

Ezra: The Man of God

Ezra 7:1-10

At various times throughout the life of his people, God raises up men of exceptional character as leaders. At some times those men seem to display all their human foibles and follies for all to see, and though they are used of God, still their weaknesses and sinfulness are clearly exposed. At other times, God provides nearly perfect examples of what it means to be a man of God. Today we will study just such a man.

He is the title character in the book we've been studying these past few months, though he isn't introduced until the seventh chapter of the book that bears his name. His name is Ezra. A significant period of time has past. Indeed, approximately 57 years have passed from the celebration of the passover in Ezra 6 until the arrival of Ezra himself in chapter 7. The events are dated by the reference to the Persian kings.

v.1-5

Likewise, the event is dated by the words of,
v.7-8

This afternoon, I want to focus on the man Ezra, and do so in an attempt to accurately define godliness. To accurately determine what are the characteristics of a man of God. And in studying this man, I will say to each one of you, "Follow his example." What you see in Ezra, work hard to put into your own life.

Unfortunately, in our day, we generally make heroes very quickly, and we make those heroes our popular leaders. We make heroes based upon very shallow criteria. A man hits a lot home runs in a single season, and he becomes a hero, or a

woman wins an Olympic gold medal. Someone stars in a comedy program on television which becomes popular, and we make him a hero. A man gains wealth or fame or power, and we make him an instant hero. Or someone is elected to a prominent political office, and immediately they become a hero.

We often fail completely to examine the character of our heroes. Their personal character. In fact, when it comes to our national leaders, we are often told that personal character is not supposed to be an issue, that a man or a woman's personal character and how they conduct their own private life won't affect how they govern and lead our country. And there is such foolishness in that, and in many ways, we as a country have paid the price for such foolishness.

Character does matter. In fact, it ought to be the preeminent characteristic we look for in our leaders. Nationally. And in the church. Note the biblical qualifications for those who lead in the church.

1Tim. 3:2 "A bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife, temperate, sober-minded, of good behavior, hospitable, able to teach; 3 not given to wine, not violent, not greedy for money, but gentle, not quarrelsome, not covetous; 4 one who rules his own house well, having his children in submission with all reverence 5 (for if a man does not know how to rule his own house, how will he take care of the church of God?)."

So leadership in the family is the ultimate test of a man's leadership. And personal reputation along with issues of personal character such as self-control and gentleness are the essential qualities of a qualified leader. I say that to say this, that we should all pay attention to our character, to the issues of personal integrity and godliness. And when good examples come along for us to study, we should make good note of them. And seek to

follow their example. Men such as Ezra.

I have known few people whose character was fully above reproach, whose life didn't in any way reveal obvious personal faults, even among those whom I respected greatly. Just a few. With most men, even those worthy of great respect, there is often evident examples of weakness. But that is not the case in our study of Ezra today, for he is presented to us, in every way, as a man of God. A man well-worth imitating, a man whose example is well-worth following. So what is,

I. THE CHARACTER OF A MAN OF GOD?

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First of all, character is a matter of the heart! The reference is not so much to the emotions, but to the inner man. Character is not a matter of how spectacular you look on a basketball court. Character is not a matter of how much money you have. Character is not a matter of how much education you have, or how much intelligence you possess. It is much deeper. Much deeper. It is a direction and commitment that resides deep in your soul.

We read that Ezra was a man who had set his heart upon something, that he had prepared his heart for something. Ezra was a man whose heart was devoted to something, and the object of his devotion is the definition of his character. And what was the object of Ezra's devotion? What had he set his heart upon? What had he prepared himself for, in the depth of his heart, as the object of his whole life and the desire of his whole being? Simple. The law of God. He set his heart to study the Law of the Lord.

A. A man of God must be prepared to seek the law of the Lord.

Ezra had concentrated his whole life on the study of the law. He was, in the description of verse 6, a "a skilled scribe in the Law of Moses."

Now, the scribes generally get a bad name, especially in the NT, when they are usually linked to the Pharisees. The NT scribes, whom Jesus so vigorously rebuked and condemned, were self-righteous hypocrites, who kept an outward form of the law all the while cherishing wickedness within. White-washed tombs, as Jesus often calls them.

But Ezra was not a scribe in that sense, but instead he was what a scribe ought to be. He was a devoted student of the law. He had prepared his heart, his whole soul, to seek the law of the Lord.

The Chaldeans, among whom Ezra was born and bred, were famed for literature, especially the study of the stars. Being a studious man, we may suppose that Ezra was tempted to devote himself to those things. But for him, the law of God was far more important than all the writings of their magicians and astrologers. Ezra made it his business to study the law of the Lord. He searched the Scriptures, he sought the knowledge of God, of his mind and will, in the inspired words of the Old Covenant Scriptures. He worked hard at it, diligently applying himself in rigorous study. He was a student of the Bible.

That's where character begins! Your character will be defined by how thoroughly you search the Scriptures, how thoroughly you have come to know God as he has revealed himself in Scripture. Your character will be determined by how well you have come to know the mind and will of God, as it is revealed in the law.

