

INTRODUCTION

In 1831, the French statesman, historian, and social philosopher, Alexis de Tocqueville, published a famous two-part work titled *Democracy in America*. In it, he identified 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 that de Tocqueville made – between a nation's goodness and its greatness – and he was right in making it. To be great, nations must be good – from the inside out – and that's what I'm going to preach about today. Turn to the passage I read, Proverbs 14:34.

VIRTUE

Let's start with the word "righteousness." Righteousness is one of the dominant themes of the Bible. It refers to rightness and goodness. Experts and writers in ethics today of course wouldn't be caught dead using the word "righteousness." They use the word "virtue" instead but it means the same thing. Virtue is rightness and goodness.

Benjamin Franklin was one of our most celebrated founding fathers. He was a truly gifted man, a genius really, who was acclaimed for many things including his wit and the proverbs and writings it produced. He did address a wide range of subjects in that regard, his favorite of which was probably virtue. In his *Autobiography*, he mentioned a small book that he carried with him at all times. This book was a list of 13 virtues that he had made his lifetime goals. It's instructive because it helps us understand how virtue manifests itself in the real world of our everyday lives. Here are Franklin's 13 virtues: (1) Temperance – drink not to elevation; (2) Silence – avoid trifling conversation; (3) Order – let all your things have their places; (4) Resolution – perform without fail what you resolve; (5) Frugality – waste nothing; (6) Industry – lose no time; be always employed; (7) Sincerity – use no hurtful deceit; think innocently; (8) Justice – wrong none by doing injuries; (9) Moderation -

avoid extremes; forbear resenting; (10) Cleanliness – tolerate no uncleanness in body; (11) Tranquility – be not disturbed at trifles; (12) Chastity – be sexually pure; and (13) – imitate Jesus.

Franklin's list illustrates what virtue is. It is rightness and goodness in the way that we think and act in our everyday lives.

ESSENTIAL TO FREEDOM

Now, notice what virtue does according to verse 34. It *"exalts a nation."* According to Bible commentator Franz Delitzsch, the Hebrew word translated "exalts" means *"determines the condition of its future as one of progress."* That's what virtue does. It determines the condition of our nation's future as one of progress.

Progress has many nuances, the most important of which is freedom. Going back to Delitzsch's definition, virtue determines the progress of our freedom. Listen to one of Franklin's proverbs in that regard. He said, *"Only a virtuous people are capable of freedom."* That is one of the most important truths of our existence. Virtue is essential to freedom.

But it wasn't just Franklin who believed that. Many other founding fathers did as well. James Madison, the chief architect of our Constitution, declared, for instance: *"We have staked the future of all of our political institutions upon the capacity of mankind for self-government; upon the capacity of each and all of us to govern ourselves, to control ourselves, to sustain ourselves according to the Ten Commandments of God."* John Adams, a signer of the Declaration of Independence and our 2nd president, concurred. He said: *"Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other."* Madison and Adams were right. Virtue is absolutely essential to the incredible freedoms that our Constitution gives us.

The second line in verse 34 helps us understand why it is. The wise man writes, *"Sin is a disgrace to any people."* Sin and vice are synonyms. The wise man is saying, therefore, that vice lowers a nation

in the eyes of God and the world. But that's not all it does. The Hebrew word also carries the idea of bringing down. Vice brings nations down. It lays them low in many ways, one of which is that it erodes freedom.

It does so because non-virtuous people aren't capable of self-government. For societies to function well, vice has to be restrained. If the people, therefore, don't restrain it, the government will by taking away their liberties. Governments always rule non-virtuous societies by force and fear, a fact that tyrants know all too well.

Several weeks ago, a school system in a New York community did something that illustrates exactly what I mean. Violence and sexual harassment became such a problem in its schools that it instituted a stern "no contact policy." This policy prohibits physical contact of any kind between students and I mean "any." Thus, the system suspended two students several weeks ago for giving each other "high fives" in the hallway, which in turn ignited a firestorm of controversy. Notice what happened here. The students didn't restrain vice. So the school system did – by taking away their liberties.

That is a microcosm of the world at large. For societies to function well, vice has to be restrained. If the people, therefore, don't restrain it, government will by taking away their liberties. When we don't govern ourselves, we invite others to govern us.

That explains why Franklin, Madison, and Adams said what they did. Virtue is essential to the freedoms that our Constitution gives us.

THE LOSS OF VIRTUE AND FREEDOM

So where does America stand in that regard? Are we the first line of verse 34 or the second? I fear it's the second.

There was a time when our culture had a body of moral knowledge to which the vast majority of its people subscribed and which they tried to follow, even if imperfectly. And that body of moral knowledge was Christian, meaning, Biblical. We were, in that sense, virtuous.

