

Confession

Ezra 9:1-15

Remember our focus last week. The holy priesthood. And the definition of those priests,

v.28 “You are holy to the Lord...”

Set apart for the Lord's own use. “And the articles are holy also.” So they were to carry all the valuables set aside for the temple worship into Jerusalem. And God protected them. They arrived safely.

v.31-32

So far, so good. But then what happened? In a word, sin. Sin happened. They fell into sin. The people of Israel, and the priests, involved themselves in all the ways of the world. They did not remain holy. They did not remain set apart to God. Just look at the description in,

v.1

It was a horrible sin, as we will look more closely in just a minute, but I want our focus this afternoon to be on Ezra's response to that sin, namely confession. This is a chapter about the confession of sin, so that will be the emphasis as we begin to consider the nature of sin itself.

I. CONFESSION MEANS THAT YOU UNDERSTAND THE NATURE OF SIN.

That's where confession must begin, and that is what is so often so obviously missing today. Ezra's response is obviously in the context of the Old Covenant, and his outward actions aren't a prescription for what we are to do outwardly in the confession of sin, but the outward actions do represent and symbolize all that ought to characterize our confession of sin even today.

v.3

The tearing of clothes did represent the tearing of the heart, the brokenness of heart which represents true repentance. Likewise, pulling the hair. And fasting. And the reverence of fear. “He sat down astonished.” Appalled.

v.4

Then, he continues,

v.5-6

Beloved, that's a genuine confession of sin, the external form representing the genuine disposition of the heart. It is consistent with what we read about the heart in,

Is. 57:15 “For thus says the High and Lofty One Who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: “I dwell in the high and holy place, With him who has a contrite and humble spirit, To revive the spirit of the humble, And to revive the heart of the contrite ones.”

Likewise,

Psalms 51:17 “The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, A broken and a contrite heart—These, O God, You will not despise.”

Perhaps the best New Testament definition and explanation of that is found in,

2 Cor. 7:10 “For godly sorrow produces repentance leading to salvation, not to be regretted; but the sorrow of the world produces death. 11 For observe this very thing, that you sorrowed in a godly manner: What diligence it produced in you, what clearing of yourselves, what indignation, what fear, what vehement desire, what zeal, what vindication! In all things you proved yourselves to be clear in this matter.”

Such godly sorrow begins with a right and proper

understanding of the nature of sin, and a clear and explicit confession of that sin. Not merely an acknowledgement of a mistake or an error or bad judgment, but sin. Confession means that you call sin, sin. And Ezra does just that. He confesses that the people did not separate themselves from the world. Instead, they imitated the world. They copied the world. Specifically,

v.2

Now, why was that so significant? Why was that so wrong? And what is so important about marriage? Let me give you a clear answer. Marriage, as a human relationship, is the closest and deepest of all relationships, and it is a permanent bond. So the people of God were not permitted to marry those who were not among the people of God. Such a marriage would represent all the worst about what it would mean not to be holy to the Lord, for if you are set apart for God, holy to the Lord, how can you join yourself in marriage to someone who is not holy? God's word, God's law, was plain.

v.10-12

The same principle certainly applies in the New Covenant, and although the outward form of the covenant is changed, the underlying principles are unchanged. God's people are holy. They belong to God, and to God alone. And so you must marry in the Lord.

2 Cor. 6:14 "Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness? 15 And what accord has Christ with Belial? Or what part has a believer with an unbeliever? 16 And what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For you are the temple of the living God. As God has said: "I will dwell in them And walk among them. I will be their God, And they shall be My people." 17 Therefore "Come out from among them And be separate, says the Lord. Do

not touch what is unclean, And I will receive you." 18 "I will be a Father to you, And you shall be My sons and daughters, Says the LORD Almighty.'"

So the nature of sin for God's people is the unwillingness to separate themselves from the world. The nature of sin is to be set apart in godly holiness. Thus,

A. We must separate ourselves from the wickedness of the world.

The Bible is uncomfortably explicit, isn't it?

1 Cor. 6:13 "Foods for the stomach and the stomach for foods, but God will destroy both it and them. Now the body is not for sexual immorality but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. 14 And God both raised up the Lord and will also raise us up by His power. 15 Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I then take the members of Christ and make them members of a harlot? Certainly not! 16 Or do you not know that he who is joined to a harlot is one body with her? For "the two," He says, "shall become one flesh." 17 But he who is joined to the Lord is one spirit with Him. 18 Flee sexual immorality. Every sin that a man does is outside the body, but he who commits sexual immorality sins against his own body. 19 Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? 20 For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God's."

There are other examples, of course, of the wickedness of the world, but sexual immorality appropriately rises to the top of the list so often. For a more comprehensive list, we can read,

Col. 3:5 "Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. 6 Because of these things the

wrath of God is coming upon the sons of disobedience, 7 in which you yourselves once walked when you lived in them. 8 But now you yourselves are to put off all these: anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy language out of your mouth. 9 Do not lie to one another, since you have put off the old man with his deeds, 10 and have put on the new man who is renewed in knowledge according to the image of Him who created him.”

