

## RIGHTEOUSNESS EXALTETH A NATION

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on April 7, 1968 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P. M.

When a giant airliner crashes with great loss of life the Civil Aeronautics Bureau immediately launches an investigation to discover the cause of the crash. When the stock market plunges analysts immediately go to work to study the reasons for the economic downswing. When someone becomes sick and dies we are concerned to know the cause of death. If death comes suddenly or if the disease is unusual an autopsy is performed. These are just a few areas in which man seeks causes for effects. We have long been convinced that nothing happens without some prior cause. Every cause has its effect and every effect has its cause. Sometimes the causes are many and intricately interwoven, but always there is a cause behind every occurrence.

When a nation such as ours--the richest, best fed, best clothed, best housed, most powerful, most influential, most modern, most advanced educationally and technically--suddenly reaches a state of near-anarchy, it is time to ask, "Why?" Although some would consider my answer oversimplification, I am convinced that the answer is not hard to discover. "Righteousness exalteth a nation, but sin is a reproach to any people." (Prov. 14:34). Our nation occupies its present precarious position, because its people have increasingly turned their back upon God and his eternal principles.

### A Look At Our Land

In recent hours I have taken something of an inventory of our nation and have listed in ten sentences what I consider to be our most serious problems. While these are not all-inclusive, I feel that they do touch the major areas about which we ought to be concerned. Let us look at each carefully.

- (1) There are unrest, violence and destruction in major cities throughout the land. We have heard the news broadcasts; we have seen the pictures. Areas in more than eighty of our largest cities are being destroyed by fire. Looting often accompanies the burning. In a few of our largest cities the damage is major.
- (2) The war in Viet Nam goes on and on destroying our young men and exhausting our resources. No one thought at the beginning that it would last so long, nor that it would be so costly in both men and material. The war moves toward a conclusion slowly, if at all.
- (3) Sensualism, by which we mean immorality and license, has grown disturbingly in recent years. Ours seems to be an age of little or no self control. Heavy drinking, the use of drugs, and the exploitation of sex seem to be the order of the day.
- (4) Materialism, by which we mean luxurious living and too great a concern for things, has a greater and greater hold upon our people. Gambling has grown into enormous proportions and the spirit of getting something for nothing seems to be everywhere.
- (5) There has been an alarming rise in all categories of crime. In every quarterly report of the Federal Bureau of Investigation in the past decade has been an increase in every category: murder, rape, robbery, assault, burglary, larceny and auto theft.
- (6) Our economic system is threatened and men are talking about the possibility of devaluing the dollar, with widespread ramifications.
- (7) There has been a decline in the effectiveness of the home and especially in the training of children.



- (8) There has been a growing distaste for hard work and discipline, and especially a decline for authority. Giving a day's work for a day's pay seems to be no longer a matter of concern. All levels of authority seem to be flaunted consistently.
- (9) There has been too great a concern for self and a disregard for the needs and rights of others. We think especially of the colored race, but we also include the millions of others both within our borders and without who are in need of food, clothing, and the basic necessities of life. Modern man seems to have little concern for others, so long as his own life prospers.
- (10) There has been a definite decline of spirituality and faith, a drift toward secularism. Some of the most devastating blows toward the destruction of orthodox Christian faith have come from those who claim to be religious leaders. the effect has been most damaging.

#### Departure From God

As mentioned before, "Righteousness exalteth a nation, but sin is a reproach to any people." Many, even most, of our problems come from the violation of basic principles of God. The words of the prophet Isaiah, uttered more than twenty-five centuries ago, sound so very timely, "Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth; for Jehovah hath spoken: I have nourished and brought up children, and they have rebelled against me. The ox knoweth his owner, and the ass his mother's crib; but Israel doth not know, my people doth not consider...Your country is desolate; your cities are burned with fire; your land, strangers devour it in your presence, and it is desolate, as overthrown by strangers." Then later in the chapter Isaiah comes to his climax and his appeal, "Wash you, make you clean; put away the evil of your doings from before mine eyes; cease to do evil; learn to do well; seek justice, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow. Come now, and let us reason together, saith Jehovah: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool. If ye be willing and obedient, ye shall eat the good of the land: but if ye refuse and rebel, ye shall be devoured with the sword; for the mouth of Jehovah hath spoken it." (Is. 1:2-4,7,16-20).

#### The Ten Commandments

It is quite revealing to read the ten commandments, so basic a part of God's law for man, and to think of the widespread disregard for these basic principles by modern man. The first of the ten says simply, "Thou shalt have no other gods before me." How obviously people of our time disregard this commandment, having as the center of their lives their own personal pleasure and satisfaction rather than the God who created them. The second commandment says, "Thou shalt not make unto thee a graven image...Thou shalt not bow down thyself unto them, nor serve them." In our materialistic age man often finds himself a slave to the machines and gadgets of the modern world.

Commandment number three reads, "Thou shalt not take the name of Jehovah thy God in vain." We are all aware that we hear this done on almost every corner and almost every hour of the day. Commandment number four reads, "Remember the sabbath day to keep it holy." In our day, as part of the Christian era, this commandment would mean to respect the Lord's Day by using it for the worship of God and the service of our fellowmen.

