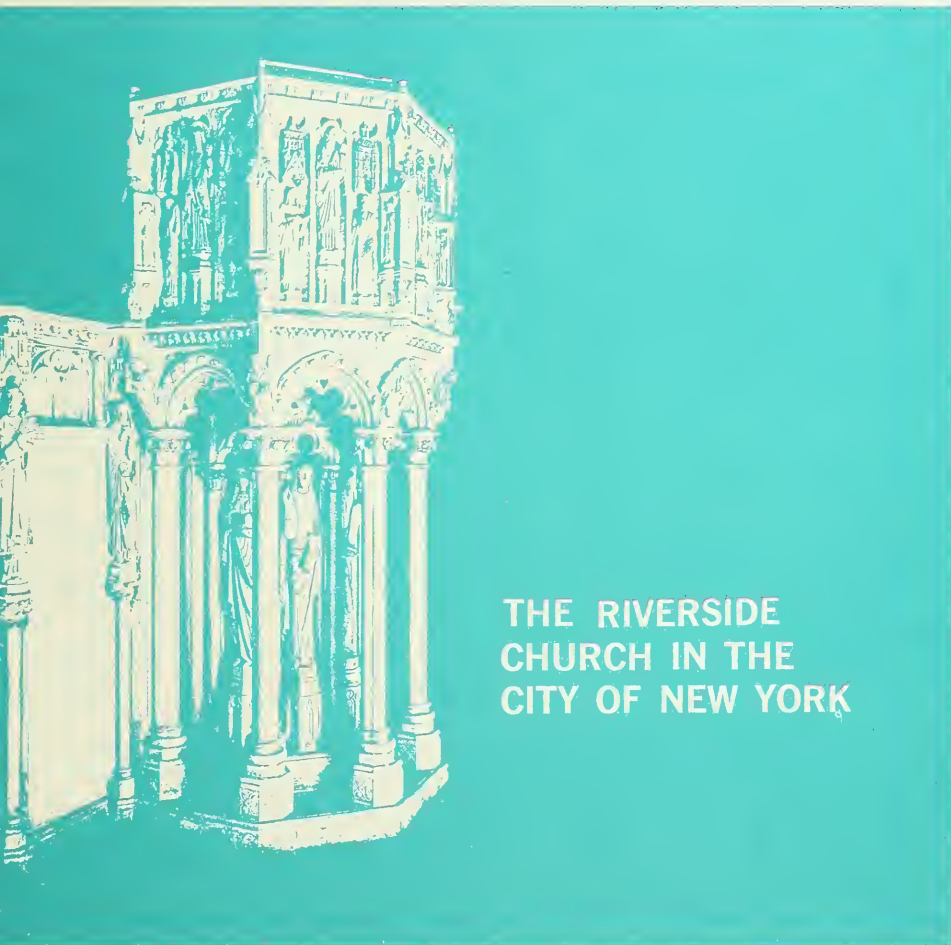


# SERMONS

FROM RIVERSIDE

"AMERICA -- CHANGE IT OR LOSE IT"

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THE RIVERSIDE  
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## "AMERICA -- CHANGE IT OR LOSE IT"

My sermon today is essentially a response to a bumper sticker. Bumper stickers as a rule are scarcely worth the time it takes to read them. But this one is different. It speaks the sentiments of millions of Americans. It purports to be the last word in patriotism. At bottom it is a superficial and dangerous over-simplification. I refer to the motto: "America - Love it or Leave it."

At first sight that motto appears to be a welcome antidote to the relentless criticisms that have been levelled at America in recent years. Upon closer inspection, however, it becomes apparent that the "love it or leave it" school of patriotism assumes: that all who criticize America hate it; that the present state of America is worthy of every citizen's affection; that America's future is best insured by a round-the-clock resistance to change.

Many who say "Love it or leave it," are sincere. But their tersely stated ultimatum smacks of death not life. For if all who love America uncritically were to stay, and all who criticize America were to leave, this nation, described by one of its founding fathers as "the world's best hope," would fast disappear.

On this fourth of July Sunday I should like to propose a more painful, but I trust more realistic, ultimatum: Not "America -- Love it or Leave it," but "America -- Change It or Lose It." Change it, because there is much in our house that is not in order. Or lose it, because we have no copper-bottom guarantee from God or anyone else that we can run our affairs as we will and still survive.

