

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,
on Sunday, May 28, 1995, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

1 TIMOTHY 6:10

“For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.”

AMERICA: HOW DID WE GET HERE FROM THERE?

(3) The 1980s — The Decade of INDULGENCE

We might call the decade of the 1980s a decade of indulgence. But let's go back to the 60s for just a moment. You see, sometimes decades close, and they don't cooperate with the calendar. I believe the 60s closed not on December 31, 1969. I believe the 60s closed in August 1969 when half-a-million young people who had spent several days at a place called Woodstock, finally left and went their several ways. And just as I believe the 60s closed with Woodstock, I believe the 70s didn't close until January 20, 1981. On that date two significant things happened: (1) Fifty-three Americans, who had been held hostage for 14 months, were released. And how we rejoiced to hear the news! But where did we hear it? We heard it on T.V. as we were watching (2) the inauguration of President Reagan. He began his presidency in an era of discouragement and disillusionment and despondency the like of which our country had not known since the Great Depression of the 1930s.

You remember when we spoke about the 1970s, I told you that as we looked back upon the presidency of Mr. Carter, it seemed as if Murphy's Law was in operation — If anything could go wrong at any time, it did. On the contrary, when Ronald Reagan came to office, he seemed to have the Midas touch. Everything he addressed seemed to turn to gold. And with that disarming smile of his, it seemed that in the 80s we were headed for a better time and a better destination.

A secular writer by the name of Isaacson said that on October 19, 1987, when the stock market crashed (you remember how the Dow Jones dropped more than 500 points in one day), “there was more than the stock market crashing at that time. What crashed was the entire Reagan yuppie illusion of the 80s, namely, that we as a people could fly a little higher, run a little faster, spend a little more, and have a little more without ever worrying about paying the price.”

As we look back at the 1980s, Mr. Carter had now gone out of office, and we had a new President who had an incredible sense of charisma and optimism. No longer was it acceptable for the President to carry his own bag! As Mr. Reagan came to office, there was a sense of royalty about the Administration. Whether it was Mrs. Reagan's \$25,000 gown for the inaugural galas, or the \$800,000 needed for improvements to make the White House “livable,” or whether it was the quarter-million dollars for new china so that they could eat properly; it just seemed that when the new President assumed office, everything that characterized the 70s — the rationing, the inflation, the paper plate presidency of Mr. Carter, were a thing of the past; and all of a sudden, we were let loose, our handcuffs were removed, as we began to live in an era of “Let's go for it! We can be all that we want to be!”

Our dignity began to return. Our hostages were freed. We invaded successfully the little Caribbean island of Grenada, teaching a lesson to those who were working hand in glove with the Communists. It may have been something of a symbolic gesture, but we took pride as a nation that now we were restoring our national and world presence.

But all of a sudden, we began to develop a real sense of pride about who we are and what we could accomplish; and the theme of the era was self-interest and personal sovereignty. Suddenly we became excessively interested in ourselves, and we began to declare that we were going to determine what our destination would become. And there was an air of excitement everywhere.

Let me read you what the social commentator John Taylor says about us at that time. He says, “Our society was sick and tired of restraints; sick and tired of being told to lower our thermostats and our expectations. We were ready to shout, ‘Enough glossy ideals and platitudes about sacrificing. Enough talk about the Peace Corps. We want to talk about ourselves. We want no longer to be denied. We want our piece of the pie, and we want it now.’”

Probably the Hollywood folk hero of the 80s was the fiercely independent guy named Rambo, who basically could get inside or outside the lines. It didn’t matter how he played the game just so long as he won. That was the spirit of America in the 1980s.

As we look at the 80s, three things seem to stand out:

1. It was a time of ECONOMIC DISASTER.

But I can hear you say, “Wait a minute, Pastor, that was a time when the economy was probably better than it’s ever been.” In one sense, yes — but we have to look at the entire decade and see how it ended up.

