

## Introduction

In 1831, the French statesman, historian, and social philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville published a famous two-part work titled *Democracy in America*. He identified in it the secret to our nation's greatness. He wrote, "**America is great because America is good, and if America ever ceases to be good, America will cease to be great.**" Notice the connection de Tocqueville made between goodness and its greatness. To be great, nations must be good – from the inside out – and that's what I'm going to preach about today in Proverbs 14:34.

## What Morality and Immorality Are

Let's start with the word "**righteousness.**" Righteousness is one of the dominant themes of the Bible. It refers to being and doing what is right and good as a result of relationship with God. It refers, in other words, to what we call morality. To be moral is to be righteous.

That raises the question of course, what is moral? According to the Bible, Jesus Himself, and a host of historical ethical writers, it's love. Love is the source from which all rightness and goodness coherently flow. It is the sum and substance of morality.

Now, love fully developed forms a host of attendant conditions and behaviors. Benjamin Franklin carried a little book at all times that listed 13 virtues to which he subscribed. I'll read five: "**temperance (drink not to elevation), silence (avoid trifling conversation), resolution (perform without fail what you resolve), justice (wrong none by doing injuries), and chastity (be sexually pure).**"

Those are examples of the constant conditions and behaviors that love forms. There are many others and together they comprise morality.

But the wise man also addresses immorality. Notice the word "**sin**" in verse 34. Sin is unrighteousness or iniquity. Those two words refer to being and doing what is wrong and bad. They refer, in other words, to immorality. To be immoral is to be unrighteous or iniquitous.

That raises the question of course, what is immoral? Remember that the sum and substance of morality is love. The sum and substance of immorality, therefore, is the opposite and absence of love. The opposite of love is hatred (ill will). The absence of love is apathy (not caring). The sum and substance of immorality, therefore, are hatred and apathy.

Hatred and apathy, like love, form a host of attendant conditions and behaviors. Franklin's 13 virtues identify by contrast what some of those are: drink to elevation, indulge in trifling conversation, don't perform what you resolve, wrong others, and so on. Those are examples of the constant conditions and behaviors that hatred and apathy form. There are many others and together they comprise immorality.

### What Morality and Immorality Do

Now that we know what morality and immorality are, let's examine what they do.

Morality, according to the first line in verse 34, "**exalts a nation.**" As commentator Franz Delitzsch correctly explains, the Hebrew word translated "**exalts**" means, "**determines the condition of its future as one of progress.**" It moves a nation in the direction of utopia, in other words, a society in which conditions are wonderful.

But notice what the second line in verse 34 says about immorality. It's a "**disgrace**" to any nation. The Hebrew word translated "**disgrace**" connotes shame. But it also carries the idea of "**bringing down**" or "**laying low.**" Immorality brings a nation down. It determines the condition of its future as one of regress. It moves it in the direction of dystopia, a society in which conditions are dreadful.

Both lines in verse 34 make sense to us when we understand the essential role of morality in human life. It's to give us a place to stand against our desires. It functions to suppress or redirect our desires. It enables us to do the right that we at the moment want not to do, and not to do the wrong that we at the moment want to do. That's the essential role of morality.

A young man told me about an experience he had in college. His roommate got hold of a big biology exam they were having the next day and wanted to give it to him. He wouldn't accept it though because he'd be cheating if he did. **"I wanted to,"** he confessed, **"But I didn't."** Notice what morality did. It suppressed his desire to take the easy way out. He did not do the wrong that he at the moment wanted to do.

That illustrates the purpose of morality. It's to give us a place to stand against our desires. And the well-being of any nation, including ours, depends on that purpose being generally achieved among the masses. The chief architect of our United States Constitution, James Madison, knew that. He wrote, **"We have staked the future of all of our political institutions upon the capacity for self-government; upon the capacity of each and all of us to govern ourselves, to control ourselves, according to the Ten Commandments of God."**

Madison was essentially saying that same thing that Proverbs 14:34 says. Morality makes a nation flourish. Immorality makes it flounder.

### **Verse 34 and America**

No verse in the Bible speaks more profoundly to the destinies of nations, including America's, than verse 34. I have a question in that regard. Does the first line or the second in it describe America? Unfortunately the answer is, **"the second line."** Let me explain.

For most of its national life, a body of moral knowledge existed in America. By **"existed"** I mean its social and political institutions made that body of moral knowledge available to the public, the masses. That body of moral knowledge consisted of what we call **"the Judeo-Christian ethic."** It was a Biblical ethic – Old Testament and New. Not everyone lived out that ethic of course, but almost everyone endorsed it as being beneficial and true. It was our cultural consensus and we were in that sense a righteous nation.

