

Text: Mark 12.13-17  
St Stephen's

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Sun AM

### In God We Trust

Today we celebrate another **birthday of America, our 228<sup>th</sup>**. I have never been more **proud** to be an American. I am not alone. Since the attacks of September 11, 2001 the love of this country has found a new place in many, many hearts. But at the same time I have never been more **concerned**.

At Gettysburg, President Lincoln said that we are "*testing whether this nation can long endure.*" Don't you feel as though we are **still testing**? Will this century be our last? A few years ago, Michael Novak put the question like this: "*Is America a meteor that blazed across the heavens and is now exhausted? Or rather is our present moral fog a transient time of trial, those hours cold and dark before the ramparts' new gleaming? Are we near our end or at a beginning?*"

I think the answer to that question very much depends on how we answer **a critical question** facing our nation, and that is the relationship between public life and personal faith in God, it is the relationship between church and state, between God and country.

In the last decades a well organized coalition of skeptics and atheists have partnered with many others to challenge assumptions long held central to our form of government and society. Their goal is clear: **no references to God in public life**. Private faith and public discourse are not to be confused or mingled. A **wall of separation** must stand between Church and State, between God and country.

**At the root of the crisis is the modern interpretation of the First Amendment** to our Constitution. This amendment starts with these words:

*Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof...*

It is a simple and profound statement, long understood to secure the freedom *of* religion in American life. But the modern theory is that the framers of the constitution intended **a wall of separation** between church and state, between God and country. In the name of that wall, the presence of religion – especially the Christian religion - is being systematically eradicated from public and civic life in America.

Under the modern interpretation of the First Amendment, overt Christian influence is slowly and effectively being removed from the public square, including our public schools, our civil courts, and our halls of government. It has effected restrictions on the use of tax dollars to support any charitable religious organization... Just this past week the Supreme Court gave an extended life to the phrase "one nation under God" from the Pledge of Allegiance. But its future is very uncertain.

The issue is critical. Listen to how **Chuck Colson** puts it. If God is removed from our civic culture, he writes, "*we lose our basis for believing that individuals have rights and dignity. In an empty universe, we have no meaning, no value. Without God there are no unalienable rights, and no certain proof that liberty is better than tyranny or that life better than death. Everything is a matter of opinion and power.*" (Breakpoint, 7/2/2004)

That is a frightening future.

2000 years ago, **Israel faced a moment like this**. In the time of Jesus, Israel was an occupied territory of Rome. In Israel, there was a group of Jews who were willing to work with the Romans. They were

**political realists**, and they viewed cooperation with pagan Rome as the realistic price for survival. “Make it work” was their bumper sticker. And then there was another group. They were **fundamentalists**, and they were not willing to work with Rome. They viewed cooperation with Rome as high treason and heresy. “No Roman pagans” was their bumper sticker. At just that moment, in the middle of that controversy, the Pharisees put a question to Jesus. They wanted to catch him on the sharp edge of contemporary politics.

*They came and said to him, "Teacher...Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?"*

Mark 12:14

It was a good question, well designed to catch him in the political firestorm between these two groups. Rome or Israel, Jesus? God or country?

*Jesus said... "Bring me a denarius and let me look at it." They brought the coin, and he asked them, "Whose portrait is this? And whose inscription?"*

*"Caesar's," they replied.*

*Then Jesus said to them, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's."*

Mk 12:15-17 (NIV)

Those words, frustrating to his opponents and amazing to his followers, became a part of the foundation for our country. Jesus is saying that we have a **dual citizenship**. We are citizens of his own kingdom and citizens of our own country. We have obligations to our God and obligations to our country. We must **honor them both**. Jesus does not picture a wall of separation, or a hostile standoff, but a **handclasp of partnership** between the two.

Our founders would agree.

**George Washington, "Farewell Address"**

*"Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports."*

**President John Adams, (first VP & second Pres) 1798:** *"Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other."*

**President Thomas Jefferson, 1781** (inscribed on the wall of the Jefferson Memorial): *"Can the liberties of a nation be thought secure when we have removed their only firm basis, a conviction in the minds of the people that these liberties are the gift of God?"*

**Justice William O. Douglas, 1952:** *"We are a religious people whose institutions presuppose a Supreme Being"*

The signs of this trust in God and his written word are part and parcel of our national fabric... An **image of Moses** faces the speaker of the House of Representatives; our **coins** proclaim, "In God We Trust"; our **Pledge of Allegiance** says we are "One Nation, Under God"; our **Declaration of Independence** declares that we are "endowed by our Creator with certain unalienable rights"; our presidents take their **oath of office** with the phrase, "So help me God"... and the list in this free country goes on and on.

