

## The Greatness of a Nation Proverbs 14:34

that are gloating over their present troubles. I hope Canada is not one of those.”

Our text today is **Proverbs 14:34** “**Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a disgrace to any people.**”

**Would he write the same things today?** We are a nation embroiled in turmoil within our streets, our schools, our Congress, our families, our churches.

Today we celebrate the 245<sup>th</sup> birthday of our great nation. Of all the nations throughout history, America is arguably the greatest nation ever. Whether you consider the dynasties of China or the empires of Babylon, Greece, Rome and even Great Britain in modern times, America stands above them all for many reasons.

We should strongly consider the words of President Reagan at a prayer breakfast in Dallas, Texas on August 23, 1984. His speech underscores the rich history of our nation founded on the principles of God’s Word and God Himself as the benevolent Creator to whom we owe our nation’s founding.

Listen to an excerpt from what Gordon Sinclair, a Canadian television commentator, had to say about America some 20 years ago. He writes, “**This Canadian thinks it is time to speak up for the Americans as the most generous and possibly the least appreciated people on all the earth. Germany, Japan, and to a lesser extent, Britain and Italy were lifted out of the debris of war by the Americans who poured in billions of dollars and forgave other billions in debts. None of these countries is today paying even the interest on its remaining debts to the United States. When France was in danger of collapsing in 1956, it was the Americans who propped it up, and their reward was to be insulted and swindled on the streets of Paris. I was there. I saw it. When earthquakes hit distant cities, it is the United States that hurries in to help. This spring, 59 American communities were flattened by tornadoes. Nobody helped. The Marshall Plan and the Truman Policy pumped billions of dollars into discouraged countries. Now newspapers in those countries are writing about the decadent, warmongering Americans...I can name you 5000 times when the Americans raced to the help of other people in trouble. Can you name me even one time when someone else raced to the Americans in trouble? I don’t think there was outside help even during the San Francisco earthquake. Our neighbors have faced it all alone, and I’m one Canadian who is tired of hearing them get kicked around. They will come out of this thing with their flag high. And when they do, they are entitled to thumb their nose at the lands**

“I believe that faith and religion play a critical role in the political life of our nation, and always have, and that the Church -- and by that I mean all churches, all denominations -- has had a strong influence on the state, and this has worked to our benefit as a nation.

Those who created our country -- the Founding Fathers and Mothers -- understood that there is a divine order which transcends the human order. They saw the state, in fact, as a form of moral order and felt that the bedrock of moral order is religion. The Mayflower Compact began with the words, “In the name of God, Amen.” The Declaration of Independence appeals to “Nature's God” and “the Creator” and “the Supreme Judge of the world.” Congress was given a chaplain, and the oaths of office are oaths before God.

James Madison in the Federalist Papers admitted that in the creation of our Republic he perceived the hand of the Almighty. John Jay, the first Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, warned that we must never forget the God from whom our blessings flowed.

George Washington referred to religion's profound and unsurpassed place in the heart of our nation quite directly in his Farewell Address in 1796. Seven years earlier, France had erected a government that was intended to be purely secular. This new government would be grounded on reason rather than the law of God. By 1796 the French Revolution had known the Reign of Terror.

And Washington voiced reservations about the idea that there could be a wise policy without a firm moral and religious foundation. He said, "Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports. In vain would that man (call himself a patriot) who (would) labor to subvert these...finest props of the duties of men and citizens. The mere politician...(and) the pious man ought to respect and to cherish (religion and morality)." And he added, "let us with caution indulge the supposition, that morality can be maintained without religion." I believe that George Washington knew the City of Man cannot survive without the City of God, that the Visible City will perish without the Invisible City.

Religion played not only a strong role in our national life, it played a positive role. The abolitionist movement was at heart a moral and religious movement; so was the modern civil rights struggle. And throughout this time, the state was tolerant of religious belief, expression, and practice. Society, too, was tolerant.

But in the 1960's this began to change. We began to make great steps toward secularizing our nation and removing religion from its honored place. In 1962 the Supreme Court, in the New York prayer case, banned the compulsory saying of prayers. In 1963 the Court banned the reading of the Bible in our public schools. From that point on, the courts pushed the meaning of the ruling ever outward, so that now our children are not allowed voluntary prayer. We even had to pass a special law in the Congress to allow student prayer groups the same access to schoolrooms after classes that a young Marxist society, for example, would already enjoy with no opposition.

The 1962 decision opened the way to a flood of similar suits. Once religion had been made vulnerable, a series of assaults were made in one court after another, on one issue after another. Cases were started to argue against tax-exempt status for churches. Suits were brought to abolish the words "under God" from the Pledge of Allegiance and to

remove "In God We Trust" from public documents and from our currency.

