

In many ways, American society is in transition these days. Now, change is always occurring, but in recent years it sometimes seems that *nothing* is as it used to be. Whether it is technology, politics, the economy, family structure, sexual ethics, even entertainment, the world in which we live today is a much different place than when we were growing up, whether growing up was seventy years ago or even ten years ago.

Amid all these changes, there seems to be a spiritual transition as well. Many believe we are now in a post-Christian society, where the influence of Christianity has evaporated as secularism has become more and more dominant.

Now, that may not be as true here on the Iron Range as it is at Ivy League universities or in cities like Seattle and San Francisco. Yet, even here the decline of religious faith is pretty evident.

For example, when Ben, our oldest son, was in the first grade at Chisholm schools (1994), my guess is that probably 15 out of the 20 students in his class were connected with a church in some way. Today, I suspect that in a typical first grade class, maybe 5 of 20 students would have a connection to a church. The influence of Christianity, even on the Range, appears to be in decline.

So, how does the Lord expect us, as a congregation and as individual Christians, to respond during these changing times? Well, that is a huge question, one which we need to be asking, and I think our text this morning can help us respond in a way that honors the Lord and benefits our souls.

Today, after a 2-month break, we return to our study of the book of 1 Samuel. We are in Chapter 12 (page 233 in the pew Bibles). Here we find the nation of Israel is also in a time of transition. After being ruled and led by various judges for hundreds of years, Israel now has a king, King Saul. This was not God's desire for

Israel. The people should have honored the Lord as king and allowed the judges to lead them in His ways. Yet, God's will was to let the people have their desire, and He called Saul to be their king.

In Chapter 11, Saul leads Israel to a decisive military victory against the Ammonites. This success increases his popularity, and at the end of the chapter, Samuel leads the people in celebration, as Saul is installed as king. Sometime later, Samuel gives a speech to what is apparently a large group of people, including many of the leaders of Israel. Though he is no longer the judge or ruler of the nation, Samuel is not retired. He is still God's prophet, and the words he speaks were important for Israel to hear during their time of transition. And I believe they are important words for us to hear today. Let's pause and pray that will happen.

1) **As Samuel speaks, the first thing he does is establish his credibility.**

He notes in 1 Samuel 12:2b – **“Here I am. Bring charges against me before the LORD and his anointed: Whose ox or donkey have I taken? Whom have I wronged or mistreated? From whom have I accepted a bribe to overlook something? I will return it to you.”** In response, the people say, **“You haven't wronged us, you haven't mistreated us, and you haven't taken anything from anyone.”**

Friends, Israel is in a time of transition. Samuel will no longer be their leader, but there is still reason for the people to listen to him and trust him. One of the problems we face today, in this time of transition and often turmoil, is that many people have little desire or reason to listen to what the church has to say.

In many circles, Evangelical Christianity has lost its credibility. That is partially the result of being unfairly attacked by secularists in the media and academic world for decades. Yet, it is also a result of mistakes made, and mistakes

tolerated by the church. The Jim Bakker and Jimmy Swaggart scandals, now over 25 years ago, did much to undermine the confidence people had in organized religion as a whole, and in Evangelical Christianity in particular. Sexual and financial misconduct by evangelical pastors in our own area have fed the skepticism that people feel toward churches like ours. And when you combine that with all the scandal in the Roman Catholic Church, there are plenty of people out there who really believe the church cannot be trusted.

So, what can we do about that? Well, like Samuel, we can be people of integrity. What do your neighbors, co-workers and classmates think about you?

Do they say:

- He is a man who always treats me with respect
- She is a student who can always be trusted
- He is a businessman who never tries to take advantage of people
- She is a neighbor who is always kind to me

If we expect people to listen to us during this time of transition and confusion in our culture, it will sure help if those are the types of things people are saying about us. Like Samuel, we want to be people with a high level of credibility.

2) **Samuel warns the people that they are making a mistake in turning away from the Lord.**

1 Samuel 12:6-7 - “Then Samuel said to the people, ‘The LORD, who appointed Moses and Aaron and who brought your ancestors up from the land of Egypt, is a witness. Now present yourselves, so I may confront you before the LORD about all the righteous acts he has done for you and your ancestors.’”

And then Samuel gives a little history lesson, recounting for the people how the Lord had brought them out of slavery in Egypt and into the Promised Land which was now Israel. The people were often unfaithful to God, turning

away from Him and worshiping idols. Yet, God in His mercy, sent judges to rescue the people from oppressors and lead them, at least sometimes, to follow the Lord.

But....the people of Israel were not satisfied. They didn't think the judges God provided were enough. Samuel says in **1 Samuel 12:12** – **“But when you saw that Nahash king of the Ammonites was coming against you, you said to me, ‘No, we must have a king reign over us’ – even though the LORD your God is your king.”** It was God's will (God's plan) to allow Israel to have their will, their desire, even though that was not His will, His desire.

