

The Book of the Law

Nehemiah 8:1-8

I often tell people that when I first sensed that the Lord was calling me into the ministry I was absolutely terrified. I had never thought that preaching was something which God had enabled me to do. The pastoral ministry had been something which I had absolutely no inclination toward. I wasn't rebelling or resisting God's calling. I just never sensed the least bit of that call. I was confident and secure in my faith, and had learned to love God and had served him for many years. Never in my wildest dreams had I considered the ministry.

I was working as a civil engineer, recently graduated from college. I was 21. And I was getting more and more active in my church and more diligent in studying the Bible with increasing doctrinal substance and theological depth. One night, in the privacy of my own bedroom where I was up late reading and studying, the thought came upon me like a ton of bricks. I quickly sensed that the thought of entering the ministry was a subjective experience of God's calling upon my life, so I couldn't immediately dismiss it. I gave careful consideration to it, I spoke to my pastor and others whom I respected in the Lord, and I began making preparations. Within a year's time, I left for seminary, confident that that was where God wanted me to be. But there was still one large problem. Preaching terrified me. And I was very uncomfortable and not very effective in the first opportunities I had to preach.

But one of the classes I started that first year of seminary 43 years ago was homiletics, or preaching, and each semester we had a similar class. I still remember the dread that preceded the appointed time for me to preach in class. It was far worse than any exam. Twice each semester I was to preach before my

classmates, before the professor, and most difficult of all, before the video camera. It was hard enough to have my classmates and the professor critique my efforts, but having to go home and watch it myself was the most painful of all.

Preaching was not something that came easily for me, though by my third year of seminary, after having maybe 50 opportunities to preach, I was at least gaining some sense that I could preach effectively for the edification of God's people. And thankfully, in God's good providence, I was able to study under a good and faithful instructor, whose emphasis in training young men to preach was to train them to be expositors. That is, to expound and proclaim what the Bible says. Everything that was put into a sermon, everything, had to come from the text, and his harshest criticisms would fall upon those students whose sermon content wasn't to be found in their text! The question in that homiletics class wasn't whether it was true or not. The question was more specific. Was it in the text?

So I learned early on to preach expository sermons. Plain sermons of biblical exposition. And we had many rules which we had to follow, rules our professor gave us permission to break only after we had gained the experience of many years. But not in the class. The rules had to be followed. And those rules enabled me, by God's grace, to learn to preach. And after about 4 to 5 years of preaching every week to a congregation of God's people, I distinctly remember gaining the sense that I had the right to do what I was doing! No longer was I terrified, in the sense of dread and terror. Instead, preaching became quite a joy, even as it continues to be a difficult and consuming work.

Our text this afternoon gives great support and encouragement to that theory and philosophy of preaching that I have developed, it certainly validates the appropriateness of

expository preaching. One of the most startling things about this text is that it is in the OT. In the OT, public worship was ceremonial. It was confined to the temple. The emphasis of the priestly work was upon the sacrifices which were offered upon the altar. The example of Nehemiah 8 seems to fit better with what you would expect from the Apostle Paul in giving instructions to Timothy. But right here in the context of the old covenant, we have a great example of that which goes on every time we gather as God's people today to worship. And it is an example which the church as a whole has woefully neglected in recent years. That example is what might be called "traditional worship." And the central act of that traditional worship was the reading and preaching of the word of God.

It was a public gathering for worship.

v.1a

We saw that same expression in Ezra. "All the people gathered as one man..." That's a definition of corporate worship. And they told Ezra the Scribe to get the book of the law and to start reading!

v.1b

The point I want to stress right at the outset, a point that is so obviously simple yet by itself would transform the worship of most churches today, is this,

I. WE MUST HONOR THE BOOK OF GOD'S LAW.

Everything in this text, everything about it, gives honor to the book of God's law.

v.1-3

Remember the days of Hilkiah the priest, during the reign of that good king Josiah? They found the book of the law. They

found it, after centuries. And they had it read. Josiah enacted the reforms which that book of the law required. But what was that book of the law? It was the Pentateuch, the first five books of our Old Testament, which was the extent of the written scriptures that Israel had by that time. The book of the law is the book of the law of Moses, consisting of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. And it was given by the Lord to Israel. Therefore, it was to be honored. It was the word of God. The inspired word of God.

