

Importance of Bible Study

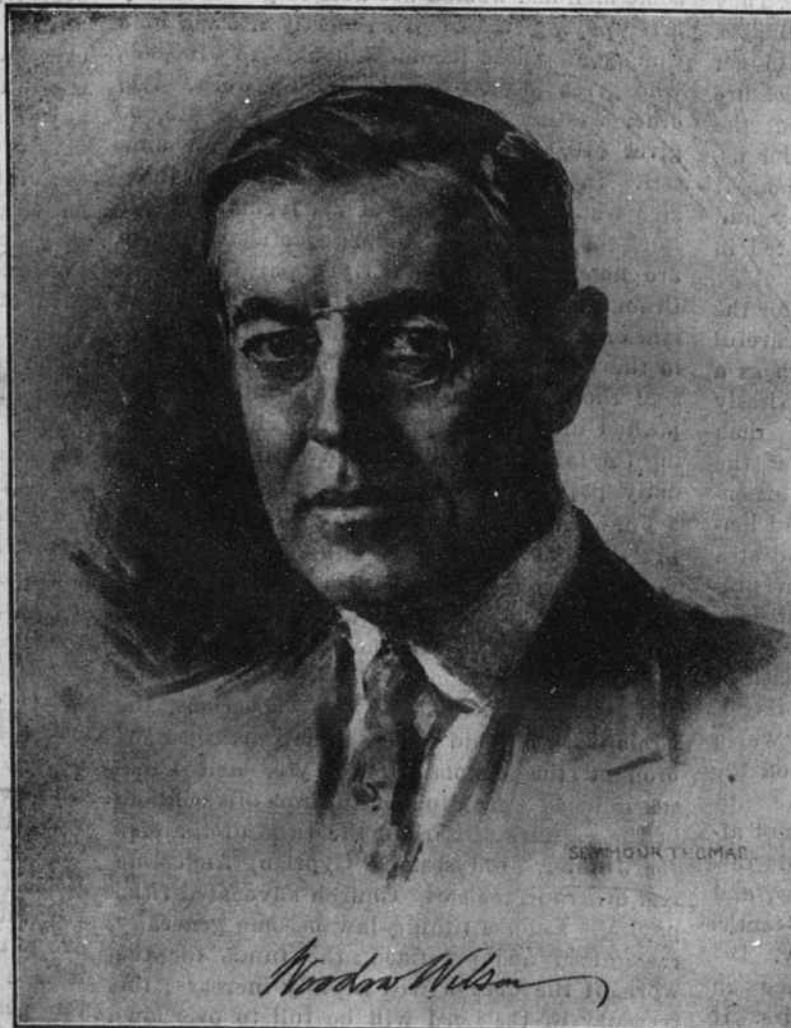
Address By
Gov. Woodrow Wilson

I take it for granted that the significance of a Sunday school lies in this circumstance: that it is an attempt to carry along the religious education of the nation with the secular education of it. Almost all my life I have been engaged in educational work. I have always had the same conception of it, from the beginning until now, namely, that education is a fundamental part of progress, that you can't make progress unless you tie one generation in with another. Any disconnection between one generation and another will be a break, and may be a fatal break in the continuity of progress. You can't make progress in disconnected groups and, therefore, with each generation you have to take the younger people as they come on and supply them with those conditions of thought which have sustained the progress of the generations that have come before them. You have to see to it that the light that has been accumulated by scholars and sages and men of profound experience shall not be dissipated, because the next generation knows nothing of it.

There is a sense in which education may be said to be the memory of the race — recollecting its experiences, building upon the things that it has done, not forgetting its successes and always remembering its mistakes; throwing aside the things that have not borne the test of time and of thought and discovery, and going on to those things which are more and more sanctioned from generation to generation by what is known and thought and discovered in the world. You know that one of the experiences of the Christian Church has been that it from time to time has feared the effect of discovery and the effect of scientific thought—the effect of the thought based upon the mere phenomena of nature—upon the teachings derived from the Bible. It has turned out to be an idle fear, because there has never been any fundamental discrepancies between the teachings of the Bible, which is God's written word, and the teachings of nature, which is God's cipher—which we make out more and more distinctly from generation to generation. Religious education is education in this very Word of God; not the Word of God written in nature, for that is the study of the schools on week days, but the Word of God written in his Scriptures.

