

Where Is America Headed?

by Vance Havner

Vance Havner's sermon challenges Americans to reflect on their moral and spiritual state and calls for a revival of character and integrity in society.

Duration: 32:07

Scripture: Matthew 6:33, John 8:31-32, John 8:44, Romans 12:1-2, James 1:25

Topics: "America"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher emphasizes that as Christians, we are engaged in a spiritual battle that has already been won by Jesus on the cross. He compares our role to that of soldiers in a war, where we are called to remain faithful even in difficult times. The preacher also highlights the importance of genuine faith, reminding us that superficial belief is not enough. He encourages believers to present themselves as living sacrifices and to be transformed by the renewing of their minds, as instructed in Romans 12:1-2.

Transcript

Here at the old time camp meeting, amen. I tell you, I still like camp meeting. I like revivals in churches and stuff like this, but there's just something about the camp meeting atmosphere that I sure like, amen.

It's just like you can just come as you are, just get in there and just shout and praise the Lord, amen. Don't feel cramped in the spirit, amen. And so we're going to have a special song for you today.

This is one of our friends and neighbor, don't live right up the road from us, and he's going to sing a good song that I'll tell you I really love. Lately I've got leaving on my mind, amen. And so I want to dedicate that to each one of you.

Maybe you're having trials and tribulations and maybe sickness and might be out of work or maybe you might be a pastor, having trouble at your church, maybe with a deacon or somebody like that, and I'm sure you can say the same thing, amen. Boy, I've got leaving on my mind, just getting out of here, bless God, and just going on to be with the Lord. That's the way we feel so many times.

And then since the bombing of the World Trade Center, then I got a great message in there, a timely message by one of the old war horses that preached all of them down this country we love very dearly, and he's home now with the Lord, amen. Now, but I'll tell you what his message still rings on, amen. It's Dr. Vance Havner preaching on where is America headed, amen.

And so I hope and pray that you will enjoy this. Now listen, we love you folks, and thank you so much for being a part of this. And please, if you ever think about it sometime, sit down and jot us a letter and let us know what you think about the meeting.

Will you do that for us? And God bless you and I hope, pray God, we'll do something real special for you this service of the year. My good friends, again, lately I've got leaving on my mind, and then Dr. Vance Havner preaching on where is America headed. May God bless you now.

Brother John. That we put on the first part of the year has run down a little. And maybe by now we're putting away the decorations and taking down the banners and lowering the flags, and life will get back to abnormal.

Somebody said birthdays tell how long you've been on the road, but they don't tell how far you've traveled. And the big question is how far has America traveled and where is America going and where are we going, because we are America. It is not my wish to paint any brighter halo around our founding fathers than they deserve.

I know that they were not perfect men. There was a mixture of the faith of the pilgrims and the philosophy of Tom Paine, Christian faith and deism and purity and austerity and the perfectibility of man. We did not inherit an unmixed blessing, but God overruled it, and they did lay the foundations with the recognition of providence in the affairs of man.

Today America stands alone in a hostile world, a world that marvels at the way we are hanging ourselves with our own rope. Corruption in government, the breakdown of the home, pagan education, and moral putrefaction. I used to say that civilization is going to the dogs, but quit that out of respect for dogs.

There are plenty of people today doing things beneath the dignity of any dog, and I wouldn't want to insult the canine kingdom by any such remark. Of course, all Americans were not going to fair meetings before the Revolution. There was sin and corruption aplenty, but most of it was changed by the Great Awakening, the revival that preceded the Revolution.

We ought to be commemorating that, but most Americans don't even know that it happened and couldn't care less. Those 56 gallant men who pledged their lives and fortunes and sacred honor to sign the Declaration knew well that if it didn't work it might mean hanging. One of them, Harrison of Virginia, a heavy man, turned to Geary of Massachusetts, a skinny specimen like I am, and said, Well, we may hang, but I'm heavy and will die instantly, but I imagine you'll dangle around for quite a while.

That was the spirit in which they signed it. Now there were some gentlemen there, the olive branch men, who thought we ought to try to have peaceful coexistence with George III, although of course that term hadn't come into existence, peace at any price. And we still have their kind among us, like the Israelites in Exodus, who said, We were better off under Pharaoh.

