

Tusculum Hills Baptist Church
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YET ANOTHER SERMON ON “IF MY PEOPLE”

2 Chronicles 7:11-15

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- “If” required action from the Israelites.
- “Then” resulted in action on God’s part.

INTRODUCTION: On this Independence Day, my mind reflects on many things. Our country’s forefathers who fought for independence, the trials and struggles we’ve had, the disagreements, the victories, and so on. No doubt we live in a unique country. A country like no other. A country like no other through all of history.

What is it that makes our country unique? Is it our freedom of speech? Separation of church and state? Is it our ability to bounce back when punched by an enemy? Is it because we are the land of opportunity? The answer is yes to all the above. And those things and more are what make people of other nations want to give up everything to come here.

It’s important for Christians to guard the freedoms of our country. There is a lot of public discourse today about separation of church and state, however, it normally goes in the direction of the church having no say-so in American policy. As a pastor, I’ve been told it’s my job to preach and that sharing my opinions about politics, government, or the direction of our country is not what a preacher should do.

You know a lot of people think Baptists are nothing but a bunch of dumb hicks. And perhaps there are a few scattered around, but did you know the principle of separation of church and state was championed by a Baptist preacher? All that the founders of our country had known was a state that was religion-run. Early in our nation’s history, there was a lot of discussion about having a government and church that were separated. Historian William McGloughlin writes that Roger

Williams, the founder of Rhode Island, was too much of a perfectionist about religious purity while Thomas Jefferson and James Madison were too indifferent. Had any of them gotten their way entirely on this matter, the country might be very different from what it is today. But a Baptist preacher named Isaac Backus had strong views about the free exercise of religion and those became incorporated into the First Amendment.

It's important for preachers to know their lanes. Occasionally, a preacher will speak out about how the country must enforce morality according to what he thinks is moral. Some years ago, a church movement in east Texas that became nothing more than a cult started using language that got the FBI involved. They said they were going to reach their city for Christ and if people did not comply, they were going to take it by force. Such people must have been sleeping through high school history class because having a church-run state has happened before and it's been disastrous. And we know those who don't learn history are doomed to repeat it.

As a pastor and a Christian, I know that I am just a pilgrim passing through. I know that my final citizenship is in heaven and my time here is only temporary. As a responsible pastor and Christian, it is important for me to be and stay informed. Sometimes people want me to make political statements when I don't feel led to. It is important for me to preach the truth of the Bible, and I certainly hope your faith influences your politics!

All of us want America to be all she can be, right? And I clearly believe the further this country gets from God the more of a mess she'll become. With a fading Christian influence will come nothing but chaos. Why? Because a solid reverence from God establishes order.

SCRIPTURE: 2 Chronicles 7:11-15

When Solomon had finished the temple of the LORD and the royal palace, and had succeeded in carrying out all he had in mind to do in the temple of the LORD and in his own palace, ¹² the LORD appeared to him at night and said:

"I have heard your prayer and have chosen this place for myself as a temple for sacrifices.

¹³ “When I shut up the heavens so that there is no rain, or command locusts to devour the land or send a plague among my people, ¹⁴ if my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land. ¹⁵ Now my eyes will be open and my ears attentive to the prayers offered in this place.

Some have said, and rightfully so, that these words were spoken by God directly to the Israelites, not to American citizens. I agree, but let’s consider the words as they were spoken to the people to whom they were spoken, and then let’s evaluate their merit today.

“IF” REQUIRED ACTION FROM THE ISRAELITES

EXPLANATION: If you haven’t already circled the word *if* in your Bible from previous requests of mine, please do it now. *If* established the condition. It is the action word which required the Israelites to choose. They could not be faced with *if* and do nothing. God himself is the author of the *if* in these verses.

Life is all about choices, and the word *if* has a lot to do with choices. In the case of God’s response to Solomon’s prayer, he started his instruction with *If* -- only two measly letters in the English language, but what a huge weight they carry.

If requires a response. It requires a choice. It requires action. *If* does not include delay or indecisiveness.

Think about it:

- *If* the Old Testament people had never rebelled, God wouldn’t have even had to set up the conditions of his blessings.
- *If* the people had simply obeyed all along, they would already be experiencing God’s blessings.

APPLICATION: How many of us have said, “*If* I had only...”

- If I had only paid more attention in school...
- If only I had not said that dumb thing I said...

- If I had only told me mom and dad I loved them...
- If I had only saved earlier in life...
- If I had only planned better for retirement...
- If I had only been more careful...

The word *if* carries a lot of weight.

Hey, I'm not trying to project guilt. I'm in the same boat as you. The reason we have regrets and *if onlies* is because early on most of us didn't know what was on the other side of the *ifs*. Most of us were just bebopping through life not really thinking of the future. Wouldn't it be great if when we were born, we had a checklist of what to do so that we would be prepared for everything? Wouldn't it be great if at every phase of life, we had a new checklist to help us along? While raising three kids, I thought about creating a checklist for other parents.

EXPLANATION: In this scripture, however, God told Solomon the formula for success, but it hinged on one word - *if*. The word clearly indicated there was a need for it. It clearly indicated there were so many things on the front side of the *if* that there would be no hope without an intervention from God to allow for a reboot. God is the God of start-overs, isn't he?

