

What Makes a Great Nation?
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Greetings brothers and sisters in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

I'm not here representing the United States or Napa, California where I'm an elected official. Rather, I am here as a representative of an eternal kingdom, a kingdom to which we all belong and in which we are all brothers and sisters. Therefore, in many ways I have come home to be here with you.

We all want to live in a great nation; a nation where righteousness and justice are administered routinely, where there is freedom and opportunity, where there is equality and fairness, and where there is dignity. But it is so elusive, so difficult to achieve. We see all over the world many nations groping in the darkness, stumbling and falling, trying to find what it is that will make their nation great. Thank God for Jesus Christ and the instructions he gives us in his word. He has shown us what it takes to make a nation great.

In Isaiah chapter 9 we read a familiar prophecy;

“the people walking in darkness have seen a great light, on those living in the land of deep darkness light has dawned, for unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given and the government shall be upon his shoulders”

From this we can infer that God desires righteous governments. You see God desires great nations, God desires great leaders, but God requires great Christians. For it is great Christians through whom Christ works, who have what is required to inspire and lead others to a fair and just society. So let us discuss what it takes to be a great Christian.

There are four dimension to being a great Christian and a great Leader. The first is that we must be rooted in God's truth. God's truth informs us, tells us our identity, gives us his expectations, and gives us instructions for justice and righteousness. As we meditate on his truth, it grows into wisdom and lights the path in front of us. It feeds us and gives us strength.

The other three things are the living expressions of a Great Christian and are summarized in 1st Corinthians 13:13

“And now these three things remain: faith, hope, and love. But the greatest of these is love.”(NIV)

When God's word says only three things remain, we should pay special attention to what they are. Each of these defines a unique dimension in our relationship with God, ourselves, and others. Each is important and affects the others. If one is weak, all are weak.

These four dimensions of truth, faith, hope, and love can be thought of as the four legs of a chair on which a great Christian rests. They must each be strong for the chair to be secure and trustworthy.

Truth

Truth reveals things as they are. It is reality. It is the foundation of understanding. A person who has a firm grasp of the truth is well informed and can make good decisions and choices. Having the facts and understanding the realities concerning our choices is a key aspect of leadership.

Truth is found in the word of God. It is also revealed in his creation and in the person of Jesus Christ. It is not just a set of facts. Rather, it is instruction in how man relates to the many dimensions of universe around him. Being rooted in the truth gives us the ability to see what others are blinded toward, to look past personal desires, to overcome our natural prejudices, and to see things as they are, as God sees them.

Psalm 1 describes a person who passionately pursues the truth of God.

Psalm 1;

“Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the company of mockers, but his delight is in the law of the Lord and on his law he meditates day and night. That person is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season and whose leaf does not wither. What ever he does prospers”

Wisdom and prosperity grow from being rooted in the truth. Such a person prospers in everything that he does. If such a Christian is a leader in a church, then that church will prosper. If such a Christian is a leader of a community, then that community will prosper. Such a person will bring forth blessing at just the right time, blessings that are delivered from God. His timing is profound. He is not shaken by the changes around him. He is always receiving God's blessing and is strong because of God's word. All those around him are blessed.

We have an example from Joshua.

Joshua is a great leader chosen by God to take the new promised land. God gave him the instructions recorded in Joshua 1:7 telling him;

“Be strong and very courageous. Be careful to obey all the law at my servant Moses gave you; do not turn to the right or to the left that you may be successful wherever you go. Keep this book of the law always on your lips; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful”.

We see from this that Joshua's success is dependent on him being rooted in the word of God.

When Jesus came to earth, the word of God became flesh.

As described in the gospel of John 1:14 we read that Jesus is the living Word;

“The Word became flesh and lived for a while among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.”

In verse 17 we read;

“For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.”

Thus, Jesus brings new dimensions to our understanding of truth. The law given through Moses was one dimension. It provided instructions. But when the Word became flesh, we were given the living dimensions of truth. Further, we learn of God’s grace through Jesus, a critical understanding of truth.

In John 15:5, Jesus provides a parable similar to that in Psalm 1. Jesus tells us;

“I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.”

We conclude that we must remain rooted in the vine, rooted in Jesus Christ, connected to his word, to his teaching, to his living example and then we will be very prosperous and fruitful. Being connected with Christ allows God's Spirit to move through us. Apart from Christ we can do nothing.

