

# A PROPER PATRIOTISM

by Ray C. Stedman

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This morning I want to do something that I seldom have occasion to do -- to preach, not a passage of Scripture, but on a subject. The subject I want to speak about is that of prayer and fasting. As I look over the congregation I see evidence of the need to preach on fasting, particularly. I do want to treat these subjects in a very serious way, because Scripture does.

About a month ago, I received an invitation from Dr. Lloyd Ogilvie, pastor of Hollywood Presbyterian Church, to attend a weekend conference in Chicago with other Christians from all over the country. The entire time was to be spent in discovering ways to mobilize Christians, and in determining how to fulfill and obey the great promise that God gives to the nations in Second Chronicles 7:14. This verse comes in the midst of Solomon's dedication of the temple, on that very solemn occasion when God promised that he would respond to certain conditions to be fulfilled by his people, no matter where they may be. That promise was given first of all to Israel; but since Israel is a model nation, it is intended to show us how God deals with all nations. It is a promise that is valid for all people, in all of time. The verse goes:

**"... if my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land." {2 Chr 7:14 RSV}**

The people at this conference met to discuss ways and means by which this could be brought to pass, that "this people," the people of God in this country, would fulfill the conditions of this divine promise. Represented at the conference were a great number of leaders from various parts of the country and a wide spectrum of evangelicals. Dr. Dick Halverson and Dr. Louis Evans, two Presbyterian pastors from the nation's capital, were there. Laymen from various organizations, Mr. Victor Nelson, from the Billy Graham Association, and Mr. Harold Lindsell, editor of *Christianity Today Magazine*, were there. One of the leaders of the charismatic movement, Derek Prince, was present, along with Jimmy Owens, who has written some fine musicals, notably one called *If My People...*, and Pat Boone, representing the Christians of Hollywood. (Now there is one of the neediest mission fields in the world! Pat told us that being a Christian in Hollywood is like being Phyllis Diller at a Miss Universe contest.) There were leaders of seminaries -- the president of Trinity Seminary, the president of Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary, and others.

The purpose of the conference was to find ways to bring about God's moving in this country. How do we turn our country around, and remove from us some of the destructive things that are going on in our land today, destroying us as a people, breaking up our nation, and causing it to lose its impact in the world?

The two major emphases that emerged from the conference were the primacy of prayer and the place of fasting. Prayer and fasting are two powerful spiritual weapons which were given to Christians, both individually and collectively, by which we may influence history and change the events of our day. The one thing that came through loud and clear to each of us at the conference was that here is a power that has been utilized very little by the church. God has placed in our hands the very key to the whole struggle of the world as it tries to find its way out of an increasingly difficult and darkening morass of problems.

I want to look at prayer and fasting today, so that we might understand what God wants us to do, and what mighty weapons are put in our hands.

With regard to the matter of prayer, I would like to turn to Paul's first letter to Timothy, beginning with Chapter 2. First Timothy is a warm, intimate letter written to Paul's son-in-the-faith, Timothy, who has been charged with being a pastor and elder in the church at Ephesus. This young man is trembling and uncertain as to what he can do to fulfill this great responsibility, and Paul writes to give him instructions on how to behave and how to act in this demanding ministry. Chapter 2 deals with how to conduct public worship, and here are

some very illuminating insights on what Christians are to do when they come together, as we have done this morning, to hear the Word of God and worship together. What ought to be the procedures that we follow and the emphases that we make? This is what Paul says:

**First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all men, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life, godly and respectful in every way. This is good, and it is acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. {1 Tim 2:1-4 RSV}**

Paul makes it clear that Christians gathering together -- such as we are this morning, seeking to advance the work and cause of God in the world, seeking to be an instrument by which God is able to accomplish what he wants -- are to give themselves first of all to prayer. Now when he says "first," I do not think he is talking about first in order of procedure. He does not mean that the first thing you must do is pray. But I think it is clear from the context that prayer is first in order of importance. The most important thing you will do when you get together, Paul says, is to pray for all men, and especially for those in authority -- kings, rulers, emperors, princes, presidents, governors, etc.

The reason for that priority is given to us in the logical development of this passage. Let me just point it out to you without attempting to expound the passage in depth. Notice that, in Verse 4, the apostle seems to gather up the goal of God in human history. He says, "God desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth."