The first requirement of the checklist was for them to **humble themselves**. Since the Israelites were at peace and prospering during this particular time under Solomon's reign, it seems like God's word to them was out of sync. Times were good, so why would they have to humble themselves? They had a leader who was sought after by other leaders for his wisdom. They had a fantastic place of worship. It was beautiful with its gold and ornate beauty. But God wasn't interested in opulence. Think about it. It wasn't a tourist attraction. It wasn't meant to be a place where people gawked over its beauty. The temple was to be a place of sacrifices, repentance, and forgiveness of sin. It was to be place of humility.

APPLICATION: There is a strong message here for all people of all times, not just for the Israelites. We should be humble in good times and bad, whether prospering or poor.

SCRIPTURE: Proverbs 3:34 says

God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble.

SCRIPTURE: James 4:6-10 This is repeated in James.

Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord and he will lift you up. ⁷ Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. ⁸ Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. ⁹ Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. ¹⁰ Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.

The second requirement was to **pray**. *“If my people who are called by my name will humbles themselves and pray...”*

APPLICATION: Humility in prayer is what gets God’s attention. I’ve heard so many prayers and don’t want to judge anyone else’s prayers, so I’ll judge my own. Many of my prayers have not been said in humility. Many of my prayers have been about what I want instead of humbly asking what God wants. Many of my prayers have been about what I want God to do in the lives of others instead of humbly making requests. Many of my prayers have been about how I want God to change my circumstances rather than humbly asking God what he is trying to show me in my circumstances, or humbly asking him to let me be his vessel despite my circumstances.

When we go to the Lord in prayer, let us relieve our minds of personal agenda. If we don’t, our prayers are worthless words and will not be heard. Lutzer the pastor at Moody Church in Chicago said, “Prayer is not trying to get a seemingly reluctant God to do something for you.”

The more I grow as a Christian the less I understand prayer. That doesn’t sound so “spur-chul” coming for a pastor, does it? Prayer is simple, yet at the same time, it’s a mystery.

I believe growing in your prayer life means letting go of trying to manipulate God to do what you want him to do. It means abandoning your position of trying to get a

seemingly reluctant God to do something for you. It means you will follow his leading in your life.

SCRIPTURE: James 5:16

The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much.

EXPLANATION: The next requirement was to **seek God's face**. *"If my people who are called by my name will humble themselves and pray and seek my face..."* Following the sequence is important: humility, prayer, seeking God's face. Too many times we get that out of order, don't we? We leave out the humility thing. We make an important decision without seeking God's will and then we pray God will bless the decision we made without prayer.

What does it mean to seek God's face? It means to seek his will. Sometimes it may be clear what God's will is and other times it may not be.

ILLUSTRATION: A friend of mine was on the brink of a life-impacting decision. He told me about it. He had made up his mind he was going to do a certain thing. Because I said nothing, he thought I was giving my approval, but I was not. I was only listening. A few weeks later he said that, after prayer and seeking the Lord's guidance, he had changed his mind.

EXPLANATION: We can learn about seeking God's face from Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. Before the crucifixion he prayed, *"If it is possible let this cup pass from me, however, not my will but your will be done."*

Seeking God's face isn't easy, but it is what you must do if you are going to grow as a follower of Jesus. Seeking God's face is the complete opposite of saying a rote prayer.

The next requirement was to **turn from wicked ways**. *"If my people, who are called by my name will humble themselves and pray and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways..."*

ILLUSTRATION: No one likes to hear sermons about sin. Most don't want to be convicted of sin, and frankly most don't want to repent of sin. Sin is all around us.

Sin has inundated every person and every society since the beginning of time. One of my Air Force chaplain friends remarked one day about a certain airman who was always dealing with some type of mess. He posed the question as to why people are sometimes caught in a quandary that never seems to improve. My response to him was “Sometimes people love their mess.” People do not like to admit their sin, repent, and seek God.

EXPLANATION: When we sin, we should confess our sin. I John 1: 9 “*If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive our sin and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*” We have lots of wacky things happening in America today. Things that are being forced upon us as normal, and we are threatened if we don’t accept them as normal. Proponents of these things are the same who promote tolerance, that is, unless you disagree with them. I dare say the root issue with most of these things is just plain old unconfessed sin. You see, when we sin and do not repent, we do whatever it takes to justify and rationalize our sin, including getting others to justify and rationalize with us. And the more who agree...and the more acceptance there is...then there is a less likely possibility that we’ll feel that we have sinned, and it is less likely that we will repent.

Back to the word “if” – God’s promise was *if* the people did the things he required, then God would act on their behalf: he would hear them, forgive their sin, and heal their land.

In today’s scripture, the *if* required action by the Israelites.

***THEN* RESULTED IN ACTION ON GOD’S PART**

Following the *if* is the *then*, in which God obligated himself to act on his part.

“¹⁴...then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land.”

Now, let’s go back to my earlier statement about this scripture being for the Israelite people and not for Americans. No, there was no United States of America when God spoke this. But if you look at the formula God has laid out... I believe you’ll agree that *if* **any** people, of **any** time, of **any** land will obey it, *then* God will hear from heaven, forgive their sin, and heal their land.

God will always carry out his promises and in this case, his promise required action from the people.

While this scripture was meant for the ancient Israelite people directly, it's just as real for us as it was in Solomon's time.

Let's look at the last verse. ¹⁵ *Now my eyes will be open and my ears attentive to the prayers offered in this place.* God's word to Solomon was clear and if the people did not do what he required, then the opposite would have been the result: his eyes and ears would be closed to the prayers of people.

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Sincerely, Paul Gunn
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