We did have security, and you have it today, and the better red than dead coat. Everything is secondary to biological survival now. The main thing is to stay alive.

Somebody asked a boy the other day, What do you want to be when you grow up? And with Adam Balmes in mind, he said, Alive. Well, that's a pretty good wish. Peace at any price, better than no peace.

Life at any price, better than no life, they tell us. We're willing today to risk our honor to save our hides, and from the way things are going, we may end up with neither hides nor honor. We tell the world that America is a great place, with two chickens in every apartment, two or three cars in every garage, and a fair land of plastics and gadgets and giveaway shows, and almost every other citizen living on a handout from Washington.

If that's all we've got, we're out of bay. We ought to tell what it really means to be an American, the price our fathers paid in blood, sweat, and tears, to make this the land of the free and the home of the brave. George Washington's foot soldiers didn't stain the snow at Valley Forge just to create a politician's paradise, and Abe Lincoln didn't work the floor all night long at the White House to pass the time away.

It cost the plenty to purchase this freedom, and it may cost more to keep it. It's no time to discuss our American birthright and make light of our liberty. One good way to appreciate this country is visit some other one, and then come back.

I like it here, and some of these gentlemen who say they like it better somewhere else, I would be happy to accompany them to New York and load them up in a boat and wave after them just as far as I could see them as they depart for the land of their heart's desire. We're living in an epidemic of mudslinging and milk-raking and character assassination, and the assassins are having a field day defaming both the dead and the living. At least vultures feed only on the dead.

Every great American from Paul Revere down has been vilified and scandalized. It has become a disease. It's about time we had a kind word about what is still good in this country and what was good about our forefathers and what is still right in the nation they founded.

I don't intend to waste my time on this smelly business of specializing in scandal. It rubs off on you, for one thing, and it's a waste of time. A bulldog can whip a skunk anytime, but it's not worth it.

And it all boils down to this, that there'll never be a better America until we have better Americans, and that means a better breed than some of them are today. How are we going to have patriotism and honor and decency and integrity and morality and character if we live as though there were no king in Israel and every man can do that which is not right but what he wants to do? In the last days, Woodrow Wilson, broken and disillusioned, said, the sum of the matter is that our civilization cannot survive materially if it is not redeemed spiritually. And Douglas MacArthur, in the latter part of his days, said the problem is basically theological.

Now, that's a tremendous statement for a general to make. It must be of the spirit if we are to save the flesh. And I think it's significant that near the end of their careers, one of America's top statesmen and one of our greatest soldiers carried the decision to the public that sounds like a preacher talking, the problem is basically theological.

Now, there was read to you a moment ago those words of our Lord, you shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free. We're hearing a lot about freedom these days, let freedom reign. But although we hear sermons on this text, it is really not right to take a text that starts with the word and and use it as a complete statement of what God is trying to say in that particular case.

And when Jesus said you shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free, that was the emancipation proclamation for all mankind. But if you take it without its context, just that one verse, you

only have two abstractions, truth and freedom. The first word in that verse is and, and so that makes us look up a verse.

And he said ye shall know the truth only if ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed, and ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free. Now, don't you see what a difference that makes? It's like Romans 12, 1 and 2. I hear preachers sometimes preach on be not conformed to the world, but transformed by the renewing of your mind, and that's good advice, yes, and it's the word of God, but the first word's and, and you need the first verse. I beseech you therefore that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, and be not conformed to the world, but transformed.

Now that's the whole message. And if you go back still one verse further up, we read that many believed on Jesus when he said some of these things. Our reverence was a superficial faith because a few verses further down he called them the children of the devil.

Just as in John 2 where I read that many believed on him when they saw his miracles, but he did not believe in them. It's the same word in the original. They believed with a superficial faith, and Jesus knew it was superficial because he knew what was in man.

Now the sequence is this, if you get it all, we believe, we continue in the word, we become disciples, we know the truth, and we are set free, and that's the only way to freedom. And so I would call it, if you want to use alliteration, freedom through faith that follows. The Bible has a lot to say about keeping this thing up once we make a profession of faith.

