

Sermon – July 4, 2021
“To Be a Nation under God”
The Rev. John C. Wright



Text: Deuteronomy 10:12-13, 17-21

Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come, visit, fill and anoint the sharing of these words. Make them to be a blessing for your people, a blessing that leads to life eternal and fruitful labor as we tarry here on this mission field. Lord, come and astonish us with your word this day. Amen

Good morning and a happy July 4th to all. There are many nations that have been birthed across the earth over the time that humankind has walked upon it, but as far as I am aware, only one has sought to be a nation under God and to so order its works and laws to honor God. How many of you had to memorize part of the Declaration of Independence when you were in school? “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.” Those are powerful, moving words that give us insight into the thoughts of those who wrote the Declaration about the essence of this new nation they envisioned. This nation was set up by its founders with a deep dependence on God and their understanding of what it meant for a nation to honor God. Let me encourage us to take a few moments today, in addition to all of the picnics, ice cream, and fireworks, to read through the Preamble to the Constitution, and the Declaration of Independence. We have been given much to celebrate as we step back from our normal duties and enjoy Independence Day. Let us not forget as we celebrate that there have been many lives given to make this great experiment in nation building possible. We would do

well to remember them and their gifts to us as the citizens of this great country. Many have labored hard to establish and continue in our collective struggle to move forward as a nation honoring God. If we will take time to read the history of the founding of this country, I am convinced that we will witness God's hand guiding those who participated in the formation of the United States of America and its sustainment.

Many of us will also remember the pledge of allegiance that we said daily in school. It ended with, "...one nation under God, indivisible with liberty and justice for all." Those words ring in our ears and hearts, serving as reminders to us that we are to be a nation under God. This morning I would like to take a few minutes not to look at our country's founding documents, but to look at God's expectations for a nation, requirements found in the Bible. In the text read earlier, Moses lays out for the nation of Israel what God will require of them as they turn from their breaking of the Ten Commandments in the matter of the golden calf and seek to go forward as a nation with God in their presence. The United States, a nation also seeking to be under God, has these requirements as well. Let's spend a few minutes looking at them this morning.

The first requirement is to fear the LORD your God. The fear mentioned here is not to fear that God will smite us or deny us entry to heaven as a consequence of our sin. The idea of fear taught here by Moses is a holy fear of God. Holy fear shapes our life as a desire to please God, to honor him with our lives as we seek to obey what He commands or requires of us. Fear of God is always a push and pull. In God's presence, we are pushed away by the holiness of God as our fear of being in God's presence rises with our closeness and a growing awareness of our own comparative insignificance and lack of holiness. Fear of God is seen in the disciples' response when Jesus stills the storm and those in the boat are filled with awe and reverence of Jesus. This fear is our response to the immenseness of God that we discover when we experience His steadfast love. We cannot grasp the overwhelming power and depth of that love, we cannot stand in the presence of such love, and so we are afraid to enter deeply into such a relationship. At the same time, we are pulled into a desire to be closer to the source of such steadfast love. Holy fear is our response as we encounter God and the things of God. Fear of God is to be part of how we as a nation under God respond to God. We are to be a nation that is seen as having a fear of God through a reverence of His ways and yet are always letting ourselves be pulled into a deeper relationship with a Holy God. Our first question to ponder this morning is, "Do we as a nation fear God?" Recent surveys in the United States find that 92% of the people believe there

is a God. Yet the number who fear God, who have a desire to please Him and are seeking to be closer to Him, seems to be a far smaller percentage.

There are more requirements for a nation under God. The next requirement given in this text is to walk in His ways. I think this is a critically important phrase for us to understand. These words occur frequently in the Old Testament, and we should seek to understand what it means for a person and a nation to walk in God's ways. In our English context, walking is moving from one place to another, but in the Hebrew language, it has a richer meaning. In Hebrew, to walk is to focus on the continuation and progress of the action. It is to go nearer and nearer to the end goal, or to grow brighter and brighter. This is not just physical movement, but a movement of our hearts to God. For a nation to walk with God, it would be continually moving into a deeper relationship with God. It would mean that all we do as a nation is done to bring us into a deeper relationship with God. Walking with God would be seen as a nation seeking to have laws that are consistent with God's ways and authorities who are always seeking to enable a nation's citizens to connect more deeply with God. As we stop to celebrate the establishment of our nation, we should ask ourselves if we are still moving closer to God. Are we as a nation walking with God? Are our laws, relationships, and mission as a nation leading us into a deeper walk with God? This is another question we should stop and ponder as we celebrate our nation's birth.

