



Small Group Guide – October 8 & 11

The Return – Untie the Rope

Date: October 8 & 11, 2026

Focus Passage(s): Ezra 9-10

Theme: You can't return to God while holding onto what competes with Him.

Leader Notes

Ezra 9-10 is a difficult passage, so context matters. Do not allow the discussion to suggest that the biblical problem was racial or ethnic intermarriage. The manuscript explicitly rejects that interpretation and points to Ruth and Rahab as examples of foreigners who faithfully followed God. The concern was Israel's spiritual faithfulness and the influence of relationships that were drawing God's people toward other gods.

Also make clear that Ezra 10 is not a command for Christians today to divorce an unbelieving spouse. The sermon specifically makes that clarification, and 1 Corinthians 7:12-16 tells believers not to divorce an unbelieving spouse who is willing to remain in the marriage.

When discussing repentance, avoid creating an atmosphere where people feel pressured to publicly disclose private sins. The purpose of the group is not forced confession. Allow the Holy Spirit to work personally and give people the freedom to share voluntarily.

At the same time, do not allow "grace" to become another way of avoiding change. The sermon intentionally holds grace and repentance together. We do not change in order to earn God's forgiveness. We respond because Jesus has already done what we could never do for ourselves.

Finally, remember that some changes require wisdom. Forgiveness does not require returning to an unsafe relationship. Repentance from addiction may require counseling, recovery support, or medical care. Changing a destructive pattern may require accountability and boundaries.

Suggested Schedule (60 minutes total)

Segment	Time	Description
Icebreaker	10 min	Get comfortable, begin connecting
Intro/Recap	5 min	Read the key passages for the week
Group Discussion	25 min	Dive into Scripture and discuss application
Deeper Dive Option	5–10 min	Deeper Bible study or individual challenge
Prayer & Requests	10–15 min	Close in prayer for growth + personal needs

Welcome + Icebreaker (10 min)

What is something you have decided to stop doing or change more than once, only to eventually find yourself doing it again?

When you realize you have gotten off track, what is usually harder for you: admitting it, deciding to change, or actually following through with the change? Why?

Key Message Recap

Most of us know what it feels like to look at an area of our lives and think, "How did I end up here again?"

Sometimes spiritual drift is dramatic, but often it happens through small compromises that slowly become normal. Ezra 9-10 confronts that tendency directly and asks us to consider not only whether we have returned to God outwardly, but whether our hearts are fully devoted to Him.

Discussion Questions (25 min)

The book of Ezra begins with God's people returning home after decades of exile. They rebuild the altar, restore worship, encounter opposition, persevere through delays, and eventually finish rebuilding the temple.

By the time we reach Ezra 9, it would be easy to assume the story should end happily. The people are home and the temple is rebuilt.

Then Ezra discovers something deeply troubling. God's people have begun returning to patterns of compromise that resemble the very spiritual drift that contributed to their exile in the first place.

The manuscript makes an important distinction about the difficult passage that follows. The issue is not race or ethnicity. Scripture itself includes foreigners such as Ruth and Rahab who faithfully follow God and even become part of Jesus' family line. The concern in Ezra is **devotion**. God had warned His people about relationships that would lead them away from Him and toward the worship of other gods.

The people had returned geographically. They had rebuilt externally. But their hearts were still vulnerable to drift.

That makes Ezra's story uncomfortably relevant. We can rebuild the outside of our lives while ignoring what is happening inside our hearts.

Read Ezra 9:1-6

When Ezra learns what has happened, he does not minimize it or immediately explain it away. He grieves what the people's compromise reveals about their relationship with God.

Read Aloud

"The problem for them wasn't geographic. The problem wasn't physical or circumstantial or racial or ethnic. The problem is spiritual.

They could rebuild the altar, the temple, restart worship. They could come back geographically. But they still had hearts that were vulnerable to compromise."

Opening Question

Why is it possible to make outward spiritual changes while our hearts continue drifting from God?

Key Truth - God is interested in more than outward restoration. He wants our hearts.

Our Hearts Have a Tendency to Drift

The message describes drift as something that often happens gradually. A compromise does not seem significant in the moment. Something we once resisted becomes something we tolerate. Something we once called sin gets renamed as normal, understandable, or simply part of a difficult season.

Eventually, we may find ourselves returning to a habit, attitude, relationship, or pattern we thought we had left behind.

That is what makes Ezra 9 so sobering. This is not an entirely new problem for God's people. They are returning to familiar patterns.

