

What to Do When You Don't Know What to Do: What Makes Us Strong?

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Proverbs 14:34 MSG

July 3, 2016

A Mrs. Powell of Philadelphia asked Ben Franklin (who was 81) at the Constitutional Convention: “*Well, what’s it going to be – a monarchy or a republic?*” He replied: “**A Republic, madam, if you can keep it.**” It takes a lot of work to keep a republic going. Having a King makes it easy – no choices are demanded of followers – the King issues an edict and you follow it or pay the consequences. But you also lose your freedom. The U.S. Constitution is a wonderful document, but it’s just words on paper unless we keep it.

The Founders knew that every American needed to participate and to do their fair share. There’s a Mark Dice YOUTUBE’s where the question is asked: “Why do we celebrate the 4th of July?” Many Americans don’t know WHY we celebrate Independence Day, what country we declared independence from, or could name any of the Founding Fathers. Mark Dice, the interviewer, would ask the person at the beach if they could name other Founding Fathers in addition to Jessie Ventura and John Wilkes Booth. Most couldn’t. One interviewer said his favorite FF was Jeremiah.

The book by Eric Metaxas, *If You Can Keep It*, is certainly the source behind today’s sermon.

Proverbs 14:34 ***Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a disgrace to any people.***
Righteousness (Wisdom) Exalts (Builds up) A nation (more than just me) But
(contrast)

Sin (Folly) Our nation was founded because our founding fathers felt that King George had not acted with wisdom and fairness towards them.

Is a disgrace (tears down, degrades, shames) to **any people** (“any” people = a principle of life for all time). Ben Franklin said: “***Only a virtuous people are capable of freedom. As nations become corrupt and vicious they have more need of masters.***” “Virtuous” means good character, dignity, glory, honor, & reputation - these words have virtually disappeared. They are often mocked today.

A Frenchman, Alexis de Tocqueville, was sent by his government to examine the prisons in America. He travelled extensively for 9 months in America in 1831 but found out far more about America than our penal institutions. He wrote a book, Democracy in America, and made profound observations:

“The American Republic will endure until the day Congress discovers that it can bribe the public with the public's money.” Like Franklin and like Solomon, de Tocqueville knew that the secret to American freedom was in our virtue. ***“I sought for the greatness and genius of America in her commodious harbors and her ample rivers – and it was not there . . . in her fertile fields and boundless forests and it was not there . . . in her rich mines and her vast world commerce – and it was not there . . . in her democratic Congress and her matchless Constitution – and it was not there. Not until I went into the churches of America and heard her pulpits aflame with righteousness did I understand the secret of her genius and power. America is great because she is good, and if America ever ceases to be good, she will cease to be great.”***

Why should anyone do the right thing? When people act in bad ways the culture is at risk. Ultimately for our Founders, Faith played the premier role. While they believed in the separation of church and state (not having a national church), they also understood that faith was of the essence to freedom.

“In France, I'd almost always seen the spirit of religion and the spirit of freedom marching in opposite directions. But in America I found they were immediately united and that they reigned in common over the same country.” Being a good citizen was a Christian response to authority that was voluntary – it was not forced or coerced. The greatest authority was not government, but was God Himself. And Christians were to voluntarily submit themselves to God.

In George Washington's farewell address in 1796 he said: ***Let us with caution indulge the supposition that morality can be maintained without religion.”*** Virtue and character were important, but religious principles and religion must also be present.

We need heroes. We need people we can look up to and admire and aspire to be like. When I ask: “Who is/was your hero/heroine?” how do you respond? Often it's a sports or entertainment figure, probably more often it's a family member. As we get older and learn more and go through different stages of life, our heroes can change. Why are they our heroes/heroines? While they may have a skill or ability that we admire, it's often because they are people with great character. Few people admire Bernie Madoff – who “made off” with other people's money

with a pyramid scheme. Few people admire Timothy McVeigh, who blew up the Murrah Building in OKC in 1995. Judas Iscariot and King Herod are not adored figures in the Bible.

