

“AMERICA! AMERICA! GOD SHED HIS GRACE ON THEE”

7-4-04

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Proverbs 14:34

*Righteousness exalts a nation,
but sin is a disgrace to any people.*

INTRODUCTION

Most of you remember I'm sure the violent volcanic eruption of Mt. St. Helens that blew away one-third of its top. While we were living 400 miles away in Montana, volcanic ash fell like fine snow. We felt imprisoned in our home for days with windows closed, warned not to be outside without dust masks, which as you can imagine, were almost impossible to find. It was uncomfortably warm with no air conditioning. Talk about cabin fever! On Mt. St. Helens itself, the heat was so intense it melted away the soil, leaving only bare rock coated with a thick mantle of volcanic ash. Forest Service naturalists wondered how long it would be before vegetation could grow there. Then, one day a park employee stumbled across a lush patch of wild flowers, ferns, and grasses rooted tenaciously to a strip of that desolation. It took a few seconds for him to note an eerie fact— the patch of vegetation formed the shape of an elk. Plants had sprouted from the organic material that lay where an elk had been buried in the ash. From then on, naturalists looked for patches of green as an aid in calculating the loss of wildlife.

Philip Yancey, in his book, What's So Amazing About Grace?, uses this to illustrate how, long after a society begins to decay, signs of its former life continue to assert themselves. People still cling to moral customs of the past and "habits of the heart" to use Robert Bellah's phrase. And, they bring life to an otherwise morally barren landscape. In our nation, I believe we are in period of time where increasingly, the moral landscape is bleak. Yet, the full impact is not yet clear, since we continue to draw upon the moral capital of a Christian faith. But, how long can that go on? Gallup polls reveal the majority of Americans are anxious about the future and 83% believe the nation is in moral decline. But as Christians, this comes as no surprise to us.

This morning, it is appropriate on this 4th of July celebration of our independence, to remind ourselves of the sources of what is best— the patches of green— in our American landscape. Most of what is best about our nation is the legacy of a more moral, God-honoring past. In our current climate where there are systematic assaults to remove anything Christian from our national life, it is important we don't forget this fact. When we sever our society from the roots that have given us what is best in our great nation, it should be no mystery when we see the shriveling of morality, character, and the noblest virtues.

Let's consider with grateful hearts, some of the gifts of God's grace from our past. In our understanding of some of those gifts, we also have a clear direction to the witness we need to give to our confused times as well as a call to live faithfully in accord with our text:

*Righteousness exalts a nation,
but sin is a disgrace to any people* (Prov. 14:34).

OUR HERITAGE OF FAITH

On July 4, 1776, The Declaration of Independence was signed. Quoting from the document,

- this giant step was taken, "With firm reliance upon the protection of Divine Providence..."
- Assuming, "The separate and equal station which the laws of God entitled them."
- They voiced the self-evident truth that they were "endowed by their Creator with inalienable rights."
- And, they appealed before the world to, "the Supreme Judge of the world."

It was at the last moment Thomas Jefferson inserted that awesome closing sentence,

With firm reliance on the protection of Divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our lives, our fortunes and our sacred honor.

The famous British statesman, Edmund Burke, who lived at that time observed that The Declaration of Independence, "was a partnership between the living and the dead and the yet unborn."

After those 56 men signed this document, the magnitude of what they had done began to weigh on them. In the silence, some wept. Some stared out the window. Others, like John Witherspoon, the only clergyman to sign, bowed their heads in prayer. Then Samuel Adams rose and said,

We have this day restored the Sovereign, to Whom alone men ought to be obedient. He reigns in heaven and... from the rising to the setting sun, may His Kingdom come.

The Liberty Bell was rung July 8, 1776 after the first public reading of The Declaration of Independence. It must have been an electrifying moment for those early Americans. But, let's not forget, inscribed on that bell is the Word of God from Lev. 25:10,

Proclaim liberty throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof.