Discuss

- Why is gradual spiritual drift sometimes harder to recognize than an obvious decision to walk away from God?
- What are some warning signs that something is beginning to compete with our devotion to God?
- Why are we so good at explaining away things we know are pulling us in the wrong direction?
- Have you ever looked back and realized you had drifted much farther than you noticed at the time?

Key Truth - Spiritual drift usually becomes dangerous long before it becomes obvious.

The Issue Is Devotion

Read Deuteronomy 7:1-4

This passage provides important background for understanding Ezra. God's concern was that these relationships would lead His people away from Him and toward other gods.

As the message explains:

"The prohibition wasn't about ethnicity. It was about faithfulness and where these relationships would lead them spiritually."

That distinction matters because it moves the discussion beyond ancient Israel and toward a question every follower of Jesus must consider: **What influences are shaping my devotion?**

Relationships matter, but so do habits, ambitions, entertainment, money, success, sexuality, bitterness, control, and anything else capable of becoming more influential in our lives than God.

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Discuss

- What is the difference between having something in your life and allowing that thing to compete with God for your devotion?
- What kinds of influences can gradually pull our hearts away from God?
- How can something that is not inherently sinful still become spiritually unhealthy if it begins controlling us?
- What helps you recognize when something has moved from being important to being too important?

Key Truth - The central question is not simply what is in our lives, but what has our devotion.

Confession Means Calling It What It Is

Read Ezra 9:5-15

Ezra's prayer is striking because he does not minimize what has happened. He does not make excuses or distance himself from the problem. He honestly names the people's sin before God.

The message describes confession in similarly straightforward language: **"Call it what it is. No excuses."**

Confession is not informing God about something He does not know. It is becoming honest with God and ourselves. Instead of continually renaming, defending, hiding, or minimizing what is pulling us away, confession agrees with God about it.

Discuss

- Why do we sometimes prefer explaining our behavior to confessing it?
- What excuses do people commonly use to avoid confronting spiritual drift?
- Why can naming something honestly reduce some of its power over us?
- What is the difference between healthy conviction and destructive shame?

Key Truth - Confession begins when we stop defending what God is asking us to confront.

Repentance Means Turning

Read Ezra 10:1-4

Ezra's confession affects the larger community. People gather, weep, acknowledge what has happened, and recognize that something needs to change.

This leads to the second movement in the message: **repent**.

Repentance involves more than feeling guilty or wishing we had made a different choice. It is a decision to turn away from sin and back toward God.

The rope illustration from the message makes this tangible. We can say we want to walk toward God while remaining tied to something pulling us in the opposite direction. Eventually, we have to deal with the rope.

Discuss

- What is the difference between feeling bad about something and genuinely repenting?
- Why can regret exist without producing change?
- What might keep someone emotionally attached to something they know is pulling them away from God?
- How does God's grace make repentance possible rather than simply making us feel condemned?

Key Truth - Repentance is not merely feeling sorry about where we have been. It is choosing a different direction.

Real Repentance Changes Something

The third movement of the message may be the most challenging: **change**.

The people in Ezra do not simply experience an emotional moment. Their repentance leads to concrete action. The manuscript carefully notes that their circumstances were specific to Israel and should not be turned into a command for Christians today to divorce unbelieving spouses. In fact, the New Testament instructs a believer with an unbelieving spouse who is willing to remain married not to divorce that spouse.

The broader principle in Ezra remains important, however. Repentance eventually affects how we live.

The message says:

"Because you can untie a knot in a piece of rope and walk out of here exactly the same. You can have a meaningful moment with God, sing a couple songs, feel convicted, and then tomorrow tie yourself right back to the same thing."

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Discuss

- Why can emotional spiritual moments sometimes fail to produce lasting change?
- What is the difference between trying harder and putting a meaningful change or boundary in place?
- When might repentance require involving another trusted person instead of trying to change privately?
- What practical change can help prevent us from continually returning to the same pattern?

Key Truth - Repentance becomes visible when our direction begins to change.

More Truth From the Gospels (10 min)

Ezra shows us the seriousness of spiritual drift and repentance. The Gospels help us see what repentance looks like when people encounter Jesus.

Jesus consistently offers grace, but His grace is not an invitation to remain unchanged. People who encounter Him are invited into a different way of living.

Jesus Calls People to Repent and Believe

Read Mark 1:14-15

At the beginning of His public ministry, Jesus announces the good news of God's kingdom and calls people to repent and believe.

Repentance and grace are not enemies. The invitation to repent is actually part of the good news because Jesus is inviting people to leave behind what is destroying them and return to the God who gives life.

Foundational Truth - Jesus does not call us to repentance because He wants less for us. He calls us to repentance because He is inviting us into life with Him.