From these parables and these examples from history we see how important it is to be rooted in the truth of God, to be fed by his instruction, and to use the word of God as the light to our path.

One very important aspect of God's Word is that it tells us who we are in Christ and what God expects of us. In other words, it tells us how we are to relate to the world around us.

Who are we? What does God say He expects of us?

Luke chapter 17 verse 10 tells us we are unworthy servants only doing what are master commands. It is important to remember that God has called us into his service not because we are worthy or strong but precisely because we are weak. He called fisherman to carry on his great work, prostitutes and sinners through which to demonstrate his great power, and a vicious persecutor of the early church to be his apostle to the gentiles and write much of the new testament. They were called, and when they responded they were only doing as their master commanded. Likewise we are unworthy servants but we are nonetheless called.

We are called to be the salt of the earth as described in Matthew chapter 5. Salt prevents corruption when it is sprinkled on meat. A little bit of salt prevents much corruption and we are called to be the salt of the earth. We also read if we lose our saltiness we are good for nothing but to be thrown on the ground and trampled by men.

In Matthew chapter 5 verse 14 we read we are the light of the world.

“A city on a hill cannot be hidden nor do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl instead you put it on a stand so that it gives light to everyone in the house.”

God's truth tells us that we are the light of the world and to allow our light to shine brightly around us. We are unworthy servants but we are nonetheless call to be the light of the world.

In second Corinthians chapter 2 verse 15 we learn that we are also the aroma of Christ;

“For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those were being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are the smell of death; to the other, the fragrance of life.”

It should be no surprise then that that we are opposed by those who are perishing, to whom we are like the smell of death. But to those who are being saved we are the fragrance of life and they will be attracted to us.

Jesus wants to work through you.

First Corinthians chapter 3 verse 16 we read that we are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in us. We are the house in which Christ's spirit resides and he is working through us. Let us honor and care for His temple.

In First Corinthians chapter 12 verse 27 we learn we are all unique parts of the body of Christ. Some of us are the voice for Christ, others are the muscle and the workers for Christ, and others are the feet and the goers for Christ. Each and everyone of us are part of the body and each of us has a role to play. We are all called to be great Christians in the areas of our involvement. We are to be great Christians for our family, for our businesses, for our church, and in every role that we play.

We are a royal priesthood as described in first Peter chapter 2 verse nine.

“But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness and into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.”

We who have received Christ as Savior and Lord all belong to the race of Christians. Our bloodline is that of God. We are all united in Christ, we are all brothers and sisters in Christ. Once we were not a people, but now we belong to the tribe of the Lion of Judah.

Second Corinthians chapter 5 verse 20 tells us;

“We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us.”

So while we desire to live in a great nation the reality is that we are visitors to a foreign land representing a great king of a much greater Kingdom to which we all belong.

Christ loves all mankind. He desires great nations here on earth just as he has in the kingdom of heaven. He has instructed us to pray that his kingdom will come to earth.

God desires great nations, God desires great leaders, but God requires great Christians.

While the truth is a source of wisdom and strength, an input to our souls, the other three dimensions of faith, hope, and love are our living expressions of the truth in us. It is how we live out God's instruction. Now let's turn to the Great Christian dimension of faith.

Faith

Faith is recognizing and being responsive to the one true and holy God. It is our relationship with the Father.

In Hebrews 11 verse 6 we read that *“without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.”* This is a simple but profound statement. Faith is not a set of disciplines, or practices that are good for you. It is not obeying superstitions just in case they are true. It is knowing and responding to the one true God and not putting another god or idle of personal desire in his place.

Hebrews gives us a list of examples of people of great faith. We read about Noah building a large ark in the middle of dry land, contrary to what his common senses might have been telling him, but in obedience to God. We read about Abraham who was told to go to a new land and he went. Later he was asked to sacrifice Isaac his son who was the fulfillment of an earlier promise from God. God substitutes a ram on his behalf but in the mean time, Abraham was obedient. We also read about Rahab the prostitute, who accommodated the spies as Joshua prepared to attack Jericho. Her household was saved and she is forever it listed in the word of God as a person of great faith because she knew there was a God, that it was the God of Joshua's people, and she was responsive to God.

Great faith is about being responsive to the one true holy God, seeking his face, finding, and doing his will.

