

# RIGHTEOUSNESS EXALTS A NATION

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**Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a reproach to any people.  
– Proverbs 14:34**

I want to ask an important question: What makes a nation great? Is a nation's greatness defined in its military, economic, or political power? Proverbs 14:34 tells us that the greatness of a nation is defined by her character. This was a seminal verse used by America's founders to help them develop a political theology that would give birth to generations of flourishing here in America. So I want to ask the question once again: What makes a nation great?

**Let's consider three truths: the promise of God, the standard of God, and the agents of God.**

### **The Promise of God**

In Proverbs 14:34, there is a very clear promise to the nations. Righteous nations will be exalted, meaning they will be lifted up and will experience divine blessing; but that promise is paralleled with a curse. Nations defined by sin will be a reproach, meaning they will be disgraced. There's not a third option. There's no middle ground. Nations will either be lifted up or taken down on the basis of their commitment to public righteousness. A nation will either be blessed or a nation will be disgraced.

Some believe that this promise only applies to Israel. How do we know that's not true? If the author wanted us to understand that this verse only applies to Israel, he would have written, "Righteousness exalts Israel." But I believe there is even a stronger argument. Let's look at the original language. The word for nation is *goy*, and the word for people is *goyim*. These words are used to describe nations and people groups in general, not a particular nation. The author is declaring that this divine promise is not just for Israel, but for all nations regardless of time and geographical location, including America.

God is the supreme ruler and judge of the nations. He alone has the power to exalt nations and he alone has the power to bring nations down in disgrace. He did it to Israel, he did it to Assyria, he did it to Babylon, and he did it to Egypt. And do not think for one second that God is not more than capable of doing it right here in America. That's why Abraham Lincoln said in his second inaugural address, "Yet, if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled by the bondsman's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword as was said three thousand years ago so still it must be said 'the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.'" He understood that righteousness in the public square results in exaltation and sin in the public square results in reproach. True greatness is not measured in a nation's military, economic, or political power, but measured in her character. A nation celebrates righteousness. Those who are students of history know that the American colonists had neither economic, military, nor political power and they went up against the greatest superpower the world had ever seen, the British Empire. There's only one reason for their victory: the providential hand of Almighty God and men and women who loved righteousness more than they loved sin. It is the promise of God to the nations regardless of time and geographical location. He will either raise this nation up or he will tear it down on the basis of her character.



## **The Standard of God**

What is the standard of righteousness that exalts a nation? We've heard a lot of talk recently that the standard of righteousness or the soul of a nation is defined by humanity or defined by the government. No, the standard of righteousness is found in the Bible. God is righteous and that his righteous standards are revealed in his Word. Righteousness according to God isn't relative. Whether it's Israel or America, the standard of righteousness can't be redefined. It was the standard of righteousness 2,000 years ago and it is the standard of righteousness today in the 21st century. The American founders understood this. Our founding fathers understood that if rights and laws are not grounded in God's standard of righteousness, that they are doomed to fail. Therefore, many of them stood firmly on their theological convictions, allowing them to shape public policy.

It is not opinion, but it is fact that Christianity served as the predominant worldview to establish the United States of America. This is so because our founders understood that the righteous standards of Almighty God are absolute and timeless. Their beliefs translated into a public and political theology that shaped the public square in 1776. This gave birth to a nation that stood for God's righteousness and resulted in unprecedented blessing—a nation that was truly exalted. Listen to some of our founders. President John Adams said, "Our constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other." George Mason of Virginia said, "The scourge of slavery will bring the judgment of heaven on a country." Rev. Thomas Baldwin said, "A virtuous people will always be free and happy." Rev. Daniel Clark Sanders said, "That public prosperity pervades every part of an empire when its members are knowing, virtuous and pious." The list goes on and on. Our nation's founding fathers and founding ministers understood that if this nation were to be blessed, righteousness must be demonstrated in a public square that shapes public policy for the glory of God. A nation that flourishes is a nation that is rooted and grounded in righteousness. That's why when Alexis de Tocqueville, French author and political scientist, came to America, he said, "Not until I went into the churches of America and heard her pulpits aflame with righteousness, did I understand the greatness and genius of America." Greatness wasn't found in Washington, DC but in our pulpits aflame with righteousness.

But do you know what our problem is today? We're no longer a nation defined by the righteous standards of God's Word. No. In the 21st century, we are a nation that murders millions of babies in the name of choice and reproductive rights. We're a nation that rejects that our rights are inalienable and God given. We're a nation that mocks states that are attempting to put the Ten Commandments back into the classroom. We're a nation that taught our children for decades that they are a cosmic, evolutionary accident. We're a nation that says gender is just a social construct. We are a nation that has more days to celebrate homosexuality and transgenderism than days to celebrate the very birth and resurrection of Jesus Christ. That is the real state of our union.