Peter says the same thing.

1 Peter 1:14 “as obedient children, not conforming yourselves to the former lusts, as in your ignorance; 15 but as He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, 16 because it is written, “Be holy, for I am holy.”

Related to this issue of marriage, Ezra also makes it clear that,

B. We must protect the purity of our family heritage in the Lord.

v.12

The purity of marriage relationships was at the heart of the ability of God's people to receive all the covenant blessings which God had to give them as his people. God promises covenantal blessings from generation to generation! Through godly, faithful marriages in the Lord. As Ezra confesses sin in this chapter, he understands all of that. He understands the nature of sin, as that which violates our standing as holy before the Lord, especially as it relates to marriage.

Secondly, as Ezra confesses sin on behalf of the people of Israel, he demonstrates that,

II. CONFESSION MEANS THAT YOU UNDERSTAND THE NATURE OF GOD.

Confession recognizes not only our own unholiness, but also God's perfect holiness. Confession of sin is the recognition of that contradiction, and confession must include the acknowledgment of our humility before. Confession is addressed to God!

v.5

Confession is not merely an apology, an acknowledgment of our own errors or faults, but it is necessarily connected with a personal, intimate knowledge of God. Ezra confesses sins to “the Lord my God.” Confession is made in the context of a personal relationship with God.

It is not a catharsis designed merely for our own benefit. It is not a personal statement made without reference to God, but just the opposite. Everything about true confession has direct reference to God, with reference to the offense against God which our sins have been. In that context, confession of sin to God includes the awareness that,

A. God our Father will discipline us as his children.

Read, please,

v.7

There is a much fuller description of this fatherly discipline found in,

Heb. 12:5 “And you have forgotten the exhortation which speaks to you as to sons: “My son, do not despise the chastening of the LORD, Nor be discouraged when you are rebuked by Him; 6 For whom the LORD loves He chastens, And scourges every son whom He receives.” 7 If you endure chastening, God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom a father does not chasten?”

Our Confession of Faith so accurately speaks of God's fatherly displeasure. Not the condemning wrath which he bestows upon the wicked unbeliever, but still the fullness of discipline. "For whom the LORD loves He chastens." That is the very definition of "God dealing with us as children!"

But notice what else Ezra understood about God as he confessed his sin to God. He understood God's grace.

v.8

Ezra understood God's mercy.

v.9

So a proper and appropriate confession of sin must also recognize that,

B. God our father is full of grace and mercy.

So God does not punish us as our sins deserve, but always less than what your sins deserve.

v.13

Fatherly displeasure, yes, but wrathful condemnation, no. This ought to be of such great encouragement to all of you today, for when you feel God's hand of displeasure, when you find yourself under the hand of God's discipline, still you never receive the fullness of what your sins deserve. And you never receive the condemnation of his wrath. As the covenant people of God, as the children of God, he always deals with you as children, full of grace and mercy.

Oh, the sweetness of God's grace! The riches of his mercy. Many people struggle to understand this aspect of God's fatherly discipline, due in large part because they have experienced the discipline of their own earthly fathers in a far more stern and

demanding way. For many people, the concept of fatherly discipline conjures up images of harsh or even brutal beating, done in severe anger and not within the gentleness of love. Sadly, many children grow up without experiencing the loving discipline of earthly father, and thus struggle to understand the nature of our heavenly father. Many earthly fathers have exasperated their children, provoking them to anger unjustly and unkindly, but even in that context, we need to learn about God from the words and pages of Holy Scriptures, not from the sinful and imperfect examples of earthly fathers.

For us earthly fathers, of course, it gives us a high standard for the exercise of our fatherly oversight and discipline. For it is our responsibility before God to teach our children, by our own lives, about this great glory of God's mercy and grace, even as we teach our children about the horrible nature and offensive character of sin. For while God is full of grace and mercy, he doesn't treat our sins lightly.

C. God our father is righteous and holy.

v.15

So you can't excuse sin. You can't make light of it. You can pretend it doesn't matter. In ourselves, in our sin, these words remain true. "We are before you in our guilt, for none can stand before you because of this." It is what David confesses in,

Ps. 51:3 "For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. 4 Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you may be justified in your words and blameless in your judgment."

So God is righteous and holy. And God is full of grace and truth. If you can keep those things in perfect balance, never emphasizing one at the expense of the other, and never

eliminating one for the sake of the other, then you will be very close to correctly understanding the nature of God. And you will be able to understand the nature of repentance. For surely,

III.CONFESSION MEANS THAT YOU UNDERSTAND THE NATURE OF REPENTANCE.