If ye continue in my word, patient continuance, whoso looketh into the perfect law of liberty, and continueth therein. After the day of Pentecost, they didn't try to stay on the mountaintop all the time. They didn't try to go through this world singing hallelujah and patting their feet all the time.

They continued daily. It has been said that nothing is more harmful to spiritual experience than too many spiritual experiences. Now that may sound contradictory, but it isn't.

Paul went up to the third heaven and he never could tell what he saw after he got back. A great trip, I suppose, and if some folks had gone there, they would have got it in Technicolor and got out posters and gone everywhere lecturing on my trip to the third heaven. But God gave him a thorn in the flesh to keep him from getting proud about it, and he learned that the thing that really matters is the sufficient grace of God from day to day.

The New Testament doesn't have much to say about special experiences. Of course, nowadays we are hearing a great deal about certain subjective experiences that seem to take care of everything once and for all and rule out much growth in grace. We read, And then the Great Commission.

And many times I have read it from the pulpit and left out two words on purpose. Then I've asked the congregation what two words did I leave out, and nowhere in this country have I found more than three or four who ever noticed a difference. I don't know whether they weren't listening.

I thought we'd all know it by now, but the two words are to observe, teaching them to observe, to do it. You haven't taught your class anything until you've taught them to do it, and we haven't learned anything until we've learned to do it. Charles G. Finney, the great revivalist, said, A revival is a new beginning of obedience to God.

Now that sounds very trite, and there isn't much to shout hallelujah about in that, but that's what it is. The revival isn't a lot of hooping and hollering and folks joining the church. It's a new decision to get right with God and the people.

We need to restructure our thinking today, both about the country and about the church. We've had enough oratory and celebration. It's time to be what we are.

We ought to be Americans. The word American is an adjective and a noun. We say so-and-so's an American, that's a noun.

We say he's an American man, that's an adjective. And the same thing is true of the word Christian. It's time to be what we are and be Christian Christians.

Jesus didn't say, Be the soul of the earth. He said, That's what you are. He didn't say, Be the light of the world.

He said, That's what you are. He didn't say, Be my witnesses. He said, You are my witnesses.

If we ever have another real revival, it'll be spearheaded by a persecuted minority, scorning the values of this world and living by rigid discipline. Anybody can look well at a dress parade. Too many of the saints today are out to wear medals and not scars.

And too much of Americanism and too much Christianity is like the Reubenites over there in the Book of Judges when Deborah and Barak won the battle and the tribe of Reuben stayed at home. They were patriotic, but they didn't go to the battle. And as the context bears out, they played little tunes on their shepherds' pipes and didn't hear the trumpet call to battle.

And sometimes watched Sunday morning crowds of well-fed, well-clad, well-housed church members saying, The Son of God goes forth to war. Honored Christian soldiers, hard to resist the desire to march down through the crowd and say, Now hold everything. That's good.

But just what battles have you been in? Are you wearing medals or scars? Amy Carmichael had it right. You haven't followed Jesus far. If you have no wound, no scar.

Last winter I was down in Florida preaching for about 10 weeks in a row. I was out at Shell Point at Fort Myers, a lovely retirement center. And on Sunday morning there was an old general, 88 years of age, who came to the service and then he came over to talk with me one afternoon.

He was a walking encyclopedia of information. He'd known every president since Theodore Roosevelt. He'd been a general with Patton in the Second World War.

And he told a story that I can't shake off. He said in the Battle of Normandy I was standing with Patton and it had really been tough. He said here came about 30-odd boys who had been all shot up.

And some of them would die in just a little while. He said the general went over to them and said, Boys, how are you? And everyone who could get his hand up to his head saluted. And they all said, Fine, General.

And most of them nearly dead. He said we walked away from there, and I noticed he didn't say anything and I didn't say anything. And finally I looked out of the corner of my eye and the tears were streaming

down his face.

They called him Old Blood and Guts, but that got him. And when I read that, I wonder if we're growing that kind of Christians today, not just the Christmas and Easter kind, the Sunday morning kind, fair-weather saints. Long ago an old warrior wrote to a young recruit, Thou therefore endure hardness as a good soldier Jesus tries.

