



THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

REDISCOVERING AN AMERICAN HERO

SERMON BY REV. DOUG PRATT ■ JANUARY 28, 2018

Dear friends, I urge you, as foreigners and exiles, to abstain from sinful desires, which wage war against your soul. ¹²Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.

¹³Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human authority: whether to the emperor, as the supreme authority, ¹⁴or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right. ¹⁵For it is God's will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish people. ¹⁶Live as free people, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as God's slaves. ¹⁷Show proper respect to everyone, love the family of believers, fear God, honor the emperor.

1 Peter 2:11-17 (NIV)

Kirkin' o' the Tartan

This is the 14th consecutive "Kirkin' o' the Tartan" service I have led and message I have presented in this church. Until I arrived here in 2004, I had never heard of the tradition; but I have made it my own and embraced it, sharing it with this great congregation and seeking to make each observance special and meaningful.

For each of my Kirkin' messages I have set these four goals: first, that what I say must be rooted in Scripture and theologically accurate; second, that it be true to some aspect of Scottish history or heritage; third, that it be not just a focus on the past but have relevance and

significance to Christians living in the 21st century; and fourth, that there be a personal meaning or application to each individual.

In past years we have looked at a wide range of topics that fit these criteria. We have learned about St. Columba and the early missionaries to Scotland; about the Scottish Reformation and John Knox; about the Covenanters and the relationship between church and state; about the Scottish Enlightenment; about the Westminster Confession of Faith and the Scots Confession; about the impact of Scottish and Scots-Irish immigrants on the founding of America, and about the highland clans.

Today I am going to focus on one of my personal heroes—one who should be revered by all modern Christians and even by all Americans who love their country, no matter what their personal faith may be. The man's name is **John Witherspoon**. His portrait hangs in our church, on one of the walls of the Lightner Conference Room. (It was Pastor Steven Grant and I—both of us American history buffs—who proposed to the Session that Witherspoon be given that place of honor.) I want to introduce him to you and, in the process, place him accurately within the flow of history and God's work in the world.

Meet John Witherspoon

Here's a quick thumbnail sketch of who he was and why his life was so significant. Witherspoon was born in Scotland in 1722, the son of a Presbyterian pastor. His academic brilliance led him to three degrees, from the Universities of Edinburgh and St. Andrews, and then to service as a pastor of two Church of Scotland congregations. He published three best-selling books in Scotland, and was renowned across his country for his brilliance and oratorical skills. At the age of 46, after two years of "wooing" and pleading, Witherspoon and his family finally decided to move from the comfortable advanced civilization of Scotland to the wilds of central New Jersey, where he would become the president of the fledgling College of New Jersey (later renamed Princeton University).

Unlike a modern university, where Presidents are primarily fundraisers, Witherspoon functioned mostly as a teacher and mentor to the best and brightest of the American colonies. Among his students at Princeton were future President James Madison and future Vice President Aaron Burr. Others who studied directly under Dr. Witherspoon included 28 future U.S. Senators, 49 Congressmen, and 10 Cabinet officers.

But his influence went far beyond just those young men. He was elected as a delegate to the Continental Congress and signed the Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1776 (the only clergyman and the only college president to do so). He was later involved in supporting and coaching Madison in the drafting of the U.S. Constitution, and in advocating for its adoption. During the Revolutionary War he paid a high price: one of his sons, serving in Washington's army, was killed in battle, and Witherspoon and his family had to evacuate their home as the British redcoats ruthlessly sacked Princeton. His fiery sermons promoting freedom, independence and courage were printed during the war and spread across the 13 colonies—earning him the hatred of King George and his government in London.

Not only did Witherspoon serve his new country faithfully, he also was an effective leader in the church (and was elected the first Moderator of the Presbyterian Church's General Assembly). He died at the age of 71 after retiring from Princeton, and is buried on the campus with his statue standing nearby (another statue of him stands in Dupont Circle in Washington, D.C.).

From my study of Witherspoon's life and thought and legacy, I will offer to you today five themes, consistent with Scripture, that are lessons we can apply to our own lives and times. Here they are, briefly.

1. Adapting to the Reality of Human Sinfulness.

You are a sinner, an imperfect and flawed person with an inner mixture of noble impulses and selfish desires. Please don't take it personally. I am not singling you out for shame or indictment, because the same verdict is true of me and everyone else here. And it is also

true of every man or woman who has ever been elevated to a place of power and influence. President Trump and Vice President Pence are sinners. So was President Obama, and President Lincoln, and President Washington; so were King George, and all pharaohs, emperors, dictators and czars of the past. So are all our top news anchors, Hollywood producers, all-star athletes and rock stars.

We **all** are vulnerable to temptation. The Bible tells us this is reality. We should never be shocked when someone has been discovered to have sinned by abusing their power, because we are all sinners—not a single one of us is totally pure and innocent, or immune to corruption. Because of this empirically verifiable reality of the universality of sin, if human beings are going to live together we need laws, and we need governments to enforce those laws, in order to restrain that sinfulness. And because governments are made up of sinful people (who can be corrupted if given too much power), the best government is one where power is spread broadly and sinners are accountable to one another—with consequences.

John Witherspoon knew this because he knew his Bible. That is why he could never be a royalist, supporting an all-powerful king. And he could never agree to the delusionary philosophy of the “divine right of kings” that somehow would convey privileges of power according to birth and heredity. Witherspoon knew—and we are wise when we, too, know—that the best government is one where leaders must earn the trust of the people through their demonstrated skill and integrity, and must then be constantly accountable to the people.