\* \* \* \* \*

The disorders in our house are many, and in some cases have reached crisis proportions. What cases? Well, for one thing, we have an economic crisis on our hands and the poor are getting restless. Despair, which unfailing by

issues in cynicism, holds an unhealthy number of our citizens in its grasp.

Just as a person in an air-conditioned office on a hot day can soon forget how muggy the weather is outside, so those who are carving out a comfortable existence from the system tend to forget the multitudes in this rich land who exist at poverty or bare-subsistence levels. "I'm okay. You must be okay too." This is how we figure it.

The notion that we are making headway in our war against poverty is an illusion. The hard facts are these: From the mid-forties to the mid-sixties the distribution of wealth in this country did not change. The top one-fifth of the nation continued to control forty percent of the wealth, the bottom fifth less than five percent.

The poor are virtually locked in. The system that keeps them down is self-perpetuating. Education, for example, is the key to coming up. "Only rarely does a suburban locality spend less than fifty percent of its local tax revenue on education, in contrast to about thirty percent in the cities where the poor are gathered." 1

Jesse Burkhead, a noted economist, has declared that "The single best indicator for predicting a child's success in school is his family income." 2

The moralistic approach to this problem is unavailing and inappropriate. During the month of June I suffered through an hour-long lecture in which a learned man tried to establish the interdependence of Christianity and free enterprise. He suggested that the concept of helping those in need is neither American nor Christian. The model he commended was drawn from Jesus' parable of the talents. The implication was clear. If the destitute only had a little more spunk, a little more drive, a little more hustle -- if they would but unwrap their God-given talent, turn it loose and multiply it, they wouldn't be where they are. This approach, of course, down-plays the role of education, inspiration and motivation in any man's success.

It also very conveniently overlooks the fact that our system as presently structured tends to make the strong stronger and the weak weaker. "The federal government, for example, has permitted income tax deductions for mortgage interest charges and real estate taxes. These deductions (which many of us here enjoy) exceed by a considerable amount the combined cost each year of all federal housing programs for the poor - that is, programs whose impact is almost exclusively inside the central city. One writer has observed that the per capita housing subsidy received by the wealthiest 20 percent of the population is twice that received by the poorest 20 percent." 3

Charles Reich has put his finger on a very sensitive nerve. The Yale professor notes "That everyone who operates 'privately' (a good American term) really is aided and subsidized, to one degree or another, by the public; the sturdy, independent rancher rides off into the sunset on land that is irrigated by government subsidy, past sheep whose grazing is subsidized and crops whose prices are artificially maintained by governmental action; he does not look like a welfare client, but he is on the dole nevertheless." 4

In the Hebrew commonwealth the prophets were careful in every generation to call the attention of the wealthy to the poor, the orphans, the sojourners, the outcasts. One does not judge a nation by what he sees in the panelled dining halls of the mighty: but by what he finds in the crowded tenements of the poor.

We have gone to battle many times as Americans on the "just war" theory. We must allow the possibility that for some of our people there could be such a thing as a "just revolution." We dare not under-estimate the fury of the discontented.

\* \* \* \* \*

Moreover, we have a political crisis on our hands: A growing number of citizens feel that their leaders do not listen to them or represent their concerns. The average

man lacks the funds to run for public office. Who then will plead the cause of the average man in the halls of government? Powerful lobbies and pressure groups exert an influence on government policy that the little man cannot match. Cities do not have political power commensurate with their population.

As the shocking disclosures of the Pentagon papers increasingly reveal, we are being ruled more and more by an inner circle of technically qualified experts and career diplomats who apparently assume that the public can be ignored, lied to, or otherwise manipulated.

I had the pleasure a few weeks ago of making my first visit to Monticello. It is amazing how history crowds in upon one as he moves about on those hallowed grounds so dear to Jefferson. I began reading up on Jefferson again and came to a new appreciation of the fact that one of his keenest struggles was with Alexander Hamilton. It was Hamilton's view that an oligarchy provided the best form of government. A small coterie of people -- preferably with royal blood in their veins -- ought to tell the masses what was good for them. Despite his nobility and gentility Jefferson stoutly insisted that our Constitution place the power of government in the hands of the people.