So, with every ding and every dong of that huge bell was an acknowledgment that our liberty comes from the Lord.

In 1787, 11 years after the signing of the Declaration of Independence and following the long Revolutionary War, the mood of the nation was euphoric at winning its independence. But now they were faced with the problem of how to shape this nation with a constitution. This was a formidable undertaking in finding a way to form these thirteen colonies together into one nation. The Constitutional Convention was convened. After three months of wrangling, trying to accommodate special interests, the atmosphere was tense and the issues seemed unresolvable. It was the middle of a hot, humid Philadelphia summer. Alexander Hamilton had already gone home in disgust. George Washington was all that was holding the convention together. Benjamin Franklin was an old man and the most senior of all the delegates. He rose to be recognized by the chairman, George Washington. What he now said, had all the more impact, because Franklin was well-known for his Rationalist views which tended to deny anything emotional and exalted reason. In general, Rationalism held we need to run things ourselves and figure them out, not expecting divine interventions. Addressing the chair, Franklin said:

How has it happened, sir, that we have not hitherto once thought of humbly applying to the Father of lights to illuminate our understanding? In the beginning of the contest with Britain, when we were sensible of danger, we had daily prayers in this room for Divine

protection. Our prayers, sir, were heard, and they were graciously answered. All of us who were engaged in the struggle must have observed frequent instances of a superintending Providence in our favor.... And have we now forgotten this powerful friend? Or do we imagine we no longer need His assistance? I have lived, sir, a long time, and the longer I live the more convincing proofs I see of this truth: 'that God governs in the affairs of men.' And if a sparrow cannot fall to the ground without His notice, is it probable an empire can rise without His aid?

We have been assured, sir, in the sacred writings that except the Lord build the house, they labor in vain that build it. I firmly believe this. I also believe that, without His concurring aid, we shall succeed in this political building no better than the builders of Babel; we shall be divided by our little, partial, local interests; our projects will be confounded; and we ourselves shall be a reproach and a byword down to future ages.

Franklin's speech seemed to be the turning point of the convention. Soon logjams were broken and the constitution came into being.

James Madison is considered the chief architect of the constitution and he operated from a decidedly Christian framework. After he graduated from Princeton University, he stayed on another year to study Hebrew and moral theology under the president, John Witherspoon. Witherspoon was a moderate Presbyterian and the only cleric to sign Declaration of Independence. Madison said of this encounter with Witherspoon as his teacher, he received "*very early and strong impressions in favor of Liberty both Civil and Religious.*" Later Madison summarized his general attitude toward religion:

Belief in a God All Powerful wise and good is so essential to the moral order of the world and to the happiness of man, that arguments which enforce it cannot be drawn from too many sources.

John Witherspoon himself forms an interesting side-note, a patch of green for sure in our nation's formation. (Teachers, take note!) While James Madison was his most famous student, this Presbyterian clergyman, while president of Princeton, was also the chief lecturer. In this capacity, he touched the lives of 500 graduates. Listen to this list of his students:

- 11% became college presidents;
- 55 were participants at The Constitutional Convention;
- In addition to a president (Madison), he taught a vice president;
- He taught 21 senators, 29 representatives, and 56 state legislators;
- As well as 33 judges, three of whom became members of the U.S. Supreme Court.

Talk about influence! You can see why historian Garry Wills has referred to Witherspoon as "probably the most influential teacher in the entire history of American education."

Prior to these formative events, much of our nation was settled by those with a Godly purpose in mind. The Quakers, the Pilgrims, the Puritans and countless others came to America so they could be faithful to God. Religious revivals preceded and precipitated the two most-shaping

events in our national history: The Great Awakening set the stage for independence from Britain and another huge revival preceded and set the stage for the ending of slavery.