Yet, turning away from the Lord was not a good decision. God has always been faithful to His people, but they still are not content and want to embrace a human king.

Friends, we need to communicate to folks around us that it is a mistake to turn against the Lord and things that honor Him. During this time of transition, many are quick to embrace all the changes and so-called progress which is occurring. We need to remind folks of some of the things we are losing.

Now, by nature, I am kind of a nostalgic person. I love to get together with old friends and talk about old times. I like to watch TV shows from the 60's. I just watched an episode of the “Beverly Hillbillies” on Netflix the other day. I like to listen to music from the 50's. I also have nostalgic memories of worshiping at our little Baptist church in Prentice, Wisconsin and singing those hymns that I still love.

Nostalgia is a fine thing, but that is not what we are talking about this morning. Culture is always changing. The music I hear on the radio and sing in church is different now than when I was a kid and will be different twenty years from now than it is today. That is neither good nor bad. Yes, it is possible to evaluate the strengths and weakness of any culture because every one of them has both. Though in many ways I believe things were better when I was born (1957) than they are today. In other ways,

there have been big improvements over the past sixty years. But, that is not really the issue.

Far more important and tragic is the rejection of God and His authority which has occurred in American culture in recent decades. Now to what degree the United States has been a Christian or Godly nation in the past is a topic that could be debated for a long time.

Without question, the Puritan roots planted by the Pilgrims of Plymouth and other early New England settlers were very Christian. Yet, even during Colonial times, there was a mixture of Godly and secular values in our culture. And that has been true throughout the history of the United States.

However, in recent years, the secular, post-Christian attitude that has dominated academic and media circles the past few decades has become pervasive in our society. Sixty years ago, many people in our country were not Christians and were not living a Godly life by any definition of the word. However, many of those same folks really did believe in God, were familiar with the basic teachings of the Bible, and respected the authority of God's Word. Even though they may not have lived according to the rules the Bible gave, they acknowledged that those were indeed the rules.

Today, of course, there are many more people who don't believe God exists, or whose idea of God is far removed from what the Bible describes. These folks often have little idea what the Bible teaches, and even if they do, they usually don't pay a lot of attention, believing the Bible is just another book.

There is not a lot we can do about that, but we need to point out the consequences. The widespread rejection of God means we now live in a society where, for many people, there is no real standard of right and wrong. Morality has become just a matter of preference. There is no inherent meaning to life. The universe is really just a cosmic accident, and we are just animals on the highest rung of the evolutionary ladder.

What we call love is really just a result of a chemical reaction within our brain. And there is absolutely no hope in the face of death. Once our brain waves go flat, that's it. Period. There is no heaven, no hell, nothing. Folks, a world without God, without a God who has spoken is a cold, dark world. That is why for many, life seems very empty and confusing.

Others attach themselves to idols, things like a career, possessions, a political ideology, sports or hobbies. They hope they will find significance or happiness through these. But idols always disappoint. They can never provide what deep down inside we really need and truly desire.

Friends, during this time of transition, where we are in many ways, moving toward a post-Christian culture, we need to remind folks what has been lost as people have turned away from Christianity. We need to warn of the dangers that lie ahead as our society and many individuals blindly chart a course without God and His Word.

Yet, no matter how clearly and convincingly we make our case for not abandoning God and the Bible, our words will still often fall on deaf ears. Ultimately, this is because, as Paul says in **2 Corinthians 4:4** - **"The god of this age has blinded the minds of the unbelievers to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God."**

From a human perspective, however, the primary reason our words often fall on deaf ears is because a lot of people just are not interested in words. No matter how cogent our arguments, they don't want to hear them. It will take something more tangible to really get their attention. That was probably true in Samuel's day as well.

3) Samuel is able to really get the people's attention.

After warning the people about the danger of turning away from the Lord, he says, pay attention. **1 Samuel 12:17-18** - **"Isn't the wheat harvest today?** (In other words, it is the

dry season.) **I will call on the LORD, and he will send thunder and rain so that you will recognize what an immense evil you committed in the LORD's sight by requesting a king for yourselves.' Samuel called on the LORD, and on that day the LORD sent thunder and rain. As a result, all the people greatly feared the LORD and Samuel."**

The people maybe had not been listening very closely to Samuel's words, but now they are paying attention. Calling up a thunderstorm was Samuel's way of demonstrating the truth and power of his words. And friends, today, in the 21st century, we as Christians need to be demonstrating the truth and power of our words as well. How do we do that? Calling up a thunderstorm, especially in November, could be one way.