He knew what he was talking about because he had been all shot up. Five times beaten with 39 strikes, three times beaten with rods once stoned, three times shipwrecked, the night and the day and the deep, perils of waters, of robbers, my own countrymen, perils by the heathen of the city and the wilderness and the sea and false brethren, weariness, painfulness, and watchings, often hunger, thirst, fastings, cold and nakedness, and beside all this the care of the church is not enough to kill anybody by itself. And with all of that, he could still say, I fought a good fight, I finished the course, I've kept the faith.

I've been faithful to the fight, I've been faithful to the faith, and I've been faithful to the finish. And I'm looking for my reward. And he sat in a Roman jail.

He wasn't writing his memoirs in a villa down on the French Riviera. He was in a jail in the middle of Rome, waiting to have his head shot, though. He had stocks and bonds, oh yes, stocks for his feet and bonds around his wrists.

And he looked to Timothy and said, Bring that old coat of mine and my books. That's about all he had. And yet I think if Almighty God had called over the parapets of heaven and said, How are you doing, Paul? I'd leave you dissoluted and said, Fine, Lord.

My friends, the taste of this business is not enough. We need to get into it. And the taste of this business is whether you're just a good soldier when the bands are playing and the bugles are blowing and the flags are waving.

But when the fighting is at its hottest and your comrades are being killed around you, and you're battling with the stub of a sword, and all men forsake you. When the great General Coles, and we do have a great General, and the other day a chaplain said he was with MacArthur on Corregidor, and he said the General attended every service I held. And one day I congratulated him on it, and General MacArthur said, I'm the commanding General here, but one of these days I'll not be here.

I shall have gone the way of all flesh, here today and gone tomorrow. He said, Chaplain, you are not serving that kind of a General. You are serving no ordinary four-star General.

You are serving the seven-star General described in the book of Revelation, who has seven stars in his right hand, who is alive forevermore, and whose kingdom endures forever. That's your General. And when that seven-star General calls down to us and says, How are you doing? I wonder if you're able to say everything's all right, Lord.

There are a lot of things I don't understand. But the strife will not be long. Today the noise of battle, and the next the victor's song.

And this is a strange war we're in as Christians. It's already been won. Jesus won it, you know, on the cross and out of the open grave.

Our water is back this way. We're just engaged in mopping up operations. But it's still a fight of faith, and it's a time for renewed pledges of allegiance, and it's about time.

There are too many faded documents and declarations grown dim. Not only the Declaration of Independence. They're doing their best to preserve it, and it's barely legible, as you know.

Even John Hancock's bold signature will fade in time. But the worst of it is not the fading of a paper. We're forgetting its original intent and ultimate purpose.

We need some new editions of it in human flesh. And then there are too many marriage certificates that are losing their significance. I had a million divorces last year in this land.

The other day I heard of two old folks in a restaurant. She couldn't hear well, and he thought he'd cheer her up, and he said, I'm proud of you. She said, eh? He said, I'm proud of you.

She said, I didn't get it. He said, I said I'm proud of you. And she said, I'm proud of you too.

Now there are too many that are tired of each other today. I don't know. I wonder if we got some here this morning.

You wouldn't admit it, but the certificate's getting dim. We need to renew that covenant. Let me say to you, you never miss the water till the well goes dry, and you'd better make most of the fact that your dear one is probably by your side this morning.

Then when the day comes that you would give just about everything you have for one day, any old day, for the touch of a banished hand and the sound of a voice that speaks. We take each other for granted more ways than one today. We do it in the church.

Church covenants don't mean what they used to. Any other organization with no more loyalty to its founder, no more joy in its program, and that uses as much raw material and turns out as poor a finished product as the average church would be out of business. If I dropped into the average church today as a non-Christian and watched a handful of church members during a so-called revival trying to get more recruits for the Army of the Lord when most of the outfit they already had has gone AWOL, I'd say either Christianity is not what it's supposed to be, or we've been sold a cheap brand and inoculated with a mild form, or we've been immunized against the real thing.

