

THE BIBLE AND THE LIFE OF THE PEOPLE

by Theodore Roosevelt

The Bible and the Life of the People

I have come here today, in the course of a series of lectures upon applied ethics, upon realizable ideals, to speak of the Book to which our people owe infinitely the greater part of their store of ethics, infinitely the greater part of their knowledge of how to apply that store to the needs of our everyday life.

There have been many collections of the sacred books, the sacred writings of the Old and New Testaments—many collections of note. Upon an occasion such as this we who think most of all of the King James version of the Bible should be the first to acknowledge our obligation to many of the other versions, especially to the earliest of the great versions, the Vulgate of St. Jerome, a very great version, a version that played an incalculable part in the development of western Europe, because it put the Bible into the common language of western Europe, the language known to every man who pretended to any degree of learning—Latin—and therefore gave the Bible to the peoples of the West at a time when the old classic civilization of Greece and Rome had first crumbled to rotteness and had then been overwhelmed by the barbarian sea. In the wreck of the Old World, Christianity was all that the survivors had to cling to; and the Latin version of the Bible put it at their disposal.

Other versions of the Bible followed from time to time, and gradually men began to put them into the vernaculars of the different countries. Wyclif's Bible is one version to which we must feel under deep obligation. But the great debt of the English-speaking peoples everywhere is to the translation of the Bible that we all know—I trust I can say, all here know—in our own homes, the Bible as it was put forth in English three centuries ago. No other book of any kind ever written in English—perhaps no other book ever written in any other tongue—has ever so affected the whole life of a people as this authorized version of the Scriptures has affected the life of the English-speaking peoples.

I enter a most earnest plea that in our hurried and rather bustling life of today we do not lose the hold that our forefathers had on the Bible. **I wish to see Bible study as much a matter of course in the secular college as in the seminary. No educated man can afford to be ignorant of the Bible; and no uneducated man can afford to be ignorant of the Bible.** Occasional critics, taking sections of the Old Testament, are able to point out that the teachings therein are not in accordance with our own convictions and views of morality, and they ignore the prime truth that these deeds recorded in the Old Testament are not in accordance with our theories of morality because of the very fact that these theories are based upon the New Testament, because the New Testament represents not only in one sense the fulfilment of the Old but in another sense the substitution of the New Testament for the Old in certain vital points of ethics. If critics of this kind would study the morality inculcated by the Old Testament among the chosen people, and compare it, not with the morality of today, not with the morality created by the New Testament, but with the morality of the surrounding nations of antiquity, who had no Bible, they would appreciate the enormous advances that the Old Testament even in its most primitive form worked for the Jewish people. The Old Testament did not carry Israel as far as the New Testament has carried us; but it advanced Israel far beyond the point any neighboring nation had then reached.

In studying the writings of the average critic who has assailed the Bible, the most salient point is usually his peculiar shallowness in failing to understand, not merely the lofty ethical teachings of the Bible as we now know it, but the elemental fact that even the most primitive ethical system taught in the primitive portions of the Bible, the earliest of the sacred writings, marks a giant stride in moral advance when compared with the con-

temporary ethical conceptions of the other peoples of the day.

Moreover, I appeal for a study of the Bible on many different accounts, even aside from its ethical and moral teachings, even aside from the fact that all serious people, all men who think deeply, even among non-Christians, have come to agree that the life of Christ, as set forth in the four Gospels, represents an infinitely higher and purer morality than is preached in any other book of the world.

Aside from this, I ask that the Bible be studied for the sake of the breadth it must give to every man who studies it. I cannot understand the mental attitude of those who would put the Bible to one side as not being a book of interest to grown men. **What could interest men who find the Bible dull?** The Sunday newspaper? Think of the difference there must be in the mental make-up of the man whose chief reading includes the one, as compared with the man whose chief reading is represented by the other—the **vulgarity, the shallowness, the inability to keep the mind fixed on any serious subject, which is implied in the mind of any man who cannot read the Bible and yet can take pleasure in reading only literature of the type of the colored supplement of the Sunday paper.** Now, I am not speaking against the colored supplement of any paper in its place; but as a substitute for serious reading of the great Book, it represents a type of mind which it is gross flattery merely to call shallow.

I do not ask you to accept the word of those who preach the Bible as an inspired Book; I make my appeal not only to professing Christians; I make it to every man who seeks after a high and useful life, to every man who seeks the inspiration of religion, or who endeavors to make his life conform to a high ethical standard; to every man who, be he Jew or Gentile, whatever his form of religious belief, whatever creed he may profess, faces life with the real desire not only to get out of it what is best, but to do his part in everything that tells for the ennobling and uplifting of humanity.