Does all this of depress you a bit? It should. What does the proverb say? Sin is a reproach to any people. It means that we feel the shame and the disgrace as a nation. When public theology forms our public policy, the nation flourishes. But when sin shapes our public policy, we are a



reproach. We will then experience shame and disgrace in the absence of the blessing of God. There is only one standard of righteousness that leads to the exaltation of a nation.

## The Agents of God

Who are the agents of God in all of this, you may wonder. God has exalted Jesus and seated him on the heavenly throne where he is currently reigning and ruling all things—but he is reigning and ruling through God’s people. This means that Christ’s followers, in the midst of an ungodly nation facing disgrace, are the ones who have been called to be agents of righteousness. In Matthew 5:13-14, Jesus gives his church a clear calling: “You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people’s feet. You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden.”

We are to be the salt of the earth, the light of the world, and a city on a hill. These are all phrases that do not describe the toxic escapism that we find in the church today: an escapism that tells us that our ultimate goal is to get saved and hope that God takes us up to heaven as quickly as possible. No! Once we’re saved, we’re now the very agents of God’s righteousness. We are salt, agents of life and preservation in a culture of death. We are light, agents bearing the light of the gospel of the Kingdom into the midst of darkness. We are a city on a hill, agents who build the city of God in the midst of the city of man.

As Jesus starts to attract followers, he never says, “Now, pay no attention to this world.” He teaches that his Kingdom is not of this world; therefore, go shape this world to look more like the Kingdom of God. He doesn’t call them to forget about the Roman Empire. He calls them go into the Roman Empire and transform every square inch as agents of righteousness. When we get to the Great Commission in Matthew 28, does Jesus say, I’m ascending to heaven, come with me? No; he says, Go into that world—that dark, dangerous, idolatrous, and ungodly world. Go into the Greco-Roman, pagan world and disciple the nations. Not simply disciple individuals, but disciple the nations so that the nations might understand the righteousness of God and experience shalom. This has been the hope of the world for 2000 years. In the midst of an unrighteous world, we serve as agents of righteousness—salt, light, and a city on a hill.

## Four Life Takeaways

***First, Proverbs 14:34 gives us a biblically-informed understanding of Christian patriotism—yes, Christian patriotism.***

You can be both Christian and patriotic, in that order. This verse, among others, provides a biblically-informed, God-centered, Christ-exalting understanding of what it means to love God and love country. Yes, my ultimate allegiance is to Christ and his Kingdom, but I love my nation enough to want the righteousness of Christ’s Kingdom to be manifest in the nation of which I’m a citizen. I love my neighbor. I love my American neighbor enough to make sure they understand the truths of God’s law and the only means by which this nation might flourish yet again. I love America but that does not undermine my first allegiance to Jesus. I’ll give you a quick illustration. I love my wife and my children. I am deeply loyal to them. But not one of you would



question my loyalty or my allegiance to Jesus or his Kingdom. My ultimate love for Jesus compels me to love my family with joy. In the same way, our love for Jesus should compel us to love and celebrate this nation, even in the midst of the imperfections. We can love this nation, honor the men and women who have fought for freedom, and celebrate our unique traditions. It is a false dichotomy that we have to either love God or love country. This passage gives us a biblically-informed understanding of what it means to love both. We can be a grateful people who joyfully entrust the true story of our nation to the next generation. The American story is far from perfect, but it is beautiful and worthy of our efforts to pass it down to our children and grandchildren.

We need to recapture a love of country that confronts evil and justice in the public square and embraces the reality that Christianity, more than any other worldview, shaped the founding of this nation. We need to understand what it means to love God and country in light of the growing popularity to be unpatriotic and to suppress the true story of America.

There are two pillars in church history that modeled Christian patriotism. They were great theologians and leaders of the Protestant Reformation—John Knox and John Calvin. No one would ever question their ultimate allegiance to Christ and his Kingdom. Nobody would ever question John Knox and his longing for the gospel to go out from his native Scotland and reach the far corners of this world. But he did challenge the Queen of Scotland to submit to the truth of God’s Word. Under a death warrant from the Queen he cried out, “Give me Scotland or I die.” He wanted his nation to be transformed and exalted through righteousness. His love of God compelled him to appropriately love his nation. John Calvin was a native of France. Like Knox, no one questions his commitment to the good news of the Reformation spreading to the nations, but this did not prevent his deep love and affection for his native land. Calvin sent missionaries all over the world, but he sent 1300 missionaries to France to share the gospel of the Kingdom with those who were living in darkness. He would often secretly visit with the hope that the truths of God’s Word would transform France. The patriotism of Knox and Calvin was never in conflict with their mission to the world. Likewise, we can appropriately love God and love America, and there’s nothing wrong with it. We need to recapture a biblical patriotism today and for generations to come.