George Whitefield was an English preacher, affiliated with John/Charles Wesley, who came to America at age 24 before the Revolutionary War to preach. He was a small man, physically, but was a huge English “rock star” as a preacher. He was so good a speaker that it was claimed: “He could move a person to tears just by pronouncing the word, Mesopotamia.” In fact, when it was announced that he was coming to America for the first time to preach, he had a huge audience awaiting him. Maybe not until the Beatles came to America in 1964 had America seen an Englishman with such a powerful draw. He was the first American celebrity. Like Francis Asbury who came several years after him, he traveled all over America. More Americans heard him speak than any other American who’d ever lived at that time. He preached about 18,000 times and is estimated to have spoken to as many as 10 million people.

Ben Franklin and Thomas Jefferson were the two least connected to the orthodox Christian faith. Ben was notoriously tight with his money. He reluctantly went to hear Whitefield preach. He estimated Whitefield spoke to between 20-30,000 people at one time. Franklin anticipated an offering would be taken. Ben resolved Whitefield would get nothing from him. *“I had in my pocket a handful of copper money, 3-4 silver dollars, and 5 pistols in gold. As he proceeded I began to soften, and concluded to give the coppers. Another stroke of his oratory made me ashamed of that, and I determined to give the silver. He finished so admirably that I emptied my pocket wholly into the collector’s dish, gold and all.”* Ben said at that same sermon was someone else there, who shared the same skepticism and sales-resistance, only had taken the precaution of emptying his pockets before he came. When the collection was made the man felt such a strong desire to give that he asked a neighbor if he could borrow some money for the offering. Franklin said that the man who was asked was perhaps the only man in the place who had the firmness not to be affected by the preacher. The man told the asker that he would normally lend him the money, but not now, “for thee seems to be out of thy right sense.”

Whitefield truly believed his message. It was said he could truly spoke from his heart and nearly always wept when he preached. And his message was that the Gospel was for all people. Children, women and blacks. He was a “social leveler” of the day. He helped unite the country. He also helped create a moral foundation. In his book, Eric Metaxas states he thought it was Whitefield, maybe more than any other person, who helped shape the moral character of America.

It's important to have character. I'd be all for lotteries if the winner won character and not money. The "love of money is the root of all kinds of evil." Good character is NOT the root of all kinds of evil. Good character means we'll have personal discipline. Good character means I think of something bigger than just me. It's important to elect leaders who love country more than self; but they are increasingly hard to find. The hard truth we must face is that we deserve the leaders we elect. They ARE us.

After the Revolutionary War was over, the newly formed United States of America was very fragile. In the summer of 1787 the States sent delegates to Philadelphia to revise the Articles of Confederation. The 55 representatives of the States had their own selfish interests in mind, not the good of the union. It was hard for them to agree about anything. They had to come up with a way to have a Federal Government w/o it being too strong. Was this possible? Towards the end of the conference, things were at an impasse. Finally, Ben Franklin gave a speech to the assembly in which he implored them to turn to God. I quote in part from that speech:

"I have lived a long time and the longer I live, the more convincing proofs I see of this truth – that God governs in the affairs of men. And if a sparrow cannot fall to the ground without his notice, is it probable than an empire can rise without his aid? We've been assured in the sacred writings that "except the Lord build the house they labor in vain that build it." I beg that henceforth prayers imploring the assistance of Heaven and its blessings on our deliberations, be held in this Assembly every morning before we proceed to business, and that one or more of the clergy of the city be request to officiate in that service."

The impasses were broken and compromises on all issues were struck. Solutions were found. The spirit of selflessness and compromise that came over this body was sufficient for them to ratify the great document called the "Constitution."

The idea that God chose this nation for great things doesn't sit well with modern sensibilities. But if you go back and look at the words of our Founding Fathers, the words of Abraham Lincoln and follow how things worked out – it's hard not to believe that we just happened.

"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." (Declaration of Independence)

The Gospel. On the one hand, no one is righteous. Only God alone. But on the other hand, we want to allow the righteousness of God in Christ into our lives. It changes us. It makes us new people. When we live out that new identity in Christ it affects our marriages, our families, our children, our parents, our friends, our neighborhood, our work, and our church. When we live it out, we become like a city set upon a hill – a shining example.

How are we made righteous? By the grace of Jesus Christ. Then we cooperate with that grace to have an impact.