Discuss

- Why can repentance sometimes sound negative even though Jesus connects it with good news?
- How might our understanding of repentance change if we see it as turning toward Someone rather than simply stopping something?

Jesus Offers Grace Without Pretending Sin Doesn't Matter

Read John 8:1-11

When religious leaders bring a woman caught in adultery to Jesus, He refuses to participate in their attempt to condemn and humiliate her.

But Jesus also does not redefine what happened as harmless. His response contains both grace and a call toward a changed life.

Foundational Truth - Jesus' grace frees us from condemnation and also invites us away from the things that keep us bound.

Discuss]

- Why do we sometimes separate grace from change?
 - What happens when Christians emphasize change without grace?
 - What happens when we emphasize grace but never allow Jesus to confront anything in us?
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Zacchaeus Shows Us Repentance That Changes Something

Read Luke 19:1-10

Zacchaeus encounters Jesus and responds with more than emotion. His relationship with money changes. He voluntarily commits to generosity and restitution for those he has cheated.

Jesus' grace comes first. Zacchaeus does not change his life so that Jesus will notice him. Jesus moves toward him, and Zacchaeus' encounter with grace produces a changed response.

Foundational Truth - Grace comes before our change, but genuine encounters with grace often produce change.

Discuss

- What is significant about the specific changes Zacchaeus chooses to make?
- If Zacchaeus had said he was sorry, but continued cheating people, what would have been missing?
- Where might repentance in our lives need to become more specific?

Peter Learns That Failure Does Not Have to Become His Identity

Read John 21:15-19

Peter's denial of Jesus is serious, but Jesus does not discard him. After the resurrection, Jesus meets Peter, restores him, and calls him forward again.

This is important when talking about recurring sin. Repentance does not mean we earn another opportunity with God. Our hope rests in Jesus' grace.

Foundational Truth - Our failure can be real without becoming final. Jesus invites us to return, receive grace, and follow Him again.

Discuss How can knowing Jesus restores people give us courage to become more honest about the places where we have drifted?

Real-life Application (5 min)

The most challenging question in Ezra 9-10 may not be, "What have I done wrong?" It may be, **"What is competing with God for my devotion?"**

Sometimes the answer is obviously sinful. Other times it may be something good that has slowly become ultimate. Success, comfort, approval, money, a relationship, control, or even our own plans can begin occupying a place in our hearts they were never meant to have.

The goal is not to create shame. Jesus has already done what we could never do for ourselves. He died and rose again so that forgiveness, restoration, and a way back to God are possible.

Because of that grace, we can afford to be honest.

Reflection Question What is one thing that may be competing with God for your devotion right now?

Next Steps Challenge (5 min)

The message gives us three words to guide our response: **Confess. Repent. Change.**

Begin with confession. Instead of minimizing or renaming what is happening, tell God the truth about it. Name what has your attention or affection and acknowledge how it has been pulling you away from Him.

Then repent. Tell God that you do not want to remain tied to it. Repentance means turning away from what is competing with God and intentionally turning back toward Him.

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Finally, identify what needs to change. If the issue is pornography, change might include telling a trusted person, establishing accountability, and removing access. If it is bitterness, it may involve beginning the process of forgiveness while maintaining any boundaries necessary for safety. If it is money, control, alcohol, approval, or another issue, ask what concrete obedience would look like rather than settling for good intentions.

Personal Challenge What is God prompting you to change, and what specific action will you take this week?

Optional Rope Reflection (Leader Notes)

If appropriate for your group, you can adapt the visual response from the Sunday message.

Give each person a short piece of rope with a loose knot tied in it. Explain that there is nothing spiritual or magical about the rope. It is simply a physical reminder of the message.

Invite participants to privately consider what the knot represents in their lives. They do not need to tell anyone else. Give them a few moments to confess honestly to God what has been competing for their devotion. Then invite anyone who is ready to repent to slowly untie the knot as a simple physical representation of their decision to stop defending or holding onto what is pulling them away.

Do not end the exercise with the knot. Ask everyone to quietly answer the more important question: **What needs to change when I leave this room?**

The rope is only a reminder. Jesus forgives and restores. The important response is what happens afterward.

Prayer Time (10 min)

Confession and Repentance Prayer

Begin by thanking God for the ways He has already been faithful. Ask Him to give wisdom to anyone who is unsure whether a difficult situation requires perseverance or a change of direction. Pray for people who are tired from waiting and for those who feel as though their progress has stopped.

Ask God for strength to do the next right thing rather than becoming overwhelmed by everything that remains unfinished. Pray for discernment when opposition comes and for confidence that God's presence is not measured by how easy our circumstances feel.