But as many ethicists point out, that is no longer the case. Take an

ethics course at any secular university or talk to the “man on the street” and you’ll see what I mean. One George Gallup poll, for example, found that 69% of Americans believe that there are no moral absolutes. In a George Barna poll, it was 71%. That means that 3 out of 4 Americans believe that right and wrong are only what each individual determines them to be. There is no longer a body of moral knowledge in our culture. There is no Christian consensus to which most people subscribe.

What is the result of that? I can tell you in one word, vice. Americans have become a non-virtuous people.

Several years ago, for instance, a *New York Times* reporter visited a New Jersey high school classroom. The teacher and students in it were discussing the case of a woman who had found \$1000 and turned it in. Of the fifteen students in the class, every one 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.”*

Unfortunately, that teacher and those students aren’t exceptions. They’re the rule. Just spend an hour watching television shows on any given night and you’ll see exactly what I mean. We are at best a morally indifferent culture in which vice not virtue rules.

And we’re paying the piper because it does. Theologian Michael Novak says it bluntly this way: *“Our people are losing virtue. That is why we have been losing self-government.”* He’s right. If we don’t restrain ourselves, we’re inviting state and federal legislatures to restrain us instead, and that’s exactly what’s happening. Government is intruding more and more into our everyday lives. I’m not being dramatic when I say that the death of virtue threatens our very liberty as a people.

INSIDE OUT

That’s the problem we face but happily there’s a solution. That solution is “inside out.” That how’s chuck Colson says it in his book *How*

Now Shall We Live. He argues that we can redeem our culture and that the best way to do that is from the inside out, ***“from the individual to the family to the community, and then outward in ever widening ripples.”*** Notice who is first. You are. I am. Private virtue is the key to redeeming our culture. I believe that with all of my heart.

Many others, however, probably most, don't. The primary emphasis in our culture today is on social justice. Public schools, universities, and churches teach people to crusade and wipe out the social ills that plague our society – poverty, drug addiction, crime, divorce, pornography, child abuse, and much more. But at the same time, they ignore the private vice of the crusaders themselves.

They fail to realize in doing so that the problem itself is inside out. Social ills always begin as private vice. Vice in the individual leads to vice in the family, which leads to vice in the community, which leads to vice in ever widening ripples. Thus, people who aren't virtuous themselves inevitably fail in their efforts to cure society's ills. It's a mistake to emphasize social justice at the expense of private virtue.

It's dangerous as well! Georgetown University professor James Schall says it this way: ***“There is no social sin without personal sin. Our youth today are almost invariably taught they must change the world, not their souls. So, they change the world and it becomes worse.”*** That is so true. Social crusaders with zeal but not virtue usually enact solutions that are worse than the problems they're attempting to solve. The infamous *Roe v. Wade* decision legalizing abortion is a classic example of what I mean.

It's clear then. The best way to redeem our culture is inside out. To change our culture, we ourselves must change. You and I must become virtuous. Remember Franklin's last virtue, the most important of the 13. Imitate Jesus. That is the essence of virtue. So, we commit ourselves to thinking and acting like Jesus in the real world of our everyday lives. That is the first and major step in redeeming our culture.

And here's why it is. Listen carefully to this. The monstrous evils

that exist in our culture are supported by the readiness of decent people to harm others or allow harm to come to others when the conditions are right. The persistence of the greater evils that monstrous people do rests upon the persistence of the lesser evils that decent people do. Without those lesser evils, the greater evils would not exist or at least would not exist as they do now.

I know Christians, for instance, who have done the following: lied about their child's age to get a cheaper amusement park ticket, paid for one unlimited refill drink at Chuck E. Cheese but the husband and wife shared it, and claimed a personal expense as a company expense.

Now, those individuals wouldn't even dream of burglarizing a home, stealing a car, or shoplifting from a store. But what they don't realize is this. What they did is on the same continuum as burglarizing, stealing, and shoplifting are on. Crime against property is one of our culture's biggest challenges and it rests on the readiness of decent people to steal when the conditions are right – just as those professing Christians did.

That means if decent people become honest and respect the money and property of others, those greater crimes against money and property will eventually decrease. It's the inside out principle at work here. That particular virtue will spread from the individuals to their families to their communities and beyond.

CONCLUSION

Do you realize what that means? You and I can do something right now to make America great. For America to be great, it must be good. But it being good has no meaning outside of the individuals who make it up. You and I are those individuals. That means for America to be great you and I must be good. We must be virtuous. So let's make the commitment this day, as disciples of Jesus first of all and as patriots second of all, that we will be. Let's change this wonderful country of ours by being virtuous, by being like Jesus, in the real world of our everyday lives. Let's change it from the inside out.

- (1) Temperance – drink not to elevation;**
- (2) Silence – avoid trifling conversation;**
- (3) Order – let all your things have their places;**
- (4) Resolution – perform without fail what you resolve;**
- (5) Frugality – waste nothing;**
- (6) Industry – lose no time; be always employed;**
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- (12) Chastity – be sexually pure;**
- (13) Imitate Jesus.**