required, or he could have secured the money before he needed it so badly. You are the custodians of other people's money, and you are not at liberty to make unsafe loans, but you see the misery of the world; you see the sore need of the world and you have to steel yourselves against the pathetic pleas which you hear, and to harden your hearts against the appeals. Beware of this danger which is connected with your business, and from which it is difficult to escape.

Then, too, avoid the spirit of the miser. Never become so engrossed in your business or in the profits that your business may bring you as to regard money as an end in itself. Money is a splendid servant, but it is a most despotic master.

Sometimes I have had people ask me how much money it is safe for a man to have, and I answer in this way: If a man gets his money honestly, I would not place any limit on the amount. As long as he gets his money honestly I would like to see him secure as much as he likes, so long as the money belongs to him; but when he has so much that money becomes his master, he has more than any man ought to have. No man should desire to be the slave of his possessions. Beware of the spirit of the miser, and remember that unless you give,—unless in proportion as you grow in wealth you grow in liberality—unless as your possessions enlarge your heart reaches out and attaches itself to things unselfish, you can not withstand the influence that the possession of money exerts.

Then let me warn you against another temptation, namely, to forget the interests of the depositor. Is it not strange that any man who makes his money out of depositors should forget them? Remember that it is the depositor who makes your bank a possibility. That is the reason you have a bank, in order that you may have depositors. And why do you want them? That you may use their money.

If I am correctly informed, 85 per cent of the money held by the banks of this country is the money of depositors, and only 15 per cent is the money of those who own the banks. How can the people who run banks forget the interests, not to speak of the rights, of those who own 85 per cent of the money upon which they make their profit? Do you know what I am coming to? Can any of you guess what I have in mind? It is the protection of depositors. Men, I can not understand the mind of a banker who is willing to allow any doubt to exist as to the ability of his depositors to get back every dollar that they deposit. I can not understand the logic of the banker who is unwilling to advocate legislation that will give to his depositors absolute security. Is there any reason why a man should put his money in a bank, except that he can get it out when he wants to? And if the banks are safe now, tell me why it is that you can not get a dollar of government money without giving special security? If the banks are as good as they ought to be, why is it that you can not get a dollar of state money without giving specific security? If the banks are as good as they ought to be, why is it that you can not get the money of a county, a city, a township, or a school district except by putting up specific security? And if banks are so unsafe that every governmental unit requires specific security, why should you make individuals who deposit their money with you take their chances on a burglar inside of the bank? Why is it, my friends, that you will organize and contribute for protection against burglars from the outside? Is there a bank here that does not belong to some association, and pay premiums to protect the bank against the burglar from the outside? Why are you so interested in protecting yourselves from the burglars without and so indifferent to the protection you ought to give your depositors against the burglars on the inside? Read the records of our court trials. Visit your penitentiaries, and you will find that there are more bank