

## **RIGHTEOUSNESS EXALTETH A NATION**

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Proverbs 14:34

We often hear people speak of our country as being a Christian nation. Is it correct to call it that when everyone knows that our land is full of crime, lawlessness, and ungodliness? Half of the people are not members of any Christian Church, and even among the other half there is much indifference toward religion. Can God look with favor upon such a nation and bless it?

### **“Sin Is a Reproach to Any People”**

God does not tolerate sins, regardless of whether they are committed by individuals or by a whole nation, Cp. Job 34:29. He has placed governments in authority to curb sinful acts which are harmful to the citizens and the State and to punish the evildoers, 1 Pet. 2:14. When the government neglects to preserve good order and outward decency, it compels God to punish the nation for the crimes it permits to go unpunished. God has commanded that murderers should be put to death by the government. Cp. Gen. 9:6; Rom. 13:1-4. But if dangerous criminals are allowed to go free, they may cause the state an endless amount of trouble. The American people have to pay dearly for the crimes that are committed and the lawbreaking that goes on in our country. The efforts to check crime cost billions of dollars annually, and billions more lost in property destroyed. Far worse, however, is the loss of the great number of lives and the suffering and unhappiness which crimes cause.

J. Edgar Hoover, head of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, said: “Today there are in America over 4,300,000 criminals actively at work plundering and murdering. There is an aggregate of 1,330,000 serious crimes and a national crime bill of fifteen billion dollars a year.” The average age of criminals today is nineteen years, much lower than in the past.

Daily items in newspapers show that the conduct of many Americans is not what it should be, since they are citizens of a country in which they enjoy blessings and opportunities as perhaps no other people in the world. Practically every issue of the daily papers contains reports of murders, robberies, suicides, divorce scandals, cruelties, dishonest business practices, and corruption in public office. Crime has grown so common that the American people are no longer horrified over shameful immoral and lawless conduct as they used to be.

All good citizens are very much alarmed over the terrible increase of lawlessness and ungodliness in our land. More and more children and young people have become lawbreakers and commit criminal acts. Our government has great difficulty in coping with the evil of child delinquency. This deplorable condition in which our country finds

itself today is largely due to the breakdown of the home and the disappearance of orderly family life. God has ordained that husband and wife are to remain faithful to each other and live together until death parts them. When married people are divorced without just cause, they overthrow God's holy ordinance, degrade marriage, and tear down the home. The home is the foundation of the State and of human society. When the homes are destroyed, the nation falls apart. The fact that one out of every six marriages ends in divorce shows how depraved and ungodly our country has become.

Our country and the other nations of the world are being led to the brink of ruin by the sins and vices of their subjects. Sins against the Sixth Commandment in particular were the cause of the downfall of the mighty Roman Empire and of many other world powers. Our land is morally on the downward grade. Sin and ungodly conduct are glorified in movie films, plays, pictures, and in much of the popular literature of today. Movie stars, many of whom have loose morals, have become the heroes, the ideals, of American youth. Morally the world is as bad as, and possibly worse than, ancient Sodom. What God did to that city He may have to do to the nations of today which are guilty of sins that cry to heaven. Cp. Gen. 18:20, 21.

One reason for the increase in crime is laxity in law enforcement and in the meting out of punishment. This may often be the result of corruption in public office and bribery, but it is also due to sentimental feeling toward offenders. However, the homes and the schools are also largely to blame. Christians are not trained to respect authority, and their sinful traits remain unchecked in youth. All sins have their roots in the heart. Modern education has been concerned only with the mind and body, but sound character training is impossible without religion. Prosperity and luxury have also become great temptations to satisfy selfish desires by unlawful means.

Our modern way of life has caused people to lose all consideration for the rights of others. The consciences have become dulled and the moral standards lowered by constant familiarity with indecent speech and acts and by the glorification of sin in the movies and popular literature.

The civil government cannot make people better morally and reform them, but it can and should check acts of lawlessness and punish the offenders severely enough to discourage lawbreaking. The administration of the laws and of justice in the courts should be made as effective as possible. Guilty persons should be dealt with properly and speedily, and the citizens should be compelled to respect law and order. Some countries have much less trouble with their citizens than our Government because the public officials have been more conscientious in the performance of their duties. A nation that neglects to preserve decency and respect for authority plunges itself into ruin. When the sins of a country cry to heaven, because nothing is done about them, God is obliged to visit that nation in His wrath. He punishes it with war, disasters, and misfortunes.

Sin is a "reproach," a disgrace, to any nation, Prov. 14:34. Luther translated this: "Sin is the destruction of the people"; that is, it is the cause of untold misery and suffering.

When sin corrupts a nation and the people despise God's Moral Law, punishment is as certain to follow as it did at the time of the Flood. "The mills of God grind slowly, but they grind exceeding fine." Christians know that God used two terrible world wars to punish the nations for their sins. Cp. Jer. 12:17; Amos 9:8.