What I have to say now is a warning because this is where Satan operates. It started in the garden of Eden where the serpent told Eve to ignore God's instructions. God told Eve not to eat of the fruit of the tree of good and evil or she would die. But the serpent said “surely you will not die and the fruit is good, so eat of it.” She chose to believe the serpent, she ate of it, and as a result we have death on the earth. Satan continues to operate and substitute the truth of God with lies that respond to our inner passions. When we knowingly disobey God, we are in rebellion, and that is sin.

There are two kinds of sin. One is where we know we are in sin and have the opportunity to repent. The other is where we do the very same thing, but instead of recognizing it as sin we

change what we believe God expects of us, just as Eve did in the garden. We say to ourselves “Surely I will not die. For this thing that I believe was meant for me, though it does not belong to me, must be something that God is providing me.” This is the worst kind of sin. We are now worshipping a different god having replaced the truth of God with a lie.

When we fail to acknowledge sin for what it is and instead substitute a false God or expectation, we enter a condition where there is no opportunity to repent. Romans chapter 1 beginning at verse 20 we read;

‘For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities--his eternal power and divine nature--have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse. For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles. Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator--who is forever praised. Amen. Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts.’ (NIV)

When we substitute the truth of God for a lie, we find ourselves sliding into a pit of darkness and self inflicted depravity. We must not fool ourselves into thinking God is accepting of our sin. God is a holy and righteous God and there is always a penalty for sin.

The Bible provides many illustrations of God’s intolerance toward sin. For instance, after the victory at Jericho, Joshua suffered a very serious defeat in what should have been an easy victory. Joshua fell prostrate before God asking why it was that God caused him to cross the Jordan River only to be defeated in front of all of his enemies who would now see his weakness and annihilate him.

God told him to stand up and informed him that someone among his clan had taken goods from the battlefield that God had commanded them not to. Joshua was commanded to find who violated God’s command. Eventually, Aiken was identified and he confessed that he had taken gold, silver and a Babylonian robe from the battlefield and had hid it under his tent.

Obedying God's command, Joshua had Aiken, his children, and his livestock stoned to death and burned. Once the sin had been identified and removed, Joshua and the Israelites again had success in battle.

An example from the new testament is that of Ananias and Sapphira. It was the New Testament church a short time after the resurrection of Christ. People were selling and sharing their possessions, placing them at the apostles’ feet to be distributed to any who had need. Ananias came before Peter and presented his offering saying that it was all that he had received from the sale of his property. Peter asked why he lied to the Holy Spirit and kept back some for himself noting that he could've given whatever he chose. Peter said “you have not lied to men but to

God” (Acts 5:4). Hearing these words Ananias fell dead. Three hours later Sapphira was brought before the church, told the same lie, and also fell dead. Fear gripped the people as they were reminded that their God is a holy God.

Many will recall that Jesus told those who were ready to stone a woman caught in adultery that “he who is without sin among you, let him cast the first stone”. Few remember that once the accusers went away, Jesus then told the adulteress to “go and sin no more” (John 8:11). Similarly, when Jesus healed a man who had been an invalid for 38 years, he told him to “stop sinning or something worse might happen” (John 5:14). Christ demonstrated he is merciful toward people, but not tolerant of their sin.

God is a holy and righteous God, one that does not tolerate sin. This must be understood if we are to understand the meaning of Christ’s sacrifice. We each have a penalty that must be paid. When we acknowledge and confess our sins, our sins are forgiven because of Christ’s sacrifice. This is our helmet of salvation. However we must not lie before God and we must earnestly pursue a life without sin. When we stumble, he will forgive our sins when we confess them. If we instead substitute the truth with a false god who approves of our sin, we are in great danger.

Thus, a man of great faith is going to be true and accountable to the one true holy God. He will pursue a life without sin as that is what God desires. He is going to be a person of great integrity, one who can be trusted at all times, because he is accountable at all times. He can be trusted with the finances of the church, or a large company, or with the running of a government. Whatever he does he can be trusted because he’s accountable to the one true holy God.

Great Christians make great leaders because great Christians can always be trusted.

Now let's look at the Great Christian dimension of hope.

Hope

It is about us. We Christians are a people who are destined for an eternal, glorious kingdom. The joy that awaits us is beyond description. We are the object of God’s love.

We are visitors on earth. God's Word tells us that there is a place prepared for us. We read in John 14:1 to 3 that Jesus has gone and prepared a place for us in heaven and that he is coming back to bring us there with him.