Joel said, I'm tired of the pagans going around saying, where is your God, where is the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob? And I'm embarrassed that the pagans walk by our churches over America and sometimes watch our feeble ceremonies, moving corpses from one mortician to another, sometimes preaching a dynamite gospel and living firecracker lives. It's time to be what we are or take down our sign. We need to renew our covenants of dedication.

If you're a Christian, Romans 7 says you're married to Jesus Christ. And James says that if you're a whirling, you are an adult and an adulteress because you are married to Christ, because that verse doesn't apply only to physical adultery. Have you noticed there never has been a culture since Christianity began where a New Testament Christian can feel at home? There never has been a culture where a New Testament Christian can be at home.

If you feel at home, you belong to the culture. You don't belong to Jesus Christ. Birds of a feather flock together and that's your native habitat in the world if that's what you love.

The professing church today is like the Jewish exiles in Babylon in Psalm 137, captives of this age, without a song, and saying, how can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land? And the only way you can solve this problem is by making Jesus Christ your Lord. When you do that, you will be a better American and a better citizen and a better church member and a better husband, father, mother, young person, businessman, whatever you do. But that making Jesus Lord must be visible because he said before man, it must be audible because he said with the mouth, and it must be credible because he said with the heart.

When it's credible, when it's real. And when you're not ashamed, you confess him before people. And when you're not ashamed, you confess him with the mouth.

The Bible says the way to be saved is to believe that God raised Jesus from the dead, that's the first move, and then confess out loud with the mouth, Jesus Christ as Lord, thou shalt be saved. And I hope you don't go out this morning accepting this sermon as information. I hope it hasn't gone in one ear and out the other.

As I said at the outset, one thing is worse than not going to church, and that's going and not doing anything about what we hear. Some of you have probably read the autobiography of Elton Trueblood who preached there not too long ago. And he says, and makes an amazing statement, that his liberal views were changed by C.S. Lewis rather lately.

And Lewis said, A man who is merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus Christ said would not be a great moral teacher. He'd be either a lunatic on the level with the man who says he's a poached egg, or else he would be a devil of hell. You must make your choice.

Either this man is the Son of God or he's a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a time and spit at him and kill him as a demon, or you can fold at his feet and call him Lord and God. But let us not come along with this patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher.

He didn't leave that open to us. He didn't intend to give us that option. And Chuck Colson, you've been reading his book Born Again, he was also moved mightily by this testimony, and he said of Jesus he was either a god or a raving lunatic.

There is less heresy in rejecting him altogether than to remake him into something he wasn't, something he isn't. If anybody listening to me now is saying, Well, I'm willing to accept him as the greatest moral leader of all time. Yes.

He didn't ask for that. You don't have that option. He said, I'm the way, the truth, and the life.

No man comes to God but by me. No man can say that. Before Abraham was, I am.

No man could say that. All things have been delivered to me of my Father. No man can say that.

All authority has been given to me in heaven and earth. No man can say that. I am my Father alone.

No man can say that. He's either what he said, or he's an imposter. And you take him all out once more, he doesn't want your compliments, he wants your commitment.

Total, utter, and absolute. I get a little tired sometimes of this habit of inviting folks down the aisle in a sort of an apologetic way, as though Jesus Christ were standing with his hand waiting to be accepted. I don't find that word much in the New Testament, but I do find believe, receive, trust, obey, follow.

That's what he means. No wonder everyone listening to me has done that. No mortal can with him compare among the sons of me.

Fairer is he than all the fair that fell to heaven and train. I'm glad I can preach to Christ who was what he said he was, and he is what he says he is, and he's the same yesterday and today and forever. And he wants you to come just exactly like you are.

You can't come any other way, and that's why we're going to sing Just As I Am without one plea. And I give you the opportunity this morning to do whatever the Holy Spirit tells you you ought to do. If it's to lay aside all your excuses and all your doubts and say, I thank Jesus Christ this morning for what he came to be, as Savior and Lord, or if you wish to rededicate your life, or if you wish to come into the fellowship of this church, the opportunity is given as we sing this wonderful song.

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