

Lesson Thirty

The Secret Ingredient

LESSON IDEA

To show why morality is indispensable for limited, constitutional government, and what can happen if it is abandoned.

PREPARATION

Copy the 1892 and 1952 Supreme Court quotations (see page four) for each member of the family. Read the discussion portions of the lesson and prepare some examples from your own personal experience.

THERE IS a secret ingredient in the American system of government that is more important than the Constitution, Bill of Rights, and Declaration of Independence. It makes the principles and provisions of those three unique documents workable. Sadly, it is rapidly being deteriorating, and unless it is revitalized, the ideals embodied in our nation's founding documents will have no more meaning than the average politician's promise.

What is this secret ingredient that George Washington called "indispensable" to our political well being? [Ask each family member for possibilities.] Those aboard the Mayflower knew the answer in 1620. So did William Penn, the Quaker leader in Pennsylvania, and George Mason, one of Virginia's most distinguished lawyers. And so did many other early American leaders.

It is our sense of right and wrong — the morality that, if properly developed, serves as a personal policing agency to govern and guide our actions. Those with such a moral compass are able to exercise personal responsibility, rather than be compelled to comply with society's rules by government force. They do not kill, steal, cheat, or commit other legal and moral offenses, because they know that such actions are wrong and behave accordingly. They are guided by such moral strictures as the Ten Commandments, and by so doing promote less rather than more government. A breakdown in personal morality inevitably paves the way for bigger government (police, courts, prisons, social programs, etc.) to cope with the

resulting social problems. The Quaker leader William Penn put it succinctly: "Those people who are not governed by God will be ruled by tyrants."

In its infancy, the United States was undeniably a religious nation whose citizens were governed more by personal conscience than by government edict. In 1892 the U.S. Supreme Court specifically stated that it was "historically true" that our citizenry was "a religious people." "From the discovery of America to this hour," the High Court held, "there is a single voice making this affirmation." And in 1952, the Court reaffirmed that "We are a religious people whose institutions presuppose a Supreme Being."

The Court's conclusion was based on solid evidence: the colonial charters, official proclamations, and, the constitutions of every state and the Union itself. "There is no dissonance in these declarations," it asserted. "These are not individual sayings or declarations of private persons; they are organic utterances: they speak the voice of the entire people.... There is a universal language pervading them all having but one meaning; they affirm and reaffirm that this is a religious nation."

WHEN THE PILGRIMS boarded the Mayflower in 1620 for the journey that would bring them to the New England coast of Massachusetts, they recognized that some type of government would be necessary to hold them together. And they knew that it would have to be an extension of the Divine Authority that governed each individual. The "constitution" they drew up was a simple moral code called the Mayflower Compact. It began, "In the name of God, Amen," and included a solemn pledge to "combine together for the preservation and furtherance of the Glory of God and the advancement of the Christian religion."

In Pennsylvania, the Quakers had the same view of life and government. They had no doubt about the importance of God as the Supreme Ruler of each individual, and as the ultimate authority for the laws that would govern their

society. That view was reflected in the speeches and writings of many colonial leaders. George Mason, one of the outstanding lawyers of the time, placed self-government above civil government when told the General Court of Virginia:

... The laws of nature are the laws of God, whose authority can be superseded by no power on earth. A legislature must not obstruct our obedience to Him from whose punishments they cannot protect us.

Can you summarize that sentiment in your own words? [Note, especially, the significance of Mason's last sentence.]

MASON WAS AMONG those who considered constitutions to be human instruments that expressed the "laws of God which all are in conscience bound to obey." George Washington, in his First Inaugural Address, revealed his own profound faith:

It would be peculiarly improper to omit, in this first official act, my fervent supplications to that Almighty Being who rules over the universe, who presides in the councils of nations, and whose providential aids can supply every human defect...

No people can be bound to acknowledge and adore the Invisible Hand which conducts the affairs of men, more than those of the United States. Every step by which they have advanced to the character of an independent nation seem to have been distinguished by some token of providential agency.

And in his Farewell Address to Congress at the end of his second term as President, Washington advised the American people:

Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports. Reason and experience both forbid us to expect that natural morality can prevail in exclusion of Religious Principles.

As a nation, are we following Washington's advice today? What is our current condition regarding biblical standards of morality and religion? [Ask each family member to give examples

to support his or her opinion. Areas of discussion could include music, movies, television, video games, abortion, family disintegration, and politics (including the many scandals in which President Bill Clinton was involved, some of which led to his impeachment). Briefly discuss how the disintegration of personal moral standards in these and other areas provides the excuse for bigger, more expensive, and more oppressive government to cope with the resulting social disruptions.]

Yet, even today, a hearty sense of right and wrong governs the actions, to one degree or another, of most Americans. Which is fortunate, as imagine for a moment what each day would be like if virtually everyone lacked a self-governing conscience. Suppose each was a liar, thief, and/or murderer: the grocer, druggist, service station operator, store clerk, teacher, librarian, postman, businessman, neighbor, doctor, realtor, and motorist ahead of you on the highway? How many policemen would it take to protect you and your loved ones? How many courts and prisons would be necessary to convict and incarcerate the worst offenders? Of what practical value would even a thousand formal laws be condemning assault, thievery, or murder? How many armed bodyguards would it take to assure that you arrive home unharmed each night? [Take time to dramatize such a situation, going over the family's daily routine and naming each individual you are likely to meet.]

We are exaggerating, of course, but only to emphasize that when the personal morality and

FOR SERIOUS STUDENTS

This lesson merely touches the surface of the fascinating subjects of law, government, and morality. For a brilliant statement of the proper role of government, see Frederic Bastiat's essay *The Law*. Bastiat, a French economist, statesman, and author, did most of his writing during the years just prior to, and immediately following, the French Revolution of 1848. His analysis of law and government led him to conclude that only in the United States was the form of government designed to keep government properly in check. Could he say the same today?

The Law is available for \$2.95 (add \$2.00 for shipping and handling) from American Opinion Book Services, P.O. Box 8040, Appleton, WI 54912.

