

The Country and the Church

by Vance Havner

The country and the church are facing a crisis of material prosperity but spiritual poverty, and the need for rebirth in patriotism and Pentecost is urgent.

Duration: 32:54

Scripture: Matthew 5:23-24, Luke 19:10, John 6:53-54, Galatians 6:14, 1 Peter 2:13-15, Revelation 22:11

Topics: "Christian Freedom", "Spiritual Commitment"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher emphasizes the need for both the Constitution and the Bible to come alive in our lives. He compares the external appearance of freedom in government to an embalmed body, lacking vitality. The preacher also highlights the importance of living by the Bible and not just possessing it as a book that gathers dust. He shares a story about a soldier's willingness to die for his country, drawing a parallel to our commitment to Jesus Christ. The sermon concludes with a reminder to submit to authority and use our freedom responsibly as servants of God.

Transcript

I thought that maybe we ought to think together about the country and the church. There are some parallels that can be drawn here, and of course you're familiar with those familiar verses in 1 Peter 2, where we read some good advice about country and our duty as Christians, beginning with the 13th, "...submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake, whether it be to the king, or supreme, or under governors, as unto them that are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers, and for the praise of them that do well. For so is the will of God, that with well-doing ye may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men, as free, and not using your liberty for a cloak of maliciousness, but as the servants of God." Then he sums it all up, "...honor all men, love the brotherhood, fear God, honor the king." Our country is about 200 years old as an independent nation.

The Church of Jesus Christ is about 2,000 years old. Many of the conditions that exist in the country today are paralleled by similar conditions in the Church. And when I say the Church, I mean the professing Church at large, you'll understand.

The same story in America now, as Rome knew in her last days, same symptoms, same disease, "...sad fares the land, the hastening ills appray, where wealth accumulates and men decay." We say it can't happen here. That's what they said. They said it in Athens, they said it in Rome, they said it in Egypt.

But the Parthenon and the Colosseum and the Pyramids bear silent witness otherwise. History repeats itself. And the only thing we ever learn from history is that we don't learn anything from history.

To begin with, both in America and in the Church, we are rich in what money can buy, and poor in what it can't buy. You remember the story of the Pope walking along with Thomas Aquinas amidst all the glories of the Vatican and saying, no longer does the Church have to say, silver and gold have I none. And Sir Tom, his listener, said, no, and neither can she say, rise and walk.

The Church can stand anything better than popularity and prosperity. We're poor when we're rich, we're rich when we're poor. We're secure in danger, but endangered by security.

I heard of a hillbilly that walked down the street some time ago by a furrier's shop, and there was a leopard-skin coat hanging out there, and he looked at it a minute and said, that old cat was better off before he was worth so much. That's possible in a nation, it's possible with people. In Revelation 3.18, Jesus tells us that he wants three things for the Church.

You know, I'd read that for years and years and years, and then one day it just jumped out of the text and grabbed me. You've had that happen. He wants three things for his Church, and the first of them was that thou mayest be rich, not get rich, God doesn't want the Church to get rich, but be rich in all that she has as the bride and the groom, who though rich for our sakes became poor.

We through his poverty might be made rich. And both in America and in the Church, our problem today is material, plenty, and spiritual poverty. Laodicea, rich and increased with goods and don't need a thing, that's material prosperity.

But wretched, miserable, blind, poor, and naked, that's spiritual poverty. I'm concerned about the condition of our country. I'm bothered about its financial condition.

I can't even think in terms of trillions of dollars, neither can you maybe. But we spend billions on nuclear armaments and probably don't have a friend in the family of nations. And the moral degradation bothers me.

Everybody wants their rights and nobody wants to do anything about their responsibilities. We lack the moral and spiritual integrity to handle the problems that science has raised. And the fact is, if we'd had it, we wouldn't have some of the problems, because they've slipped up on us because we didn't handle them.

The real problem has always been sin, and science does not have the answer to sin. When I think of the drug craze and the sex craze, drug crazy, sex crazy, show crazy, sports crazy, land devourers, broken homes, unmarried couples by the million, living as man and wife, teenage single parents, homosexuality, age of permissiveness when man becomes his own god, humanism, getting ready for the man who will claim to be god a little later on, no king in Israel, every man does not what's right in his own eyes, that would be bad enough. But what he wants to do, whether it's right or not, no nation can survive that.

