

Equipping the Church

Part 11: 'The Next Reformation'

Every move of God carries the potential for reformation. Every visitation of God carries the possibility of a revival that is not supposed to end until there is true reformation within our culture and our whole society. For decades now I have been studying the Protestant Reformation which turned the Church and the world upside down over 500 years ago. Luther, Calvin, Zwingli and all the great reformers left us so much to study as we dig down and discover the condition of the Church at that time and why such a reformation was so desperately needed. In so doing, we are eventually forced to take an honest look at the Church and the world today as we long for another reformation.

I doubt you would find a single thinking person on the planet who does not agree that our world is in desperate need of change in so many areas. There is so much wrong in the world today we really don't know where to start. Or do we? Surely, as the people of God; the Church of Jesus Christ; those who base our lives and beliefs on God's Word, surely we have always known where to start. The Bible has made that very clear for thousands of years. The place to start is always in front of the mirror. But we would much rather find someone else to blame and then ask God to fix them!

What am I talking about? Well brace yourself as I answer that question by reading just one verse of Scripture. It is one you have no doubt heard many times but not one you may want to spend too much time pondering because it's pretty confronting. I won't be unpacking this verse in today's sermon, I just want to use this as a springboard and the backdrop to what I want to say later. Here it is and I want you to listen for God's voice to us right now.

2 Chronicles 7:14

"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 will forgive their sin and heal their land."

*"If my people who are called by My Name . . ." This is God talking about His people. At first that was Israel, but now He is speaking about the Church. **We look at the mayhem around us and keep waiting for the world to repent - but God is saying the healing of the land is dependent upon His people repenting.** "If My people who are called by my name will humble themselves and pray and seek my face, turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven will forgive their sin and heal their land."*

The repentance of God's people is the starting point of all true reformation. God desperately wants to change the world around us but He has always chosen to do that by changing the hearts of His people first. We are His change-agents. We are Ambassadors for Christ. We are the ones who are called to embrace the mission of Christ so that through us, He might transform the world. As the people of God are renewed and filled with God's Spirit, the presence and power of God overflows into the world around us.

All that is made possible as God's people accept the gift of repentance and let God change them from the inside out. Repentance is not a religious act or duty – repentance is a mindset, a permanent attitude, a daily reality. Repentance is not a place we visit occasionally – repentance is where we live – always changing, always conforming, always becoming.

Brothers and sisters, we live at a wonderful time and in a wonderful country. We are blessed beyond measure. There is so much to be thankful for at this point in our journey. However, there are forces at work within the Church and certainly outside the Church, which are hell-bent on undermining the very foundations of our faith and the foundations of a healthy society. We are currently dealing with a global pandemic and we cannot deny that has been a huge challenge to every nation. However, it is also a major distraction and a convenient smoke screen for the enemy of God to camouflage many more serious issues we face in our society today.

Governments all over the world, including our own, have ventured into areas which are well beyond the traditional boundaries of law-makers as they directly challenge God's creative purpose, God's will and God's authority. God is not even mentioned in most of these new laws and most of those members of Parliament who pass them don't have any idea they are attacking the foundations of our society and God's purpose for humanity – but that is exactly what they are doing. Already we have seen a raft of laws passed in almost a hundred countries which completely re-define marriage. This is now being followed by laws which completely disregard gender, redefine sexuality and totally ignore any and all indicators of God's creative purpose in our physical, psychological and relational make-up. In a nation where God and His will were once at the very centre of our society, our governments and our national identity, there is now a deliberate anti-Christian campaign being run by vocal minority groups who are determined to undermine, ridicule, attack and remove all references to God and His relevance in our world.

I am not a doomsday prophet by any means and nobody likes hearing bad news but there is a limit to how long we can keep our fingers in our ears while singing, *'My God is so big, so strong and so mighty.'* Of course our God is all those things but our God has also determined that His strength, His might and His impact in our fallen, broken world will be seen, felt and heard in and through the Church! God wants us to have our eyes and ears open to see what He sees happening around us. We have vital issues unfolding in our world which will affect multiple generations ahead and they are hanging in the balance right now. There has never been a period in our lifetime when we have needed a visitation of God like we do today. We desperately need an invasion of God Almighty Who will come among us to bring healing, deliverance and total reformation.