If you ask your neighbors, "**What is freedom?**" - they will say something like, *"Freedom is doing what I want, when I want, the way I want, where I want, with anyone I choose."* "What else could it be", many people ask.

I want to introduce you to a new member of our family. We have a **new puppy**. She is an 11 week old Cocker Spaniel named “Bella”. She is about as cute as a dog can get. She wants to be free. She wants to come and go as she pleases. She wants to chew up the shoes and tear up the rug and jump on the couches and sleep on the beds. She wants to jump and nip at our faces and hang on our trousers. She likes to leave little “puppy pods” in surprising places around the house. I know in just a few short weeks she will want to get out of our fenced-in backyard. She would like to run out in the front yard and the alley way and on Beaver Road. She would like to have lots of other dog boyfriends. She will want what she wants, when she wants, the way she wants, with any dog she wants, anywhere at all.

But here is the problem. You and I know that this kind of life will never make our little Bella rise to her God-given potential. It will instead **degrade her** if we let her do that. She’ll be a shadow of what she could be. And she will **die young**, on some roadside somewhere. So I don’t let her do it. We restrict her freedom.

When people think “I want to live... *doing what I want, when I want, the way I want, where I want, with anyone I choose.*” problems multiply. Life gets crazy. It degrades people. Did you catch **Bill Cosby’s** comments on what the **hip-hop culture** is doing to black and white kids? It is degrading them, scarring them for life. It is living in the little world of “me”, following the little god of “me”.

You know what living like that does? It **kills relationships**. Because **relationships demand time and commitment and sacrifices**. As a result we have abortion, drug addiction, pre-teen sex, no-fault divorce, *laissez faire* family structures, church-hopping, fractured communities. People can’t make a commitment and give what they need to give to keep the fabric of our human relationships intact. You know what else it does? It **kills people**. Too many people die young living like this. This isn’t freedom. It is the worst kind of bondage.

**Is this what America stands for?** Let me give you a **better option**.

*Freedom flourishes upon the foundation of “right and wrong”.*

*The foundation of “right and wrong” flourishes upon the foundation of the God of the Bible.*

This country was built on the linkage between those three: freedom, right and wrong, and faith in the God of the Bible. Take away one, they begin to fall. Those thoughts are central to the history and future of this country. **Take away** the broad cultural consensus of right and wrong that come from the Bible, and all you have left is your **opinion** and my opinion and **power politics**. Liberty and choice only work as they live inside the moral framework given by God. That’s why one of our most beloved national hymns has these words: “*Confirm thy soul in self-control, Thy liberty in law.*” They are partners.

Freedom will not flourish without virtue. And virtue is not possible without faith in God.

Did you know that when **Thomas Jefferson** wrote the Declaration of Independence he **only mentioned God twice**? Before Congress would sign it, members insisted that four names for God appear: He is the **Author** “of nature and nature’s laws”; He is the **Creator** who endowed us with our rights; He is the **Judge** to whom we appeal and before whom we stand; and He is **Providence**, the sovereign God who orders all things for his glory and our good.

When George Washington was caught with the American troops on Long Island by the British, he knew they were springing a trap. They tried to get off the island. That night, they got half the troops off the island – they didn’t have enough boats – and then a fog rolled in as the morning broke and during the fog, they got the rest of the troops off the island. When the British troops closed the trap, the Americans were

gone. They knew it was Providence. Nothing escapes his attention. They depended on that kind of a God.

Take away that civic faith in God as our Creator, and we are left to ourselves. Take away our accountability to him as Judge, and we will insist we are accountable to no-one. Take away our dependence upon his sovereign oversight and provision, and we are left only to our own resources. And then our freedom will turn on us and degrade us and kill us. God founded this country for a higher purpose than that!

**What do we do?** I want to come back to Jesus' words. His **operative word is "give"**. Give to Caesar... give to God... The tragic response of too many to the difficulties of the relationship between God and country is **to hold back** in both their duties to their country and their relationship with God. "Me first" we say. But **Jesus says, "give"**.

### 1) Give To Your Country

*"Give to Caesar what is Caesar's." Mark 12.17*

With these words, Jesus clearly meant pay your taxes. But the principle is larger. He also meant **honor** your leaders, **pray** for them, **get involved** in your government, **vote** your values and your faith, help with the great moral issues of our day, carry your share of the load...