The order of this verse is interesting. If I were writing it, I would reverse it: "God desires all men to come to the knowledge of the truth and to be saved." It is significant that the apostle puts it exactly opposite. Ordinarily we think that men gradually come to understand life, and understand their problems, and understand the world around them in a slowly dawning enlightenment that finally brings them to see and hear the gospel. Then, after they have come to the knowledge of the truth, they are saved. But it is the other way around, according to this passage. Men need to be saved in order to come to the knowledge of the truth.

Look around the world today. What is really wrong is the profound ignorance of man. We do not understand what is happening, we do not understand our problems, we do not understand how to do things. We do not even understand how to run our complicated technological machinery in such a way as to avoid harming, polluting, destroying, and playing havoc in the world in which we live. We boast about our knowledge, but really we are gripped by a most profound and desperate ignorance. Nothing we do to enlighten ourselves, in terms of making education available, seems to help.

The reason, of course, is that there is something wrong with us. Men need to be saved; they need to be delivered from the grip of evil in their lives that warps their thinking and distorts their whole mental processes, making it impossible for them to understand. It blinds their eyes to what is going on in the world. Therefore, men need to be delivered from that evil.

This deliverance does not happen in a moment. We are introduced to salvation through faith in Jesus Christ, and then we grow in knowledge. Gradually there comes a dawning knowledge of basic, fundamental truth. This is what God is after. God's will is that all men should know about salvation.

Sometimes I am asked, by young people especially, about some certain event, some tragedy that has struck, or some terribly repressive injustice that has occurred, or some awful political system that is allowed to go on and on, such as the Nazi regime under Adolf Hitler. They say, "Why does God permit this? Why does he let these things happen?" This is probably the most frequently asked question of our day. "Why does God allow these tragic injustices, these horrible mutilations of human beings, and depredations of human rights? Why does God permit it?"

The answer is right here: Because God desires all men to be saved, he withholds his avenging justice. He could straighten it all out, he could easily end evil if he wanted to; he could stop this whole tragic process -- or any single event -- from occurring, but he does not. Why? Because he wants all men to be saved and to come

to the knowledge of the truth. He gives them opportunity. He restrains himself. There is probably no greater testimony to the compassion and the love of God for man than that very fact that God has, through all these centuries, held back his avenging wrath.

If God wants all men to be saved, then how does he bring it to pass? Paul reveals here that a condition in society is necessary in order that "we may lead a quiet and peaceable life, godly and respectful in every way," so that men may hear the gospel. The moment there is anarchy, strife, and violence in a community or in a nation, the ability to spread the delivering Word, the liberating truth of God, is diminished.

There is ample testimony to this today, both locally and in far countries. When the iron curtains of this world come crashing down, the opportunity to spread the Word of God almost immediately is diminished tremendously. God is interested in peace. God loves peace among nations. He promotes peace; he wants it. He is not the God of war and the God of anger and the God of wrath we so often paint him to be. The Old Testament tells us that he always moves to judgment reluctantly.

What God wants is peace. He wants communities that are tranquil and open for expression, especially the expression of the gospel. Our very Constitution, I think, is one of the most remarkable testimonies to the truth of those statements. What a tremendous document the Preamble to the Constitution is! It is good for us to hear it again.

We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union [that is, harmony, unity between the states], establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility [that means peace at home], provide for the common defence [that means peace abroad], promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity [not only for us, but our children as well], do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.

The Preamble to our Constitution is perfectly in line with God's desire for humanity and reflects strongly what Paul is bringing out here, that God desires peace. He wants us to "lead a quiet and peaceable life, godly and respectful in every way."

Now, how is this kind of life promoted? Here you come to the heart of the matter. This is what prayer does. The prayers of Christians enable those in a community to live peaceable and godly lives. "First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all men, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life, godly and respectful in every way." To underscore that, the apostle says, "This [praying for leaders and those in high positions] is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior." God wants us to pray. Paul suggests four kinds of prayers:

First of all, there are prayers of supplication. These would be specific requests, such as we made this morning when we prayed about those two tragic incidents on the Stanford campus. "Pray for all men," Paul says. Anyone, any need, any burden, any problem, any type of difficulty is included in that. We are to supplicate the throne of God.

Second, there are prayers. That is a more general term which means praying in general principles. My prayer this morning that God would put down the wicked and raise up the righteous in political office was this type of prayer. It was not specific; it was a general prayer that God would undertake in the country's need and in its government.

Then there are intercessions -- praying on behalf of someone else. The word *intercedes* means to "fall in alongside of." This word has in view a kind of intimacy in prayer, a free and familiar holding up of people before a beloved Father, entreating his help on their behalf, interceding freely and boldly.

