

- Followers, that we could pray together saying, "Our father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen." (audience coughing)

- A few weeks ago, during the Christmas season, there was a fresh and fiery outburst in the growing national debate, over religious observances in tax-supported institutions. To an extent perhaps not witnessed before, verbal and printed wrath boiled over from both sides of the debate. It is becoming evident that reason is being replaced by emotion, that many on both sides are shouting louder and are listening less. Consider a few Christmas events of this immediate past Christmas. Two lawyers in Overland, Missouri, wrote the mayor of that city a very hostile letter, demanding that the nativity scene be removed from the lawn of city hall and claiming that its presence there, violated the first amendment of the constitution. The mayor with equal hostility simply ignored the letter. In Duluth, Minnesota, a father demanded that the singing of Christmas carols be stopped immediately in all of the city schools. The same demand was made in the state of Florida and one sheriff in that state reacted by saying that if he were handed a warrant to arrest a school official for allowing Christmas carols to be sung, he would refuse to make the arrest. In Eugene, Oregon, an opponent of religious observances in government, went so far as to obtain an injunction to forbid the city officials to light up a cross, which had been illuminated each Christmas in previous years. The city officials disregarded the injunction, refused to obey it, turned on the lights, and appealed to the state supreme court. Well, even though the emotional tone of the debate became disturbingly and uniquely shrill during these past Christmas holidays, there have in signs during the last several years, that the tension was building up. January the 11th, a year ago, Senator Everett Dirksen introduced a joint resolution into the 90th Congress, calling for an amendment to the constitution, which in effect would prevent any court, including the Supreme Court from prohibiting voluntary and non-denominational prayer in public institutions. The Christian Century Magazine reacted belligerently. It was opposed to religious observances in public institutions no matter how voluntary and had often stated its opposition. But when the editors learned that Senator Dirksen was going to introduce this proposed amendment, the Christian Century went beyond reasoning and resorted to blackmail. In a prominent editorial, Christian Century threatened that if Senator Dirksen's amendment passed, the editors would use all the influence of their command to disrupt the entire educational and governmental system of the whole United States. They promised that if the amendment passed, their program would be ready. And so they wrote, "We will push its implementation to the hilt." What was their plan? It was to go the Mormons into demanding three hours per day of reading from The Book of Mormon in every school where they are in the majority. The editor said they would do their best to get the Jews to demand a similar reading of the Torah in every school where they are in the majority, and so on. They would so they said, needle the Baptists into demanding that a Baptist open with prayer, every post office, every fire station, every Social Security office, Internal Revenue office, and FBI office in America every day. In short, the Christian Century promised that if the Dirksen amendment passed, they would do everything they could and I quote, "To use prayer to tie up the whole educational and governmental

process until there should be a demand that would prevail to repeal the amendment." Well, it's clear from these and from many other indications, which could be given, that we are rapidly approaching a point in this controversy, when pushing and shoving, will replace dialogue and listening, when psychosis will replace sanity, when we will all talk past each other, when bitterness will make any peaceful solution impossible. Into this situation, some lines from a poem by Robert Burns come with intense relevance and hopefully with soothing balm. You know what they are? The lines by which he is best known, "O, wad some Power the giftie gie us To see oursels as others see us! It wad frae monie a blunder free us, An' foolish notion." Translating those lines from the charming Scottish language to the English language and from poetry to pros, we find Robert Burns wishing that some power would grant us the ability to understand how we look to others, so that we might avoid numerous blunders and be set free from many foolish notions. There are few blessings, my friends, that one can imagine, which would help resolve this heated controversy more than the one for which Burns called. If only we could see how our opponents interpret our position, not how we interpret it. We already know that. How they hear our arguments. How our posture looks to them. There might be enough change on both sides take place to make possible a resolution of the conflict. What we have to understand, however, is that by and large, up to now, we are not trying to do what Robert Burns called for. Rather, we are attempting to do the opposite. Some years ago in a different context, Dr. Harry Emerson Fosdick wrote a parody on Burns poem, which he more nearly described our true passions. Fosdick said that instead of our praying "O, wad some Power the giftie gie us To see oursels as others see us!" we fervently pray, "Owe what some power to others gie to see myself as I see me." This is precisely what both sides in the controversy have been praying actually. Each has been demanding that the other side see matters our way. The result is that, increasingly, we are willing to talk, but not to listen, quick to demand, slow to understand, while a beginning point would be to hear what the side opposite you is saying about you. You can do that right now during this sermon. Since both sides in this debate are represented at Duke university, I shall presume both are present in this congregation now. One side contends that it is no violation of the first amendment to have voluntary religious observances in public institutions. For convenience, let's call that side or team A. Now, the other side contends that even voluntary religious observances in public institutions does violate the first amendment. Let's call that side team B. Now this is what the controversy is all about. That's all there is to it, But there are many overtones and undertones, which are played on this simple theme And neither side really hears the message from the other side. For a few minutes, let us hear now. I've selected two points from each side. Will you listen? Team A needs to hear and ponder something which team B has been saying for a decade. They have been declaring that prayer and Bible study in the public school is not a proper substitute for religious training in the home and in the church. They claim that team A is insisting that we have have religious observances in school to make up for their own failure to provide it at home or to go with their children to church and church school. They wanna let George do it at the public school. Is there truth in this accusation? I think there is. Far too many parents have wanted their children to have religious training, but they've not wanted it badly enough to become involved in it themselves. And this has given them a very guilty conscience, which has emerged in the form of an insistence upon religious instruction in the public schools and other public institutions by public officials. Can you hear that word this morning? If you can, what blunder will hearing it free you from and what foolish notion will it dispel? Now, let's try one on the opposite side. Team A has been saying something about team B for several years namely, that they are confusing the language of the first amendment of the constitution and are insisting that the first amendment means something it has never meant before, and which the Americans who wrote