As you look at the educational institutions of the 80s, you see that those who went to college went for a different reason. Their majors were different. English majors dropped about 60 percent. Psychology majors dropped 40 percent. And business majors began to double in numbers. The reason for going to college was changing. In a 1967 survey of college freshmen, 83 percent said it was crucial for them to go to college to develop a philosophy of life. But 20 years later, in 1987, 76 percent of the students said they were going to college so that they could be better off financially. They wanted to learn how to make money. The most popular magazine of the 1980s was Money Magazine. And the two favorite shows on T.V. were “Dallas” and “Dynasty,” and people wanted to live in that kind of environment. And then we had Robin Leech come on T.V. to give us the lifestyles of “The Rich and Famous,” and people began to get sucked into that whole mindset.

The heroes of the 1980s were the money people, men like Lee Iacocca and Ivan Boesky and Donald Trump. And across the country seminars were held telling you how you could become a millionaire within five years, if not sooner! In the old days people made money through hard work, by developing a product and by helping people. But in the 80s we began

hearing terms such as “creative leveraging,” “corporate raiders,” “junk bonds,” and “hostile takeovers” — these became household words; and here were people making millions of dollars, seemingly in a very short time, but sometimes leaving companies bankrupt or with thousands of jobs lost.

And during that time of economic frenzy, Ronald Reagan came out with a new financial package that basically consisted of three things:

- a. He said he was going to slice taxes;
- b. He said he was going to rebuild our military; and
- c. He said he was going to balance the federal budget in the first term of his office.
(Does that sound familiar?!)

George Bush, who was running against him for President, called it “Voodoo economics.” We heard about “supply side” and “trickle down” economics and all those kinds of things.

But while they were talking about the slashing of taxes, the nation began to go on a personal spending spree. Credit cards got completely out of control, and pretty soon we found that not only was our country head over heels in debt, but we found that we were ourselves.

They did a survey of teenage girls and found that for 93 percent of them, shopping was their favorite activity; and the malls became the Meccas of America. While that was happening, Ivan Boesky was crisscrossing the country giving lectures and making up to \$3 million a year in speaking fees, and his main theme really was “Greed is good!” The President was slashing taxes and rebuilding the military, and that was very fine. However, the third part of his plan was not working too well because the federal deficit, instead of decreasing, soared to unbelievable heights. And while that was happening Bobbie McFerrin and other popular singers were belting out, “Don’t worry; be happy!” And somehow, we bought into that, and every time we would begin to question the burgeoning federal deficit, Ronald Reagan would come on T.V. and we’d ask about his economic plan, and with a tilt of the head he would flash that charismatic smile of his and say, “Well, two out of three isn’t too bad!”

A fellow by the name of Joseph Pinola wrote a book entitled The Challenge of the 1980s. It came out in September 1979. Allow me to read a few paragraphs from this book. Now remember, it was written in 1979. He said, “We stand in September 1979 on the threshold of a new decade. While I have no crystal ball, nor any special gift for prediction, I think it will be safe to say that our major problems in the 80s will be of an economic nature.

For the first 175 years or so of our Republic we were a nation of producers. We cleared the land, we tilled the soil and produced crops in such abundance that there was enough left over to feed nations other than our own. We dug holes in the ground and extracted the raw material to produce energy to power our factories which, in turn, produced goods in abundance. We developed systems such as the assembly line to increase the workers’ productivity. In short, we were the marvel of the industrialized world.

Then, at some point in our history, say within 35 years or so, things began to change. We, as a nation, began to de-emphasize the producer role and began to emphasize the consumer one. Look at the disturbing facts. (Remember, this was written in 1979.) The federal government has 100,000 employees, staffing 41 regulatory agencies. They earn about \$4 billion every year from taxpayers, and their agency expenditures have doubled over the past five years. The president of a giant pharmaceutical firm says his company spends more man-hours on government required paperwork than it does on cancer and heart research combined. One Washington observer counted in a single day no less than 242 committees and subcommittees of Congress in session for legislative purposes. No wonder we have so much legislation and regulation.

I think it would be optimistic if those in government responsible for budget and expenditures, had some idea (he said) of what a billion really is.

Do you know that a billion seconds ago it was 1947? A billion minutes ago Jesus Christ was walking on earth. A billion hours ago nothing on this planet walked on two feet.