And verse 15 is a marvelous expression of repentance.
v.15

Repentance means to agree with your sentence of guilt, to admit your guilt, to confess your guilt.

A. True repentance makes no excuses for guilt.

No excuses, no extenuating circumstances. No psychological jargon to justify the guilt. No explanations, no rationalizations. No medical jargon based upon the latest syndrome that a doctor might diagnose. Sin is not a disease, for they are two very different categories, albeit often related. And neither is sin merely an addiction, in a strictly medical context. The nature of sin is that it does enslave, but that slavery to sin does not excuse the guilt of the root sin. And the real danger and spiritually disastrous consequence of the medical model of addiction is that there is no redemption for addiction. There is no forgiveness, for addiction isn't a moral category. Nor is there any hope for mere addiction, for if your only hope is a prescription medication, if your only hope in medical treatment, then you have very little hope indeed.

But there is forgiveness for sin. And there is hope. There is always hope, before God. So even when there are medical complications that arise out of sin, and alcoholism or drug addiction are primary examples, even when there are medical treatments and therapy that can offer help, the root issue of sin is still moral. And repentance comes to terms with that moral culpability we call guilt.

Repentance also must have no blame-shifting, allowing the guilt of your own personal sin to be diminished by some description of childhood trauma or parental errors. True repentance doesn't explain away guilt because of something that someone else has done to you in the past.

Surely, we are sinned against. Surely some people do experience emotional and psychological trauma or even physical abuse that leaves them vulnerable to sin or prone to particular temptations. And surely the gospel affords compassion and sympathy for those who are vulnerable. But never is that to be a mitigating excuse for your own sin.

One of the worst expressions of excusing sin is when a confession of sin has the word “but...” at the end. You describe your sin, then you say “but...”, and you keep going. That's not repentance! Once you add that word “but” you have stopped confessing sin. True repentance does no such thing! Nor does it justify sin as the lessor of two evils, or a necessary evil. Ezra's words are the proper prescription, “Here we are before You, in our guilt, though no one can stand before You because of this!”

True repentance makes no excuses for guilt. Secondly,

B. True repentance is built upon a grief and hatred of sin.

Here is where repentance really differs from what is commonly called an apology. Here is where repentance really becomes an issue of the heart. Here is where repentance can really be judged to be genuine or not. Is there grief for the sin? Not just grief because of the unpleasant consequences of the sin, nor grief because you got caught, nor personal embarrassment or shame, but you grieve that you have sinned. You grieve that you have sinned against your father who loves you.

And you hate the sin! So this is the challenge for all of us, that when you confess your sin, you legitimately hate the fact that you have sinned, you hate the sin itself.

It is far too easy simply to know what sin is, but not to hate it. Hating sin means that you consider it an enemy to be destroyed, that you are eager to put it to death. Hating your sin means that you wage war against the sin that so easily besets you, that you are willing to put into practice what Jesus means when he says,

Mat. 5:29 “If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell. 30 And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell.”

So ask God for just such a hatred of sin. That's true repentance, and that is Ezra's example.

v.3

Those outward actions are intended to communicate this sort of hatred I've been describing. There is the danger of the outward form substituting for true hatred of sin, but there appears to be no such hypocrisy here with Ezra. Ezra was appalled, astonished, verse 3. He continues,

v.4

He grieves and mourns the very existence of sin within the life of God's people.

v.5-6

Blessed are those who mourn! Let me end with one further reminder of God's grace, because this is essential for the true

godly sorrow of sincere repentance. To say it plainly,

C. True repentance is stirred by the awareness of God's grace.

The awareness of fatherly displeasure is sometimes sufficient to turn people away from their sin, just as it is with very young children. The threat of discipline is the beginning of child training, to be sure. But in terms of motivation, it is not the ultimate goal. The goal of maturity with our children is that obedience comes not by the childish fear of punishment, but because of the conscious awareness of love and grace. So it is before God, that you would turn from your sin in repentance because you know and understand that God is a God of grace!

Paul says it so well in,

Rom. 2:4 “Or do you despise the riches of His goodness, forbearance, and longsuffering, not knowing that the goodness of God leads you to repentance?”

For Ezra, the past experiences of God's grace have made the sin of his own people more offensive.

v.9-10

And he makes the proper connection,

v.13-14

What a marvelous, godly question! Since you have been so gracious to us, should we sin against you again? Of course not. “Shall we sin that grace may increase?” Of course not! God forbid.

When you understand the grace of God correctly, when you really understand grace, then that grace will never be a license to sin. And if you understand grace, it will never give you the sense

that you can go on sinning because God will forgive it anyway. Instead, your motivation for obedience becomes your love for God instead of your dread and terror of God.

And when you do sin, that awareness of God's grace will cause you to weep, to grieve, that you have offended your heavenly father who loves you. When you confess your sins in those tears of grief, then you rightly understand repentance, “knowing that the goodness of God leads you to repentance.”