Today, there are those who are fighting to make sure voluntary prayer is not returned to the classrooms. And the frustrating thing for the great majority of Americans who support and understand the special importance of religion in the national life is that those who are attacking religion claim they are doing it in the name of tolerance, freedom, and open-mindedness. Question: Isn't the real truth that they are intolerant of religion? They refuse to tolerate its importance in our lives.

When John Kennedy was running for President in 1960, he said that his church would not dictate his Presidency any more than he would speak for his church. Just so, and proper. But John Kennedy was speaking in an America in which the role of religion -- and by that I mean the role of all churches -- was secure. Abortion was not a political issue. Prayer was not a political issue. The right of church schools to operate was not a political issue. And it was broadly acknowledged that religious leaders had a right and a duty to speak out on the issues of the day. They held a place of respect, and a politician who spoke to or of them with a lack of respect would not long survive in the political arena. It was acknowledged then that religion held a special place, occupied a special territory in the hearts of the citizenry. The climate has changed greatly since then. And since it has, it logically follows that religion needs defenders against those who care only for the interests of the State.

There are, these days, many questions on which religious leaders are obliged to offer their moral and theological guidance, and such guidance is a good and necessary thing. To know how a church and its members feel on a public issue expands the parameters of debate. It does not narrow the debate; it expands it.

The truth is, politics and morality are inseparable. And as morality's foundation is religion, religion and politics are necessarily related. We need religion as a guide. We need it because we are imperfect, and our government needs the Church,

because only those humble enough to admit they're sinners can bring to democracy the tolerance it requires in order to survive.

A state is nothing more than a reflection of its citizens: The more decent the citizens, the more decent the state...

We establish no religion in this country, nor will we ever. We command no worship. We mandate no belief. But we poison our society when we remove its theological underpinnings. We court corruption when we leave it bereft of belief. All are free to believe or not to believe; all are free to practice a faith or not. But those who believe must be free to speak of and act on their belief, to apply moral teaching to public questions.

If we look back through history to all those great civilizations, those great nations that rose up to even world dominance and then deteriorated, declined, and fell, we find they all had one thing in common. One of the significant forerunners of their fall was their turning away from God.

Without God, there is no virtue, because there's no prompting of the conscience. Without God, we're mired in the material, that flat world that tells us only what the senses perceive. Without God, there is a coarsening of the society. And without God, democracy will not and cannot long endure. ***If we ever forget that we're one nation under God, then we will be a nation gone under.***

If I could just make a personal statement of my own: In these three-and-a-half years I have understood and known better than ever before the words of Lincoln, when he said that he would be the greatest fool on this footstool called Earth if he ever thought that for one moment he could perform the duties of that Office without help from One who is stronger than all."

**How far have we digressed from his message?  
How close are we to being a nation gone under?**

Earlier this year in a debate over the Equality Act, Jerry Nadler responded to comments made by Republicans that Democrats were ignoring biblical values on the issue of gender. He said, "What any

**religious tradition describes as God's will is no concern of this Congress."**

Contrast that with the early years of our nation as Congress debated about the finer points of the Constitution. Gridlocked with little progress, Benjamin Franklin suggested that each session should begin with prayer led by area clergy. He saw the need of asking God to guide their efforts in writing the Constitution.

As our nation moves further away from its founding principles, how important it is to understand our text today if we will continue to be a great nation. Our greatness is not found in the number of its population. It is not found in its military might. It is not found in its prosperous economy. It is not found in its academic prowess. It is not found in its civilized greatness. It is not even found in the framework of the documents by which our nation was established. Our greatness depends on whether we take seriously the wisdom of Solomon in this verse that righteousness is what exalts a nation, that righteousness is what makes it great.

What we are seeing played out daily in the streets and cities across our nation is not the result of failed policies and neither is it the result of one political party over against another. As we have seen in our study of **James 3:16**, chaos and every evil work reigns when man neglects God's wisdom and pursues wisdom apart from Him. Where righteousness is absent a nation falters and ultimately will fail.

In contrast to what is happening today, the founding fathers, and in fact going back as far as the pilgrims and the Mayflower Compact, they all knew that for this new nation to succeed, it needed to be established on the principles of God's Word. But they also understood that it wasn't just that laws should be forged on biblical beliefs or that the policies enacted should reflect biblical values. They understood that the character of its citizens should exhibit biblical morality in obedience to God's Holy Word. They understood that people living out the Word of God in righteous character would influence society as a whole for the better.

When the Bible speaks of righteousness it is understood in one of two ways. The first is the righteousness that God imputes to the person who by faith trusts in Christ as Savior. His righteousness is credited to the believer so that God sees that person as without sin.

