

**"THE DISCIPLINE OF FREEDOM"**  
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Deuteronomy 6:12-25

"Righteousness exalteth a nation, but sin is a reproach to any people."

Ephesians 5:6-14

*Proverbs 14:34*

"That ye may be blameless and harmless, the sons of God, without rebuke, in the midst of a crooked and perverse nation, among whom ye shine as lights in the world."

*Philippians 2:15*

Having now been retired for five years and not having the opportunity, nor the responsibility, of preaching every Sunday, preparing a sermon becomes a bit more onerous than it once was. When I spoke recently to a fellow superannuated preacher in Estes Park, he confirmed that this was, indeed, a problem and that freedom from such a responsibility encouraged one to develop ergasophobia--the fear of work. Nevertheless, I appreciate this opportunity once more to stand in this pulpit and, as a Congregationalist, to say with complete freedom whatever may be on my mind and heart. And freedom is the subject about which I wish to speak.

As most of you will know, if you have an awareness of Congregational history or an understanding of your Congregational heritage, the early American clergy of New England had the habit on one Sunday of each year, of preaching a patriotic sermon, the sum and substance of which was usually the admonition contained in the Book of Proverbs wherein the author writes that:

"Righteousness exalteth a nation; but sin is a reproach to any people."

Those early and very lengthy sermons drew the listeners' attention to the virtues which were essential in any people desiring to remain free under a government designed for service to the people in contrast to a government which most of them had experienced in Europe intended to be served by the people.

Exercising my prerogative as a Congregational clergyman standing within that cherished tradition, I have elected to preach that same kind of sermon this morning. If I dare to criticise my country and its citizens a bit, many of you will know that it is because I cherish and have always strongly advocated the magnificent political principles upon which the Founding Fathers established this republic, principles which were drawn primarily from the Judeo-Christian heritage. As a great patriot from this very congregation once put it, "Freedom is a religious discovery."

Again, if I dare to criticise my country at this critical time in its history, many of you will also remember that Christmas Eve many years ago when the midnight service was picketed by members of the Communist Party because the minister, so they said, was a "super patriot"; one of the finest compliments I have ever received coming from that source.

If I grieve for my country and express concern over the path it has often taken, it is because I love and cherish its grand and noble heritage.

II.

Many great, and some not so great, men and women of history have had the habit of maintaining a journal or a diary in which they have recorded, not the unimportant details of their daily lives, but the ideas and concerns which lay closest to their minds and hearts. It is a practice to be commended. I have not been well disciplined in keeping my

own journal, but frequently I have incorporated in it quotations from others who express my thoughts and feelings more adequately than can I.

This thought comes from that journal. It is a judgment written by a long-time friend and ministerial colleague, Edmund A. Opitz of the Foundation for Economic Education:

"It is a solid truth, I believe, that you cannot build a free society out of just any kind of people. A free society is built around a nucleus of people of superior intellect and integrity who are, at the same time cognizant of economic and political reality. You need people who love God and their neighbor; people of understanding and compassion; people with enduring family ties. Our schools and our churches should be producing people of this caliber, for it is the function of education and religion--in the broad sense of both terms--to make us better and wiser men and women. When we have a significant number of wise and good people living lives of a quality high enough to deserve a free society, we'll have a free society. All the rest of us, riding on their coattails, will reap the rich blessings of liberty." <sup>1</sup>

The president of Hillsdale College, George Roche, offers a very similar observation. This, too, I recorded in my Journal:

"We misread our dilemma--and hugely underestimate our peril, I fear--if we suppose that the nature of world struggle is geographic, or economic, or one system of government versus another. The conflict is between our Christian heritage and secular power, between keeping the faith and having none, between God and clever monkeys who are astonished at their ability to add and subtract. The conflict is between irreconcilable conceptions of man, the universe, and ultimate reality." <sup>2</sup>

If these two scholarly observers are correct, as I strongly believe them to be, then it is little wonder that freedom and justice and peace seem continually to wane in our American society.

Living where I do, I do not subscribe to a daily newspaper. Most of the news of the world I receive from a daily television newscast, the first 15 minutes of which are usually filled with stories of the crime and violence that daily takes place in the city of Denver. The second 15 minutes is usually devoted to politics and tells of the corruption and malfeasance in office of elected officials or of their various schemes to increase the scope and power of government. That description may be a slight exaggeration but not very much.

The national news differs little from the local news with its stories of crime, violence, drugs, Aids, and you know the rest. The political news frequently includes a story of some pressure group demonstrating and asking not what it can do for the country, but what the country can do for it, demanding privileges and rights. There is seldom anything mentioned about duties and responsibilities. Nearly every group in our society is today in controversy with some other group. Of course, religion is seldom mentioned, except negatively, for that is the most controversial subject of all. As a consequence, it becomes less and less a matter of serious concern.