it and who adopted it, never intended it to me. Specifically, they are saying, the first amendment prohibits religious observances and practices in government when it only was designed to prohibit a state church or an established denomination, such as the Church of England is. In other words, team B, they say, is making a religion-government controversy out of what under the constitution could legitimately only be a church-state issue. Is there truth in this charge? I think there is. Chief among those apparently in error on this point, are certain honorable justices on the US Supreme Court who have written that the first amendment forbids even voluntary and non-sectarian prayer in public schools. If by that, they mean that Thomas Jefferson and the members of the Congress, which adopted the first amendment, intended any such interpretation, they are 100% in the purest of error. All the writings of Jefferson and the records of that first Congress, have been carefully worked through and there can be no slight doubt on this point. This has been meticulously documented, and it has been fully published, and it is available. No one needs to be in this kind of darkness. The first part of the first amendment was designed to prohibit the establishment of a state church or state denomination and nothing more. The second portion of the first amendment, was designed to guarantee that nothing would be done to prevent the free exercise of religion. Therefore, to say that the first amendment was designed to prevent voluntary prayer and other religious observances in tax-supported institutions, is to confess that one has not read early American history. Can you hear that word this morning? Does it sink in? If so, what blunder will that free you from, and what foolish notion will it dispel? All right. Let's switch back to the other side. Team A needs to open its ears and hear a word which team B has been speaking for quite a while. They have been charging that the attempt to keep Bible in the public schools, to keep prayer in legislative halls, to keep chaplains in Congress and in the armed forces, to keep the motto "In God We Trust" on our national coins, is an attempt to make America Christian by label, to baptize our country by official acts, which are not matched by genuine piety. Team B has seen this as a superior's attempt to get God on our side so that when America goes to war against an enemy, team A can call God's attention to all the official religiosity we have accumulated in the hope that God will fight our battles for us and give us the victory. Is this charge true? I think it is partly true and partly false. This is the case for an interesting reason. As often happens in other areas, we find groups of people with entirely opposite motivations, apparently seeking to do the same thing. Some members of team A probably do try to keep religious observances in public institutions for reason assigned by team B. I once heard of a racially segregated veterans organization, which opened its meeting one night by singing "God bless America," and then plunged into an evening of gambling, drunkenness and other immorality. However, there are many other members of team A who seek to maintain a Christian influence in governmental institutions for an entirely different reason. They realize that neutrality is both logically and psychologically impossible, that all institutions, sooner or later, begin to make either pro-Christian or anti-Christian assumptions. And these members of team A want our nation to know that we stand as a nation under the judgment of a righteous God. They therefore believe that if the public school is conducted on the assumption that if there is a God, the school does not need to take Him into account. And if the university is conducted on the assumption that its affairs are excluded from the province of God, and if the legislature and the Congress are led to believe that the nation's laws do not have to be measured by the plum line of God's righteousness, then we have surrendered to the central doctrine of secularism, which is that whether there be a God or not, He is at least irrelevant to the way we organize our life together. This would not be neutrality. This would be a flat denial of Christian faith, which is that God and his righteousness, are relevant to all of life, nothing excluded. These members of team A do not wish this to happen. So, depending on which members of team A you're