I am making a plea, not only for the training of the mind, but for the moral and spiritual training of the home and the church, the moral and spiritual training that has always been found in, and has ever accompanied, the study of the book which in almost every civilized tongue, and in many an uncivilized, can be described as “the Book” with the certainty of having the description understood by all listeners.

A year and a quarter ago I was passing on foot through the native kingdom of Uganda, in Central Africa. Uganda is the most highly developed of the pure Negro states in Africa. It is the state which has given the richest return for missionary labor. It now contains some half-million of Christians, the direction of the government being in the hands of those Christians. I was interested to find that in their victorious fight against, in the first place, heathendom, and, in the next place, Moslemism, the native Christians belonging to the several different sects, both Catholics and Protestants, had taken as their symbol “the Book,” sinking all minor differences among themselves, and coming together on the common ground of their common belief in “the Book” that was the most precious gift the white man had brought to them.

It is of that Book, and as testimony to its incalculable influence for good from the educational and moral standpoint, that the great scientist Huxley wrote in the following words:

“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 English history; that it has become the national epic of Britain; 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 of a great past stretching back to the farthest 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?"

I ask your attention to this when I plead for the training of children in the Bible. I am quoting, not a professed Christian, but a scientific man whose scientific judgment is thus expressed as to the value of Biblical training for the young.

And again listen to what Huxley says as to the bearing of the Bible upon those who study the ills of our time with the hope of eventually remedying them:

"The Bible has been the Magna Carta 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 in 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."

This is the judgment of Huxley, one of the greatest scientific thinkers of the last century. **I ask you to train children in the Bible. Never commit the awful error of training the child by making him learn verses of the Bible as a punishment.** I remember once calling upon a very good woman and finding one of her small sons, with a face of black injury, studying the Bible, and this very good woman said to me with pride: "Johnny has been bad, and he is learning a chapter of Isaiah by heart." I could not refrain from saying "My dear madam, how can you do such a dreadful thing as to make the unfortunate Johnny associate for the rest of his life the noble and beautiful poetry and prophecy of Isaiah with an excessively disagreeable task? You are committing a greater wrong against him than any he has himself committed." Punish the children in any other way that is necessary; but do not make them look upon the Bible with suspicion and dislike as an

instrument of torture, so that they feel that it is a pain to have to read it, instead of, as it ought to be, a privilege and pleasure to read it.

In reading the Bible and the beautiful Bible stories that have delighted childhood for so many generations, **my own preference is to read them from the Bible** and not as explained even in otherwise perfectly nice little books. Read these majestic and simple stories with whatever explanation is necessary to make the child understand the words; and then the story he will understand without difficulty.

Of course, we must not forget to give whatever explanation is necessary to enable the child to understand the words. I think every father and mother comes to realize how queerly the little brains will accept new words at times. I remember an incident of the kind in connection with a clergyman to whose church I went when a very small boy. It was a big Presbyterian church in Madison Square, New York; any New Yorker of my age who happens to be present here will probably recollect the church. We had a clergyman, one of the finest men that I had ever met, one of the very, very rare men to whom it would be no misuse of words to describe as saintly. He was very fond of one of his little grandsons. This little grandson showed an entire willingness to come to church and to Sunday School when there were plenty of people present; but it was discovered that he was most reluctant to go anywhere near the church when there were not people there. As often happens with a child (every mother knows how difficult it often is to find out just what the little mind is thinking), his parents could not find out for some time what was the matter with the little boy or what he was afraid of in the church. Finally, Doctor Adams, the clergyman, started down to the church and asked his little grandson to come with him. After a little hesitation the small boy said yes, if his grandfather were coming, he would go. They got inside the church and walked down the aisle, their footsteps echo-

ing in the empty church. The little fellow trotted alongside his grandfather, looking with half-frightened eagerness on every side. Soon he said: "Grandfather, where is the zeal?" The grandfather, much puzzled, responded: "Where is what?" "Where is the zeal?" repeated the little boy. The grandfather said: "I don't know what you mean; what are you talking of?" "Why, grandfather, don't you know? 'The zeal of Thine house hath eaten me up!'" Now that little fellow had been rendered profoundly uncomfortable and very suspicious of the church because he had read this statement, had accepted it in literal fashion, and concluded there was some kind of fearful beast dwelling in the church, as to which it behooved him to be on his guard.