For my part, I am interested in Sunday school work only as a study of the Scriptures. The only significant book, the only book that can have any possible significance as a text book in the Sunday school is the Bible itself, and as we must train our children in the rest of the thought of

the world, we must if we are to make progress as a nation ground each generation as it comes along in the established and tested moral judgments of the world. When you think what this is—what all men in all ages have been in search of—the search for what is right to do and right to think and right to feel is not a search confined to Christian nations. It began long before the Bible began to have the pervasive and general influence that it has in the modern world. The



PRESIDENT-ELECT OF THE UNITED STATES.

great thinkers of the old so-called heathen nations thought along these profound lines of human morality—of the things that made human life pure, effective and happy. I take it that what every man and woman in the world is in search of in the last analysis, is happiness, and that the trouble with the greater part of the world is the superficial view it takes of happiness. So many people waste so many years of their life in the pursuit of those things which they fancy will bring them satisfaction, but which bring them only repining and disgust. The search of the world is for peace of mind, hap-

piness of relationship, the joy of living and of sharing the life of others.

If you turn to the works of Dante, the great Italian writer, to that extraordinary book of his which he denominated "The Divine Comedy," you will find the same thing. There is one thing in Dante which is, perhaps, to be found nowhere else. One of Dante's books—one of the divisions of his great work—is entitled "The Inferno," in other words, it is entitled "Hell." It is a picture of the life of the damned, and the significant thing of that book is that Dante picks out characters living at the time that his book was written, and shows them already in hell, displaying, perhaps, for the first time in literature the significant fact that a man goes to hell of his own volition and of his own character, and gets there before he dies; that hell is the moral setting which he has made for his own life. It is the debauching and debasing of his own motives, it is the conscience that he lives and sleeps with, and he is tortured long before the day comes when he shall render his final account.

Is there no man present who can testify to that? Is there no man present who tosses uneasily on his bed at night because of the things that he remembers that he did in the day time? Is there no man here who works feverishly during the day in order that he may forget what he did yesterday? Is there no man here who resorts to strong drink in order to forget? Is there nobody here who knows the impulse of plunging into that stream of forgetfulness that the ancients called the Stream of Lethe? You know what Dante meant when he depicted those still living as already caught in the tortures of iniquity; and so all great serious literature has this first or last as its theme: What was man born into the world for? What are the motives which will lift him along the highway? What are those that will drive him downward into the pit?

The beauty about the Bible is that it is the most wholesome, the most perfectly symmetrical, the least morbid picture of life and motives of men in the world. Almost every other book has a streak of morbidness in it, but this book is wholesome and sweet and natural and naïf from cover to cover. Here are no dull moralizings; here is the life of man set forth as it was simply lived from generation to generation. I take it that the problem which you would all study for the Sunday school is the biographies and the histories of the Old Testament and of the New. I

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pleasure in all the aspects of the natural world; in the changing seasons of the year; in the starry heavens; in the faces of children and in the works of art. And yet herein is the grace of God illustrated, for blindness, in his experience, was but the shadow of God's wing. It brought him into the secret place of the Tabernacle of the Most High, into the pavilion of the Divine Presence; and a failure of natural vision only made the eye of faith more clear to visions of beauty transcending the brightest scenes of earth.

Dr. Brown's old age was like the vestibule of the Temple, in which he waited reverentially and patiently until the time arrived, when by a single step he passed within the veil to see the King in his beauty, and to behold the land no longer afar off but a present inheritance, an eternal and satisfying possession.