So against that backdrop, I want to talk to you today about Sodom, Gomorrah and Nineveh. All three cities had the absolute judgment of God pronounced against them. Now I realize that the judgment of God is not a very popular subject, but get used to it. It's still in the Bible. He didn't take off His judge hat when He became Saviour but God's judgment always flows from God's love. Let me put it this way, if you discovered a cancerous tumor in your body, you would not want to go to a doctor who believed that cancer should have its own freedom of expression - you would want a doctor who would bring swift judgment on that which is working to destroy your life. In the same way we want the mercy of God in our lives, but also the judgment of God that cuts off everything that is against His will and our own destiny in Christ.

Now everyone knows that Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed. People who don't even read the Bible know about Sodom and Gomorrah and why they were destroyed. Ask anyone and they will tell you that these cities were destroyed because of their immorality and their gross sexual perversion. But most of us don't ask the most important question: how did they end up in such moral decay? Well let me read some interesting words from the Prophet Ezekiel which may shine a stronger light on these cities and indeed, our own cities and culture in 2022.

Ezekiel 16:49

"Look, this was the iniquity of your sister Sodom: She and her daughter had pride, fullness of food, and abundance of idleness; neither did she strengthen the hand of the poor and needy."

I would like to suggest to you that abundance in our life has to find expression through compassion, or it will be misused and abused. It has to find release, through compassion. The Pharisees complained to Jesus because He healed a man on the Sabbath - what was missing in them was compassion for the paralytic who had no use of his arm. Religion is always more concerned about keeping the rules than seeing somebody set free. You see this on almost every page of the Gospels. The complete absence of compassion is what caused the religious leaders to be so blind to their own heart condition and so blind to the cries and needs of the people around them. They completely refused to allow their hearts to be moved by this divine expression of compassion.

In Acts chapter 3 we read where Peter and John are walking to the gate beautiful and there's a lame man there begging for money, as he had done most of his life. Peter turns to the man and says this: *"I don't have silver and gold but what I have I give to you ..."* Did you catch that? *"What I have, I give to you."* I believe that the Lord wants to heighten our awareness right now of something that actually was at the foundation of the fall of Sodom and Gomorrah. They had all these perversions which actually developed out of their surplus time, surplus money, surplus food, and the absence of compassion. They developed into a self-seeking, self-centred, self-consumed culture. Now that sounds a whole lot like the culture which surrounds us today. We all live with surplus time, surplus money, surplus abilities and when we have extra and it's not directed towards serving the needs of people around us, we will become insulated and isolated from the real needs of the world. So whilst we smugly look at the dreadful sins of two ancient cities and feel good about ourselves, we need to take a step back and ask how did those cities get to that point. Ezekiel tells us and that is very confronting because it puts our society much closer to that point than we dare imagine!

So when Jesus announced, *"The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free,"* He was declaring that He had what was needed by the blind; He had what was needed by the prisoners and the oppressed. When you are aware of what you have, then like Peter said to the lame man, you too can say, *"Such as I have, I give to you."* Peter knew he carried an eternal flame within him. He knew he had something beyond the physical, tangible things of this world. He knew that God had imparted something supernatural to him. So Peter expected a God-encounter as he opened his mouth to speak. He had nothing for this man from this kingdom, but he knew he had God and His kingdom at his disposal. So he said, *"Such as I have, I give to you."* At that point God's kingdom came upon this lame man - God's will was done on earth as it is in heaven – all because a disciple of Jesus was moved by compassion and gave what he had.