Every time we have a disaster, tornado or something like that, you read immediately that they had to be on the guard against looters. Well, where were those fellows all the time? Right here among us. They didn't just drop down for that occasion.

My Bible says we're sheep among wolves. You'll find that out if you get out much among them. A generation that's never learned how to work, for the most part, will turn into anarchy if things get worse.

It's a sad time. You might as well try to dam up Niagara Falls with toothpicks as to hold back the flood tide of lawlessness that will sweep in when the great hinderer is removed. Cheap Christianity, Laodicean church.

I know we have the 4,000 who have not bowed the knee to Baal, but millions of church members have only a form of godliness without the power. We used to have too much respect for church to join it unless we were converted. Now everybody comes in, and as in the days of Constantine, out to Christianize paganism, and it turns around paganizing Christianity.

The standard is so low, and the majority of our church members live at such low ebb, you'd have to backslide to be in fellowship. In the second place, America has lost her regard for the flag. Stars and stripes have become cheap, commonplace.

Gone are the days when it brought tears to our eyes, and a lump in our throat, and a tug at our hearts. All the white no longer means purity, and the blue doesn't mean loyalty, and the red doesn't stand for the blood of martyrs who gave their lives that we might have the land of the free and the home of the brave. And the banner of the church is the cross, and God forbid that we glory in anything else than that.

But it's the cross of Christ, mind you, because a Christless cross is as meaningless as a crossless Christ. Let him come down from the cross, and we'll believe him, they say. And they would.

They'd accept him today, if you leave the cross out of it. But he's not just the paragon, he's the propitiation. And the cross is the symbol of our faith, the vertical beam that speaks of our relationship to God.

Love the Lord thy God, and the horizontal beam, thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. On these hang all the law and the prophets. Paul wanted to have a conscience void of offense toward God and man, and the way he did it was exactly that way.

He stayed right with the cross, right with God, and right with people. How about you this morning? I don't carry a crucifix around, but many times in my meditations I find myself saying, Lord, how am I doing in my relationship to you? Is there any point of rebellion in your heart between you and God? And how about you and people? Is there anybody that's mad at you? And you haven't done the thing the Bible says do. Jesus says in application, you bring your envelope to church for the offering, and remember your brother's mad at you, hang on to your offering until you get right with your brother.

That sure would spoil a lot of offerings over the country, some of our churches. Get right with your brother. That's what the book says.

But the church today has devised a new cross, an ornament to wear around the neck, a commonplace symbol twisted out of context, a charm, kind of a holy horseshoe. I think A. W. Tozer never wrote anything better than the old cross than the new. Have you ever read that? It's been translated in other languages.

I think that was his masterpiece. It doesn't interfere, this new cross, with godless living. It never goes against the grain of the old nature.

Sunday morning churchgoers sing, and sometimes I get nervous as I hear them make their way through it to the old rugged cross. I'll never be true. It's shame and reproach.

Gladly bear. God help us, we're not bearing it any kind of way much, let alone gladly. A song leader told me the other day, said the kids here were supposed to give a program one night, and they illustrated this business of putting, well I, the way I put it, putting cushions in the church instead of crosses these days, said they were supposed to come down the aisle singing onward, Christian soldiers marching as to war.

And at the last minute, some of them wanted, each of them wanted to bring a little cross along with them. Well, it was too late, the song leader said. But a few had one anyhow, but they didn't like it.

He took them away and hid them in the Sunday school room. When you start that and the kids rebel, you're in trouble. They came down singing onward, Christian soldiers marching as to war, with the cross of Jesus hid behind the door.

I don't blame the kids. I don't blame them at all. That's why we've hid it.

We've hid it behind the door. It's about time the stars and stripes meant something in America. It's about time the cross of Jesus meant something again to the church.

During the First World War, Caruso came to Atlanta to sing for a patriotic rally. And that man, in whose throat was lodged perhaps one of the greatest voices that mankind's ever known, sang, finished, with a star-spangled banner. But when he reached that last note, instead of the normal place where you sing it, he lifted it an octave.

And they said it took nearly half an hour to get that crowd quiet. Because that did something to them. I'd like to see a church full of professing Christians really get happy sometime singing, in the cross of Christ our glory, towering over the wrecks of time, all the light of sacred story gathers round its head sublime.