At this meeting of our Virginia Synod, among the vanished forms and faces of those who once shared with us in its deliberations, we recall most vividly the form and face of this venerable and honored servant of God, his quiet and dignified demeanor, his placid countenance, his slow and measured tones, his serenity of spirit, his deferential bearing towards his brethren, and his reverence for all sacred things.

Of unquestionable courage and inflexible devotion to principle, he was gentle in manner, tender hearted and full of generous sensibility. Even in controversy, though he wielded a trenchant blade, so highly tempered as to cleave in twain any error however iron-clad, or to pierce any sophistry however shielded, he was stern and uncompromising only to error, without animosity to its advocate.

IMPORTANCE OF BIBLE STUDY.

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suppose that the Epistles of the New Testament are for the perusal of those who are mature, because in the Epistles is set forth, as it were, the philosophy of the whole thing, the thoughtful reflection based upon the providence of God and the revelation of his Son. The Epistles constitute the theology of the Bible, and the rest of it constitutes the experience of mankind in contact with Divine Providence.

The reassuring thing about the Bible is that its biographies are not like any other biographies that you know of. Take up almost any biography outside of the Bible and the writer tries to make a hero of the man he is writing about. No writer in the Bible tries to make a hero out of mere human stuff. There isn't a character of the Bible—there isn't a character even amongst those who are picked out by the Bible itself, by the special representatives and ambassadors of God, whose life is not displayed as full of faults and shortcomings and natural slips from the way of virtue. It were a matter of despair to those of us who have come after, if the Bible had represented these persons as unimpeachable in character and unexceptional in their conduct, because the theme of the Bible, so far as it is a biography, is the theme of the discovery of itself by the human soul, is the theme of the slow "come on" which each man and woman may gain for himself or herself under the guidance of the Spirit of God.

After all, we fight not with flesh and blood, but with unseen forces, most of which are within ourselves. The Bible says: "Let no man say he was tempted of God, for God tempteth no man." I am inclined to add: "Let no man say that he was tempted of the devil," for the devil never comes into any man's soul except by his permission and invitation.

How often does the Bible eulogize the man who masters his own passions? "Greater is he that ruleth himself than he that ruleth a city," and the foundation of the mastery of cities and of states and of nations is the mastery of one's self. Just as soon as the man who tries to master human circumstances puts himself at the front of it, then begins the day of his weakness, and the day of his defeat. In every circumstance of

life, for the child as well as for him who is grown, in every day and in every turn of every day, the question is: "Shall we rule our own spirits?" and here, set forth in such simple terms that the child may understand it, in the annals of the Holy Scripture are written the histories of men of every kind, whose glory was that they did master their own spirits, and through the whole thing lies what the Greek tragedies were never able to supply—the key, the thread to the labyrinth, the solution of the problem, the answer to the eternal question.

THE LIGHT THAT GUIDETH EVERY MAN.

He alone can rule his own spirit who puts himself under the command of the Spirit of God, revealed in his Son, Jesus Christ, our Saviour. He is the captain of our souls; he is the man from whose suggestions and from whose life comes the light that guideth every man that ever came into the world. Ah, if we can make our Sunday schools the blazing centers of that light, then indeed will the darkness of the world be dissipated. The happiness of seeing a great company of people gathered together in the interest of the Sunday school, is the happiness of knowing that there are they who seek light and who know that the lamp from which their spirits can be kindled is the lamp that glows in the Word of God.

Every Sunday school should be a place where this great book is not only opened, is not only studied, is not only revered, but is drunk of as if it were a fountain of life, is used as if it were the only source of inspiration and of guidance. No great nation can ever survive its own temptations and its own follies that does not indoctrinate its children in the Word of God; so that as schoolmaster and as governor I know that my feet must rest with the feet of my fellowmen upon this foundation only; for the righteousness of nations, like the righteousness of men must take its source from these foundations of inspiration.

DAILY BIBLE READING.

