

SERMON for Sunday, February 1, 1976, by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor  
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"HOW TO CELEBRATE THE TRICENTENNIAL"

St. Matthew 4:1-11

Text: "But he answered, 'It is written, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God." ' " St. Matthew 4:4

This year we celebrate our bicentennial. We can look with pride back across the 200 years since our national beginning. We Americans have achieved a great deal and we have come a long way. Yet many of us are just beginning to realize the full impact of Watergate when a president was forced to resign in dishonor and disgrace and when many top officials have been indicted. Watergate seems to be only the tip of the iceberg. Underneath the surface there seems to be a far larger crisis that faces our nation--a moral crisis. Our Founding Fathers were deeply suspicious of centralized power. It was their rejection of total government that made them rebel against a King who could--because of his power--rule arbitrarily. They would absolutely shudder at popular assumptions which regard government as the answer to all of our problems and which permits public officials to claim rights and privileges superior to those men and women who have elected them. And the reason they feared government was because they had a basic Christian understanding of the nature of man. They understood very clearly that man was basically evil and they could say that power corrupts and total power totally corrupts. Thus, James Madison wrote in The Federalist Papers, "In framing a government which is to be administered by men over men, the great difficulty lies in this: you must first enable the government to control the governed, and in the next place oblige it to control itself."

So, at heart our problem today is not a political problem, not a scientific problem, not a diplomatic problem, not a technological problem. No, at heart the problem that faces us is a moral problem. Alexander Hamilton once wrote, "Is it not time to awake from the deceitful dream of a golden age, and to adopt as a practical maxim for the direction of our political conduct that we, as well as the other inhabitants of the globe, are yet remote from the happy empire of perfect wisdom and perfect virtue?" We are, indeed, very remote from perfect virtue. As we look at the American scene today we cannot but wonder at our growing imperfection. And as we realize the magnitude of the moral dilemma, one begins to wonder if we will ever celebrate a tricentennial. That is, if the present moral degeneration continues unabated and unslackened a hundred years from now will our nation have survived to celebrate its 300th birthday?

The number of democratic nations today is swiftly diminishing. Yet, the United States is the greatest nation in the world today because of its democratic principles. And isn't it passingly strange that patriotism to our nation, to the principles that have made us great, is looked upon by many as adolescent and obsolescent. We have entered upon a period of self-castigation unparalleled in history. Many have arisen who wish to "liberate" our nation from the particular political system that has made us who we are and they have sometimes sought to overthrow the structures of our society by marches and burning and intimidation. More and more government is telling people what age and sex and race a job applicant must be to be hired, what school our children will attend, and how our resources will be redistributed. In the process, the incredible corruption of those in charge of such programs keeps floating to the surface. We are discovering that despotism and power is not limited to dictatorship, but, as John Adams once said, even the majority of a popular assembly, appealing to the greed in people, can become "equally arbitrary, cruel, bloody, and in every respect diabolical." And the dilemma of our nation is a moral dilemma.

Arnold Toynbee, the great historian, in his magnificent work called A Study of History, tells us that in recorded history there have been 26 civilizations. Sixteen of those civilizations have perished, nine of them have so degenerated that only vestiges of them remains. That leaves one remaining civilization, and it is ours in the world today. He looks at all of the civilizations to determine if there is some pattern that can be seen. He discovers a distinct process by which a civilization comes into being, grows, develops, and then begins to deteriorate. When he puts that pattern to our civilization he discovers that we are in the final throes as we move towards disintegration and dissolution. One of the evidences of the ending of a civilization is its moral disintegration. Toynbee goes on to ask if the process of decay can be reversed. It is his conclusion that it can be, but only if there is a religious revival, a moral renewal. That brings me to our text for today. In our scripture Jesus says that man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God. If Jesus was right, and I believe He was, here in America we must have a new revolution--a moral revolution--that returns us to the basic religious principles on which this country was founded. Without a moral revival, America as we have known and loved her will not survive intact to celebrate her tricentennial.

Jesus said that we must live by the word of God. That means that our world has moral structure to it as well as a natural structure. For example, in the natural realm we are governed by certain laws and principles. We can fly an airplane because of certain physical laws that make flight possible. We can drive our cars home after church this morning because of certain reliable principles that we can count on. This is the physical world we live in. It is reliable--we can count on it--it always works by the physical laws of nature. Now, by the same token, the world has a moral structure.