It would be a great misfortune for our people if they ever lost the Bible as one of their habitual standards and guides in morality. In addressing this body, which must contain representatives of many different creeds, I ask you men and women to treat the Bible in the only way in which it can be treated if benefit is to be obtained from it, and that is, as a guide to conduct. I make no pretense to speak to you on dogmatic theology—there are probably scores of different views of dogma here represented. There are scores of different ways leading toward the same goal; but there is one test which we have a right to apply to the professors of all the creeds—the test of conduct. More and more, people who possess either religious belief or aspiration after religious belief are growing to demand conduct as the ultimate test of the worth of the belief. I hope that after what I have said no man can suspect me of failure rightly to estimate the enormous influence that study of the Bible should have on our lives; **but I would rather not see a man study it at all than have him read it as a fetish on Sunday and disregard its teachings on all other days of the week**; because, evil though we think the conduct of the man who disregards its teachings on weekdays, **it is still worse if that conduct is tainted with the mean vice of hypocrisy**. The measure of our respect for

and belief in the man and the woman who do try to shape their lives by the highest ethical standards inculcated in the Scriptures must in large part be also the measure of our contempt for those who ostentatiously read the Bible and then disregard its teachings in their dealings with their fellow men.

I do not like the thief, big or little; I do not like him in business and I do not like him in politics; but I dislike him most when, to shield himself from the effects of his wrong-doing, he claims that, after all, he is a "religious man." He is not a religious man, save in the sense that the Pharisee was a religious man in the time of the Saviour. **The man who advances the fact that he goes to church and reads the Bible as an offset to the fact that he has acted like a scoundrel in his public or private relations, only writes his own condemnation in larger letters than before.** And so a man or a woman who reads and quotes the Bible as a warrant and an excuse for hardheartedness and uncharitableness and lack of mercy to friend or neighbor is reading and quoting the Bible to his or her own damage, perhaps to his or her own destruction. Let the man who goes to church, who reads the Bible, feel that it is peculiarly incumbent upon him so to lead his life in the face of the world that no discredit shall be brought upon the creed he professes, that no discredit shall attach to the Book in accordance with which he asserts that he leads his own life.

Sometimes I have seen—all of you have seen—the appeal made to stand by a man who has done evil, on the ground that he is a pillar of the church. Such a man is a rotten pillar of any church. And the professors of any creed, the men belonging to any church, should be more jealous than any outsider in holding such a man to account, in demanding that his practice shall square with the high professions of belief. Such a man sins not only against the moral law, sins not only against the community as a whole, but sins, above all, against his own church, against all who profess religion, against all who belong

to churches, because he by his life gives point to the sneer of the cynic who disbelieves in all application of Christian ethics to life, and who tries to make the ordinary man distrust church people as hypocrites. Whenever any church member is guilty of business dishonesty or political dishonesty or offenses against the moral law in any way, those who are members of churches should feel a far greater regret and disappointment than those who are not members. They cannot afford for one moment to let it be supposed that they exact from the attenders at church any less strict observance of the moral law than if they did not attend church. They cannot afford to let the outside world even for a moment think that they accept churchgoing and Bible-reading as substitutes for, instead of incitements toward, leading a higher and better and more useful life. We must strive each of us so to conduct our own lives as to be, to a certain extent at least, our brother's keeper. We must show that we actually do take into our own souls the teachings that we read; that we apply to ourselves the Gospel teaching that a corrupt tree cannot bring forth good fruit,

and that the sound tree must prove its soundness by the fruit it brings forth; that we apply to ourselves the teachings of the epistle wherein we are warned to be doers of the Word and not hearers only.

I have asked you to read the Bible for the beautiful English and for the history it teaches, as well as for the grasp it gives you upon the proper purpose of mankind. Of course, if you read it only for aesthetic purposes, if you read it without thought of following its ethical teachings, then you are apt to do but little good to your fellow men; for if you regard the reading of it as an intellectual diversion only, and, above all, if you regard this reading simply as an outward token of Sunday respectability, small will be the good that you yourself get from it. Our success in striving to help our fellow men, and therefore to help ourselves, depends largely upon our success as we strive, with whatever shortcomings, with whatever failures, to lead our lives in accordance with the great ethical principles laid down in the life of Christ, and in the New Testament writings which seek to expound and apply his teachings.

Compiled by
Buddy Dano, Pastor
Divine Viewpoint
www.divineviewpoint.com