A crisis is indeed upon us when people do not feel that they are reliably connected with those who hold the seats of power. Certainly from within the point of view of Scripture, no man has the right to reduce another man to the role of a mere pawn. Each of us is made in the image of God, from the lowest to the tallest. Each of us is entitled to some voice in those decisions that affect his destiny.

\* \* \* \* \*

Finally, may I suggest that we have a moral crisis on our hands: We have lost our capacity to be shocked by flagrant wrong. We can be aroused by the burning of draft cards, but we seemingly cannot be aroused by the burning of women and children and whole villages by indiscriminate fire-bombing in Indo China. We can be stirred by the ques-

tion of how certain vital papers were leaked out of the Pentagon, but remain calm in the face of the contents and implications of those papers. We can become enraged over a ghetto that riots, but we do not become enraged by the day-by-day conditions out of which those riots come.

I trust that none of us is nursing the assumption that we are making banner progress in the field of race relations. I was disturbed, to say the least, to discover how hard it is even with federal funds to relocate the impoverished outside our major cities. The United States Commission on Civil Rights (whose report we have largely ignored) reported "that of the quarter of a million public housing units that have been built by the city housing authorities in the 24 large metropolitan areas, in only one--Cincinnati-- has the city housing authority been permitted to build outside the central city. In that city, the housing authority built 76 low-rent units in its suburbs. Thus, the public housing program, inadequate as it is even in the cities, has served to intensify the concentrations of the poor and the non-white in the central city."6 Are you listening Englewood? Are you listening Scarsdale? Are you listening Huntington?

Blacks are grossly under-represented in the building trades as we all know. And would you believe that only last month a book was published in San Francisco entitled: A Tourist Guide For Black Americans. After twenty years of intensive civil rights pressures and much good legislation it is still true that the Black man does not travel freely in his own country. To avoid embarrassment he still needs a listing of hotels and restaurants that will welcome his business and serve him without prejudice!

There is something sick about a society that avidly debates the morality of long hair, mini-skirts and rock music -- and sits idly by while television channels which belong to the general public drown us in a sea of mediocrity and banality seven nights a week! Only in a bread and circus society would we pay our athletes and ephemeral entertainers annual salaries in six figures, and allow our teachers, our nurses, our social workers and our fruit pickers to remain underpaid and our poor under-cared for!

A nation's durability does not come with multiple singings of the National Anthem, or repeated pledges to the flag in unison. Durability rises from the truth of a nation's values and her commitment to the right. As the author of Deuteronomy put it: "...choose life that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying his voice, and cleaving to him; for that means life to you and length of days, ..." (Dt. 30:19b-20a)

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"America -- Change it or Lose it." July fourth falls next on a Sunday in 1976. What we will be that day, or, indeed, whether we will be, depends on our willingness to change. It is my hope for the churches of America, and for this church in particular, that we will be a steady force for constructive change. That we will keep before our countrymen the option of a better way. Because God is gracious and forgiving, no man need stay the way he is. No nation need remain the way it is. Life can be redeemed. Men can be reborn. Courses can be reversed. Wrongs can be redressed.

Change it or lose it -- for change, after all, is nothing more than God's way of getting us from where we are to where we ought to be.

### CLOSING PRAYER

Lord, show us as Christians our role in  
this society, our place in this nation's life.  
Give us a due sense of our shortcomings,  
lest our public witness be flawed by a  
self-righteous spirit.  
Keep us constant in mercy's varied works,  
the fruit by which all men shall know  
that we are Christ's disciples.  
For we pray in His dear name.

Amen.



## FOOTNOTES:

1. Alan K. Campbell and Donna E. Shalala, "Problems Unsolved, Solutions Untried: The Urban Crisis," p. 12, The States and the Urban Crisis, edited by Alan K. Campbell, American Assembly, Columbia University, 1970
2. Ibid., p. 9
3. Ibid., p. 13
4. Reich, Charles, A., The Greening of America, p. 99, Random House, New York 1970
5. Alan K. Campbell and Donna E. Shalala, Op. cit., p. 14





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