The final type of prayer is that of thanksgiving, gratitude. The older I grow, the more aware I become of how thankful to God I ought to be. I have begun to realize how much I have been taking for granted in my life. More and more God is showing me that I have no right to anything. All of these tremendous blessings that come pouring into my life day by day are given to me by the love and care of the heavenly Father, quite apart from any deserving on my part.

My wife and I just recently have been very thankful for feet. She has injured a foot and has been hobbling around and using wheelchairs. We have come to understand the value of feet more than we ever have before. What useful appendages they are! How much they are missed when one is taken out of service! The fact that you have two might make you think you had an extra one, but it is not so. There are no extras; when one is gone, the whole process of locomotion is hindered. So we are giving thanks for feet, and hands, and eyes, and for health, grace, strength, security, and protection -- all these things.

Our thankfulness ought to be expressed constantly in praise to God. This is what the apostle urges us to do as we come together for a church service.

All this simply points out that the key to peace in a nation or community is put into the hands of praying Christians. They hold the key. I hope we will believe these words. They are not put here to sound nice. They are not just something to encourage a moment of prayer on Sunday morning; they are to help us realize the power and responsibility God has put in our hands.

On Friday I was having lunch with a friend in a little restaurant in Los Altos and heard a commotion outside in the street. We turned around and saw a sheriff's car going slowly down the street, siren blowing. Right behind it was a fire truck, and other trucks, all just swarming with high school kids blowing their horns, yelling, and waving banners. It was obvious they were on their way to a football game. I turned back to my friend and said, "Thank God for that."

My mind instantly had gone back to a few years ago when our high school campuses were anything but places of cheer and happiness. You would see unsmiling groups of kids standing around, looking grim, talking and planning all kinds of violence and depredations on campus, looking with contempt on an display of joy at a football game. Our high schools were grim places then, fear-ridden places. Many of them still are, I know, but it encouraged my heart to see some degree of sanity, of joy, returning to the high school campuses of our area. I know that in San Francisco, and other cities, many campuses still are frightening places where horrible things are happening. But things are a lot better than they were. There is some change. Why?

The only possible answer is the gracious moving of the Holy Spirit called the Jesus Movement that hit our campuses about five years ago. It was God fulfilling his word in Isaiah 59:19, "When the enemy comes in like a flood, he will raise up a standard against him." The spirit of God moved in and swept many bitter, disillusioned, fearful, angry young men and women into the kingdom of God. And what marvelous changes have come as a result of that! How much more could come if we were faithful in praying that God would do these things.

No one yet has understood fully why God asks his people to pray, but there is no question that he does. "If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land." This is what God asks us to do.

In 1960 I was invited to speak at a large conference of pastors from all over South Vietnam. This was before the Vietnamese war had really gotten under way. At that time there were only a few U. S. military advisers in Vietnam, but the country was already in great turmoil, and the Viet Cong were so strong that it looked like they were about to take over the country. Christians were very fearful that they were about to lose their freedom to preach. This was emphasized by the murder of one pastor who was on his way to the conference. He was waylaid by the Viet Cong and beheaded, his head allowed to lie in the dust of the road as a warning to the other pastors. Members of the Viet Cong were present in our meeting -- they were pointed out to me as they sat scowling at us.

The pastors met at five o'clock every morning to pray. It was a moving experience to come that early in the morning and find five hundred men and women praying. They prayed together -- all one voice. I could not understand the language, but missionaries told me they were praying for their country, praying for their homes, praying that God would spare their land. I was moved. I went off by myself to pray, stepping back just a few yards from the building, for you did not dare go back into the jungle area because the Viet Cong

were there. I asked God to spare this land, to raise up some force that would keep the doors open for the preaching of the gospel in Vietnam. I remember thinking of Hezekiah's prayer in Isaiah. Hezekiah turned to the Lord and cried out in a moment of desperation, and God spared his life. Hezekiah lived fifteen more years. I thought of that prayer and said, "Lord, I don't know what your purposes are for this land, but if it please you, keep the door open for at least fifteen years. I pray that you will grant that."

I returned home, and, shortly after, the U.S. forces increased in number in Vietnam. I will not go into the subject of the war or try to justify all that was said or done there, but, nevertheless, the door was kept open. I had forgotten that prayer until last spring when Vietnam suddenly collapsed, despite the expectations of many that the country would remain open for several years. But it collapsed, and I remembered that 1975 is fifteen years from 1960.

I believe God answers prayers. I believe there are many, many instances today, in the past, and in the Scriptures that encourage us to pray that God will move behind the scenes of a nation's history. By praying, we exercise a true patriotism by upholding the leaders of government, that we may lead quiet and peaceable lives, that the gospel may have access to the land in which we live.

