



## THE SECOND SUNDAY IN LENT

### Reform!

#### Jeremiah 26:8-15 (NIV)

<sup>8</sup> But as soon as Jeremiah finished telling all the people everything the LORD had commanded him to say, the priests, the prophets and all the people seized him and said, "You must die! <sup>9</sup> Why do you prophesy in the LORD's name that this house will be like Shiloh and this city will be desolate and deserted?" And all the people crowded around Jeremiah in the house of the LORD. <sup>10</sup> When the officials of Judah heard about these things, they went up from the royal palace to the house of the LORD and took their places at the entrance of the New Gate of the LORD's house. <sup>11</sup> Then the priests and the prophets said to the officials and all the people, "This man should be sentenced to death because he has prophesied against this city. You have heard it with your own ears!" <sup>12</sup> Then Jeremiah said to all the officials and all the people: "The LORD sent me to prophesy against this house and this city all the things you have heard. <sup>13</sup> Now reform your ways and your actions and obey the LORD your God. Then the LORD will relent and not bring the disaster he has pronounced against you. <sup>14</sup> As for me, I am in your hands; do with me whatever you think is good and right. <sup>15</sup> Be assured, however, that if you put me to death, you will bring the guilt of innocent blood on yourselves and on this city and on those who live in it, for in truth the LORD has sent me to you to speak all these words in your hearing."

"What you are doing is wrong. You don't listen to God's Word. You don't follow all his commands. You need to reform your ways." Ouch! How can you say that? I'm... I'm a good Christian. I don't need to take this from you. Be gone, and take your holier-than-thou attitude with you!

What's your reaction when someone calls you to reform your ways? As the Lord's prophet, Jeremiah was called to correct and reform the people. He told the Jews at the temple, at their church, that they were sinning and needed to reform. "This is what the LORD says: If you do not listen to me and follow my law, which I have set before you, and if you do not listen to the words of my servants the prophets, whom I have sent to you again and again (though you have not listened), then I will make this house like Shiloh and this city a curse among all the nations of the earth." (verses 4-6)

As soon as Jeremiah finished telling all the people everything the LORD had commanded him to say, the priests, the prophets and all the people seized him and said, "You must die!" (verse 8) They couldn't believe that Jeremiah would have the audacity to speak such treason against the Lord and his temple and his city. He said multiple times throughout their history that his name would dwell here forever. And you, Jeremiah, claim to speak for the Lord and say that this place will become desolate and deserted like Shiloh?

What's the big deal about Shiloh? Before the temple was built, this was where their Tent of Meeting, the tabernacle, found a permanent fixture after they entered the promised land of Israel. That lasted about 400 years until the Israelites used the ark of the covenant that was supposed to stay in the Most Holy Place in the tabernacle as a good luck charm in battle. The Lord showed them the error of their ways by having the Philistines defeat them, capture the ark of the covenant, and demolish the tabernacle and the city of Shiloh. The tabernacle was never set up there again, nor did the ark return there. The city laid desolate.

The Jews connected the dots. Jeremiah was preaching that Jerusalem and the sacred temple, their place of worship, their church, the Lord's holy city, would be destroyed and left desolate. Then the priests and the prophets said to the officials and all the people, "This man should be sentenced to death because he has prophesied against this city. You have heard it with your own ears!" (verse 11) Kill this man for what he says about our church!

Have you ever reacted to personal, spiritual criticism with this kind of anger? At first, it's easier, and probably even more appealing, to identify with Jeremiah, to be the stoic prophet, the one who doesn't back down from preaching God's Word, that you will tell people the truth even though it hurts, and then to righteously accept the persecution that follows. But, if we are honest with ourselves, we are probably more like the crowd or the prophets or the priests who responded in anger to the call to reform their actions. Someone accuses us of not listening and living out God's Word, we most likely will respond in anger and indignation. How dare you?! We respond this way because we love God, and we take pride in what we do. Sometimes this love and this pride leads us to overlook what needs to be corrected.

I personally love this church. I love the people here. I take pride in what I see you doing, your love for one another, your spirit of sharing God's saving Word with others, the offerings you give of your time, talents, and treasures. I take pride in the place where we worship, how the church is decorated and upkeep. I love being here. I put a lot of time and energy into doing things as excellent as I can in service to you. And so many of you put in your time, care, attention, and love in service to others and to God.

