

Recovering Our Lost Influence

Editor's Note: The following word was first published on May 26 as a Prophetic Moments bulletin by R. Loren Sandford, pastor of New Song Fellowship in Denver, Colorado (). A full version of this message as preached may be viewed via streaming video at .

Recently I've heard prophecies that America has just two to  three months to turn things around before the judgment comes. Those voices have it wrong. The two to three months applies to a period of time concerning which the Lord spoke to me at the end of last year, and the judgment is not on America, but on the church in this country.

After Obama's election I believe the Lord told me that we would see six months of delusory hope, followed by a whirlwind. Caught up in the whirlwind I saw a flurry of papers representing accelerating change. I suspect the papers represent a flurry of legislation. We will see the effect of it two to three months from now.

I don't see judgment falling on the nation yet but rather on the church—God's people—and it has only just begun. 1 Peter 4:17 clearly indicates that judgment begins with the house of God.

The first stage of judgment—already in motion—is that we have lost both our power as a voting block *and* our cultural influence. We have lost these things (1) because we have presented ourselves to the nation in the religious spirit rather than the Spirit of Christ and (2) because our integrity in high places has been badly compromised.

The second stage of judgment on the church in days to come is that the culture of this nation will continue in the direction it has been choosing to take for the last 40 years. The judgment is that we can do nothing to stop this slide into

lawlessness and immorality because we've sacrificed our moral authority.

Where the world is concerned, we'll begin to see an economic recovery take hold at mid-year. The signs are already beginning to surface and will take a long time to have full effect, but we will see the beginning. Morality, however, will continue its downward spiral, and in many cases, legislation will back it up.

At the root of our loss of influence politically and culturally is the spirit of the Pharisees, the religious spirit. The Bible teaches us that Jesus *invites righteousness*, the grace that leads to repentance, while the religious spirit tries to *force behavior*. Jesus demolishes walls and builds bridges while the religious spirit creates a chasm between those who think themselves righteous and those the righteous judge to be defiled. Hatred results.

The Pharisees called people to repent, but the only motivator they could offer was condemnation—and condemnation presents too great an obstacle for anyone to overcome. For example, in Luke 19 the Pharisees grumbled against Jesus because He honored Zacchaeus, the sinner, by going to stay at his house. Condemnation never motivated anyone to repent and change, but love and honor do. In response to the honor Jesus offered him, Zacchaeus gave away half his wealth and restored four times to those he had cheated. Honor and grace lead to repentance.

Remember the power of the Republican party just four and eight years ago? Do you remember how that party was widely viewed as the party of evangelical Christians? Do you recall the power both Republicans and evangelicals wielded in every election? Today many are singing death songs over the Republican party and over evangelical Christian influence in general. I'm not saying that one party is better than the other. I'm saying that any political party left to itself without a balancing influence is a bad thing.

We can't pray in the schools. Islam and the New Age can be taught in the classroom but not Christianity. State after state approves gay marriage. The Ten Commandments get removed from the statehouse lawn. But that's not the fault of the unbelievers, nor can we lay that at the door of Barack Obama. We might cry, "Bad Democrats! Bad liberals!" as if it were their fault, but it isn't. Nor can it be blamed on unbelievers. Neither the liberal left nor the devil did this to us. Don't blame them. We Christians did it to ourselves.

For years I have warned that if we didn't change our language, our approach and our heart, we would see just what we are now seeing. Matthew 23:25-28 proclaims, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you cleanse the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of extortion and self-indulgence. ... Even so you also outwardly appear righteous to men, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness" (NKJV).

As I mentioned earlier, two components have left us open to opposition, locked us out of public life and rendered us powerless to balance what is happening to our nation: (1) We have been captivated by the religious spirit that masquerades as righteousness while offering only condemnation. It's our shrill voice of judgment toward homosexuals, people who support abortion rights, liberal politicians and anyone else deemed a sinner. (2) We've been destroyed by our own hypocrisy as we have outwardly cried for righteousness while we have been inwardly compromised and publicly exposed.

What discredits Christian faith today in the eyes of the world is that we judge the sinner and build a wall of separation out of bricks of condemnation while we display rampant immorality in our own behavior. We've become the Pharisees—outwardly clean but inwardly compromised.

The religious spirit that tries to force righteousness through

shrill cries of condemnation is really a failure of faith. We think it's God because it condemns sin and exalts righteous behavior, but it's really unbelief that the Holy Spirit will actually do what He says He'll do and that grace really works.

Romans 2:4 reads, "Or do you despise the riches of His goodness, forbearance, and longsuffering, not knowing that the goodness of God leads you to repentance?" Goodness (and kindness, as some versions read) lead to repentance; condemnation never can.

Jesus said, "Nevertheless I tell you the truth. It is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you; but if I depart, I will send Him to you. And when He has come, He will convict the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment" (John 16:7-8). Notice that Jesus said *the Holy Spirit* will convict the world of sin. Not me. Not you.

If we believe that the Holy Spirit will convict, then our whole demeanor must change, along with our words, our approach and our attitudes. We must embrace sinners with grace and love. We must model love, joy, peace, patience and kindness. We must make righteousness appealing, compared with the destruction that sin brings.

Persecution and discrimination toward Christians have risen in this country not because we're followers of Jesus, not because people hate Jesus, and not because the government is evil, but because the world believes that we propagate hatred and therefore considers us dangerous. We've earned that reputation because we so often fail to understand or even believe what our own Lord and Savior teaches us.

The religious spirit poses as God, but it's really a twisted form of unbelief that leads us to isolate ourselves from those we call sinners or those we perceive as a threat. But look at what Jesus declares that people said about Him: "The Son of

Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, 'Look, a glutton and a winebibber, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!' Yet wisdom is justified by all her children" (Luke 7:34-35).

Jesus' last sentence in the passage above implies that we recognize wisdom by the fruit it produces. Pharisees condemned sinners and expected their treatment of them to produce repentance. It didn't. It only created a divide that could not be crossed.

Jesus befriended sinners and as a result they came in droves to repent. When we in the church learn what this means and live it out, we'll begin to recover our lost influence in this world.

Final word: Don't go to the Old Testament prophets to find a model for addressing the culture today. That was another time, another people and another covenant. That was a covenant of law.

We live under a new covenant of grace. Study Jesus. Learn His heart. Walk in His Spirit. And the world will rise to call us blessed.

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