And how was it honored? First of all, by being read. Now, perhaps that is too obvious, but think about it. At the typical worship service of the typical church in our day, how often is the Bible read? Not even restricting it to the Old Testament or to the first five books, but speaking about the whole Bible, how much of worship is given to the public reading of Scripture. In some places, most places, almost none! And that's wrong. Terribly, terribly wrong.

A. We honor God's law by having it read in public worship.

Ezra read for half a day!

v.3

Can you imagine such a thing today! In many places, you're doing well just to get a few verses here and there.

It is by conviction that I read a lot of Scripture in worship, most clearly the text from which I will be preaching. Though it's not restricted to that. Our worship begins with a reading of Scripture, God's invitation to his people to assemble. I read Scripture before and after a confession of sin, and often include readings from both the Old Testament and the New. And the worship service ends with the reading of Scripture. Throughout our

worship, I want you to be conscious that we are engaged in a dialogue with God. God speaks to us, through his word, and we respond to him in appropriate and prescribed ways. That's what worship is. It's a conversation, between us as a congregation and our God.

And so we honor God's law by having it read in public worship. By Nehemiah's example, reinforced by the instructions of the apostle Paul in,

1 Tim.4:13 "Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching."

The public reading of Scripture is not part of the sermon—it ought to be distinct. It ought to stand by itself, and we ought to honor the word by giving it preeminence. I should also note that there is a reason that the pulpit is in the center of this sanctuary, and even elevated slightly. All of that gives prominence to the word as it is read, and rightly so, for,

B. We honor God's law by the sincerity of outward expressions.

You can't be restricted to outward expressions, as if those outward expressions were all that mattered in a pharisaical self-righteousness. Jesus called such hypocrites "white-washed tombs." But outward expressions, as the demonstration of inner sincerity, are very meaningful. And important.

Note those outward expressions here. First, Ezra stood at a platform of wood. A pulpit, would call it.

v.4

I propose to you that this pulpit does add to the honor which we ascribe to the word. It adds to the weightiness of the reading and preaching of the Word. Typically, when I or anyone else

teaches a class, Sunday school or otherwise, we use a podium on the floor. That's not merely symbolic, but represents the distinction of what takes place during the preaching of the word. We have good biblical precedent for using this distinctive piece of furniture. I believe that if I were to try to come out from the pulpit, as so many preachers are want to do today, I would only be elevating myself and diminishing the respect which the Word demands. If I left this pulpit altogether in an attempt to be more informal, then I can only think that I would be demeaning the honor and glory of the word that is preached. This pulpit is a sign of authority, not my authority, but the authority of the word.

And for Nehemiah, the pulpit was slightly elevated.

v.5a

It used to be in older churches that the pulpit was highly elevated, and the preacher had to ascend a number of stairs to enter the pulpit. Though I don't suggest we return to that practice, I understand the good reasons for it. Outward expressions are significant, when they express sincerity of heart!

And notice the outward expression which the people offered upon hearing the word. They stood up.

v.5b

Honor and reverence are the key words in that. Respect. Deep respect.

We are trained, and required, to rise when a judge enters a courtroom, for the judicial system does indeed hinge upon the respect and honor which we afford to the office of judge. We must respect the judge if we are to respect the law, so we stand.

It is proper to stand when dignitaries enter a room, or in polite

company, for a man to rise in honor at the entrance of a woman. Those are all good signs of honor. And so is the standing of God's people when the Scriptures are opened. And then,

C. We honor God's law by responding to it with genuine acts of worship.

Again, outward acts, by themselves, are empty and meaningless. Outward acts of honor unaccompanied by genuine acts of worship are useless, even wicked.