We read in Revelations about heaven, where there is no more tears, no more scorching heat, no more pain, and no more suffering; where we stand before the throne and praise God. That's our destiny. It is our precious treasure. It is the promise of our Holy Father and it belongs to us. It is our inheritance.

In Matthew chapter 6:19 we are told not to store up treasures on earth were moth and rust destroy but to store up treasures in heaven where things cannot be stolen or damaged. We are reminded that “where our treasure is our hearts will also be”.

But our hearts are often captured by the temptations around us. When the rich young ruler approached Christ, described how he had kept the command of God from his youth, and then asked what more he needed to do, Christ replied:

“You still lack one thing. Sell all you have and distribute them to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me.” (Luke 18:22)

The young ruler then became very sorrowful for he was very rich. Faced with choosing the riches of heaven or the riches of earth, he found his heart was chained to earthly things.

Another illustration is the parable of the rich man storing up for himself his wealth in barns, only to die that night. Christ reminds us that “so is he who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God” (Luke 12:21).

The apostle Paul writes in 1 Timothy and other places about the trouble the love of money brings;

“But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.”

Great hope is born from an understanding of the glorious riches of heaven, of being in eternity with the creator of heaven and earth, embraced in his love and ever adoring his glory. Great hope looks past the immediate trappings of wealth, power, and pleasure and seeks an eternal reward. Hope is being aware that there's something better beyond today; that our current circumstances are temporary.

Thus, a person of hope is a person who looks past the immediate rewards available to himself, denies himself, and instead pursues a greater future. People of hope see things as they could be and hold fast to the pursuit of those things to make life better for the people they serve.

Because a great Christian's hope and treasure is in heaven, he will not be distracted by the trappings of wealth and power and the many other things of this earth. He has little to lose on this earth. He will be fearless and courageous in the pursuit of a greater future as his future is already secure.

Great Christians are people of great hope. Great leaders are people of great hope. They look to the future, see what needs to be done to prepare, and are willing to make the sacrifices that are necessary today so that the people they serve can have a better future.

Now let's look at the fourth dimension which is the greatest dimension, that of love.

Love

It is about others.

The final leg of the chair is love. In John chapter 13:34 Jesus says the following;

“A new command I give you; love one another. As I have love you so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you're my disciples if you love one another”.

Now this does not sound like a new command. It sounds like the old great command found in Deuteronomy and Leviticus which tells us to love our neighbors as ourselves. But it is a new command. Jesus said love one another as I have loved you. You see, while we were enemies of the cross, Christ died for us; while we were still sinners, Christ paid the penalty for our sins and he has commanded us to love others as he has loved us.

In Matthew chapter 5, Christ commands us to love even our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. He reminds us that there is little reward in simply loving those who love us back.

Love is the greatest dimension. That is to say it's the most important dimension. However, this last leg of the chair is perhaps the most difficult dimension.

In John 14:15 Jesus says “if you love me you will obey what I command.” Jesus has commanded us to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. To love our enemies, as Christ commanded us, we must overcome our natural fear of those who mean to harm us.

Love overcoming fear is the definition of courage. To love as Christ commands us, we must be very courageous. This kind of love requires the we first die to ourselves. In John chapter 15:13 Jesus says “greater love has no one than this that one lay down his life for his friends”.

We are instructed to follow Christ's example;

Ephesians 5:1. *“Be imitators of God therefore as dearly loved children and live a life of love just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.”*

We see how fundamental the role of love is in our walk and our ability to overcome fear. First John 4:16 tells us that “God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God and God in him. Love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment because in this world we are like him. There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear because fear has to do with punishment. The man who fears is not made perfect in love.”

Now we begin to see how all four of the legs of the chair work together to make a great Christian. If your treasure is here on earth, you will be a person of fear because there'll always be the chance that someone will steal what you have. But if your treasure is in heaven, then the fear is removed and you have the opportunity to love even that person who is your enemy, to have the courage to overcome your fear and love as Christ has commanded us.

Loving your enemy is not easy. It takes effort. It takes prayer. It takes the work of the Holy Spirit. I have found that to love a person who is difficult to love, you must see past those things that you might find objectionable. You have to develop the ability to see the beauty in the other

person. God made everybody beautiful. God loves everyone of us; those who are saved but more than that he loves those who are lost. That is where God's lost treasure exists. It is a treasure yet to be recovered. Therefore, it is precisely these difficult people who we are to pursue.