Our physical world with its laws places certain restrictions on us. As long as we stay within the framework of those limitations and use the limits of our natural world, we can be productive and happy. But the moment we rebel against that structure of our world, as soon as we rebel against the limitations that the natural laws place on us, disaster is the consequence. For example, take the law of gravity. Gravity is a fact of life, a law of nature. It is very useful to us and without it we would be thrown off this spinning ball we call earth. Yet, the moment I rebel against this law, the moment I begin to try to violate this restriction of my world, I begin to destroy myself. For example, suppose I decide to jump off a ten story building. Now, I don't destroy the law of gravity--I don't even break it. What I do to break my own silly neck.

Apply this illustration to the moral realm. The Bible tells us that we live in a morally structured universe. Just as there are physical laws to govern life, so there are moral laws set down by God that govern life. To violate those spiritual laws, to go against God's structures for human life, is like jumping off that ten story building. It doesn't break God's law or destroy his structure, but rather it destroys human life and it breaks mankind's silly neck.

Jesus says that man shall not live by bread alone. If our nation is to celebrate its tricentennial we must rediscover those spiritual laws which God has used to structure human society and to apply them to our own lives, the lives of our children, and the life of our society. This is the great task of the church today. Many within the church have seen our task somewhat differently. They have tried to make the task of the church that of redesigning the structures of society, the task of remodeling institutions, the task of social manipulation. Yet, the one great mission of the

church in human society today is to tell the world that man shall not live by bread alone. As Associate Justice of the Supreme Court, Lewis F. Powell has said, we must rediscover "that a sense of honor is necessary to personal self-respect; that duty, recognizing an individual subordination to community welfare, is as important as rights; that loyalty, which is based on the trustworthiness of honorable men, is still a virtue; and that work and self-discipline are as essential to individual happiness as they are to a viable society."

The seriousness of our situation today is revealed in a recent college poll which revealed that students ranked religion and patriotism as the least important values in their personal lives. And one of the disheartening aspects of the current revolution in human values is that the organized church often appears on the wrong side. If we are to celebrate a tricentennial, the church must focus its attention, it must concentrate its efforts, on proclaiming to men that the world shall not live by bread alone. Evidences of moral degeneration is everywhere. There is nudism in the theater, in pornography in literature, in extramarital relationships in marriage, in promiscuity in personal life and in dishonesty in social relations. Major crimes have increased six times as fast as our population in the last ten years. Who shall stand and proclaim to such a world that man shall not live by bread alone?

Many of the leaders of today have a humanist conviction that man is inherently good. And when much of the money for the well-intended programs ends up lining the pockets of deceitful people, everyone asks, "Why?" Well, back in the Old Testament the prophet Jeremiah knew why. He wrote, "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately corrupt." (Jer. 17:9) And the only solution to a deceitful heart is a transformed heart when man discovers that he shall not live by bread alone.

This year we are celebrating our bicentennial. But the real question is this, will we celebrate a tricentennial? And the answer is simple. We will not celebrate a tricentennial unless there is a moral revolution. Where will such a moral revolution come from? Will it come from humanistic politicians? Will it come from schools where Bible reading and prayer have been banned? Will it come from colleges where a Christian view of man is scorned? Will it come from the masses of people who are too often motivated by self-interest? Will it come from a world that is more and more being dominated by atheistic communism? Will it even come from a church that is more and more oriented towards social programs and social manipulations? And the answer to all of those questions is no.

No, the moral revolution needed today will come from none of those sources. Instead, such a moral revolution will come from dedicated men and women who believe the Bible to be the Word of God, who recognize they are sinful people who need to be redeemed by Jesus Christ, who realize that they live in a moral universe where man does not live by bread alone. A revolution always starts some particular place in the hearts of some particular groups. Let such a revolution begin here in our hearts. Let such a commitment to God and his word begin right here. Let us here in this congregation recommit ourselves to God and commit ourselves to provide the facilities, the resources, the teaching, the preaching, and most of all the example of our own lives that we might provide for others, for our children, and for our children's children the spiritual heritage that man shall not live by bread alone. By God's grace such a renewal and revival may start such a fire that the fires of moral and spiritual revolution may sweep across this land of ours. And then--just perhaps--we may one day celebrate our tricentennial.