

February 18, 2024

HOW TO DEAL WITH SIN

Ezra 9-10

(4 of 9 in a series through Ezra-Nehemiah)

Sin is as old as the fall, but sadly it didn't stop at the fall. After Adam and Eve's rebellion against God in Genesis 3, Genesis 4 shows that corruption and depravity continued on, infecting their children as well. And we know that ultimately the whole human race would show itself tainted with sin and guilt before our Maker. Just prior to the flood God would announce that "the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually" (Gen 6:5). And as much as we might like to imagine that things have gotten better, despite our own continued corruption and depravity, that's a hard argument to make. We may have technological advances and have found ways to feed more people, but violence, sexual immorality, and covetousness sure haven't lessened. In fact, it seems that we've developed new and more convenient means of carrying out our sin. If Isaiah could say that he was a man of unclean lips in the midst of a people of unclean lips, it feels like we could say more with all the ways we've created to increase sin.

Yet all of us sitting here this morning have no doubt found that the big problem in the world isn't the sin committed out there as much as the sin committed in and by us. I don't say that to downplay the vicious nature of abuse that some of you may have faced—clearly the sin of others. But I'm also aware that even in those situations, we can respond to those terrible situations by then chasing after sin ourselves. How often does the one abused become an abuser, the one cheated on become an adulterer, or the like? More often than we'd like to admit. Needless to say, sin is our big problem.

And the Scripture seems to suggest that until the resurrection, you and I won't be free from it. We'll still feel the temptation to sin and give in to selfish, lustful, and prideful thoughts, words, and actions at points. So what do we do about it? What do we do in light of the fact that sin is something we can feel such a draw to? What do we do about the reality that you and I have sinned and do sin? You may even have walked into this room this morning with your sin feeling like an albatross that has been hung around your neck. Well, if that's the case, the good news is that the text we're looking at this morning (Ezra 9-10) addresses this very issue, showing us how we should respond to our sin. Specifically it shows us how we should respond when we have sinned.

The reason the text is helpful in showing us how to respond to our own sin is because that's precisely what Ezra encounters as he arrives back in Jerusalem. You may remember from our text two weeks ago in Ezra 7-8 that Artaxerxes commissions Ezra to go back to Jerusalem, taking others with him, in order to assess how the returned Jews were doing with regard to obeying God's law, and then to call them back to God's law, if necessary, instructing them in what God commands.

Well, after they get back, some officials that had come back to Jerusalem with Ezra reported that some of the Jews had intermarried with other peoples. We read of their report in Ezra 9:1-2 as the text reads, “After these things had been done, the officials approached me and said, ‘The people of Israel and the priests and the Levites have not separated themselves from the peoples of the lands with their abominations, from the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians, and the Amorites. For they have taken some of their daughters to be wives for themselves and for their sons, so that the holy race has mixed itself with the peoples of the lands. And in this faithlessness the hand of the officials and chief men has been foremost.’”

Now, perhaps when we hear that, our first thought is that this sounds racist. But the reason they were forbidden from marrying people of other descent wasn't because of their different race, ultimately. It's that the Lord knew that these people of other lands were practicing abominations. That word actually appears in verse 1 as we hear of the “peoples of the lands *with their abominations.*” The Lord had forbidden this intermarrying with the peoples in the lands in Exodus 34:11-16, specifically forbidding taking “their daughters for your sons” lest “their daughters whore after their gods and make your sons whore after their gods.” In other words, it's not that marriage couldn't happen with someone who was born a Moabite, for example. We know that from Ruth. But Ruth is a picture of a convert, one who came from Moab but then converted and became an Israelite, for all intents and purposes. But short of such conversion, God forbade his people from intermarrying with these other peoples lest their hearts be turned away from him to chase after these other gods. And so when Ezra hears this report, he's hearing a report that a number of Israelites, and even chief men, have violated this command in the law and have sinned against this Lord.

What I want to argue, then, is that what follows is a picture for us of how we are supposed to deal with sin. The events of Ezra 9-10 answer our question, “What do I do if I sin?” So I want to walk us through the events of these two chapters under each of the steps of response to this sin. First, then we must recognize the gravity of sin and mourn over it.

Recognize the gravity of sin and mourn over it

Ezra's response is certainly not to make light of this rebellion. In fact, his response is on the complete other end of the spectrum. He feels the gravity of sin and mourns over it. He tells us in 9:3, “As soon as I heard this, I tore my garment and my cloak and pulled hair from my head and beard and sat appalled.” We will later read at the beginning of chapter 10 that Ezra also wept and a great assembly gathered with him and “wept bitterly” (10:1).