Next, the ten commandments deal with human relationships. The first mentioned is, "Honor thy father and thy mother." How out of date this sounds in our modern world. Then comes, "Thou shalt not kill." This, too, seems out of touch with modern reality. Ours is a land of killing and assassinations, and our age has



developed more death-dealing machines than any previous century. The command next comes, "Thou shalt not commit adultery." This, too, is foreign to the modern twentieth century, for ours is an age in which the prophets of the new morality are brazenly claiming that the old standards are outmoded and actually harmful to mankind. Then comes the command, "Thou shalt not steal." It is followed by, "Thou shalt not bear false witness." Then, finally, we read, "Thou shalt not covet." (Ex. 20:1-17). These commands, stated here in their briefest form, have been the foundation for most civilizations of the past and must be foundation stones in any civilization that is to last. Our widespread disregard of these principles is in large measure responsible for our national plight today. The words of the prophet Hosea are coming true, "They sow the wind, and they shall reap the whirlwind." (Hosea 8:7).

#### A Return To The Lord

Our situation is not hopeless, but it demands a determined response. We must return to the Lord and his teachings. Just here, we remember the occasion on which a scribe came to Jesus to ask, "What commandment is the first of all?" Jesus responded, "The first is, Hear O Israel; the Lord our God, the Lord is one: and thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength. The second is this, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. There is none other commandment greater than these." (Mark 12:28-31).

Christ is saying in this famous text that the two basic commandments of God are, first, the love of God, and, second, the love of man. In fulfilling the requirement to love God, we must respect the laws of God, Jesus said, "If ye love me, ye will keep my commandments." (John 14:15).

The love of man is shown in a statement concerning the promised Messiah which we find in Isaiah 61:1-3, "The Spirit of the Lord Jehovah is upon me; because Jehovah hath anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek; he hath sent me to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound; to proclaim the year of Jehovah's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all that mourn; to appoint unto them that mourn in Zion, to give unto them a garland for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness; that they may be called trees of righteousness, the planting of Jehovah, that he may be glorified." This passage was read by our Lord, as recorded in Luke 4, after which he said, "Today hath this scripture been fulfilled in your ears." (Luke 4:21).

Christ's great love for those who are in need is suggested in this paragraph, "When thou makest a dinner or a supper, call not thy friends, nor thy brethren, nor thy kinsmen, nor rich neighbors; lest haply they also bid thee again, and a recompense be made thee. But when thou makest a feast, bid the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind: and thou shalt be blessed; because, they have not wherewith to recompense thee: for thou shalt be recompensed in the resurrection of the just." (Luke 14:12-14).

Over and over again throughout his life our Lord emphasized his love for the poor and his concern for the downtrodden. Luke 10 tells the story of the Good Samaritan, which surpasses almost every other in showing the need for man to have concern for those who are in trouble.

#### Conclusion

The crucial fact is that modern man--often led by prominent theologians--has ignored God. He sometimes declares openly that God does not exist. Even more often he lives as though God did not exist. The inevitable result is a crumbling of ethics and morals. There is no way to sustain a nation's moral behavior apart from



religion. Unless we return to God and his truths our nation faces anarchy.

It was the apostle Paul in I Cor. 10:12, who wrote, "Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall." As a great and powerful nation this admonition ought to be taken seriously by America's Nations rise, but they also fall. Our future may not be nearly as glorious as has been our past. To use an expression from the book of Daniel, in recent days we may have seen the "handwriting on the wall."

In a sense our nation is like a man who has suffered a heart attack. Often we hear of some friend or neighbor who has suddenly been stricken with a heart attack and is in critical condition in some hospital. He was a man who pushed himself too hard physically, ate too much of rich foods, and took little care of his body. After the attack he lies critically ill for a few days, during which time it is not known with certainty whether he will live or die. Then, a few days later the doctor smiles and says, "I believe he will make it." After a few weeks the man is able to go home. He has been shocked and warned by the unexpected attack. He now takes care of his body through rest and through the absence of long extended pressure. He eats more wisely. He protects himself. As a result, he lives many years. Our nation is like such a man. It is not in a state of crisis, but if we are wise, if we return to God and let him direct us, we will yet have many years in which to live. However, this is only if we make amends and live with concern and caution.

Our situation is not hopeless, though it is indeed grave. Having turned our back upon God, as a nation, we must turn toward God and again become responsible to his directions. We are encouraged by the fact that God always is willing to forgive those who seek his forgiveness and change the direction of their lives. The story of the prodigal son (Luke 15) affords us great hope. God never wearies of helping those who return to him and ask for help. This is our hope in this mid-twentieth century in one of the most serious crises of our national existence. May we have the wisdom and the will to return to God while there is yet time.

Our hope also lies in a great largely-silent segment of our population which continues to respect God and man. There are yet millions of good people in the land. They are "the salt of the earth" and "the light of the world." It is they who must determine the future direction of our land. May they speak out and lead men back to God.

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