The second way the Bible speaks of righteousness is in the moral behavior that God expects of His people who are now a new creation. A changed heart is evident in changed behavior. Since we are a new creation in Christ, we are to exhibit His character and put away the characteristics of the old nature, those sinful desires that were evident in our thoughts, desires, and actions.

Paul instructs us through **Titus (2:12)** “to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in this present age.”

In order for a nation to be great, in order for a nation to be blessed by God, in order for a nation to be exalted, honored, lifted up, it's people and leaders must be known for their moral and righteous character. That truth is evident in **Psalms 1:1-3**. Joy comes not just in the reading of it, but in obedience to it.

The morality of a nation is never neutral. The nation either conforms to God's Word in obedience to His laws by pursuing God's character or not. One leads to being honored, the other leads to disgrace and ruin. One leads to peace in the land, the other to chaos and every evil work.

When the majority of people in a nation choose righteousness and pursue the character of God in their own lives, that nation will be morally strong and exalted. That nation will then always have the best interest of its people. Where sin is allowed to persist because God and His righteous nature are spurned, that nation will experience ruin, characterized by greed, arrogance, selfishness, and hatred among other things.

For a nation to maintain righteousness it must be taught from one generation to the next. It was

imbedded into the daily fabric of the Israelites in **Deuteronomy 6:6-7** that parents were to use every opportunity to instill godly values into the lives of their children through daily events and life experiences. Nationalism and religion are not to be two separate entities as some would debate regarding the separation of church and state, but they are to be intertwined so that the two are actually lived out together in harmony.

The nation learned early on following their exodus from Egypt that for it to be blessed and to prosper, they must follow the laws of God, in essence, live righteously. Look it up in **Deuteronomy 6:8-25; 28:1-14**. But if they turned away from God by pursuing a life of sin, God would not only withhold His blessing, He would send a curse on them and their land as seen in **Deuteronomy 28:15-68**. The curses of God on the nation would come in stages if they disobeyed. Their social life would decay. Their crops would fail from famine. Their military would be defeated. Finally, there would be total national destruction. It is evident throughout the Old Testament. It's very clear in the book of Judges. When the people began to do what was right in their own eyes, they deviated from God's righteous path and brought judgment on themselves. When they repented, God brought peace and blessing. But that didn't last long, and the cycle repeated itself.

Throughout their history, when they followed God by obeying Him, they were blessed. When they disobeyed God and followed the gods of the nations, He judged them. Finally, both the northern and southern kingdoms were completely destroyed. In 722 B.C., Assyria conquered the northern kingdom and in 586 B.C., Babylon destroyed the southern kingdom.

We are seeing that same pattern played out in our nation. We have been blessed because our nation was founded on the values of God's Word. The pilgrims sought to honor God and live righteously. As the fledgling nation grew it was blessed and has been a blessing to other nations. When God's people live righteously by obeying Him, they can influence the nation for good. But when we tolerate

sin and allow people to do what is right in their own eyes, we become a disgrace. It is the strongest word that can be used to describe shame. It speaks of losing respect and favor with others, not only by other nations, but its own citizens. **Why else do people burn the flag, turn their back on the anthem, and protest in the streets?**

**Why are we in disgrace by so many?** I would suggest to you today that it's because the church is not influencing the nation for righteousness, because the church has tolerated sin. We tolerate the sin of the nation, because we tolerate the sin in the church, and in our own lives. We tolerate sin because we have lost our sense of the holiness of God. If we, as God's people, are to influence the nation for righteousness we must once again come face to face with the holiness of God. Because we have lost sight of the holiness of God, we have lost sight of the seriousness of sin and we tolerate it.

When Isaiah was brought into the presence of God through a vision, for a moment he was lost in the splendor of God's majesty and glory. He was captivated by the worshipping angels. But then he saw himself in his sinful state in comparison to a holy God and realized how unworthy he was to be there in His presence. **(Isaiah 6:1-6)**

One day Peter was busy cleaning his fishing nets having spent the whole night toiling with nothing to show for it. Jesus had gathered a crowd on the shore. There were so many He climbed into Peter's boat and instructed him to row out a bit from shore to continue His teaching. When He was done giving a verbal lesson to the people, He had a visual lesson to give Peter. He told the seasoned fisherman to throw his net out again. Peter initially balked at the idea claiming he had fished all night with no success. But because the Lord told him to, he did and instantly the net was full to the breaking point. Calling his partners to bring their boat, they filled the two boats so that they began to sink. His only and immediate response was to fall down before Christ and tell Him to go away. He was aware of his sinfulness and Christ's holiness. **(Luke 5:1-8)**

**When we come into the presence of the Lord, do we**

**see His holiness and our sinfulness and fall down before Him in repentance?** If God is to exalt our nation, His people must see sin from His perspective and repent of it instead of excuse it away. When we deal with sin and desire to live righteously, those around will take notice.