So, when a criticism is leveled at me as a pastor, at this congregation, at this church, I know that anger and denial are the first thoughts I have. "No, I don't do that. No, my people don't do that. No, we are great Christians. You're wrong. We're good." It's almost like when someone insults your momma or your wife. You don't take that, and you raise your fists in defense of the people you love, in what you take pride in.

This is the reaction of the prophets, priests, and the people after hearing what Jeremiah proclaimed. The very idea that the temple and the city that they loved would be destroyed because they didn't listen to the Lord's Word infuriated them. "You can't talk that way about our church or our God!" They wanted to kill Jeremiah.

Jeremiah defends himself simply: "The LORD sent me to prophesy against this house and this city all the things you have heard...As for me, I am in your hands; do with me whatever you think is good and right. Be assured, however, that if you put me to death, you will bring the guilt of innocent blood on yourselves and on this city and on those who live in it, for in truth the LORD has sent me to you to speak all these words in your hearing." (verses 12, 14-15) The Lord has brought this message to you before, back in the days of Moses, in the days of Joshua, in the days of recent kings, and just a few years ago from me while Josiah was king. This is the Word of the Lord, not my word. If you go against what I'm saying now, you are going against the Lord, not me. You are sinning. Reform your ways!

"In your anger do not sin." It is sin to get mad at people who rightly criticize you and your sinful actions and then attack them instead. Yes, it hurts your feelings; it hurts your pride. This makes us want to hurt them back, make them the villain, the one who is the problem. This is sinning in our anger, a way of shooting the messenger, even if the message is accurate and spoken for our good.

Instead of sinning in anger as the people were about to do with Jeremiah, when we receive criticism, take that moment to stop and listen. Is what they say valid? You may very well have to push your anger down to consider this. Was this correction given out of love? Did they say this to help me? It's just like discipline. No discipline seems pleasant at the time. It hurts us, but it also corrects us, leads us to God-pleasing behavior. It's like when you smack your kid's hand away from the hot burner. They may cry and get mad at you for doing it, but you know at the same time it was done to protect you from much greater pain. In the same way, if we don't do anything or say anything to correct our brothers and sisters in Christ, we are not loving them. We are allowing their sin to fester, perpetuate, further infect. The unconfessed sin will not go away, but it will only grow and get worse.

"Now reform your ways and your actions and obey the LORD your God." (verse 13a) The criticism has been spoken. It's hurt my feelings, maybe my pride. Instead of lashing back out in that hurt, it's a time to see how I can apply those words into my life. Am I listening to God's Word or ignoring it wanting to simply be confirmed in what I'm doing or left alone from people who want to change me? Am I living the way God wants me to live, how he commands me to live? How can I reform my ways that I am more in line with God's Word, especially because I am in need of constant reform?

Thankfully, the Jews stepped back and reformed their ways after hearing the Lord's Word from Jeremiah. Killing Jeremiah would have been sinning in anger over the right and just criticism that they weren't listening and obeying God. Then the officials and all the people said to the priests and the prophets, "This man should not be sentenced to death! He has spoken to us in the name of the LORD our God." (verse 16) They listened to the Word of the Lord. They curbed their anger. They reformed their ways.

The Word of the Lord changes our hearts and it reforms our ways. It's for this very reason that the Lord keeps sending us his Word, especially through people like Jeremiah. The Lord does not give up on reforming us, on bringing us to hear, understand, and take to heart his Word. As Jeremiah preached that if the people reformed their ways, "then the LORD will relent and not bring the disaster he has pronounced against you." (verse 13b) The Lord keeps calling us to reform our ways because he has hope. His Word can and does reform us which in turn spares us from disaster and judgment, from becoming desolate and deserted like Shiloh when the people did not listen to the Lord. God does not threaten punishments because he's sick of dealing with us, but as a loving action to gather us to himself as he longs to do, "as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings." (Luke 13:34) The Lord continues to call us to reform our ways by listening and obeying his Word because he does not give up on us or consider us a lost cause.

When we listen to the Word of the Lord, we hear what God has done for us. Jesus, he listened to God's Word. He actively obeyed it for us. He paid for our sins on the cross. The Holy Spirit works through this Word to cause me to believe these truths, which in turn reforms us. This is how he gathers us to himself through his Word. He does this so that we will not be punished for our sins, becoming desolate like Shiloh. He has reformed us by his Word. So we take in those criticisms as God's call to continue to reform us. Help us to hear those who call us to reform and to make those changes as empowered by you, O Lord. Amen.