But a billion dollars ago it was only 19 hours ago in Washington, D.C. The government spends a billion dollars every 19 hours 365 days a year!"

And that was 1979 — and it spelled economic disaster, because the Reagan Administration did not have the moral courage to curb the spending spree that caused the national debt to soar and make it so difficult for us to pass legislation today to balance the budget: although, truth to tell, the Democratic Congress did little or nothing to encourage or assist the President to deal realistically with the burgeoning national debt.

2. The second thing that marks the 1980s is that it was a time of ENVIRONMENTAL DISEASE.

Our self-interest began to manifest itself in the way we treated the environment. Business was booming. Raw materials were needed. Loggers were logging, and strip miners were strip mining, and oil drillers were drilling. And in the process sometimes we were probably not proper stewards of our environment. When someone would ask concerning the pillage of our natural resources, business people would say, "Pipe down; stocks are up 26 points!" We began, perhaps, to put our priorities on some things that we should not have.

Now I understand that the environment issue is highly controversial, and I'm not an "environmentalist," to be honest with you. In fact, there are basically two sides to the story. We now know that the scare about global warming, the "greenhouse" effect, and the holes in the ozone layer due to the concentration of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, has been greatly exaggerated.

I read about this sawmill out in Utah, and they were selling T-shirts on the back of which was a recipe for a "Loggers' Stew." Among the ingredients were:

4 large well-plucked spotted owls;

3 finely chopped falcons; and
2 well—beaten environmentalists!

3. The 1980s was a time of ETHICAL DECAY.

The Old Testament tells us about a time when people did “what was right in their own eyes.” (Judges 17:6 KJV) Basically they had a personal agenda and they said, “I don’t care what happens to the nation or to my neighbor; I just want to take care of myself and do my own thing. I’m concerned only about my personal rights, my happiness; this is what has top billing in my thinking.”

We watched this happen in the 1980s. We watched in disbelief as drug pushers passed around packets at playgrounds; as AIDS carriers passed down their disease to others whenever they could; as pornographers turned women into objects for profit; as lawyers litigated everything under the sun regardless of what was right or wrong; as corporate raiders put thousands of people out of work in order to put a few more millions into their private stash; as mothers terminated their babies’ lives because they were not in the mood to be pregnant; as divorced fathers stopped sending child support to kids, leaving them in desperate straits; as looters helped themselves to whatever they wanted during the San Francisco earthquake and everyone was doing what was right in his own eyes. But all this was OK because that’s how “personal sovereignty” deals with ethics. It redefines right and wrong according to how it makes “me” feel at the time.

Sadly, that was not only the philosophy of the worldly person. It began to creep into the church, and we began to hear from T.V. preachers in the 80s about a “prosperity gospel” that said that all God’s people deserve to be rich. As we began to let that poison invade our churches, it was no longer obedience or commitment or sacrifice or faithfulness to Christ — it was basically — You serve God and find out what kind of material return you can get, and as quickly as possible! The question is — Are you serving God because you want to serve Him, or are you serving Him for the tangible benefits that it brings to you and your family?

Folks, when you buy into that stuff, you don’t have to have a degree in theology; you just have to have a three-digit IQ to know that those who proclaim this “prosperity gospel” are shysters. But this whole “personal sovereignty” nonsense came to its pinnacle, I suppose, when Shirley MacLaine was running around on the beach saying, “I am God: I am God!”

Let’s review what happened in the 80s:

Economically on October 19, 1987, the stock market dropped almost 600 points in one day. Our federal deficit, which was running at \$74 billion a year, is now at \$400 billion. We have a national debt that now approaches \$5 trillion. I can promise you, the piper still has to be paid.

Environmentally, the land began to scream in protest. Our beautiful beaches, in some cases, had to be closed because the ocean was beginning to vomit up hypodermic syringes and plastic bottles and all kinds of hospital waste and raw sewage of all kinds; and barges laden with city garbage plied the ocean for hundreds of miles seeking someplace to dump the stuff. Rain

forests in Brazil that are critical to the global economy were being burned in Nebraska-sized chunks. Chernobyl was discharging its radioactive cloud extending 1,500 miles, and we don't know yet the total damage caused by that catastrophe. And, of course, there were the millions of gallons of crude oil released into our Alaskan waters by the tanker that struck the rocks and disgorged its deadly cargo.