But notice the great response of the people to the reading of the law by Ezra.

v.6

So much is packed into these few verses, which is why I wanted to linger on them this afternoon, and save the verses that follow for next week. So first, as an act of worship, after Ezra gave words of blessing and praise to the Lord, the people answered with AMEN. Which is to say, "I agree." So be it. Let those words be mine.

AMEN is an appropriate response among those who are God's worshippers. Now, clearly we ought not to fall into the habit of meaningless repetition, uttering that word as a sort of game, bantering back and forth with the preacher. But you ought not to be constrained to be silent, either. Let me encourage you to shed some of your inhibitions in this regard. It might be an appropriate response after the word is read. You might even utter that word appropriately during the preaching of the word, if you wish to claim for yourself and join in agreement with what has been said.

In the Nehemiah 8, the people even raised their hands to God, while they answered AMEN. And they bowed low and worshipped the Lord with their faces to the ground. All of those

things are outward expressions, and genuine acts of worship.

Let me use those words to give a literal definition of worship itself. Worship, the word, in Hebrew, means to bow down. And there are a series of words used here for emphasis, all describing the same thing. Three different expressions all referring to the same thing. They bowed their heads. They worshipped the Lord. With their faces to the ground.

That's reverence! That's honor. Honor which is due to the reading of God's word, honor which is given ultimately to the author of that word.

You might hear silly arguments from people accusing us of worshipping a book. But that is such a foolish accusation. We don't worship a book. We don't worship pieces of paper. But we do worship God the Father, who is the author of the book. We do worship God the son, who is the word of God in the flesh, the word incarnate. And we do honor the spirit of God, who inspired all the writers of the book. So I'm not advocating worshipping a book.

But the Bible is no mere book. It is the living word of God.

Heb. 4:12 "12 For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart."

We are to honor the reading of God's law, the reading of God's word, by responding to it with genuine acts of worship. And by definition, those acts of worship humble us. Worship means to bow down before God. And that means that we bow down before the authority of God as it revealed in the written word of God.

This book, these pieces of paper, are not an idol. These pieces of paper are not the object of our worship. But these pieces of paper, by faith, are to be received with honor and reverence for they are the word of God, which God, in his providence, had committed to writing for the benefit and edification of the church.

We must honor the book of God's law. And when it is read in public worship, it must be read and received with dignity and the deepest reverence.

Yet, even so, we must not be afraid to touch it! Honoring and respecting God's word doesn't mean that you get a big family heirloom Bible that you display prominently in your home, or in the pulpit, but never read or study. On the contrary,

II. WE MUST STUDY THE BOOK OF GOD'S LAW.

I'm always glad to see a well worn Bible. I'll never forget a man in a church I previously pastored who apologized to me when I visited with him because his Bible was falling apart. As we would talk, he would invariably pick it up and make reference to some passage or the other. Pages were falling out, due to many years of heavy use. The binding was broken. And if you have one of those Bibles, one that you have worn out by constant use, then there is nothing to apologize for! Indeed, if you've had a Bible for any length of time and the pages still stick together—now that's something for which you ought to be ashamed!

We must study the book of God's law! Diligently. Daily. And to do that, we ought to have teachers, for clearly, from this text,

A. God ordains teachers to explain what he has revealed in his word.

v.4

Ezra the scribe, the teacher of the law. And he was accompanied by six men at his right hand and seven at his left. We don't know exactly who these men were, and whether or not they were even Levites, but clearly by their presence we can assume that they are leaders in the community. They were, in some way, Ezra's assistants. And more are mentioned in verse 7, identified as Levites, those responsible for the interpretation of the law. And we read what they did in,

v.8

Look very carefully at those words, and realize the divine calling of a teacher!

v.7 They "helped the people to understand the law."

They helped the people to understand! That's pretty plain isn't it? What a horrible condemnation upon those marvelously eloquent preachers of our age who actually make what is plain in Scripture to be very cloudy! Woe to those who present what is presented clearly and openly in the Bible in a way that is obscure and confusing, even to the distortion and ultimately to the rejection of what was given to us by inspiration of the Holy Spirit!