The way we sang it, now you'd think it was a lullaby instead of a reveille. It's supposed to wake us up. In the third place, the Constitution of the United States means mighty little to Americans today, and the Bible means mighty little to the average church member.

Daniel Webster said this about government. If you take one word out of what he said, you can apply it in all directions. You may look at government and see it possesses all the external marks of freedom, and yet find nothing of the essence in it, no vitality, just as you may contemplate an embalmed body where art has preserved proportion and form amid nerves without action and veins without blood.

The Constitution needs to come to life again today, and the Bible needs to come to life in our experience. To the average church member, it's almost a dead book. Oh, everybody has one.

Once in a while they quote it. It's in a pew rack at church and gathers dust on tables, but although we say lovely things about it in tribute, few there be who make it the rule of their lives. My friend Adrian Rogers, who has a tremendous church now, bailed you following Robert G. Lee.

The other day, you know, Madam O'Hare was worrying because they didn't have any holiday for her crowd, no national holiday. Said, I know a good one, April Fool's Day. The fool has said, there is no God.

Something wonderful about this old book I heard a long time ago of some man who liked to go hear Bob Ingersoll, who was quite an ardor, but an infidel, and he came out and said, well, that really did things to

your mother's old time religion, but it didn't because mother said she wouldn't cross the street to hear Ingersoll lecture on the mistakes of Moses, but she'd go a long way to hear Moses speak on the mistakes of Ingersoll. There's a wonderful thing about this old Bible. It's been said that if you dig into it, you have a feeling like an electrician rewiring an old house where the power has not been cut off.

You'll get a shock, get a charge. Church members are ignorant of the Bible and the Constitution all too often. Now, we're not to worship the Bible.

That would be bibliolatry, but it's the only authorized textbook of our faith. Jesus said when the disciples said, we don't understand what you're talking about. How can we eat your flesh and drink your blood? I wonder what would happen to the average calm, satisfied, sedate American congregation if a preacher bore down on that some morning when they had the Lord's table observed and say, you've got to eat his flesh and drink his blood, or you don't even have the life in you.

Well, no wonder they asked him. He said, the words that I speak unto you, their spirit and their life. Then we have another problem.

Too many people in America are only Americans in name and un-Americans and anti-Americans in conduct. Now, the church has a corresponding ailment. Too many church members name only members of the church, but not members of the family of God.

I remember the First World War and how Teddy Roosevelt lambasted people who had a double loyalty, some to the other crowd, and all those now citizens of this country. He called them hyphenated Americans. He said, this country is not a polyglot boarding house.

Ah, that was terrific. And the Bible says a friend of the world is the enemy of God. I have been in some churches that I think the Lord's crowd has been well compared to sheepfold, but I get in some more like a zoo as I go about.

Did you hear that church the other day? A little church had a sign out in the front that had so many church splits and divisions over the community. I get Harmony Church Number Two. The Lord Abdul Number One.

Hyphenated Americans. He that is not with me is against me. He that gathereth not with me scattereth abroad.

America needs better Americans. The church needs better Christians. One of the great leaders in my denomination, the Southern Baptist, had years gone by, Dr. Gamble, said the trouble with us Baptists is we're many, but we're not much.

That's something to think over. It's the quality that bothers me. We're so anxious today to run up a big roll of statistics that somebody said the Bible says we shall reap if we faint not, but in our zeal we faint if we reap not.

So that's the wrong way to go about it. I've just been out in Los Angeles at the Southern Baptist Convention speaking to the pastors, and that's a crowd of pastors to face. But I said to them, Southern Baptists have never been noted for an inferiority complex.

We brag a lot. I said, now we're out here in Los Angeles, they got a lot of smoke, I think we could blow it out in three days. But I told them this, I said, but it reminds me, years ago they had more smoke than usual, and the meteorologist said this, and it has a double meaning.

It will take a wind from elsewhere to clear up this situation. I said, we need the wind that blew at Pentecost to clear up our situation. That's the only thing that'll do it.

And I wonder, they say we're the soul of the earth. My soul, if we're the soul of the earth, why is it so corrupt? I know the world's not going to be converted, but it'll be a lot better than it is if we're the soul of the earth. And if we're the light of the world, why is everything so dark today? I haven't found a satisfactory answer for that, except that we're not letting our light shine, and we're not remembering that God made of us the soul of the earth to rub us into the carcass of a decaying civilization, and have some effect on it.

