

The Bible and Character

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Address at a meeting of the American Bible Society

There are certain truths which are so very true that we call them truisms; and yet I think we often half forget them in practice. Every thinking man, when he thinks, realizes what a very large number of people tend to forget that the teachings of the Bible are so interwoven and entwined with our whole civic and social life that it would be literally—I do not mean figuratively, I mean literally—impossible for us to figure to ourselves what that life would be if these teachings were removed. We would lose almost all the standards by which we now judge both public and private morals; all the standards toward which we, with more or less of resolution, strive to raise ourselves. Almost every man who has by his life-work added to the sum of human achievement of which the race is proud, almost every such man has based his life-work largely upon the teachings of the Bible. Sometimes it has been done unconsciously, more often consciously; and among the very greatest men a disproportionately large number have been diligent and close students of the Bible at first hand.

Lincoln—sad, patient, kindly Lincoln, who, after bearing upon his weary shoulders for four years a greater burden than that borne by any other man of the nineteenth century, laid down his life for the people whom living he had served so well—built up his entire reading upon his early study of the Bible. He had mastered it absolutely; mastered it as later he mastered only one or two other books, notably Shakespeare; mastered it so that he became almost “a man of one book,” who knew that book and who instinctively put into practice what he had been taught therein; and he left his life as part of the crowning work of the century that has just closed.

In this country we rightly pride ourselves upon our system of widespread popular education. We most emphatically do right to pride ourselves upon it. It is not merely of inestimable advantage to us; it lies at the root of our power of self-government. But it is not sufficient in itself. We must cultivate the mind; but it is not enough only to cultivate the mind. With education of the mind must go the spiritual teaching which will make us turn the trained intellect to good account. A man whose intellect has been educated, while at the same time his moral education has been neglected, is only the more dangerous to the community because of the exceptional additional power which he has acquired. Surely what I am saying needs no proof; surely the mere statement of it is enough, that education must be education of the heart and conscience no less than of the mind.

It is an admirable thing, a most necessary thing, to have a sound body. It is an even better thing to have a sound mind. But infinitely better than either is it to have that, for the lack of which neither sound mind nor a sound body can atone, character. Character is in the long run the decisive factor in the life of individuals and of nations alike.

Sometimes, in rightly putting the stress that we do upon intelligence, we forget the fact that there is something that counts more. It is a good thing to be clever, to be able and smart; but it is a better thing to have the qualities that find their expression in the Decalogue and the Golden Rule. It is a good and necessary thing to be intelligent; it is a better thing to be straight and decent and fearless. It was a Yale professor, Mr. Lounsberry, who remarked that his experience in the class room had taught him “the infinite capacity of the human mind to withstand the introduction of knowledge.” Some of you preachers must often feel the same way about the ability of mankind to withstand the introduction of elementary decency and morality.

A man must be honest in the first place; but that by itself is not enough. No matter how good a man is, if he is timid he cannot accomplish much in the world. There is only a very circumscribed sphere of usefulness for the timid good man. So, besides being honest, a man has got to have courage, too. And these two together are not enough. No matter how brave and honest he is, if he is a natural born fool, you can do little with him. Remember the order in which I name them. Honesty first; then courage; then brains. And all are indispensable; we have no room in a healthy community for either the knave, the fool, the weakling, or the coward.

You may look through the Bible from cover to cover and nowhere will you find a line that can be construed into an apology for the man of brains who sins against the right. On the contrary, in the Bible, taking that as a guide, you will find that because much has been given to you much will be expected from you; and a heavier condemnation is to be visited upon the able man who goes wrong than upon his weaker brother who cannot do the harm that the other does, because it is not in him to do it.

