

THE VALUE OF AN IDEAL

An Oration

by
William Jennings Bryan



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What is the value of an ideal? Have you ever attempted to estimate its worth? Have you ever tried to measure its value in dollars and cents? If you would know the pecuniary value of an ideal, go into the home of some man of wealth who has an only son; go into that home when the son has gone downward in a path of dissipation until that father no longer hopes for his reform, and then ask the father what an ideal would have been worth that would have made a man out of his son instead of a wreck. He will tell you that all the money that he has or could have he would gladly give for an ideal of life that would turn his boy's steps upward instead of downward.

An ideal is above price. It means the difference between success and failure—the difference between a noble life and a disgraceful career, and it sometimes means the difference between life and death. Have you noticed the increasing number of suicides? I speak of those cases where the person who takes his life finds nothing worth living for. When I read of one of these cases I ask myself whether it is not caused by a false ideal of life. If one measures life by what others do for him he is apt to be disappointed, for people are not likely to do as much for him as he expects, but if he measures life by what he does for others, there is not time for despair. If he measures life by its accumulations, these usually fall short of his expectations, but if he measures life by the contribution which he makes to the sum of human happiness, his only disappointment is in not finding time to do all that his heart prompts him to do. Whether he spends his time trying to absorb from the world, only to have the burden of life grow daily heavier, or spends his time in an effort to accomplish something of real value to the race, depends upon his ideal.

The ideal must be far enough above us to keep us looking up toward it all the time, and it must be far enough in advance of us to keep us struggling toward it to the end of life. It is a very poor ideal that one ever fully realizes, and it is a great misfortune for one to overtake his ideal, for, when he does, his progress stops. I like to think of life as a continual progress toward higher and better things.

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