The Lord will not let the sins of our own country go unpunished. He has destroyed many nations for the very sins that are being freely committed in our country, and He will deal all the more severely with a nation that has been so highly favored by Him and has had such manifold opportunities to hear His Word as the American people. If our people would only follow the example of the city of Nineveh, to which God granted another season of grace because the people repented after they had heard the warning of the Prophet Jonah! Cp. Jonah 3:5-10.

The present situation must cause Christians considerable worry and concern, since not only the welfare of the State is endangered, but also the Church is confronted with serious problems. Moreover, such conditions tend to become worse and get out of control in times of war. It should be evident that the Christians have the important obligation to prevent their country from sinking into moral decay and ruin. What can they do to help promote better and cleaner conduct in civic life?

### **God Rewards Civil Righteousness**

Relatively speaking, it is permissible to speak of our nation as a Christian country, because of the large number of nominal Christians among its citizens, the influence of the Church, and the Christian principles according to which our Government functions. Our country is certainly more Christian than China, Japan, India, Russia, and many other nations. But the Christian character of our country is, unfortunately, not as real and strong as it should be.

There are probably more churches in our land than in any other country, in proportion to the population. Nevertheless, less than half of our people claim membership in any Christian denomination. On the other hand, the majority of those who are listed as church members seldom attend the church services, receive very little religious instruction, and show no interest in religion. Many are members of churches which deny fundamental teachings of the Bible and proclaim false doctrines instead of the Word of God.

Since not all the inhabitants of our country are Christians, it cannot be expected that all will live like children of God. But even the heathen and unbelievers are obliged to live according to the Natural Law that is written in their hearts and to obey the laws of their government. Cp. Rom. 2:14,15. Natural man is able to conduct himself in an outwardly decent manner and conform his behavior to the standards of morality which human society and civil government demand of him. By living as a respectable, upright, and loyal citizen he acquires a so-called "civil righteousness," which not only places him in good standing with his rulers and fellow citizens, but which God has also promised to reward with temporal blessings. Cp. Rom. 2:10.

As long as heathen nations tried to keep themselves morally clean and preserved decency and order, God blessed them with peace and prosperity, as we see in the case of the ancient Roman Republic, whose citizens were shining examples of moral integrity, honesty, and patriotism. The strength of a nation lies not in its armies and navies, but in the character of its people. The better the citizens conduct themselves in their relationship toward the State and toward one another, the more will the country as a whole prosper.

*“Righteousness exalteth a nation.”* Never perhaps in the history of our country was there so much need of having this proverb dinned into the ears of every American citizen. The more civil righteousness there is in our country, the better off it will be because of this.

Perhaps we know people who are not members of any church and yet are honest, upright, and law-abiding. As far as their outward lives are concerned, these people are model citizens. Sometimes they put church members to shame by their good conduct. It is, of course, a pity that they are not concerned about their souls and usually trust in their work-righteousness as sufficient for getting them into heaven. For their eternal welfare their good conduct has no value. But it does serve them in good stead for this life and is of great benefit to the State. Our Lutheran Confessions say:

We think concerning the righteousness of reason thus, namely, that God requires it. . . . For God wishes those who are carnal (gross sinners) to be restrained by civil discipline, and to maintain this, He has given laws, letters, doctrine, magistrates, penalties. And this righteousness of reason by its own strength can, to a certain extent, work, although it is often overcome by natural weakness and by the devil impelling it to manifest crimes. Now, although we cheerfully assign this righteousness of reason the praises that are due it (for this corrupt nature has no greater good [in this life and in a worldly nature nothing is ever better than uprightness and virtue], and God also honors it with bodily rewards), yet it ought not to be praised with reproach to Christ. (Apol., Art. IV, Trig p. 127.)

While we recognize the value of civil righteousness, we must not close our eyes to its limitations and defects. The natural heart of man, which is not under the influence of the Gospel, is itself corrupt and unreliable. Cp. Matt. 7:18; 12:35; 15:19. The civil righteousness of the unbeliever is built on sand, Matt. 7:26, 27.

But there is still a much better righteousness than that which natural man can produce. Solomon, in Prov. 14:34, speaks of the righteousness which is practiced by men who fear God and which flows from the faith that a Christian has in his heart. Christians alone are able to do good works which God is pleased to accept for Jesus' sake as fruits of their faith. Their righteousness is of an entirely different kind and quality from that of the unbelievers, Cp. Matt. 5:20. They serve God from the heart and conduct their entire lives according to His will. They are deeply grieved by the sins of their fellow citizens and by the ungodliness in their nation. But they pray fervently to God to spare

their country from severe punishment, and they do everything in their power to improve the moral conditions.

God continues to show mercy and favor to a nation like ours by reason of the believers who serve Him faithfully. If He would have saved Sodom for the sake of a handful of righteous people and in answer to Abraham's prayer, He will have mercy upon our country for the sake of the godly people He has in it. Cp. Gen. 18:23-33. "*By the blessing of the upright the city is exalted,*" Prov. 11:11.