So I plead, not merely for training of the mind, but for the moral and spiritual training of the home and the church; the moral and spiritual training that have always been found in, and that have ever accompanied the study of, this book; this book, which in almost every civilized tongue can be described as “The Book,” with the certainty of all understanding you when you so describe it. One of the highest tributes of modern times to the worth of the Bible as an educational and moral influence of incalculable value to the whole community came from the great scientist Huxley, who said: “Consider the great historical fact that for three centuries this book has been woven into the life of all

that is noblest and best in our history, and that it has become the national epic of our race; that it is written in the noblest and purest English, and abounds in exquisite beauties of mere literary form; and finally, that it forbids the veriest hind, who never left his village, to be ignorant of the existence of other countries and other civilizations and of a great past, stretching back to the furthest limits of the oldest nations in the world. By the study of what other book could children be so much humanized and made to feel that each figure in that vast historical procession fills, like themselves, but a momentary space in the interval between the eternities?

"The Bible has been the Magna Charta of the poor and of the oppressed. Down to modern times, no State has had a constitution in which the interests of the people are so largely taken into account; in which the duties, so much more than the privileges, of rulers are insisted upon, as that drawn up for Israel in Deuteronomy and Leviticus. Nowhere is the fundamental truth that the welfare of the State, in the long run, depends upon the righteousness of the citizen, so strongly laid down. The Bible is the most democratic book in the world."

The teaching of the Bible to children is, of course, a matter of especial interest to those of us who have families—and, incidentally, I wish to express my profound belief in large families. Older folks often fail to realize how readily a child will grasp a little askew something they do not take the trouble to explain. We cannot be too careful in seeing that biblical learning is not merely an affair of rote, so that the child may understand what it is being taught. By the way, I earnestly hope that you will never make your children learn parts of the Bible as punishment. Do you not know families where this is done? For instance: "You have been a bad child—learn a chapter of Isaiah." And the child learns it as a disagreeable task, and in his mind that splendid and lofty poem and prophecy is forever afterward associated with an uncomfortable feeling of disgrace. I hope you will not make your children learn the Bible in that way, for you can devise no surer method of making a child revolt against all the wonderful beauty and truth of Holy Writ.

The immense moral influence of the Bible, though of course infinitely the most important, is not the only power it has for good. In addition there is the unceasing influence it exerts on the side of good taste, of good literature, of proper sense of proportion, of simple and straightforward writing and thinking. This is not a small matter in an age when there is a tendency to read much that even if not actually harmful on moral grounds is yet injurious, because it represents slipshod, slovenly thought and work; not the kind of serious thought, of serious expression, which we like to see in anything that goes into the fiber of our character.

The Bible does not teach us to shirk difficulties, but to overcome them. That is a lesson that each one of us who has children is bound in honor to teach these children if he or she expects to see them become fitted to play the part of men and women in our world.

Again, I want you to think of your neighbors, of the people you know. Don't you, each one of you, know some man (I am sorry to say, perhaps more often, some woman) who gives life an unhealthy turn for children by trying to spare them in the present the very things which would train them to do strong work in the future? Such conduct is not kindness. It is shortsightedness and selfishness; it means merely that the man or woman shrinks from the little inconveniences, to himself or herself, of making the child fit itself to be a good and strong man or woman hereafter. There should be the deepest and truest love for their children in the hearts of all fathers and mothers. With-

out such love there is nothing but black despair for the family; but the love must respect both itself and the one beloved. It is not true love to invite future disaster by weak indulgence for the moment.

What is true affection for a boy? To bring him up so that nothing rough ever touches him, and at twenty-one turn him out into the world with a moral nature that turns black and blue in great bruises at the least shock from any one of the forces of evil with which he is bound to come in contact? Is that kindness? Indeed, it is not. Bring up your boys with both love and wisdom; and turn them out as men, strong limbed, clear eyed, stout hearted, clean minded, able to hold their own in this great world of work and strife and ceaseless effort.

If we read the Bible aright, we read a book which teaches us to go forth and do the work of the Lord; to do the work of the Lord in the world as we find it; to try to make things better in this world, even if only a little better, because we have lived in it. That kind of work can be done only by the man who is neither a weakling nor a coward; by the man who in the fullest sense of the word is a true Christian, like Great Heart, Bunyan's hero. We plead for a closer and wider and deeper study of the Bible, so that our people may be in fact as well as in theory "doers of the word and not hearers only."