Finally, thank Jesus for His faithfulness through suffering, the cross, and resurrection. Ask Him to help the group become people who remain faithful because their hope is ultimately in Him.

"Where am I tempted to quit because progress has been slower or harder than I expected? God, what is the next right thing You want me to do?"

Deeper Dive - Character Study

Zacchaeus: When Grace Produces Change

Primary Scripture: Luke 19:1-10

Overview

Zacchaeus is an excellent picture of the progression at the center of this message.

He is a chief tax collector who has become wealthy within a system notorious for exploitation. Whatever explanations Zacchaeus may have used to justify his lifestyle, his encounter with Jesus brings the reality of his life into focus.

What is especially significant is what happens next. Jesus moves toward Zacchaeus before Zacchaeus cleans up his life. Grace comes first.

But Zacchaeus does not use grace as permission to continue unchanged. His response becomes concrete, costly, and measurable. His story gives us a New Testament picture of confession, repentance, and change.

Key Moment 1: Jesus Moves Toward Zacchaeus

Read Luke 19:1-6

Zacchaeus wants to see Jesus, but Jesus is the One who stops, calls him by name, and announces that He will stay at his house.

The crowd does not approve. They know Zacchaeus' reputation.

Yet Jesus moves toward him anyway.

Discuss

- What does Jesus' willingness to enter Zacchaeus' home reveal about grace?
- Why is it important that Jesus' acceptance comes before Zacchaeus changes his behavior?
- How does grace make honest confession safer rather than less necessary?

Key Truth - We do not change so Jesus will move toward us. His grace is what makes genuine change possible.

Key Moment 2: Zacchaeus Stops Defending His Old Life

Read Luke 19:7-8

Zacchaeus could have defended himself. He could have explained how tax collection worked or argued that everyone else took advantage of the system, too.

Instead, something changes. He acknowledges that his relationship with money and his treatment of people cannot remain the same.

This connects with confession in the message. At some point, we stop renaming or defending what is happening and call it what it is.

Discuss

- Why is defensiveness such a common response when an area of our lives is challenged?
- What excuses are we most tempted to use when God confronts something in us?

Key Moment 3: Repentance Becomes Concrete

Zacchaeus does not merely say he feels bad.

He announces that he will give half his wealth to the poor and repay people he has cheated.

His response is specific because the problem was specific.

The area that had captured his devotion and shaped his behavior was the very area where repentance became visible.

Discuss

- What makes Zacchaeus' response more than an emotional moment?
- Why does genuine repentance often require specificity?
- How might we know whether our response to conviction is actually changing something?
- Where might saying "I'm sorry" need to be followed by a practical action?

Key Truth - Real repentance eventually becomes visible in how we live.

Key Moment 4: Change Flows From Grace

Read Luke 19:9-10

Jesus' closing words make the larger story clear. He came to seek and save people who were lost.

Zacchaeus' changed behavior does not purchase salvation. His changed life is evidence of what has happened through his encounter with Jesus.

That protects us from two errors. We do not earn God's grace by changing ourselves, but neither do we receive grace as permission to remain willingly tied to what Jesus came to rescue us from.

Discuss

1. What comes first in Zacchaeus' story: Jesus' movement toward him or Zacchaeus' change? Why is that order important?
2. How does grace motivate change differently from shame?
3. What would have been missing if Zacchaeus had welcomed Jesus, but refused to change anything?
4. What is one area where Jesus' grace is inviting you toward a different way of living?

Key Takeaways

Zacchaeus reminds us that repentance is not a transaction where we change ourselves enough to deserve Jesus. Jesus moves toward sinners in grace.

But grace is powerful enough to change the direction of a person's life. Zacchaeus' response is not vague. He identifies what has been wrong and takes concrete steps to live differently.

That gives us a helpful pattern for this message. Confession tells the truth about what has been pulling us away from God. Repentance turns our hearts and direction back toward Him. Change asks what obedience now looks like in real life.

Additional Scriptures for Further Study

Psalm 51:1-12

David models honest confession after serious sin and asks God for cleansing and a renewed heart.

Proverbs 28:13

This passage contrasts hiding sin with confessing and turning away from it.

1 John 1:8-9

John reminds believers that denying sin is self-deception while confession is met by God's faithfulness and forgiveness.

2 Corinthians 7:8-11

Paul distinguishes godly sorrow that produces repentance from sorrow that leads nowhere.

Romans 2:4

Paul explains that God's kindness is intended to lead people toward repentance.

1 Corinthians 7:12-16

This passage is particularly important for understanding how New Testament believers should approach a marriage in which one spouse does not share the other's faith.