A few years ago, a fellow was going to be a missionary in Mauritania, a predominantly Muslim country with almost no Christians. When asked what his strategy for reaching people would be, he replied, "I am going to raise dead people." He meant that, literally. He believed doing that would be a powerful sign which would cause people to listen to his words. And if the Lord had enabled him to do so, it certainly would have been, though I am not aware of a lot of dead people coming back to life in Mauritania. If the Lord chooses to use someone to perform signs and wonders, that is fine with me, though I would suggest our focus maybe should be elsewhere.

I think there are two ways we can and should be demonstrating the truth and power of our words to the folks around us today. These may not seem very spectacular, but they are indeed powerful signs.

The first is showing others that our lives have been transformed by the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Someone said the greatest miracle in the history of the world was the resurrection of Jesus, and the second was the conversion of the Apostle Paul. How Saul of Tarsus, the brilliant Pharisee and Jewish leader who was zealous in persecuting Christians, could all of a sudden

become, not only a follower of Jesus, but Christianity's greatest missionary and theologian, defies any explanation. It was truly a miraculous work of God.

Friends, few, if any, of us have such a dramatic testimony, but if you are a believer in Jesus Christ, your life has been changed in some significant ways. Perhaps you have been able to overcome an addiction. Maybe you were able to forgive someone who had hurt you deeply. Perhaps you have become a generous person, when before you hung on tightly to every penny you had. Or maybe, like me, your pride bubble has popped, and the arrogant thoughts of being smarter or better than people around you evaporated as the Lord humbled you in significant ways.

Perhaps you have started to tell the truth, after years of deceiving people because you were afraid to let them know who you really were. Or maybe after struggling with worry and anxiety all your life, you are able to sleep much better at night, not because you are taking some new pill, but because you have learned to rest in God's sovereignty and promises. When we are able to truthfully tell people about how the Lord has changed our lives, or better, when they can see how He has changed our lives, it demonstrates the truth and power of our words just as much as a November thunderstorm.

The second demonstration is along the same line, but one to which Jesus specifically points. **John 13:35 – "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."**

As Francis Schaeffer used to say, "That is the mark of the Christian." That is how people will know our faith is real and something more than just words. Yes, our expression of love for God will demonstrate that in some ways. Certainly our expressions of love for people around us in the community will cause people to be more attentive to what we have to say. Yet, Jesus says most important is the love you have for one another, especially the love you have for other Christians in this room. That is how folks out there will know your faith is real, and that

there is good reason to listen to what you have to say.

It also is a reminder of how tragic and destructive unresolved conflicts within the church can be. When we fail to love each other, it is no surprise that people don't pay much attention to what we have to say, especially during this time of transition.

4) The final part of Samuel's message to the people of Israel is, "It is not too late. There is still hope."

After the thunderstorm, the people are pretty upset. They realize that Samuel is speaking the truth when he says they turned against the Lord and are in danger of experiencing His judgment.

1 Samuel 12:19 - "They pleaded with Samuel, 'Pray to the LORD your God for your servants so we won't die! For we have added to all our sins the evil of requesting a king for ourselves.'"

They are now ready to listen to Samuel, and the words he shares are indeed full of hope.

1 Samuel 12:20-22 - "Samuel replied, 'Don't be afraid. Even though you have committed all this evil, don't turn away from following the LORD. Instead, worship the LORD with all your heart. Don't turn away to follow worthless things that can't profit or rescue you; they are worthless. The LORD will not abandon his people, because of his great name and because he has determined to make you his own people.'"

He then sums up his message in **1 Samuel 12:23-25 - "As for me, I vow that I will not sin against the LORD by ceasing to pray for you. I will teach you the good and right**

way. Above all, fear the LORD and worship him faithfully with all your heart; consider the great things he has done for you. However, if you continue to do what is evil, both you and your king will be swept away."

Friends, as our culture has transitioned into being "post-Christian," our message, to those who by God's grace are willing to listen, needs to be very much like Samuel's:

**It is not too late.
There is still hope.
You need to turn to the Lord.**

You need to stop trying to find satisfaction, significance and salvation in all the wrong places. You need to look to the Lord Jesus to provide what you truly need, and deep down, what you desire. You need to consider the great things God has done for you through Jesus Christ, through His death and resurrection on our behalf.

No matter how many sins you have committed, no matter how big the mistakes are that you have made, no matter how much of a mess you are in right now, there is hope. Things can be OK, if you will turn to the Lord Jesus.

And for our post-Christian society, as the cold, dark emptiness of secularism becomes more and more pervasive, there is still hope. Even though everything around us seems to be changing, one thing is still the same. Jesus Christ, the Light of the world, is the same yesterday, today and forever.

Today, in November 2017, individuals and societies will still find meaning, salvation and hope if they will only turn to Him. May the Lord help us and those around us realize that this is what we need to do today!