LIVING FAITHFULLY

Much, much more could be said regarding God's hand in our nation's history and the importance of Biblical values— but then I'm preaching to the choir, for I know you all realize the importance of our nation being "under God," as we affirm in our pledge. You know that freedom of religion does not mean freedom from religious expression in our common life as a nation. You know the importance of the current battles regarding the Pledge of Allegiance, Christmas and other religious holidays, prayers in public gatherings, and the display of the Ten Commandments on government property. But I want to focus now upon our personal discipleship, for that is what our text this morning ultimately comes down to. It is the righteousness of individuals that make a nation righteous. For our purposes here, a good working-definition of "righteousness" is "right-living" or living faithful to God's purposes and obeying His will. If we as Christians would just live as Christ calls us to live, our nation would be far different.

Think about it. Over 95% of Americans say they believe in God. And, something in the neighborhood of three-fourths would identify themselves as Christians. Of course, we realize all who call themselves Christian are not *really Christians*. So, George Barna and George Gallup— both of whom are committed Christians— in their separate polling organizations have been tracking Christian belief closely for well over a decade. The numbers of people who would describe themselves as "born-again Christians" seem to constitute something between 35-49% of the population. So, over one-third and possibly almost one-half of Americans claim Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior, saying He has transformed their lives and they are living for Him as His disciples. But, here's the discouraging part. Polls also suggest the divorce rate among born-again Christians is about the same as for non-Christians. And, there are many other statistics suggesting we are not living as Christ called us to live. In one Barna nation-wide survey, interviewing hundreds of believers, including pastors and many church leaders— these were people regularly involved in the church and it's programs— Barna concludes:

Not one of the adults we interviewed said that their goal in life was to be a committed follower of Jesus Christ or to make disciples of the entire world— or even their entire block.

Instead, when this group was asked what they wanted to accomplish in life, eight out of ten believers (80%) saw success in terms of family, career, and financial achievement. How would you have answered if you had been contacted in that poll? Is your life focused upon Christ's call to us as disciples? Of course, after our **40 Days of Purpose**, you'd all respond with the five purposes of The Purpose Driven Life, saying your purpose was to:

- Worship (honor God in all of life, putting Him first);
- Fellowship (be connected, involved with other believers in the church family);
- Discipleship (learning to live in obedience to Jesus' teaching);
- Service (involved in ministry, using our gifts, helping the church and others);
- Evangelism (reaching out to those who don't know Christ here and in missions).

What if every born-again Christian truly followed Jesus as their Master in all of life, truly made

Him Lord of all? That would be maybe 40% of our population. Could that make a difference? What if we all refused to watch on TV or at the movies any of the programs or films that make a mockery of our Christian values through their language, sexual content, or violence? What if we cared enough for the lost to learn how to share Christ with the unsaved and began to wrestle in prayer for those we contact to experience the inner transformation the Holy Spirit brings to our hearts? What if the world could look at us and say, as they did of the early church, “Behold how they love one another?” This love would be seen in our caring, guarding reputations, and being involved wherever there was a need. What if we all were involved in our society in sacrificial ways providing loving care and support? What if we willingly simplified our lifestyles and let go of our materialism so we all gave at least 10% (a tithe) of our incomes to the Lord?

Would 40% make a difference? You bet it would. TV would change, movies would change, and millions would come to know Christ. Our impact upon the social order would be incredible!

CONCLUSION

In all this, I hear a clear call to get more serious about my discipleship– to follow the Master more courageously and with greater purity of heart. I can be guilty of “cocooning”– being satisfied with my own needs being met and failing to engage our culture. I need to live with more of an energetic expression of the fruits of the Spirit– love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, goodness, faithfulness, and self-control. I need to be more passionate about reaching out to those living without Christ in their hearts.

On the eve of independence, John Adams wrote of his fear that, “We have not men fit for the times.” But those men did appear, thanks in no small part to a faithful teacher and preacher at Princeton, John Witherspoon. May we take our commission as seriously as he did his. May each one of our lives become a patch of green, promoting the abundant life Jesus offers, and nourishing the roots of morality and righteous living in our time.

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