The next requirement is to serve God with all the heart and soul. The idea is to serve God as if we are seeking to satisfy a thirst within ourselves for God. We can understand within our hearts what it is like to thirst for God, to want to experience God's steadfast love in the same manner as we thirst for a drink when our need for water is overwhelming. But how does a nation thirst for God and seek to serve Him in such a way? We would expect to see the people of the nation collectively seeking to serve God. I can think of many times over the years when our country was a leader in helping aid people caught up in an overwhelming natural disaster, and during the days, weeks, and sometimes months of those efforts, it is easy to see the compassion, assets, and serving hands we as a nation bring to those with great need. However, we also export many things as a nation that do not serve God and His mission to other people. We need to stop and ask ourselves on this day of celebration, "Are we as a nation seeking to serve others as God would have us serve?" If we are not, then we need to repent, ask God for forgiveness, and seek to serve only in this manner.

This list of requirements for a nation seeking to walk with God ends with the requirement to keep the commandments of the Lord your God. This is obedience. One of the first things that we may find coming to our minds when we hear this requirement are the Ten Commandments and that thought might also include all of the regulations that are included in the Mosaic Law. It is my understanding that for many years our nation's laws and regulations drew heavily from these sources. However, in the late 20th century, legal scholars began to separate from these sources as the underpinning of our legal system and to incorporate other sources from human reason. I personally lack the legal knowledge to assess if this change is helpful or hurtful for the direction of our legal system as a nation. However, I do find it concerning that we as a nation no longer are looking primarily to the commandments of God as the foundation for our legal system. We also need to recall that Jesus moves the foundation of our law or commandments to the singular idea that we are to love each other as God has loved us. A loving foundation enables us to focus on loving others as Christ demonstrated God's love for us by dying for our sins that we might be reconciled to God. Jesus told his disciples no one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for another. Many are those in the history of this nation who have laid down their lives that we might continue as a nation. As we celebrate the birth of the nation, it is right that we should also remember and thank God for their sacrifices. However, we also need to ask God if our nation reflects this requirement that we are to obey this singular commandment of loving each other and being a nation that is loving others more than self.

The result of following these requirements for a nation walking with God is well-being. I hope that all of us realize the great blessings that we have been given as those living in the United States of America. We are certainly blessed among all of the nations of the world with freedoms that are unique to this experiment of being a nation under God. And so, we should take time as we celebrate the birth of this nation to give thanks to God for the well-being that He has given to us and humbly ask that we might be a nation that continues to walk in His ways so that His well-being might be extended to the next generation. And we should pray that God will grant us wisdom to continue to be a nation seeking to draw closer to Him, for great wisdom is needed as we seek to live with each other as members of this great nation. We desire God's blessing, but will we walk with Him?

Before I close, let me remind us that while we live in the United States, and are greatly blessed to have that good fortune, we are also members of another kingdom, the kingdom of

God. As Christ followers, those who have surrendered their lives to Christ, we have become part of the heavenly kingdom, a kingdom not made with human hands, but a kingdom that is eternal. The requirements of God for a nation are also requirements of God for His kingdom. We live in the now and not yet of this coming earthly kingdom. As members of this kingdom, we are those who are at work to walk closer with Jesus each day of our lives and to bring this new heavenly kingdom fully into existence by loving others more than self so that they also may become part of God's eternal kingdom as we seek to be Christ in all of the places we live. Ultimately, it is not through the structural components of a nation that we become a nation that follows God, but through individual lives, transformed by the love of Christ and seeking to more fully love each other as Christ loves us. As we love in this manner, we become not only citizens of a nation seeking to walk with God but also become members of the kingdom of God, a kingdom where God will wipe away every tear. As we love in this manner and seek to walk with God, the nation we live in is transformed into a nation walking with God. If we desire to see our nation continue to be a nation under God, then our task is to be a people seeking to love God and others more than self. Our mission becomes one of loving others and sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ with all people. It is not through the transformation of the structural components of a nation that we become a nation under God, but it is through the transforming love of Christ shared with those of this nation that we become one nation under God. As we seek to spread scriptural holiness throughout the land, we seek to become a nation of people who love others more than self. As we celebrate the birth of this nation, let us also give thanks for the eternal kingdom that we are at work to establish in the hearts of all people. Let us now move into a time of prayer for this nation and then to communion with Jesus that we might be strengthened to be at work to transform the hearts of all people.

Pray with me: Lord, we praise you for allowing us to live in this great nation. We give thanks for all of the blessings we have been given. Yet, Lord, our hearts are stirred to be more fully members of your kingdom and to be at work loving others as you love us. Give us wisdom and courage to share the love you have for us with others that your kingdom will come. Amen

Prayer for the Nation.

Almighty God, you rule all the peoples of the earth.

Inspire the minds of all women and men to whom you have committed

the responsibility of government and leadership
in the nations of the world.

Give to them the vision of truth and justice,
that by their counsel all nations and peoples may work together.

Give to the people of our country
zeal for justice and strength of forbearance,
that we may use our liberty in accordance with your gracious will.

Forgive our shortcomings as a nation;
purify our hearts to see and love the truth.

We pray all these things through Jesus Christ. Amen.

(ANDY LANGFORD, U.S.A., 20TH CENT.)