

A Covenant of Repentance

Ezra 10:1-19

We noted last week the significant sin among the people of Israel. It was the matter of intermarriage with the Canaanites, against God's explicit commands, violating the purity of the people of God in the Old Testament. We read,

Ezra 9:1 "When these things were done, the leaders came to me, saying, "The people of Israel and the priests and the Levites have not separated themselves from the peoples of the lands, with respect to the abominations of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians, and the Amorites. 2 For they have taken some of their daughters as wives for themselves and their sons, so that the holy seed is mixed with the peoples of those lands. Indeed, the hand of the leaders and rulers has been foremost in this trespass."

Ezra confessed that sin with earnest zeal.

Ezra 9:5 "At the evening sacrifice I arose from my fasting; and having torn my garment and my robe, I fell on my knees and spread out my hands to the LORD my God. 6 And I said: "O my God, I am too ashamed and humiliated to lift up my face to You, my God; for our iniquities have risen higher than our heads, and our guilt has grown up to the heavens. 7 Since the days of our fathers to this day we have been very guilty, and for our iniquities we, our kings, and our priests have been delivered into the hand of the kings of the lands, to the sword, to captivity, to plunder, and to humiliation, as it is this day."

And then, in our text today, the people demonstrated their repentance. They put away the foreign wives.

v.3

v.18-19

That's repentance. Not merely an apology. Not merely saying, "I'm sorry," or simply the experience of feeling badly for what they had done. Not even merely asking for forgiveness. But more than all that, dealing directly with the sin involved! They put away the sin! And that sort of repentance begins by understanding and recognizing,

I. THE NATURE OF SIN.

Look at how Ezra expresses it.

v.2

"We have trespassed against our God." We have been unfaithful to our God. We have broken faith with God. That puts sin into the context of a relationship, and sin is a breach in that relationship. Sin means that you have broken your promise, that you have failed to keep your commitment. Sin is not just a personal or private matter, but something which causes a breach in a relationship with another person. The most obvious example, of course, adultery. When you get married, you promise faithfulness, to one person. As long as you both shall live. You can't have a marriage relationship without that mutual commitment. So the act of adultery is breaking faith, it is to break the covenant.

"We have broken faith with our God..." That's a confession that understands the nature of sin. Ultimately, all sin can be defined that way, a breach of faith against God. So as David would confess his sin in Psalm 51, those memorable words are these,

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."

The reality is that your sin is always a sin against God. Your sin is always a breach of faith in your relationship with God.

A. Sin is breaking the covenant relationship which God has established.

And that is where repentance begins, that is what repentance is built upon.

It's amazing, that even in the attempted confession of their sin, some people remain entirely self-absorbed. For some people, the sin is still about them, and sadly, that is what "shame" is really all about. Shame is about what sin does to me. Embarrassment is the effect that sin has on me. And in terms of repentance, that is inadequate. I need to confess my sin in terms of its effect upon you. More importantly, I need to define my sin in terms of the breach of my relationship with God. Not, "I am ashamed...", but rather,

v.2 "We have been unfaithful to God..."

Learn to practice this, when you have occasion to confess your sins. Try to identify when the dominant feeling is shame or embarrassment. Try to recognize when you fall into that trap, and seek to move beyond it. Try to confess your sin as a sin against God, a sin that breaks faith with God, a sin that you identify as an the failure to keep your commitment and the failure to perform your duty and responsibility before God. When you confess sin, say to God, "Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight." Say to God, "I have broken faith with you." I have broken the covenant relationship you established with me.

And as you do so, realize the consequences. The effect of sin.

B. Sin destroys the covenant relationship between God and his people.

Just as adultery destroys the relationship between a husband and a wife.

It's not a mere mistake. It is not something that you try to explain away, or even worse, to justify. Don't downplay the effect of your sin, just confess it. With the realization that if you don't turn from your sin, if you don't repent, you will destroy your relationship with God.

v.7-8

As we've seen before, that is in the context of the Old Covenant, but the principles that embody those verses are still valid. Ultimately, that would become the exercise of church discipline in our context, following what Paul writes in,

1 Cor. 5:11 "But now I have written to you not to keep company with anyone named a brother, who is sexually immoral, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or an extortioner—not even to eat with such a person. 12 For what have I to do with judging those also who are outside? Do you not judge those who are inside? 13 But those who are outside God judges. Therefore "put away from yourselves the evil person."