Now I should say at this point, there are many Christians,

many professed Christians, who have little or no interest in such a study. After all, they claim with such horrible misunderstanding, “We are now under grace, not law.” There are many people who specifically and consciously avoid the study of God’s law, declared with misguided zeal that they are free from the law and wish to avoid any involvement with legalism. But, oh the errors of such naivety.

You have heard me say it often, and I will continue to say it often, that the law is not, and never was, the means of salvation. You will not be granted entrance into heaven on the basis of your law-keeping, and you will never be able to reestablish a relationship with God which had been broken by sin, by somehow making up for your sins by obeying the law. There is no possibility that your law-keeping can atone for your sins, for Jesus is the only one who can do that. He is the only one who can offer a true atoning sacrifice, a sacrifice of propitiation, which satisfies the demands of God’s justice and wrath. You are saved by grace through faith, not by works, so that no one can boast.

But having said that, we must not think that as God’s people, as those who are saved by grace through faith, that we should now reject the law. Just the opposite. Now, as God’s people, as those who are saved by grace through faith, we can learn to love the law! For we are freed from its curse and condemnation, we are freed from its propensity to enslave. We are freed from its oppressive restraints, for those restraints now become a delight! And so we sing,

Ps. 119:97 “Oh how I love your law! It is my meditation all the day.”

And we sing,

Ps. 19:7 “The law of the LORD is perfect, converting the soul; The testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple; 8

The statutes of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; The commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes; 9 The fear of the LORD is clean, enduring forever; The judgments of the LORD are true and righteous altogether. 10 More to be desired are they than gold, Yea, than much fine gold; Sweeter also than honey and the honeycomb.”

So a man of God must be prepared to seek the law of the Lord, a worthy example for all of us. You must set your heart to study the law of the Lord, to know what God’s will is, his revealed will. That is the foundation of your character.

Now, please be assured of this, that the law of God is good. If you sense that God’s law is restricting you in a way that is not good, then you are wrong! If you feel that God, in any way, forbids you from doing something that is good, then you are wrong! If you feel that what he requires of you to do is somehow oppressive or burdensome, then you are wrong! The glory of knowing Christ is knowing the law of Christ is good!

1Tim. 1:8 “Now we know that the law is good, if one uses it lawfully.”

And the law is not burdensome. Not in the slightest! Our obedience, far from being an oppressive weight that God imposes upon us to keep us miserable, our obedience is the very definition of love. And so we read in,

1John 5:3 “For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome.”

So the challenging question for all of us is simple. Do you love God? “This is love for God, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome.”

Like Ezra, a man of God must be prepared to seek the law of

the Lord, and to seek it by diligent effort. To study, to set his heart and mind on a course to learn and understand what it is that God has revealed in his law. But learning is, of course, not enough. Ezra had not merely prepared his heart to seek the law of the Lord, but also to do it!

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B. A man of God must be committed to keeping the law of the Lord.

Knowing, and not doing, is called hypocrisy. Knowing, and honoring the law, but failing to obey it, is the essential nature of the hypocrite. Consider,

James 1:22 “But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. 23 For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man observing his natural face in a mirror; 24 for he observes himself, goes away, and immediately forgets what kind of man he was. 25 But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does. 26 If anyone among you thinks he is religious, and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this one’s religion is useless. 27 Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world.”

Be doers of the word, and not hearers only! Oh, how often that exhortation needs to be given to God’s people. The goal of Christianity is not intellectual knowledge. The goal of Christianity is not merely an understanding of what God has said. The goal is a transformed life. Like Ezra, you must prepared your heart to DO the law of the Lord. As Jesus puts it,

Mat.7:24 “Therefore whoever hears these sayings of Mine, and does them, I will liken him to a wise man who built his house on the rock: 25 and the rain descended, the floods came, and the

winds blew and beat on that house; and it did not fall, for it was founded on the rock. 26 “But everyone who hears these sayings of Mine, and does not do them, will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand: 27 and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it fell. And great was its fall.”

This is such a simple message, with such a simple and direct exhortation. And it is precisely the simple message and the direct exhortation that the church of our day needs to hear the most. And it is a simple message we all need to hear ourselves, personally.

Let me put it this way. I suspect that everyone of you, every one, could identify in your own mind some area of disobedience to the law of the lord in your own life. I suspect that every one of you could identify something that you know and understand in God’s law but are not consistently doing. And I have to confess that I put myself in that category, too.

That’s not comfortable to think about, is it? And I could list some specific categories, and probably hit the nail on the head with many of you. The truth is, few of us are really doers of the law in any sort of exhaustive way. Few of us really do set our hearts to obey everything that we already know and understand about God’s law.

And if you do, if you do seek to do everything that you know about God’s law, even assuming that it is true, then I still won’t let you off the hook, for you should be ever more searching God’s law to see if there are areas in which you are still falling short. And your genuine, fervent prayer should be that of David, which we find at the end of Psalm 139,

Ps. 139:23 “Search me, O God, and know my heart; Try me,

and know my anxieties; 24 And see if there is any wicked way in me, And lead me in the way everlasting.”

A man of God must be committed to keeping the law of the Lord. And then, one more thing.