Friends, right now we need encounters that are inexplicable, unreasonable, unmanageable, outside of our control, so that we come face to face with the fact that God is upon us and within us. We are empowered by Him Who has no limitation, no boundaries, no restrictions, no restraints other than our unwillingness to cooperate with Him. Obviously, God can do whatever He wants, but His first choice at all times is to flow through His yielded people. When I don't yield, when I look at a problem as an impossibility and don't think in terms of *'What I have, I give to you,'* then I miss the whole purpose I am here and the Church is poorer for it and the world continues to fall apart. This is where the true demise of Sodom and Gomorrah began. Out of their abundance, they refused to give as others had need and because of that dysfunction in how they did life as a culture, they opened a wide door for Satan and his demons to create a playground of absolute perversion. But it all started with excess and abundance that wasn't directed towards helping, serving and loving people.

So what about our third city, Nineveh? Well the story of Jonah is a personal favorite of many and it contains one of the most underrated miracles in the whole Bible - the healing of the city of Nineveh. Now if you want an example of reformation, if you want an example of repentance that becomes the seedbed of the transformation of society itself - look no further than the story of Jonah and Nineveh.

God speaks to this prophet Jonah and tells him to go and preach to Nineveh. Interestingly He doesn't tell Jonah to warn them and say that unless they repent, they will be destroyed. He said, *"Just go and tell them I am going to destroy them."* There was no offer of repentance; no promise; there was nothing given; just the announcement that they were about to join Sodom and Gomorrah.

Well Jonah doesn't like this assignment so he runs from the presence of God, gets on a boat, and then is thrown overboard to save everybody on the boat. Just when he thought his day was not going well, he is swallowed by a big fish. At that point Jonah remembers the Lord – as you might too if you ever get swallowed by a fish. Jonah repents and the fish pukes him up on the beach. Just imagine you are sunbaking on the beach one day when a man is barfed in your direction by a giant fish. Maybe you would listen to what he had to say ... or maybe not.

Anyway, Jonah begins to preach in Nineveh and I think it takes him three full days to walk from one end of the city to the other announcing that God's judgment is coming. Word travels all the way to the King and he announces that they're going to repent and see if by chance God might have mercy on them. So they repent - I mean, really repent - from the greatest to the least they all wore sackcloth and ashes – they even required the animals to fast. With such a deep sense of judgment coming upon them that they knew they deserved there was such clarity in their thinking that their repentance was not at all casual. For four days they are in this place of deep repentance before the Lord and when God shows up, He changes His mind and forgives them.

Meanwhile, Jonah is sitting up on a hill waiting for the judgment of God to come upon the city and he's angry when he realizes that God forgives them. He's angry because God showed mercy on these people and that's why Jonah didn't want this assignment in the first place. He didn't want to announce judgment and then have it not happen and make him look bad. He spent days warning thousands of people about a judgment which never came! How humiliating is that? Do you know that so much ministry in the Church today gets perverted because we are more concerned about how we will look than we are about revealing God and changing people's hearts?

So Jonah is not happy and he's sitting on a hill and this weird thing happens. The sun is now beating down on Jonah and so the Lord makes this plant grow to cover Jonah and protect him. Jonah was very pleased about the plant but then God created a worm to destroy the plant and when the sun rose God sent a strong east wind just to really get Jonah's attention. Jonah finally moans, *"It is better for me to die than to live!"* This is one unhappy camper! Then God explains this bizarre scene and drives the whole point of this story home for Jonah – and, I trust, for us too!

Jonah 4:10-11

"But the Lord said, "You have had pity on the plant for which you have not laboured, nor made it grow, which came up in a night and perished in a night. And should I not pity Nineveh, that great city, in which are more than one hundred and twenty thousand persons who cannot discern between their right hand and their left ...?"

God holds up a mirror in front of Jonah and shows him that he had more compassion for a plant that died in his presence than he did for a city full of people who were so morally and ethically twisted, that spiritually speaking, they didn't know the difference between their right hand and their left. They are so lost in their moral condition, that they couldn't find their way into a place of sanity, unless the mercy of God came upon them. God reveals to Jonah that his problem is the absence of compassion. Jonah was fine with the compassion of the Lord when it was directed towards him. He ran from God, got swallowed by a fish; was puked up on the beach and he survived it all. He didn't mind a little compassion from the Lord when he was the recipient, but he was not happy with the compassion of the Lord, when it was directed towards those whom Jonah wanted to see judged.