***Second, we need to understand that we are in a spiritual battle for the soul of our nation.***

Will it remain one nation under God? In order to recapture the soul of the nation, we need to be praying for revival. Do you know what great event happened in this nation prior to 1776? The Great Awakening. Through the gospel preaching of ministers like Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield, the Great Awakening brought true revival to America. These ministers called people to repent and stand for righteousness in both private and public. This laid the foundation for the birth of a new nation. We need to understand that the very thing that gave birth to this nation began with the people of God repenting and celebrating righteousness in the public square. We need to be praying for another Great Awakening to sweep across America again. If we want to see cultural and political transformation, we first need to see spiritual transformation and revival.



***Third, we need to vote for policies and leaders that will best fight for righteousness in our nation.***

Listen to me very carefully. A political election is not ultimately a decision between right versus left. It is a decision between right versus wrong. Unfortunately, I have heard many pastors claim that voting is simply your civic duty and not your biblical duty; they then conclude that it's permissible not to vote. This is nonsense and it is unbiblical. It is our biblical duty to vote in every political election. It is one way we love our neighbor well and exercise our dual citizenship in both the Kingdom of God and America. We go to the ballot box electing imperfect candidates who will best fight for righteousness in America. Currently there are roughly 25 million eligible evangelicals that are not registered to vote in this nation. It's our biblical duty, not just our civic duty.

***Fourth, and most importantly, to be an agent of righteousness you must be righteous.***

The problem is, the Bible says that no one is righteous. The Bible says that we are all born in a state of unrighteousness because of our sin nature. This prevents us from having a relationship with a righteous God. Thankfully, God has provided a remedy through the cross of Jesus Christ. On the cross all of our unrighteousness falls to Jesus and all of Jesus' righteousness is freely granted to us through faith alone. In fact, Romans 15 tells us that the reproaches of man fell upon Jesus. The reproach and disgrace we read about in Proverbs 14:34 crushes Jesus so we can be declared righteous and experience the full blessing of God forever. Simply by believing in Jesus alone you can receive his righteousness and be utterly transformed to be agents of righteousness—salt and light in a very dark world. And so I plead with you, if you do not know Jesus, the Righteous One, there is no righteousness apart from him. We have no hope of appeasing the righteous judge and ruler of the nations apart from a saving relationship which is offered to you freely. I plead with you to repent and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved.

## **A Call To Action**

My family and I had an opportunity to travel to Oxford, England. While visiting, I wanted to see an outdoor site called the Martyrs' Cross. It's a very small cross on the pavement that marks the spot of the martyrdom of Hugh Latimer and Nicholas Ridley. On October 16, 1555, these leaders in the Church of England and the Protestant Reformation were burned alive because they refused to recant the biblical truth that man is saved by faith alone in the finished work of Christ alone. They were martyred for their righteous convictions but before the flames consumed them, Latimer turned to Ridley and said, raising his voice, "Be of good comfort Master Ridley and play the man; for we shall this day light such a candle, by God's grace, in England, as I trust shall never be put out." For many centuries, England experienced the light and the heat of that candle in unprecedented ways. The sacrifices for righteousness gave rise to the British Empire, at one time the greatest superpower known to man. God exalted that nation. But I think it's fair to say that that nation has been disgraced. Several years ago, a public official proudly declared that England was finally a secular nation. I'm afraid to say that the candle lit in 1555 has gone out. But there was another candle lit in this nation in 1776 and I fear that it's quickly being extinguished. We still have an opportunity this day, however, as the people of God to fan those flames and to ensure that the candle does not go out on the next generation.



May America continue to be a beacon of light and hope that stands for righteousness, not according to the standards of man but according to the standards of Almighty God. Will we ever learn from history? Every history of every nation, kingdom, and empire that has fallen mocks us today and says, Will you not learn from history? The same God who exalts a nation is the same God who can bring it down. We need to long for another Great Awakening in this nation in which the American people can reimagine a nation once again in line with the righteousness of God and a biblical worldview. People of God in the 21st century, may we humble ourselves, may we pray, may we repent, and may we seek the face of God and not lose hope. Why? Because the light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it. Amen.