1 Cor. 5:4 "In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when you are gathered together, along with my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, 5 deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus."

That's what sin does, if it is left unchecked. That's the effect of sin, the danger of sin. It destroys the covenant relationship between God and his people. It is a breach of that relationship, such that the call of the gospel is always the call unto repentance! So the Lord writes to the angel of the church in Ephesus,

Rev. 2:4 "Nevertheless I have this against you, that you have

left your first love. 5 Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place—unless you repent.”

And to the church in Laodicea,

Rev. 3:9 “As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten. Therefore be zealous and repent. 20 Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me. 21 To him who overcomes I will grant to sit with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne. 22 “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”

People of God, understand the nature of your own sin, and confess it as such. When you sin, you need to confess, “We have have broken faith with our God...”. Then, put it away. Put the sin away. That’s,

II. THE NATURE OF REPENTANCE.

The covenant of repentance which the people of Israel made with God shows us just what repentance is all about, and what we see here in Ezra 10 is what you and I ought to be doing when in our own repentance before the Lord as well. So what is involved with putting away sin? What is the nature of repentance? It begins with grief.

A. The grief of repentance.

As Paul expresses it in 2 Cor. 7, it is godly sorrow or godly grief. Sorrow for sin. Grief because of the presence of sin. Because you are aware of your sin, you grieve.

Most of us grieve when we get caught. Or we grieve because of the hard consequences of sin, the results of sin. We are

sorrowful because of the bad effects of our sin, and we are sorry that we hurt people. But the grief of repentance goes beyond all of that. It gets at a hatred for sin. When you grieve your sin, you hate it. Godly sorrow means that you actually hate the sin itself.

That’s hard, because the so often the very reason that we sin is because we cherish the sin. At least in part, we like the sin. We indulge because it feels good. We fail to resist the temptation because we really don’t want to resist it. The sin so easily besets you because your flesh is still attracted to the sin. So that’s the challenge, putting to death the flesh. And learning to hate the sin, to grieve in repentance.

Look at our example this afternoon,
v.1

When was the last time you actually wept because of the consciousness of your own sin? Perhaps you have cried because you hurt someone you loved, but here, the weeping is because the people broke faith with God. “The people wept very bitterly.” Further,
v.6

Mourning over sin. That’s repentance. Grieving in sorrow as you might respond to the experience of a tragic death. Mourning over the ongoing presence of your sin. And even further,
v.9

This is what Paul writes about godly sorrow,

2 Cor. 7:8 “For even if I made you sorry with my letter, I do not regret it; though I did regret it. For I perceive that the same epistle made you sorry, though only for a while. 9 Now I rejoice, not that you were made sorry, but that your sorrow led to repentance. For you were made sorry in a godly manner, that you might suffer loss

from us in nothing. 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.”

Our Westminster Shorter Catechism has this marvelous definition of such repentance, Question 87 “Repentance unto life is a saving grace, whereby a sinner, out of a true sense of his sin, and apprehension of the mercy of God in Christ, doth, with grief and hatred of his sin, turn from it unto God, with full purpose of, and endeavor after, new obedience.”

So we hear the word of the Lord through the prophet Joel, Joel 2:12 “Now, therefore,” says the LORD, “Turn to Me with all your heart, With fasting, with weeping, and with mourning.” 13 So rend your heart, and not your garments; Return to the LORD your God, For He is gracious and merciful, Slow to anger, and of great kindness; And He relents from doing harm.”

There is, of course, in that prophecy and in our Catechism a crucial element of repentance, to accompany the grief and sorrow.

B. The hope of restoration.

The godly grief of repentance is not without hope. It does not have despair. Rather, it looks toward the promise of the gospel in the forgiveness of sin. And that was true even in the Old Covenant context of Ezra.

v.2

Amazing, isn't it, to find that expression of hope right here!

But it is always there, the hope of the gospel is always present. Consider again David's godly grief of repentance expressed in,

Ps. 51:7 “Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. 8 Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones that you have broken rejoice. 9 Hide your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities. 10 Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. 11 Cast me not away from your presence, and take not your Holy Spirit from me. 12 Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit.”