I am sorry, for the men who do not read the Bible every day. I wonder why they deprive themselves of the strength and of the pleasure. It is one of the most singular books in the world, for every time you open it some old text that you have read a score of times suddenly beams with a new meaning. Evidently the mood and the thought of that day, bred by the circumstance that you cannot analyze, has suddenly thrown its light upon that page and upon that passage, and there springs out upon the page to you something that you never saw lie upon it before. There is no other book that I know of of which this is true; there is no other book that yields its meaning so personally, that seems to fit itself so intimately to the very spirit that is seeking its guidance. And so when we teach our children we do not teach them, I hope dogmatically. We must not try to make them read the Scripture as we read it, but merely try to bring them into such contact with the Scripture that it will yield its meaning to their hearts and to their minds. Make it their companion, make it their familiar text book, and the rest will take care of itself.

Who shall dare to guide another human spirit in the same path that he himself has trodden? Shall we not merely take those whom we teach to the road and say: "Here is the way of life. Walk ye on it; don't follow us; don't look to us as examples of the consequence of our teaching. Walk ye on it, and it will lead you to the City of Light."

THE WORD OF GOD AT THE BASIS OF GOVERNMENT.

There are great problems, ladies, and gentlemen, before the American people. There are problems which will need purity of spirit and an

integrity of purpose such as has never been called for before in the history of this country. I should be afraid to go forward if I did not believe that there lay at the foundation of all our schooling and of all our thought this incomparable and unimpeachable Word of God. If we cannot derive our strength thence, there is no source from which we can derive it, and so I would bid you go from this place, if I may, inspired once more with the feeling that the province of God is the foundation of affairs, and that only those can guide, and only those can follow, who take their province of God from the sources where it is authentically interpreted.

THE TEACHING OF THE SCRIPTURES.

I congratulate you that you have a part in the development of the great Sunday school work. I sometimes wish very candidly, ladies and gentlemen, that there was more simple reading and interpretation of the Bible and fewer elaborated Sunday school lessons. I want to say very frankly that I never saw a Sunday school lesson that yielded the meaning of the text that it was trying to interpret. If you will only give these little people the pure bread itself you won't have to ask some inexpert chemical analyst to tell them how the bread is made up. There is no man with insight enough to see how the bread of life is made, and I wish sometimes that we could strip off these superficial explanations and get down to those things that sustain our spirits.

I want to urge that we get down to hard pan again, that we regard the whole business of the Sunday school as the familiarizing of the children of the United States with the Word of God.

GIVE IT TO THE CHILDREN STRAIGHT.

If you only made them read it again and again, and added no comment that they did not ask for, you would be doing an incomparable service for American morality and American progress. Thomas Carlyle used to say, skeptic though he was, in some fundamental respects, that the best thing that ever happened to him was that he was obliged to learn the Shorter Catechism when he was a small boy and didn't understand it, so thoroughly that when he grew up it kept coming out like an infection. He got it in his memory so that he could never get it out again, and suddenly when he would come face to face with some situation some time that tried his soul, those wonderful definitions of the Shorter Catechism would stare him in the face, and he would know where he was. You can't explain the Shorter Catechism to anybody under twenty-one successfully. Don't try to. Get it into their blood, and then it will come out sometime, and hold them like a monitor whom they cannot avoid, and similarly with the Word of God. Don't cheapen it with your explanations. Give it to them straight. It isn't too strong meat even for babes. It will set well on any stomach, no matter how tender.

Give it to them unadulterated, pure, unaltered, unexplained, uncheapened, and then see it work its wholesome work throughout the whole nature. It is very difficult, indeed, for a man or for a boy, who knows the Scripture, ever to get away from it. It haunts him like an old song. It follows him like the memory of his mother. It reminds him like the word of an old and revered teacher. It forms part of the warp and woof of his life.

I conceive my theme, therefore, to be the exaltation of the Word of God as the one and only theme for study on this sacred day, when we call our children together to drink from the original fountains of human life.—*The Expositor*.

How often have we seen the man who sought good for others receive good, and he who sought evil, broken on his own wheel.