But that's no longer the case. For a host of reasons, a body of moral knowledge does not exist in America today. Its social and political

institutions do not present a body of moral knowledge of any kind, Christian or otherwise, to the masses. Why don't they? It's because they think that there's nothing to present. There's no objective standard by which to determine what is right and wrong. What is right and wrong, therefore, is not and cannot be a subject of knowledge.

A few years ago, a *New York Times* reporter visited a New Jersey high school classroom. The teacher and students were discussing the case of a woman who found \$1000 and turned it in. All fifteen students in the class said she was a fool for doing so and that they themselves would have kept the money. Stunned that the teacher didn't correct them, the reporter asked her after class why she didn't. To which she replied, **"If I came from the position of what is right and wrong, then I'm not their counselor."**

Do you get the teacher's point of view? What is right and wrong is not a subject of knowledge. When it comes to morality, therefore, there's nothing to teach her students. She exemplifies the condition of America culture today.

The results, as verse 34 teaches, are catastrophic. When morality is rejected as knowledge, the only thing left to direct people is their desires. Feelings come to govern them. That in turn brings not just them down but their nation as well. It lays it low. It turns it in the direction of dystopia. Consider two quick examples of what I mean.

One is the encroachment of government on our freedoms. John Adams, a signer of the Declaration of Independence and our 2<sup>nd</sup> president, said this, **"Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other."** For a society to function well, people's wrong desires and the vices to which they lead have to be restrained. If the people themselves don't restrain them, then government will – by taking away their liberties. That is in fact happening today at every level of government.

Violence and sexual assault became such a problem in one New York

school district, for instance, that its Board of Education instituted a stern **“no contact policy.”** That policy prohibits physical contact of any kind between students and I mean **“any.”** So, one school suspended two students for giving each other **“high fives”** in the hallway, which ignited a firestorm of controversy. What happened is clear. The students didn't restrain themselves. So, the school board did by taking away liberties.

A second example of our descent to dystopia is America's paralyzing debt at both the individual and governmental levels. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure it out. On the individual level, people want things they can't afford and go in debt to get them. On the governmental level, our politicians want things the government can't afford and go in debt to get them. Without moral knowledge, individuals and governments (local, state, and federal) indulge their desires. The result is calamitous debt – almost \$16 trillion at the federal level.

The evidence is overwhelming. The line in verse 34 that describes America today is the second. It is immoral and being brought down.

### **Inside Out**

But let's not despair. Let's do what we can about it instead. Chuck Colson explains what that is in his book *How Now Shall We Live?* He contends that we can redeem our culture and that the best way to do so is, **“from the inside out - from the individual to the family to the community, and then outward in ever widening ripples.”**

Notice that redeeming culture begins with individuals – you and me. You and I must become righteous. Becoming that is a three step process.

First, we develop a relationship with God. Remember how the Bible defines righteousness. It's being and doing what is right and good as a result of relationship with God. So, we develop such a relationship. We make the decision to be with Jesus in order to learn and do all that He says. We then arrange our affairs around carrying that decision out.

Second, we learn the body of moral knowledge that exists. There is an objective standard that determines what is right and wrong. That

standard is the nature of God, which He expresses in His written word the Bible. So, we study and learn everything we can about His nature and written word. We know what is right and wrong when we do.

Finally third, we let the body of moral knowledge we've learned direct what we are and do. We intend to be and do what is consistent with God's nature and word and not to be and do what is inconsistent them. We then carry out our intention as best as we can.

Take something as simple as being "**thin-skinned**," overly sensitive to the comments and actions of others. Or take being a windbag, one who dominates conversation. I've studied and learned God's body of moral knowledge and know this. Both, according to 1 Corinthians 13:4-5, are contrary to love and morally wrong. So, I intend to be thick-skinned and a good listener and am carrying out my intention as best as I can.

But redeeming culture starts not stops with individuals. According to the inside out principle it moves out from the individual to the family to the community to the nation. Simply put, we confront people, groups, and institutions with the body of moral knowledge we know. We attempt to preach, promote, and protect it with regard to them.

Proposition 8, for instance, bans same sex marriage in California. Christian groups spent significant time and money promoting it and defending it on appeal. Tony Campolo argues that they doing so is foolish and wrong – that it's unloving and won't change homosexual behaviors. But there's something he doesn't grasp. When Christians abandon culture to secularists, it becomes what Richard Neuhaus called a "**naked public square**." It's a public square or culture devoid of any spiritual thought at all to guide it.

## **Conclusion**

That then is God's call for Independence Day 2012. We must be and do what is right and good as individuals. And we must work to make our culture be and do what right and good as well. We must be righteous, in other words, from the inside out.