And most of all, ethically. There was in the 1980s an incredible ethical erosion. We did in the 80s what seemed right in our own eyes. What did Ivan Boesky, Michael Milken, Leona Helmsley and Jim Bakker and Charles Keating have in common? They all spent time in prison. You see, you have to pay the piper. It is true what Paul said to the church at Galatia, "What you sow, you're going to reap." (Gal. 6:7) And although others didn't go to jail, think of men like Gary Hart and Jimmy Swaggart and Pete Rose, and ask them if what they did really pays off.

I suppose the most poignant testimony to the emptiness of the 80s was that of Lee Atwater, that politically powerful figure of the Republican Party who got presidents elected; a young bright star, ruthless in his politics. He would do anything for victory. But after he received Christ, and just a short time before he died of cancer at the age of 40 in 1991, he said:

"The 80s were about acquiring — acquiring wealth, power, prestige. I know. I acquired more wealth, power and prestige than most. But you can acquire all you want and still feel empty... It took a deadly illness to put me eye to eye with that truth, but it is a truth that the country, caught up in its ruthless ambitions and moral decay, can learn on my dime. I don't know who will lead us through the 90s, but they must be made to speak to this spiritual vacuum at the heart of American society, this tumor of the soul."

Lee Atwater's testimony reminds me of a story Jesus told about the Prodigal Son who started off with such euphoria as he took all that his father gave him and decided that his life was going to be filled with fun and parties and friends. For a period of time he had a bunch of fun, but his money ran out. He didn't understand what America didn't understand in the 80s — you've got to pay the piper. When his money ran out, he got job, a job that was certainly beneath the dignity of a Jewish boy — he worked in a hog pen. And there among the hogs, trying to eat some of the food that was given to them, he realized that he had miscalculated what life was all about. He had squandered his money. His friends were gone. The Bible says something very significant in that passage of Scripture. It says that there came a time, there in the hog pen, when "he came to himself." He got off the merry-go-round, and he looked at himself, and he said, "I've had parties and friends and money. I've been there; I've done that; and I'm empty." But in that emptiness "he came to himself," and said, "Now I know what I'll do. I'll go back to home and Dad, and I'll ask forgiveness, and I'll start all over again." The best day in his life was that day that "he came to himself."

You say, "Pastor, what does that have to do with the 1980s and with America?" Very simply, as a country, we have to "come to ourselves." We have to get off the ride. We have to take a good long look at who we are, what we've done, the result of it, and how we're going to get back.

I think before we can ever sing "God bless America" we have to repent. We have to

come to ourselves; and I believe it must begin with you and me. God says, “If My people who are called by My name, will humble themselves, and turn from their wicked ways... I will heal their land.” (2 Chr. 7:14) You and I must be salt and light in an environment that is corrupt and in darkness.

Believe me, if we rebel, as the nation did in the 60s, or sink into inner depression as we did in the 70s or flaunt wealth and power as we did in the 80s, God is not going to let us get away with it. He’s not going to let society get away with it, and He’s not going to let the church get away with it.

May God help us as we leave this service this morning to sober up. May He throw some cold water on our face and get us out of Dreamland. There’s a price to be paid; there’s a call to be heard; there’s a mission to be accomplished; and it has to start with God’s people. May we say with Joshua of old, “As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.” (Joshua 24:15) May God give us the wisdom, the courage, and most of all, the power of the Holy Spirit to claim the promises of His Word — “Greater is He Who is within us than he that is within the world.” (1 John 4:4); and “If God be for us, who can be against us?” (Ron. 8:31) Although we may not be one nation under God, we as Christians, can be people under God. With strength and character and discipline may we be that kind of people.

God bless America, land that we love; do stand beside her, and guide her, and protect her, and bring her back home from the hog pen to the heavenly Father’s house; and may we be a part of the solution, and not a part of the problem.

AMEN.