Not conversion of the whole world, no, but as many as you can. And then America suffers from a low-grade patriotism, if we have any. I remember World War I, and the boys leaving for France, and their sweethearts weeping at the high school where I was a student.

Oh, we were going over to make the world safe for democracy. It's never been safe for anything since. But anyhow, that's what they went for, and they were willing to give their lives.

Down in Florida, Shell Point, wonderful resort, there's a, I met an old general who was beside George Patton in World War II. And George Patton is a pretty rugged man, you know. But he said one day we were standing there in the Battle of the Bulge, and they brought along a bunch of soldier boys, all shot up.

Some of them would die in a couple hours. George went over to them and said, how are you boys? And everyone who could get his hand to his head saluted, and said, fine, General. Said we walked down the road a little bit, and he never said a word, and I never said a word.

And finally curiosity got the better of me, and I looked at him, and tears were streaming down that rough old face, because that was it. There was patriotism, and willing to die for something. And I think of Paul and that long list of things he'd been through, shipwrecks and everything else under the sun.

And yet I'm sure that when the Lord called over the parapets of heaven, said, how are you doing, Saul? He was in pretty bad shape most of the time. But he said, fine. Yeah.

Do we do that? Certainly we should. I know we've fought more lately than, as Paul Harvey says, we were afraid to win and ashamed to lose. Said rightly.

And we're in a new internationalism, and lost our national identity sometimes, forgetting that a man's a better citizen of the world and nations if he's true to his own nation. Better member of the human family if he's a good member of his own family. I heard Douglas MacArthur say, strange voices are heard across the land about this old and proven concept of patriotism.

Seductive murmurs are arising now that it's outmoded and that we are provincial and immature and reactionary and stupid when we idealize our own country, that there is a higher destiny for us now under another more general flag. He said, rebuke it from the platform, rebuke it from the pulpit. And I put in my little 10 cents worth today in that direction.

Just as America's gone international in some strange ways, the church has gone universal in some rather odd ways. I know of, I heard of a fellow who wanted to sing in the choir but didn't want to join the church. Preacher said, what church do you belong to? I belong to the invisible church.

Preacher said, I suggest you join the invisible choir. I believe we all belong to something. I believe in tying up with the local fellowship.

We have a lot of these movers. Some time ago I heard of a fellow who was about his fifth move, I think, from denomination to denomination. And he said to his pastor pro tem, because any pastor he had was pro tem, he said, I'm thinking about coming to your church.

Well, the preacher said, never does any harm to change labels on an empty bottle. Well said. But in such a time, we need a rebirth of patriotism in the country and a rebirth of Pentecost in the church.

It won't happen until we humble ourselves and pray and seek God's face turned from our wicked ways. I don't hear much about that in Washington. I haven't heard anything much about that from there in a long, long, long time.

Pride goeth before destruction. Holy Spirit before a fall. God resisteth the proud and giveth grace to the humble.

And our forefathers, when they came over here, some of them had a desire to build a new nation on Christian principles, Puritanic and the Pilgrim group. But unfortunately, there came along with them another crowd who had been infected and infested with the philosophy of Tom Paine and the viewpoint, I'm sorry to say, of Thomas Jefferson, who said that the gospel contains no mystery and he never read great as the mystery of godliness and said that Jesus Christ never thought of himself in terms of human excellence and anything but human excellence. Well, somehow everything got mixed up and to this day, the brotherhood of man is confused with the fatherhood of God and we're trying to create a false millennium, a counterfeit kingdom of God on an unregenerate society and it won't work.

I've heard a number of my preacher brethren lately who are uneasy about this land and they're not that kind, but they say things aren't turning out so well. It sort of started in 1912, old Mordecai Ham used to have a sermon on the sinking of the Titanic. He said God was trying to give us an object lesson and we didn't get it.

We were so smart, we built one that one of them even said even God can't sink it and the only thing it ever did was sink on the first trip. I was 11 years old and I remember how as a country boy that thing, that did something to me and there are books galore about the Titanic. I don't know how many in our library in my town, movie about it and they're going over now to have another look at it, if they can get at it this time, quite a problem, but with the new paraphernalia, they think they might be able to.

They know it's there and they had a glimpse that corresponds to the proportions, but the strange thing about it all was that it seems as though God said, you're not as smart as you think you are. I'm going to take a hunk of ice, just plain old ice and slit the side of this thing and show you you're not as smart as you thought you were. I think there was a lesson in it.

