

# Defining honor

[Life](#), [Emotions](#)



If I were to ask half a dozen people at random to tell me what they meant by the word “ honor,” I think that I would probably receive very different answers. One of the reasons for this is that it often means different things in the minds of different people. For instance, we say that it was a great honor for Jim Smith to be elected captain of the football team; and then, on the other hand, we talk about a code of honor, — or the laws of honor.

What does Jim Smith’s being captain of the eleven have to do with the laws of honor? What we mean, in the case of Jim, is that his election as captain shows that the other boys have confidence in his play, and therefore this position gives him a local reputation as a comparatively good player and leader. Now many people in the world have only this idea of honor; and, when they speak of holding their honor sacred above all else, they mean keeping their reputation good in the eyes of men.

For this reason, they value any office or reward that adds to their reputation; and the more their reputation grows and the more distinction they earn, the more honorable they feel themselves to be. This was the idea of honor existing among the ancient heathen people before the Christian era. You know that, after the fall of the great Roman Empire, there was a period of about a thousand years, when the light of civilization went out in Europe, and the darkness of ignorance and barbarism took its place.

During these dark days, there was much going on that was not better and sometimes even worse from a moral point of view than in the days of the Roman Empire; but, when the minds of men began to wake up again, their standards really had advanced further than the old heathen standards of life.

A seed Christian principle had been germinating for all these years and finally blossomed out in the Age of Chivalry.

This, as you know, was an assertion first of all that the notion that “ Might makes Right” is false, although it had been almost universally believed to be true, in practice, before the coming of Christ. The orders of knighthood which arose in various parts of Europe were composed of men who made it their business to bring order out of confusion, — to kill the wild beasts that interfered with flocks and herds and made farming difficult, — to overpower and abolish the highwaymen and robbers who made traveling unsafe, — and to protect women and children in respect and security.

These men bound themselves by solemn vows to keep certain laws which were necessary for carrying out their work, and their obligation or sense of responsibility to keep these laws they called their “ Honor. ” Hence a new conception of honor came into being, and their code of honor was the law according to which their conduct was judged among themselves. This is, of course, a very different idea of honor from that which consists of thinking that distinction before men is better worth having than anything else, and which therefore puts reputation above character.

Anybody who compares these two ideas of honor can see that the one is only a counterfeit imitation of the other, and that there is not necessary connection between them at all; for a man may have character without reputation, and he may have reputation without character, for reputation may be either true or false; and, when true, it is in many cases because of the character underlying it. But many fine reputations of all sorts are the

result of clever self-advertising, and this practice is one of the most destructive and degrading to character and true manliness.

This is so because, when we seek reputation for its own sake, we are yielding to the temptation of vanity; and vanity is a weakness and disease of the soul. Everybody has temptations to overcome, and it is everybody's business to know and work against his weaknesses; but, when our chief ambition in life fosters our weakness, and we deceive ourselves by giving the name of "honor" to that which weakens us, we can hardly expect to grow stronger as the years go by.

The old knights had the right idea of honor, and there have been a great variety of orders of chivalry in different countries, such as those mentioned in the Boy Scout Manual; and the main idea in all of them was to hold up a standard of public service which would raise men above the habits and customs of selfish brutes and merely worldly men.

There is another great distinction between these two conceptions of honor: when we think of our reputation as our honor we require spectators, for our reputation is what we are in the minds of other men; but the honor of character, which is our sacred obligation to keep the law of our code and to do our duty in God's sight, is just as binding upon us when we are all alone, and therefore it must control our most private acts and secret thoughts.

A little newsboy boarded a crowded car the other night with a very large bundle of papers, and the conductor, with coarse good-nature, tried to favor him by declining to take his fare, although of course he could not do this

without cheating the railway. The boy looked at him with indignation and could not believe that he was the conductor. He went all through the car hunting for the real conductor to whom he could pay his fair.

This little boy was richer than if he had had millions in bank in place of this high-minded feeling of honorable independence and of determination to fulfil all his obligations; and, if he remains true to this principle in all the phases of his life, he will accomplish far more than if he amassed millions, or became President of the United States. He will add to the joy and dignity of many other lives as well as his own; for, sooner or later, every human being finds out that without this loyalty to honor life cannot be happy, is — indeed, not worth living.

But we must be careful to remember that, although this is such an important and central truth, we cannot expect every one to know about it; and therefore we cannot expect them to act accordingly. In this, as in all other such matters, we must be on our guard against feeling superior to those who have not had our advantages. Next to keeping our own obligations of honor is the duty of protecting the honor of all those with whom we have contact; — and especially of the weak and ignorant.

The weak must be protected by whatever means is necessary and appropriate, and the ignorant may be taught if we go about it quietly and in a friendly spirit, without “ laying down the law. ” Of course, it is the duty of patrol leaders to see that all their boys understand as thoroughly as possible the nature of the obligations which they have taken upon themselves. It is

also the duty of scouts to hand along whatever helpful knowledge they have to other scouts within reach of their friendship.

But this holds good not only for boy scouts and their officers but for all men; and it cannot be done unless, in the first place, we ourselves try to practice what we teach and then teach it with a humble appreciation of the beauty or use of the subject, and without any vanity or conceit. There is no merit, but only privilege, — so great that it is difficult to estimate, — in teaching and being taught to understand and live by the deep and tested truths of life; and the more we learn, from obeying them, the more humbly grateful we shall be.