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<sup>1</sup> The Freeman, August, 1986

<sup>2</sup> Imprimus, August, 1986

That brings us to the very nub of our problem, the problem high-lighted by William Grede who authored that phrase I quoted earlier, "Freedom is a religious discovery," and likewise emphasized by Edmund Opitz and George Roche whom I have just quoted.

My thesis here this morning is that the only cement or glue that can hold a nation together in freedom is a common religious philosophy, some basic body of moral, ethical and spiritual principles believed in and adhered to by the majority of the citizens. That we do not adequately possess in America today.

### III.

Through many past generations, Americans for the most part did adhere to moral and ethical principles, basically Judeo-Christian in nature, which in the present generation are being rejected in favor of only one value; whatever gives immediate gratification. It is a neo-hedonism applied to such matters as sex, abortion, drug use and even economics and politics. The argument is, "give us what we want and give it to us now; let future generations pay for it if they can." Even the elderly have gotten on their bandwagon. All of this is presented under the banner of human rights. Little if any concern is given to long-term consequences for either the self or for society.

Why is it, I keep asking myself, that we think we can abandon these values of the past, revealed and established through centuries of human experience, and still have a nation safe and secure against chaos and tyranny? Moral judgements are not arbitrary. Ignoring these time-honored principles always has serious consequences.

We would all argue, no doubt, in favor of freedom, and we ought always to seek to maximize human liberty, but freedom is not license to do anything we please with no restraints. Freedom has metes and bounds which must be observed if it is not finally to be rejected in favor of any order, an order which will then be imposed by force. Society cannot exist without some order and men and women will prefer an omnipotent government over anarchy and chaos. When the situation gets bad enough, there will be a strong call for an imposed order which can only mean increasing the power and authority of the state and a consequent loss of freedom.

More than anything else, freedom demands self-discipline and a mutual assent to the proposition that there are right actions and wrong actions and rightness does not depend on our personal opinion. The Founding Fathers, whatever their differences, agreed on this one thing: Freedom is dependent on morality. When morality goes, freedom goes. We are succeeding, in no small sense, in using our freedom to destroy that which made us free.

True freedom demands a price. That price is self-restraint. Just to be free of restraints on our actions is no real freedom. John Dryden once wrote:

"I am as free as Nature first made me,  
Ere the base laws of servitude began,  
When wild in woods the noble savage ran."

But do we wish to be nothing more than savages? Is that all we desire? If not, then some constraint must be put upon our appetites.

St. Augustine in the 5th century more fully understood the problem when he wrote,  
"He that is good is free, though he be a slave; he that is evil, is a slave,  
though he be a king."

It is not Communism, or any other political evil, that will take away our freedom in America. It is our own lack of moral and spiritual self-discipline.

In a book entitled *The Real Enemy*, a Frenchman, Pierre d'Harcourt has written,  
"...a man's real enemies are not ranged against him along the borders of a hostile country; they are often among his own people, indeed, within his own mind. The worst enemies are hate, and greed and cruelty. The real enemy is within."

If we look to the politicians to save us, we look in vain. Margaret Thatcher of Great Britain, has confessed the falsity of that hope in a speech to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland:

"The politicians and other secular powers should strive by their measures to bring out the good in people and to fight down the bad: but they can't create the one or abolish the other. They can only see that the laws encourage the best instincts and convictions of the people, instincts and convictions which I am convinced are far more deeply rooted than is often supposed."

One can only hope and pray that she is right, but it is not uncommon today to find people who have no basic grasp of good and evil, people who believe that nothing is particularly wrong unless it is illegal; but where lying, cheating and contempt for the person are the rule, the liars, cheats and bullies take over and freedom is lost. A nation's values absolutely depend on the values of the people who comprise that nation.

The 6th century Chinese philosopher, Lao Tse, called moral goodness "rightness in the soul" and wrote,

"If there is right in the soul, there will be beauty in the person. If there is beauty in the person, there will be harmony in the home. If there is harmony in the home, there will be order in the nation. If there is order in the nation, there will be peace in the world."

And, there will be freedom!

May I remind you once more of the motto by which I have tried to guide my own life--"God told me I had to fight; he didn't tell me I had to win."

Our task is to live by and exemplify the moral truths contained in our Christian faith. We have no greater task than this. And if each one of us succeeds in doing that to the best of our ability, we will fulfill the command of St. Paul directed to the Philippians:

"That ye may be blameless and harmless, the sons of God, without rebuke, in the midst of a crooked and perverse nation, among who ye shine as lights in the world."

The rest is in the hands of God.

Let us pray:

"Our Father's God, to thee, author of liberty, to thee we pray.  
Long may our land be bright with freedom's holy light;  
Protect us by thy might, great God, our King. Amen."