C. A man of God must be ready to teach others the law of God.
v.10

So what did Ezra do? We read in, Nehemiah 8:1 “Now all the people gathered together as one man in the open square that was in front of the Water Gate; and they told Ezra the scribe to bring the Book of the Law of Moses, which the LORD had commanded Israel. 2 So Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly of men and women and all who could hear with understanding on the first day of the seventh month. 3 Then he read from it in the open square that was in front of the Water Gate from morning until midday, before the men and women and those who could understand; and the ears of all the people were attentive to the Book of the Law. 4 So Ezra the scribe stood on a platform of wood which they had made for the purpose...8 So they read distinctly from the book, in the Law of God; and they gave the sense, and helped them to understand the reading.”

What a glorious thing happened on that day! And that same glorious thing ought to be happening every time we meet together for worship, every time the Bible is opened for study. Indeed, the very task of the church, as it is defined by the Great Commission, is to teach God’s people to obey. In modern day terms, to make disciples.

Mat.28:18 “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19 Go therefore and make disciples of all nations,

baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.”

We can’t leave out the task of “teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.” Even when we are faithful to go and preach the gospel unto salvation, even when we are faithful to go and tell others what they must do to be saved, we cannot be negligent in teaching them how to live.

In the truest form of Christian fellowship, we should be teaching and admonishing each other, in obviously informal but very personal ways. Paul speaks to the church at Rome as a whole in Romans 15, and says this,

Rom.15:14 “Now I myself am confident concerning you, my brethren, that you also are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, able also to admonish [or instruct] one another.”

And so the fullness of your character should include your readiness to teach others the law of the Lord. And often that teaching will be through the power of your own example. Often it will be done through the gentle and persuasive words of a soft rebuke or word of encouragement. And sometimes, through direct teaching. So there it is. The man of God. Same would be true for a woman of God. Someone who has “prepared his heart to seek the Law of the LORD, and to do it, and to teach statutes and ordinances [among God’s people].” May you all strive to seek such an honorable status.

Now, having defined the character of a man of God, let me go on to note,

II. THE BLESSINGS UPON A MAN OF GOD.

You see, Ezra is a good example to show that this life of

godliness, this devotion to the law of God, is a blessed thing. It's not oppressive and dispiriting. It's wonderful, for there are many blessings from God given to the man we have just described.

Ps.1:1 "Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; 2 but his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night. 3 He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers."

Blessed is the man whose delight is in the law of the Lord! Blessed is the man who obeys the law of the Lord!" Oh the horror of Satan's lie, to make you think that there is actually blessing, happiness, in disobedience to the law. It goes right back to the garden of Eden, when Satan convinced Eve that the fruit of that forbidden tree looked good for food, that it was pleasant to the eyes, and that it was desirable to make one wise. What a lie he told.

And what a lie he continues to tell! The lie is this, there is blessing in disregarding or disobeying the law of God. The truth is this. "Blessed is the man [whose] delight is in the law of the Lord." In the words of Jesus, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled." How are those blessings defined, from Ezra's example? First,

A. The man of God will experience the hand of God's protection.

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"The king granted him all his request." Now we've seen that before in the life of God's people under the leadership of Zerubbabel, leading the people back to their promised land and rebuilding the temple. It isn't a universal promise, that the civil

rulers will grant all our requests, all those made in the name of the Lord. But in Ezra's case, he did. And that should certainly give us the boldness to ask for the blessing of the civil authorities when that becomes necessary. But more than that, it does point out a principle which is always true. The man of God will experience the hand of God's protection.

Ps. 37:23 "The steps of a good man are ordered by the LORD, And He delights in his way. 24 Though he fall, he shall not be utterly cast down; For the LORD upholds him with His hand. 25 I have been young, and now am old; Yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken, Nor his descendants begging bread."

The man of God will experience the hand of God's protection. That doesn't mean that all his troubles will go away immediately, for the Lord has ordained that our troubles will be a means of grace, enabling our faith to grow and mature. But even in the midst of troubles, the Lord will protect. You can be confident that you will be sustained by the hand of God's protection. And in that,

B. The man of God will experience the hand of God's goodness.

v.9

God's hand is good. All that God brings to us is good. All that God does for us is good. All that God leads us through is good. The hand of God's goodness is upon us.

And that is what keeps the doctrine of eternal predestination and God's decrees from becoming nothing more than fate or fatalistic hopelessness. Everything that God has determined to happen will happen, and for those called according to his purpose, to those who love him, everything that happens will work

together for good. You recognize that verse, I hope.

Rom.8:28 “And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose.”

What a glorious promise! And so we read in,
Psalm 16:5 “O LORD, You are the portion of my inheritance and my cup; You maintain my lot. 6 The lines have fallen to me in pleasant places; Yes, I have a good inheritance.”

So it is for the man who “delights in the law of the Lord.”
“Whatever he does shall prosper.”

People of God, let Ezra be your hero. Let Ezra be your role model. Strive after the reputation which Ezra obtained. Above all else, let these words be words which describe you, that you have “prepared [your] heart to seek the Law of the LORD, and to do it.”

And may the good hand of your God be upon you.