So grieve, people of God, grieve your sin. Hate your sin. Mourn in the depth of your heart, that though you have been loved by God, you have broken faith. Grieve in the consciousness that you have sinned against God. And do so with the hope of restoration!

Ps. 103:8 “The LORD is merciful and gracious, Slow to anger, and abounding in mercy. 9 He will not always strive with us, Nor will He keep His anger forever. 10 He has not dealt with us according to our sins, Nor punished us according to our iniquities. 11 For as the heavens are high above the earth, So great is His mercy toward those who fear Him; 12 As far as the east is from the west, So far has He removed our transgressions from us.”

That's the hope of the gospel. And that hope is fully engaged in the expression of repentance that we as God's people ought to have when we sin. With,

C. The commitment to obedience.

There is no “easy-believism” here, no license to sin. Just the opposite. The grief of repentance and the hope of forgiveness should join together to motivate you to this commitment of obedience. That's the idea of a covenant. A covenant of obedience.

They took an oath! We ask our new members to take an oath, don't we? The last time, just last week. It is an oath every one of you has taken as a member of this church. Not just, "Do you believe the Bible is the word of God," though that is certainly where we start. Not just an oath to believe in the doctrine of the trinity, or that you trust for your salvation in Jesus Christ. But this oath, this promise. "Do you acknowledge Jesus Christ as your sovereign Lord, and do you promise that, in reliance on the grace of God, you will serve him with all that is in you, forsake the world, resist the devil, put to death your sinful deeds and desires, and lead a godly life?"

Let me urge every one of you to renew that promise in your own heart and soul as you sit in the presence of God today. Do you promise to lead a godly life? In reliance on the grace of God, yes, absolutely. But in that reliance, will you now promise to God that you will serve him with all that is in you? Will you promise to resist the devil? Will you promise to put to death your sinful deeds and desires?

People of God, that is the commitment to obedience to which you are called. And when the law of God is read and proclaimed, that commitment really is no different than the covenant commitment of the Old Testament people of Israel,

Ex. 24:3 "So Moses came and told the people all the words of the LORD and all the judgments. And all the people answered with one voice and said, "All the words which the LORD has said we will do." 4 And Moses wrote all the words of the LORD. And he rose early in the morning, and built an altar at the foot of the mountain, and twelve pillars according to the twelve tribes of Israel. 5 Then he sent young men of the children of Israel, who offered burnt offerings and sacrificed peace offerings of oxen to

the LORD. 6 And Moses took half the blood and put it in basins, and half the blood he sprinkled on the altar. 7 Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read in the hearing of the people. And they said, "All that the LORD has said we will do, and be obedient."

With that commitment comes,

D. The practice of new obedience.

Here is the final element of repentance. New obedience! Putting into practice the law of God! New obedience. Evangelical obedience we might call it, not any effort to earn your salvation, but the effect of that salvation upon your life. Or, more simply, love.

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

Look at the example here in Ezra,
v.11

Confess your sins with your mouth. Then produce fruit in keeping with repentance. Confess the sin of marrying foreign wives, and separate yourself from them!

v.12-19

This is all so very practical for us today. As you apply these words, identify what it is in your own life that is represented by those foreign wives of Ezra's day? What in your own life, represents your willingness to be a friend of the world? To imitate the world? To love the world? To be entangled with the world? What are the issues of your life where your repentance has not yet produced the commitment to and practice of new obedience? Wherever that might, whatever the example might be in your own life, make a covenant of repentance with your God this very day.

Confess your sin as a breach of your relationship with God.
Confess any and every sin as serious a breach of unfaithfulness
as the act of adultery would be for one who is married.

No excuses. No downplaying the sin. Just stand before the
God who loves you, and plead guilty.

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.”

Then, with the gospel hope and biblical promise of the
forgiveness of your sins, commit yourself to new obedience.
However it is that you have married foreign wives, put them away.
Put away the sin. And renew the commitment of your own oath,
“Do you promise that, in reliance on the grace of God, you will
serve him with all that is in you, forsake the world, resist the devil,
put to death your sinful deeds and desires, and lead a godly life?”

May all of God’s people say, “I do.”