Linked with prayer, throughout the Scriptures, is the subject of fasting in hours of special crisis in a nation's history. I know many people feel uneasy about fasting. It is always amazing how thoroughly ready people are to go along with any kind of diet that demands abstinence from certain foods. But when you call it a fast, they get uncomfortable.

All through the Scriptures, in both the Old and New Testaments, God's people fasted. The Lord Jesus seemed to take it for granted that his people would fast. In the Sermon on the Mount he says, "When you fast, don't be like the hypocrites," {cf, Matt 6:16}. Jesus himself fasted. The apostles fasted. The early Christians fasted. Before they sent out new missionaries, they fasted and prayed. They fasted and prayed before they selected elders in the churches. There are many references to fasting all through the Old and New Testaments.

The purpose of fasting is to afflict our souls. Fasting is something that prepares us. It does not do anything for God; it is not something that he requires in order to act. It is something that helps us.

In Psalm 35, the psalmist says, "I afflicted my soul in fasting," {cf, Psa 35:13b}. And in Psalm 69 he says, "I humbled my soul in fasting," {cf, Psa 69:10}. Fasting is a way of opposing that prideful spirit that is within all of us, that wants to be independent of God, that thinks we do not need God and God's power to act. Fasting opposes our confidence in our own ability. Furthermore, fasting seems to oppose self-indulgence, the love of ease that our flesh covets. It is a way of saying to your body, "Look, you're the servant; I'm the master. You need to be kept in your place."

Fasting is not a way of winning Brownie points with God. If you fast for three days, then say, "Now, Lord, look what I've done: I've fasted for three days; you surely ought to grant my request," you are bargaining with God. That is absolutely wrong, and Scriptures speak against that attitude.

Neither is fasting an ascetic practice. It is a way of bringing yourself to the place of bankruptcy. It makes you feel your helplessness before God more thoroughly, and it enables you, therefore, in all honesty, openness, and sincerity, to call upon his omnipotence for aid.

At the conference we were invited to set aside one Friday per month, preferably the first Friday of every month, for a fast, that we might remember in prayer and fasting our nation's need in this critical hour of her history. I would like to urge you, individually and in groups, to take one Friday at month at least, and set it aside for a time of prayer for our nation's needs.

I want to close this by reading a proclamation by Abraham Lincoln, made when he was first elected President, in 1861. It reads:

Whereas a joint committee of both houses of Congress has waited on the President of the United States and requested him to recommend a day of public humiliation, prayer, and fasting, to be observed by the people of

the United States with religious solemnities, and the offering of fervent supplications to Almighty God for the safety and welfare of these states, His blessing on their arms, and a speedy restoration of peace. And whereas it is fit and becoming in all people at all times to acknowledge and revere the supreme government of God, to bow in humble submission to His chastisement, to confess and deplore their sins and transgression, in the full conviction that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and to pray with all fervency and contrition for the pardon of their offenses and for a blessing upon their present and prospective action. Therefore I, Abraham Lincoln, President of the United States, do appoint the last Thursday in September next as a day of humiliation, prayer, and fasting, for all the people of the nation. And I do earnestly recommend to all the people, and especially to all ministers and teachers of religion of all denominations, and to all heads of families, to observe and keep that day, according to their several creeds and modes of worship, in all humility, and with all religious solemnity, to the end that the united prayer of the nation may ascend to the Throne of Grace, and bring down plentiful blessings upon our country.

We almost have reached the place where it is impossible for the President of the United States to make a proclamation like that. That perhaps marks something of the drift of our land. Let's turn it back. God has placed it in our hands to do so. Let us be faithful to respond to the command of the Apostle Paul to uphold the leaders of our country in such a way that God's blessing may rest once again upon this land.

## Prayer

Our heavenly Father, we do thank you for the abundant blessings that have come to us. Thank you for the freedom that we enjoy this morning -- freedom to gather here, freedom to preach and teach, freedom to open the Word, freedom to sing and pray without restraint. Thank you, Father. But how rapidly these liberties are being eroded, how quickly they are disappearing in a flood of immorality and pornography, vileness and filth, political corruption and scandal. Lord, we ask you to restore us. Forgive us. We have offended. Lord, we have grieved you. We Christians have failed to obey your Word. We ask you to forgive us, and to heal us, Lord. Help us to turn from our wicked ways; forgive our sin, and heal our land. We ask in Jesus' name, Amen.

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