Think about it. So many speakers today leave us impressed with their eloquence, but wondering about what it was that they said. The job of the teacher is to help people understand what is written. My job in preaching is to help you understand the words that are written in the text that is before us. Nothing more, nothing less! My own opinions and ideas are irrelevant, even out of place. The objective is to explain what is written. And so we read in,

v.8

They read distinctly, clearly, from the law of God. They made it clear. That word could actually mean that they gave their own

translation in the vernacular and understanding of the people. Perhaps Jews more familiar with Aramaic would need someone to read to them by translating the Hebrew. I believe this is quite likely Nehemiah's meaning, and I am committed to preaching to you from the authority of the original languages, but to do so in your own language. In other words, it would, of course, do you no good for me to preach using the Hebrew words of the OT or the Greek words of the NT. Instead, it is my calling and my responsibility to take those Greek and Hebrew words and read them distinctly to you, that is, to translate them for you. And so, in the OPC, there is the requirement that ministers know the original languages! I find that to be an essential tool for a faithful preacher!

I believe that is what Ezra was doing with the law, translating it so that people could hear it in their own language. And, as it says in verse 8, "they gave the sense." To help them "understand the Law."

My job, and the job of all preachers, cannot be defined any more explicitly! God ordains teachers to explain what he has revealed in his word. And so we have these instructions from the Apostle Paul, so clearly in line with our text in Nehemiah,

2 Tim. 4:2 Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching."

Teaching, clear teaching. Careful instruction! On the whole counsel of God. Going back to my initial fear of preaching, and my initial sense of inadequacy, here is where I have gained great confidence. I don't need to figure out something profound to tell you each week, even several times each week. I simply need to explain to you what the Bible says. And by God's grace, I can do that.

I'm not nearly creative enough, nor nearly captivating enough as a speaker, to communicate to you my own ideas. Indeed, on my own, I have little to say to you, and very limited natural ability to communicate. But when I see my task in this light, it becomes a whole different ballgame. God ordains teachers to explain what he has revealed in his word.

But what about you? What's your responsibility? Having said all of that about my responsibilities and my obligations, what about you?

v.3b "...and the ears of all the people were attentive to the Book of the Law."

B. God's people are called to listen attentively to the proclamation of his word.

"The ears of all the people were attentive." So often today, we rate the effectiveness of the preacher by what we actually see and hear in him. And there is a great danger in that, because the effectiveness of the preacher is really determined by the attentiveness of the people.

Now, if there is nothing of substance to be attentive to, then the preacher is justly condemned. But to follow the biblical example, you must let your ears be attentive.

Our Shorter Catechism has this marvelous definition in answer to the question of how the word is to be read and heard.

Question 90: "That the word may become effectual to salvation, we must attend thereunto with diligence, preparation, and prayer; receive it with faith and love, lay it up in our hearts, and practice it in our lives."

And if you want a fuller explanation, you can turn to the Larger

Catechism, Question 160: “It is required of those that hear the word preached, that they attend upon it with diligence, preparation, and prayer, examine what they hear by the scriptures, receive the truth with faith, love, meekness and readiness of mind, as the word of God; to meditate, and confer of it; hide it in their hearts, and bring forth the fruit of it in their lives.”

I will quote briefly that glorious praise afforded to the Christians at the church in Berea, in,

Act 17:11 “Now these Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica; they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so.”

You are called to listen attentively.

I am thankful to be in a church that values such expository preaching of the Bible, and a church which does have people who listen with such attention. But I want to stimulate that attentiveness more and more, among more and more of you.

With this commitment in terms of my own preaching and teaching,

v.8 “...they read distinctly from the book, in the Law of God; and they gave the sense, and helped them to understand the reading.”

Regarding our denomination, the question is often asked, “What does orthodox mean?” In “Orthodox” Presbyterian Church. The answer is quite simple. Orthodox means straight, straight teaching. Straight, not crooked, in line with what is revealed in Scripture. And so my commitment, as a minister of the gospel in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, is to give you straight teaching from the word of God. May your commitment be to receive the word with all readiness and to search the Scriptures daily to find out if what you are being taught is true!