talking about and the motivations they have, this charge by team B may be true or it may be false. But all members of team A need to hear the charge, because if they do, it may free them from blunders and false notions. And it is important for team A not to allow the charge to be true. Okay, let's turn our attention to a second word, which team A has been speaking about team B, and which team B assuredly needs to hear. Team A points out that a strong majority of American people, traditionally have been and are now, positively-oriented towards the Christian religion. They remind us that the last United States census, showed that only 3% of the American people identified themselves as being in any sense Jewish. And that if one added up all the adherence of all non-Christian religions in the United States, the total probably would scarcely exceed 5% of the population. And yet, charges team A, we are called on by team B to neutralize all public institutions, less some child of this 5% minority, should hear some Christian word or song, which might influence him in favor of the Christian religion and against the creed of his parents. Perhaps the most eloquent statement of this point of view, has been given by Dr. Erwin Griswold, who was Dean of the Harvard University Law School, and not too long before he became the Solicitor General of the United States at the time he wrote the article. Here are some sentences from the article which he wrote. "This is a country of religious toleration. That is a great consequence of our history embodied in the first amendment. But does religious toleration mean religious delectity? I wonder why it should be thought that it does. This is a Christian country in origin, history, tradition, and culture. It was out of Christian doctrine and ethics that it developed its notion of toleration. But does the fact that we have officially adopted toleration as our standard, mean that we must give up our history and our tradition. The Muslim who comes here may worship as he pleases and may hold public office without discrimination. This is as it should be. But why should it follow that he can require others to give up their Christian tradition merely because he is a welcomed member of the community? The child of a minority group is to be sure different in his beliefs. That is what it means to be a member of a minority. Is it not desirable and even educational for him to learn and observe this in the atmosphere of the school? And is it not desirable that at the same time, he experiences and learns the fact that his difference is tolerated and accepted? He too has the opportunity to be tolerant. He allows the majority of the group to follow their own tradition, perhaps coming to understand, and to respect what they feel is significant to them. In a country which has a great tradition of tolerance, is it not important that minorities who have benefited so greatly from that tolerance, should be tolerant too?" Well, the essence of team A's charge here is that, team B is willing to see the religious supports of morality, of decency, of law and order, disappear from all our public institutions, rather than see one child hear a prayer or a scripture reading from a tradition different from his own. Team A charges that, as a result, juvenile delinquency will grow, immorality will increase, crime and violence will expand in ever widening circles. Is this charge true? Perhaps only history can decide. But for now, the least that team B can do is really to open its ears and hear that charge. If they do, if they do, it may result in the elimination of some blunders and the abandonment of some foolish notions. And so finally, speaking for all of us, Robert Burns would say, "O, wad some Power the giftie gie us. To see oursels as others see us!" If that gift can be given to us and if we will accept the gift, we can not only hear each other, but perhaps we can come together to make some very wise decisions for the glory of God and the up-building of our country. The Prophet Ezekiel was sent by God many years ago, to take a message to the Israelites who were in exile at Tel Abib by the River Chebar. The message was that they were abundantly wicked and that if they didn't reform, there was bad news on the way for them. Well, Ezekiel went on his assignment, but when he got there, and as the scripture says, "sat where they sat for a whole week." He was astonished because he saw their misery

as they saw it themselves. He still finally spoke the message of God, but it was in a new context of understanding their plight as they understood it themselves. If enough of us will practice this virtue, perhaps by next Christmas, there will not be so many nasty letters written, nor so many injunctions taken out, nor so many appeals to Supreme Courts, nor blackmail, nor pushing, nor shoving. We will be able to listen as well as to talk, to understand as well as to propagandize. And if we do, I'm sure it will free us from many a blunder and foolish notion. Let us pray. Oh, God we do not ask for the transplant of a new heart, but we do ask that thou will give us clean hearts and right spirits so that we can hear our brothers and love them and believe that they are as sincere as we are and work together for thy glory in Jesus name. Amen. (soft organ music)