It was this vision that allowed Witherspoon and our other founders to break away from the iron-grip rule of a one-person monarchy, and give birth to the first-ever true representative democracy in human history, the United States of America. It was the same vision that had inspired, two hundred years earlier, the development of the Presbyterian form of church government: no bishop or pope would govern the church from the top down, but rather the people would hold the power and would choose their own leaders.

2. The Impact of Faith on a Nation.

Although non-believers can (and should) be virtuous because their Creator has planted within each one a conscience, nevertheless John Witherspoon could see clearly that one quality above all would make a democracy work. The best and most faithful citizens would be those who have surrendered their lives to Christ. The result of that personal decision of faith is that, in the words of the Old Testament, God's law would be "written on their hearts" or internalized.

Just as with every individual person outward discipline is less important than inward discipline, so the external laws and punishments of a human government cannot do as much as an internal commitment to do what is right and obey the laws. Parents discover that all the rules and consequences won't be enough to shield their children from danger once they are away from the home and parental restraints; what makes their children successful is to make the parents' values their own. In the same way, a government cannot employ enough policemen and build enough jails if all their people intend to break every law they can. It is the inner strength of obedience—not just to avoid human punishment but as a response to God our Creator—that makes us moral people and makes a free country and free society work. The Spirit of God within is the greater force to restrain sin and prompt virtue and selfless service and compassion.

As John Witherspoon and other believers in each subsequent generation have shown, America is strongest when Christians do not withdraw from the public arena but actively become involved in it. We pray earnestly that faithful believers will be raised up who will serve our community and our nation (whether it is in politics and government, in law and the courts, in the military, the news media, or as first responders) out of their devotion to God and to their fellow citizens.

3. The Supremacy of God's Word Over Human Wisdom.

Before he came to America, Witherspoon had to struggle against many of his peers in Scotland who had fallen into the same cycle that has reappeared in our own times. In European church circles in the

18th century, human pride was leading professors in the academies and universities to question the authority of scripture. After all, since mankind was becoming so wise and sophisticated, surely modern man knew more than those primitive people who wrote the Bible. There were “Progressives” in the Scottish church who wanted to water down or compromise the teachings of scripture to fit modern preferences. It is the original sin of the human race, stretching back to Adam: he wanted to be equal to God. Our pride tells us we can decide for ourselves and don’t have to listen to God.

This same struggle is one that I and my pastoral colleagues on this staff have had to deal with all our ministries; those who succeed us as the leaders of this church will have to deal with it as well. The “groupthink” of progressives and revisionists will always try to elevate human wisdom over the truth of the Word of God. That’s one of the reasons why we look to John Witherspoon as our role model and hero. He fought the good fight to guard the Gospel in his generation, and we must do so in our own. Even the Apostle Paul had to do so 2,000 years ago. In his final letter, 2 Timothy, he urges a young minister he has mentored to be vigilant against those, both within and outside the church, who would like to compromise the unchanging truth revealed to us. It’s why we invest so much time and money into mentoring the next generation of young pastors-in-training: so that when we are gone, they will carry on faithfully and proclaim the truth to their generation without corruption.

4. God is Always Lord Over the State.

The Apostle Peter in our text makes this clear. Christians follow the fair and just laws that exist to protect us; and they support even those non-believers who are carrying out the proper role of human government. We “honor” the emperor (or president, or governor, or mayor, or sheriff, or whatever their role might be); but above all we “fear God” alone—not in the sense of terror and anxiety, for God loves us and wants our good. But the “fear of God” the Bible talks about means that we honor, revere and obey Him above all earthly powers. The emperor is not, and never will be, a god. Those in gov-

ernment are as accountable to the only true Lord of the Universe as all their people are. And so, whenever the command of a government is contrary to the law of God, we must obey God and not men.

Thus John Witherspoon and other committed Christians in 1776 could see that their earthly king, far away in London, was abusing his power: in oppressing people, depriving them of rights and freedom, and putting himself wrongly in the place of God. This tyranny or injustice was evil. Because they “feared God” alone, they did not fear King George. They pledged their lives, their fortunes and their sacred honor to resist him precisely because they loved God and served Him, and desired that their fellow Americans in future generations (including us today) might live in freedom under just laws. Our Founders have shown the world that resisting tyranny in the cause of justice is a noble and right choice for a Christian.

5. Our Unity in Christ is Greater Than Our Differences.

For a couple hundred years after the Reformation, the prevailing and unhealthy pattern that had developed in Europe was one of constant conflict and rivalry between denominations—often to the point of violence. It was all so clearly the opposite of the spirit and intention of Jesus and the prevailing brotherhood and mutual forbearance we find in the New Testament.

But John Witherspoon and other Scottish and American believers, by the time of the mid-18th century, had begun a great correction. A wave of spiritual renewal swept the American colonies, led by passionate preachers named George Whitefield and Jonathan Edwards. When Witherspoon arrived at Princeton, he found that true believers across denominational differences were learning how to love and support each other. The necessity to unite (and not let their traditional divisions pull them apart) was essential if the newly-declared independent nation had any hope of prevailing against its oppressor.

In our own times of the early 21st century, Christians of all denominations are likewise finding that what we have in common is far more important than our differences. Wherever we can, we are

choosing to work together and pray together. In the face of an increasingly secular—and sometimes even hostile—society, we need each other. The witness of Christ and His work of reconciling the world requires that we serve as the prototypes: people whose love for each other prevails over anything that would divide us.

This has been a quick tour of the five great themes of the legacy of this American hero. And I hope not only that we give him the proper honor and credit for his impact on our nation but also that we rededicate ourselves—personally, as a church, and as a nation—to these truths that are such a solid foundation for our faith and our freedom. We stand on the shoulders of the great man, John Witherspoon, today. ■



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