I don't think we learned it. I know one thing, at the offices of the line that made the Titanic and the lines in New York that were back of it too, they had when it was all over, only two lists, lost and saved and I'm living in a world where so far as God's concerned, there are only two lists and then on that Titanic, there

were millionaires, wealthy people, famous people on down to poor folks in the steerage, but after it was all over, they were only lost and saved. And on the boat of life, you have rich man, poor man, beggar man, thief, butcher, baker, candlestick maker, everybody.

But when it's all over, there will only be the lost and the saved. I don't know how long it's been since I've heard anybody use that old word lost and say, my boy is lost, my girl is lost. I've been listening to see if anybody ever says it anymore.

Sinners are pretty hard to find today. My boy is a good boy, so is the rich young ruler, but he wasn't God's boy. It's gone out of our vocabulary and yet those are the people Jesus came to seek and to save, the lost.

And I turn over to Revelation and there's another one that jumped out lately and sees me. Revelation 22, 11. He that is unjust, let him be unjust still after it's all over and Jesus comes.

He that's filthy, let him be filthy still. He that's righteous, let him be righteous still. He that's holy, let him be holy still.

Do you realize, dear friend, this morning that there's coming a day when we are going to reach a point of fixation? And what you are then, you will be forever. How are you getting fixed for such a thing? Remember, we're going to be congealed by then. We're going to be forever what we are then.

Oh, we have polls today for and against and undecided. There aren't any undecided about Jesus Christ. If you've reached the age of accountability, you've done one or the other.

He that is not with me is against me. He that believeth is not condemned. He that believeth not is condemned already.

You're one or the other. That's all there is to it. Billy Graham says, as an American, I'm a pessimist, but as a Christian, I'm an optimist.

That's about the way I feel about it, frankly, this morning. I heard of a little parade of youngsters. They were doing pretty well, except one kid was out of step all the time.

And they checked and found that he had a transistor radio in his pocket and was marching to music from a thousand miles away. That's what a Christian does, goes through this whole world tuned in on heaven. That's why you can't keep step, or you'd better not, with the way this other crowd's going.

Because you are going by the beats of another drummer. I hope you are this morning and making good time at it. I'm glad, as an American, to put my hand on my heart and join in singing the Star Spangled Banner.

This is the best patch of dirt there is left on this old earth. They're trying to get in over here and trying to get out everywhere else, it seems to me. I love it, the rocks and rills and all the rest of it.

But I still get happier when I can sing about that other country and that Jesus shall reign where'er the sun doth his successive journeys run. You know, we're out like David, we're out to crown a king. I've been working on a sermon, I haven't got it to suit me yet on that.

David was out to crown a king. And they started in the cave of Adullam. That's a mighty unpromising looking place.

Somebody said the history of many a church is from cave to cathedral. We get to the cathedral, a different story sometimes. But the thing that makes me happy is expressed most in the old bootblack in a business firm down our way.

He'd been there for years and they all loved him. He was a wonderful Christian, old man. Had his Bible right beside his outfit there.

They all knew he was a Christian, wasn't ashamed of it. One day one of the businessmen came along and said, well, I see you're reading in Revelation. Do you understand what Revelation means? He said, yes.

He said, now wait a minute. Bible scholars have differed on the meaning of Revelation. And you say, you know what it's all about.

What do you say? He said, it means Jesus is going to win. Thank God that's what it does mean. Why, you could get 500 theologians together and they wouldn't come up with anything better than that.

It means Jesus is going to win. I've got a Bible with no devil on the first two pages, no devil on the last two pages. Thank God for a book that takes care of the devil before you get through it.

Meanwhile, I'm a pilgrim and a stranger. And what the church needs today is to recover her pilgrim character. We're just passing through.

We're not citizens in this world trying to get to heaven. We're citizens of heaven trying to get through this world. And Paul Harvey says, Christians believe Christ will return and take over when mortals have made a hopeless mess of self-government.

Well, then he ought to come anytime because we've done it. Oh, we say we've got democracy. Yes, and that means government by the people.

And the world over, the people are not doing too well with democracy even today. But there's another one. I believe in the theocracy above all and a Christocracy that's coming.

And in the meantime, let us render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and unto God the things that are God's.

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