

## **“The World’s Going To Hell In A Handbasket”**

When I was a kid it seemed like the old folks were always griping. They’d say, “The world’s going to hell in a handbasket.” I wasn’t sure—in fact I’m still not sure—what a handbasket is or what it has to do with going to hell, but I got the gist of what they were saying: things are bad and it’s getting worse all the time. I remember being a little puzzled by this and wondering, “How are things getting worse? They seem pretty good to me.” Now I find myself thinking, “things are going to hell in a handbasket! The old folks were right!” Of course I’m one of the old folks now. Still, there are a lot of Americans who share my opinion. For the last twenty years or so, polls consistently indicate that a majority of Americans believe that our country is headed in the wrong direction. Now if they’re right, why might that be? What happened to turn our country in the wrong direction? The best explanation I have ever heard of what causes a country to start going downhill is that of a French philosopher by the name of Montesquieu.

Montesquieu had a major influence on our founding fathers—especially on Thomas Jefferson—and that influence is evident in some key parts of the *Declaration Of Independence* where the wording is drawn directly from Montesquieu’s writings. For example, it was Montesquieu who said that governments derive their power from the consent of the governed and that if a people do not consent to be governed in a certain way they have not only the right but the duty to abolish their present government and establish a new government. So all government must obtain the consent of the people they govern in order to remain in power. However, he said, different forms of government obtain the consent of the governed in different ways. A monarchy is based upon the people’s loyalty to their king. A dictatorship is based on the people’s fear of the dictator. But a republic, he said, is the most fragile of all forms of government because it derives its power to govern from what he called the public virtue. By “public virtue” he meant a willingness on the part of the people to put the good of the republic above their own good. In a republic you don’t fight for the king or out of fear you’ll be shot if you don’t: you fight because you believe that your country is worth fighting for and, if necessary, dying for. That spirit is what constitutes the public virtue. But if the spirit of public virtue wanes and gives place to a spirit of self-interest, things go downhill. As Montesquieu put it, when the citizens of the republic begin to vote themselves largesse from the public treasury, it is the beginning of the end of the republic.

60 years ago in his inaugural address, John Fitzgerald Kennedy famously said: “ask not what your country can do for you; ask rather what you can do for your country.” In response, thousands of young Americans volunteered for public programs—charitable organizations, the Peace Corps for example. But nowadays, political leaders say, “ask not what you can do for your country, but what your country can do for you.”

On December 8<sup>th</sup>, 1941, the day after the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, tens of thousands of young men and women enlisted in the armed forces to offer up their lives for their country. When the Covid 19 virus hit and people were urged to stay home and engage in social distancing, hordes of college students hit the beaches to show that no one could tell them what to do. It appears that self-indulgence is now considered a public virtue. This selfishness cuts across all levels of society from top to bottom. It's in the self-satisfaction of the rich man who is blind to the Lazarus lying at his gate. It's in the anger and resentment of the poor man who hates the rich man simply because he is rich. Selfishness has been the curse of the human race ever since Adam and Eve aspired to be like God rather than to serve God. And ever since, one of Satan's most successful tactics has been to convince people that the road to happiness lies in the pursuit of self-interest. It's a lie—a boldfaced lie—but people believe it. It's a lie that has even taken root in the church. It's called the prosperity gospel or the health and wealth gospel and its message is that God will reward a person's faith in Jesus Christ by bestowing material blessings upon him. Get Jesus into your life and good things will come your way. You'll get a promotion; your kids will grow up to be perfect adults. One of the largest congregations in America hears this message every single week. Luther called it a "theology of glory"—the idea that God rewards those who believe in him by glorifying them during their lives in this world. The problem is that if that's so, then why did God allow some of his most devoted servants—the Old Testament prophets and the New Testament apostles and the martyrs of the early church—to be persecuted and killed for their faith? Where was the worldly glory in that? Isaiah, according to tradition, was sawed in two. Jeremiah was insulted, thrown into a well, and finally led off in chains to Egypt. In the New Testament era all of Jesus' apostles were persecuted and all but one died violent deaths. In the early days of the church, so many Christians were persecuted and killed that the saying arose: "the blood of the martyrs was the seedbed of the church." When Jesus recruited Paul to be his apostle to the gentiles, he didn't promise him honor and glory: he said, "I will show him how much he must suffer for my name." Is this a theology of glory? Sooner or later, every Christian has to face the fact that there are no detours around Calvary. Ours is not a theology of glory, but a theology of the cross. We are not called to indulge ourselves and bask in our worldly success; we are called to deny ourselves, take up our crosses and follow Jesus. This is the lesson of today's Gospel. Jesus asks his disciples, "Who do men say that I am?" Some of the answers are, "John the Baptist," "Elijah" or "one of the prophets." These were mainly prophets of judgment. John the Baptist described Jesus as, "an axe laid at the root of unfruitful trees"; a caster of human chaff into unquenchable fire"; and the judge of an unrepentant world." Elijah had 450 priests of Baal slaughtered and withheld rain from Israel for three and a half years. Prophets of judgment. But Jesus was different. Jesus drove out evil spirits, healed the sick, cleansed lepers and cured paralytics; restored sight to the blind and hearing to the deaf; and raised the dead to new life.

Jesus didn't deal in judgment and punishment but in mercy and healing. He said, "I have come not to judge the world, but to save it." But they were too blind to see! They were so full of themselves they couldn't recognize their own savior, or, for that matter, that they even needed a savior. He brought forgiveness but they saw judgment. He did the work of God and they called it the work of the devil. So Jesus asked them—just as he asks you and me: what about you—who do you say that I am?" And Peter answered: "you are the Christ, the son of the living God." So at least Peter got it right. Right? Not entirely. As soon as Jesus began to explain to them what that meant for him and what it would mean to them, Peter began to argue with him. So Jesus laid it on the line—to Peter, to the other eleven, to the crowd and to us: "if anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the Gospel will save it." He couldn't have put it any more clearly. "You have a choice to make," he said. You can give yourself over to a life of self-service, self-promotion, self-worship and whatever other self-ism you can find. Or, you can give yourself over to me. One way leads to despair and death; the other way leads to joy and eternal life. Now there is no doubt that this is one of the most inscrutable mysteries of our faith—that by denying ourselves we find ourselves, that by dying we find life, and that by becoming slaves we find freedom. Paul wrote: "you are not your own; you were bought at a price." We are either slaves to ourselves or we are slaves of Christ: there is no third alternative. But if we offer ourselves up as slaves of Christ, things that seemed impossible become easy! Our marriages cease to be battlegrounds where we vie for control and demand "our fair share," and become sanctified partnerships where we strive to serve each other in love. Our happiness ceases to be a function of wins and losses and flows from a knowledge of the immeasurable blessings God has bestowed on us. Only the eye of faith can see the continuity between the broken figure on the cross and the enthroned son of God. But if we allow ourselves to be guided by this eye of faith, as the world continues to go to hell in a handbasket we will be able to see ever more clearly the splendor of the kingdom God where we will live forever. Amen.