If we are to love as God loves, we must see as God sees. We need to see the beauty in that person. We have to look past Muslim, past tribe, past rags, cleanliness and politics, and past all the possible offenses they may have done and said and see the beauty in that person. When we do see beauty, we can then love them from the heart and not feign love from an empty sense of duty.

If a leader loves as Christ commanded us and loves even his enemies, then when he is setting policy he will treat each person fairly regardless of who it was that put him in office. He will be objective and fair to everyone he represents.

Thus, in a great Christian we see the four critical dimensions working together. A great Christian is wise as he is rooted in the truth and able discern what others can not see. A great Christian is a person of integrity as he lives to please a holy God, one who is merciful, but one that does not tolerate sin. He can always be trusted. A great Christian is a person whose heart resides in a future hope, who is not distracted or consumed by the immediate pleasures of today. He is a person of vision. A great Christian is courageous, loving even his enemy, and able to administer justice with fairness and equity.

God desires great nations, God desires great leaders, but God requires great Christians.

Example from History

I believe America is a great nation or at least it has been a great nation, and is a good example to be studied.

In it's early formation during the early 1800s, there was a French philosopher named Alex de Tocqueville who wanted to know what it was that was making this young nation so prosperous. So this person from another country came over to the United States, and sought to find the answer to that question. He was a third-party observer in this very formative time. And the following is what he writes in his book titled democracy in America.

"Americans combine the notion of Christianity and liberty so intimately in their minds that it is impossible to make them conceive of one without the other."

"Upon my arrival in United States the religious aspects of the country was the first thing that struck my attention. And the more I stayed there the more I perceive the great political consequences resulting from the state of things to which I was not accustomed. In France I had almost always seen a spirit of religion and the Spirit of freedom pursuing courses that were opposed to each other. But in America I found that they were intimately united, that they were reigning in common over the same country."

"I sought for the greatness and genius of America in her large harbors and great rivers, but it was not there. In her fertile lands and boundless prairies, but it was not there; and in her rich mines

and vast commerce, but it was not there; not until I went into the churches of America and found her pulpits aflame with righteousness did I understand her secret of genius and power. America is great because America is good. And if America ever ceases to be good America will cease to be great.”

From this independent observer, what made America great was great Christians.

Summary

There are four things to remember and do; a great Christian must (1) be rooted in God's truth, (2) faithful to the one true holy God, (3) hold fast to our eternal hope, and (4) live out the kind of love with which Christ loved us.

There is a story about a little girl in the Sunday school class. The teacher had a very hard time keeping her occupied. So the teacher took a page out of the magazine with a picture of the world and cut it up into a little puzzle and gave it to her. She asked her to put the puzzle of the world back together and she assumed that would take the child sometime. However the little girl quickly returned with the map all put together. The teacher asked how she did it so quickly. The little girl replied that it was easy. On the back was a picture of a man. She explain that all she had to do was put the picture of the man together and the world took care of itself.

To put the world together we must put the man together. A great nation begins with great Christians. If we have great Christians in our churches, we will have great churches. If we have great churches, then we will have great communities, and if we have great communities then we will have a great nation.

In Matthew 16:24 Jesus tells us "whoever wants to be my disciple must deny himself and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it but whoever loses their life for my sake shall find life. What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world and yet lose their soul.”

Great Christians have to be willing to pick up their cross and follow Jesus. This means we have to be ready to die to ourselves each and every day. This is what it will take if we are to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. It is what it will take if we are to say “no” to the temptations of today for a greater tomorrow. It is what it takes to be truly obedient to the holy and righteous God who is our God.

Many have paid a great sacrifice and each of us have to be willing to follow their example. We are not yet perfect but God continues to refine us so that we are continually becoming more like him.

You see God desires great nations. God desires great leaders, but God requires great Christians.

Deeply rooted in the truth of God's word, they know their purpose. They are the salt, light, and the fragrance of Christ. They are ambassadors and a royal priesthood of an eternal kingdom. They're wholly devoted and faithful to God. They are people of integrity. They trust in an eternal

hope and are not compromised by wealth. They give themselves in their confident pursuit of a brighter tomorrow. They are unconditionally loving and forgiving. They are righteous and just.

Great Christians are great leaders and they form the foundation of a great nation.