I see this across the Church today; I see this in our world; where people will love the standard of mercy when it's extended to them, but they get very frustrated when that standard of mercy is extended towards others. There are not very many things that I could emphasize today that would be more pertinent to the hour in which we live than this right here. **The mercy I've received, I must give away. All that God has given me, is meant to be shared, but especially His grace and mercy.**

Here we have Jonah, the prophet of the Lord, who knows the voice of the Lord, who knows the presence of the Lord, but who ran from God and in that moment committed a bigger sin than all of Nineveh, who didn't know any better. When God extended mercy to Jonah, the man of God, who fled from God's presence, unwilling to do His will, that was a greater sin than a city that didn't even know how lost they were. I am not trying to grade sins here, I just want to say that when we grow up in a Church environment, which many of us have, we tend to deal lightly with our own sins, like jealousy, accusation, gossip, being offended etc. . and yet we are harsh towards those whom we think have the 'greater' sins.

In Matthew chapter 12 we read of the time Jesus healed a paralytic, upset the Pharisees and then withdrew – only to have a crowd gather and follow Him - so He healed everyone in the crowd! Then a blind and mute man is brought to Jesus, and He is healed too. It was a busy day at the office! But it says in verse 38 that some of the scribes and Pharisees then asked Jesus for a sign. It's one of the weirdest stories in the Bible for me. They just witnessed miracle after miracle with their own eyes and then they say, *"We want to see a sign from you."*

It seems weird at first but not in the context of the Jonah story and this sermon today. Here we see the battle between signs/miracles that come from compassion, and signs/miracles that elevate my own esteem and my own sense of control. The Pharisees, as always, want to dictate what happens and so they want Jesus to perform tricks for them. Jesus refuses to perform for them, especially since he has just delivered a whole series of signs/miracles that brought incredible healing, deliverance and transformation to people. But that all went unrecognized by the religious leaders. They were not moved with compassion; they were in the exact place Sodom and Gomorrah were in their time of judgment, because they didn't use their surplus towards serving, helping, blessing and redeeming others. So in verse 39 Jesus responds to this outrageous request for a sign:

Matthew 12:39

"But (Jesus) answered and said to them, "An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign, and no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah."

Then just in case He was not pointed enough, Jesus made it painfully clear in verse 41.

Matthew 12:41

"The men of Nineveh will rise up in the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and indeed something greater than Jonah is here."

There's something unmistakable in this message that Jesus brought in that He always provides people a way to enter life and avoid condemnation. He gives access to life, to breakthroughs, to becoming all that God designed us to become. The disciplines of God are never punishment – they are always meant to refine our focus so that we more fully step into life and embrace who we were designed to be. I believe that the vital testimony of Scripture is that we have a sense of indebtedness as believers, to get filled with the Spirit of God until we are conscious of what we have in Christ so that we too can say, *"What I have, I give to you."* In other words, the burning conviction that what I have is greater than the problem you have and I'm going to make an exchange with you, I'm going to give you a gift. Only then will we become the channels through which the rivers of reformation flow!

This is what the Lord is looking for in us, first and foremost, to become aware of our God Who is with us, Emmanuel. Then to allow His heart to bring us to that place of compassion, yielded-ness, so that the gifts of the Spirit move freely in us – all in the context of love. Not for showmanship, not because we want a bigger crowd - not any of that stuff.

God want us to know that we have the whole kingdom of heaven at our disposal every day. God wants us to believe in the power of the gospel flowing through us to change a person's life. The greatest miracle of all is the conversion of a soul, but it does not stop there - that power touches every part of people to heal bodies, bring deliverance from torment and change a whole person's worldview which can then change the world.

Contemplate the power of the gospel. Meditate on the power of the gospel. It is unlimited in its scope; it is unlimited in its measure; it is unlimited in its ability to not only restore every person reading, watching or listening to this sermon now – restore you to a place of friendship with God, restore you as a child to your loving Father ... but also ... through your transformation and many like you ... this same gospel has the power to heal the land through us ... and right now we really need God to heal our land.

Let those who have ears to hear, listen to what the Spirit is saying today.