I want to let you know that my daughter-in-law, who is working in Senator Santorum's office, has forwarded to me a Citizen's Link that talks about the Federal Marriage Amendment. I hope you are aware of this (extra copies are available at the Information Center). That vote is coming up in two weeks. Marriage is central to the life of America and Western Civilization. If we let marriage go, the suffering will be immense and wide-spread across this country. And it is under attack now. You've got to get **involved!** Don't step **out**, step **in!** Get involved in the sanctity of life issues. Get involved in the great moral issues of our day. Don't step **out**, step **in!**

What we need is Christian citizens. Men and women who are doctors, nurses, lawyers, politicians, voters, parents, school board members, teachers, administrators, businessmen and women, workers, citizens.... people who will be salt and light, take the values of God and Gospel of God and get involved! Give to America, give to Pittsburgh, give to the boroughs of the Quaker Valley region. Be an effective citizen for your God.

### Give to your country!

### 2) Give to your God

*"Give to God what is God's." Mark 12:17*

If we are citizens of America, then we are **also citizens of a higher Kingdom**. We must give to God what is due to God... above all, our first allegiance to him. We do not say "our country, right or wrong". We do not say that because we serve a higher God and a higher calling who calls our country to account. Of all the things we give to God... Our worship, our hearts, our obedience above every earthly obedience, I want to mention one specific thought for today.

We must **give our country back to God**.

**Michael Novak** once again... "Our sons are going to forget about the Revolution, the founders expected; they're going to forget the suffering we went through. They're going to forget the frozen feet at Valley

Forge, the gangrene and the hunger, the lack of pay and the despair. They're going to forget all that, and their grandchildren will tire of hearing it. There's a moral entropy in human affairs, such that even if a generation succeeds in reaching a very high moral level, it's almost impossible for the next generation and the one after it to maintain that level. **A republic, therefore, has to fight moral entropy.** That's why there will have to be a series of moral awakenings. The founders didn't see how that would happen without religious inspiration.”

That is why we need **a new civic faith in God**. That is why we need prayer in our schools and the Pledge of Allegiance in our schools where we affirm a unifying principle in our country that is bigger than me or you, that we are one nation under God. And that is why we need an affirmation of our trust in God on our money and other markers of our widely held faith in God throughout our common life in America. These statements shape our values and strengthen the fabric of our national life. Don't be embarrassed by them; fight for them! They keep us from the tyranny of our own little selves.

In September 1774, members of the First Continental Congress journeyed to Philadelphia. On their arrival, they heard that the king's troops were shelling Boston, and rumors flew. They were confronted with impending war. The first act of that Continental Congress was to request a session of prayer. Mr. Jay of New York and Mr. Rutledge of South Carolina immediately spoke against this motion because (they said) Americans are so divided in religious beliefs that they could not join in the same prayer. But the motion for prayer carried.

Thus it happened that the first act of Congress on September 7, 1774, was an official prayer. You know who led it? It was an Episcopal priest. He read a Jewish prayer, Psalm 35 in *The Book of Common Prayer*:

*Plead my cause, O Lord, with them that strive with me. Fight against them that fight against me. Take hold of buckler and shield, and rise up for my help. Say to my soul, "I am your salvation." Let those be ashamed and dishonored who seek my life. Let those be turned back and humiliated who devise evil against me.*

Kneeling at that prayer rail were Washington, Henry, Randolph, Rutledge, Lee, Jay; Congregationalists, Episcopalians, Quakers, many different denominations kneeling at the same rail. They wrote later that the presence of God was extraordinary in the room.

Michael Novak says, *“In this fashion, right at its beginning, this nation formed a covenant with God that is repeated in the Declaration: "with a firm reliance on the protection of Divine Providence." The founders pledged their fidelity to the will of God and asked God to protect their liberty.”*

What is needed is a new wave of patriots, young and old, who are ready to give to God what is God's, starting with themselves and including their country. Who seek from God moral awakenings with religious inspiration underneath them, fueling them, firing them. Who are ready to make a **new Declaration** - this time not of **Independence**, but of **Dependence**. In God We Trust. And I wonder if you are willing to be in that wave. I want to close today with this hymn and make it our prayer to our God for our country:

**My country 'tis of thee, Sweet land of liberty, Of thee I sing.  
Land where my fathers died, Land of the pilgrim's pride,  
From every mountainside Let freedom ring.**

**Our fathers' God! To Thee, Author of liberty, To Thee we sing.  
Long may our land be bright With freedom's holy light;  
Protect us by Thy might, Great God our king.**