Any great awakening in a nation where the unrighteous repent and turn to Christ for salvation has always begun with a revival among God's people first. Where the people of God get a sense of the holiness of God in contrast to their sinfulness, there is great repentance as they recommit to live righteously before God. When the unsaved see how seriously the church takes sin and repents and begins to live in obedience to God and His Word, the convicting work of the Holy Spirit draws them to see their need of a Savior.

**You have seen those commercials where they take an old, faded car headlight, rub a compound on it and the headlight is miraculously restored.**

We are called to be the light of a world that is in darkness, to shine the glory of God before a watching world. But where sin reigns in our lives, the light of Christ is dimmed. Repentance renews His light in us and through us.

**Joel 2:12-13 “‘Turn now,’ declares the Lord, ‘return to Me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning.’ Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the Lord your God, for He is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and He relents from sending calamity.”**

John Phillips writes, “The handwriting is on the wall. What the United States of America needs is another Holy Spirit revival that will put conviction back into the pulpits and pews; conscience back into government; common sense, decency, and discipline back into the schools; integrity back into businesses; commitment back into marriage; shame back into sin; courage back into the courts; character back into our leaders; safety back into the streets; purpose back into our youth; and God back into our national consciousness. Such a revival is the answer to our shame.”

My prayers should not just be that the godless would turn to Christ, but instead should begin with my own sense of God's holiness, asking Him to reveal my sin and bring about greater righteousness. My prayers should be like King David.

**Psalm 51:1-4, 7, 10\***

**Psalm 139:23-24**

I can't pray for the righteousness of others if I do not begin with that in my own prayers. When we get serious with our own righteousness, considering what God's Word says about holiness, then we will begin to see God's Spirit move in our nation and once again be exalted. Until then sin will be our disgrace as a nation.

No policy will ever be able to create the kind of righteousness that is needed to exalt a nation. Only the work of God's Spirit can do that as we begin to deal with our sin and live according to God's Word.

Samuel Adams wrote, "Neither the wisest constitution nor the wisest laws will secure the liberty and happiness of a people whose manners are universally corrupt. He, therefore, is the truest friend of the liberty of his country who tries most to promote its virtue."

Dr. James Dobson wrote a response to that: "Virtue ennobles individual character and lifts society as a whole. These cherished principles eschew prejudice and discrimination, confirming that "all men are created equal." This dearly held belief encompasses characteristics of goodwill, patience, kindness, respect, humility, gratitude, courage, honor, industry, honesty, chastity, and fidelity. These precepts serve as the cornerstones for both individual happiness and societal governance. Regardless of our differences, we must anchor ourselves to a value system that upholds the dignity and value of all human life. While the Constitution and Bill of Rights were crafted with a Judeo-Christian ethic, we know, as believers, that our true allegiance is to God Who reigns over all nations. Accordingly, it is imperative that Christians beseech God to guide Americans and our leaders to seek after His righteousness."

It was the hope and aspiration of President Trump to make America Great Again. His desire was through changed policies and putting into place a judiciary through appointments that would uphold the rule of law and follow the Constitution. While those are admirable pursuits, where he failed in making America great again, is that it fell short of moving the people of this nation to pursue righteousness. Only righteousness can make a nation great. J. Vernon McGee stated that "the pathway of history is strewn with the wrecks, the debris, and the ruins of nations that didn't follow this principle." **"Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a disgrace to any people."**

John Calvin described it as making the invisible kingdom, visible. The invisible kingdom is made visible when we, it's citizens, live godly lives.

If we want to be a righteous nation that is exalted, a familiar passage gives us three required actions followed by three outcomes.

**II Chronicles 7:14**

Solomon had just dedicated the Temple to God. God appeared to him in a dream telling the new king that if the nation deviated from following Him, calamity would follow. To experience God's mercy, three steps were required. They included humbling themselves before God where they put themselves in proper perspective by recognizing who they were in comparison to who God is. Second, they were to seek God through prayer, which is an admission of their need and dependency on God, in this case for His mercy because of their sin. This leads to the third requirement, which is to repent of sin. They must acknowledge a violation of God's law, seek His forgiveness and turn from that sin. Henry Blackaby writes that "Revival will never come to the people of God until we view the awfulness of our sin as God does."

When God's people are serious about those three requirements, three outcomes will occur: God will hear our sincere prayer, He will forgive us of our sin because of His promise (**I John 1:9**) and He will heal the land.

Therein lies the requirements for the greatness of a nation. Revival begins with each of us seeking God and repenting of sin. **"Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a disgrace to any people."**