What do we do with this response of Ezra tearing his clothes, pulling his hair out, sitting appalled, and weeping at news of these intermarriages that had taken place contrary to God's commands? I think we're to recognize that this is a man who is seeing sin in light of the abomination that it actually is. And, perhaps, a further response should be to acknowledge that we are prone to treating sin too lightly. Sin is no small matter. And what Ezra pictures for us is not some out-of-proportion response to sin but a response that recognizes the gravity of sin and mourns over it.

Now, I'm not suggesting we should literally tear our clothes or pull out our hair when we sin. Nor do I want us to wallow in our shame unnecessarily. We'll address that shortly. But nor do I want us to move too quickly over recognizing the reality of what sin is. It needs to register in our hearts that sin is utterly inappropriate. If we look at pornography or force ourselves to throw up in pursuit of a certain body image, it's not enough to tell ourselves, "This is just what men and women do." No. We need to recognize that we are sinning against the Lord and our own bodies in ways that aren't appropriate for believers. We need to see the gravity of our sin clear enough that we think, "This simply must not happen anymore." Sin a big deal. And seeing it as a big deal, feeling the gravity of it, and mourning over it is actually a way of gauging our spiritual health. Let me explain.

In Hebrews 3:12-14 we're told that we need people in our lives to exhort us daily so that we're not "hardened by the deceitfulness of sin." Now, let's take that phrase—hardened by the deceitfulness of sin—and contemplate what this tells us. Sin, by nature, is deceptive. It holds out pleasures that are only fleeting, promises of fulfillment that actually leave you feeling empty, and a hope of relief that only leaves you burdened. It's deceptive as it comes to us, and it's deceptive as we partake in it. After we partake of sin, then, there can be a sense of shock that we feel after sin. We can't believe we crossed this line, said that thing, or viewed that image. But if we keep going back to it, our heart might not be as bothered by it. We might start to reason that it isn't all that bad. We might tell ourselves that other people that we know and even respect engage in the same activity. Then, at some point, we stop our rationalizing altogether because we don't need it. Our sin simply doesn't affect us. We've become hardened by sin's deceit. We've like the alcoholic who thinks he's ok because he no longer feels the affect of alcohol. Rather, what we're witnessing is a level of deterioration in our hearts. It's become calloused and hardened by sin. And our pronouncement that we're unaffected by watching sexual activity on a screen, for example, is a pronouncement that we've become calloused toward what should alarm us. It's a confession that the deceptive nature of sin has successfully had its hardening effect on our hearts. And that's a frightening place for a believer to be.

Rather, we must feel the gravity of our sin. Be appalled by it as Ezra is. And mourn that we've allowed it to have a place in our lives. This is our first response to sin. It's okay not to rush past this too quickly. It's okay to make sure that we're clearly seeing sin for what it is. Make sure our hearts are still tender and not hardened by the deceitful nature of our sin. But we don't stay there. Second, we must confess our sin and own it.

Confess your sin and own it

This point has much overlap with the first, so I'm not envisioning clear steps where there is a clear break between each one. Ezra realizes the gravity of the people's sin and mourns over it, but he also moves into confession at the same time. In other words, he does both. Now, this might be a point where we want to hit the "pause" button and ask, "Why is Ezra confessing? He hasn't sinned?" Well, there are two responses here. First, the fact that Ezra is acting as a priest, and under the Old Covenant the priest served as a representative for the people. Therefore, it's

completely fitting that the priest would confess sin when those whom he represents sinned. But we're also going to see that the people themselves also respond to their sin with confession, but before we get there, I want us to see Ezra's picture for us of confession.

As Ezra begins to confess sin, he confesses that they have sinned and are guilty, saying, "O my God, I am ashamed and blush to lift my face to you, my God, for our iniquities have risen higher than our heads, and our guilt has mounted up to the heavens" (9:6). He acknowledges that the Lord has been good and them and provided for them (9:8-9), and in return, he acknowledges that "we have forsaken your commandments" (9:10). He even notes the precise commandment they've violated in 9:12.

This is what confession looks like. There's no framing of things in such a way that you're giving excuses for your actions. There's no downplaying what's been done. Ezra simply acknowledges the sin. And instead of providing excuses, he provides reasons for why the people should *not* have sinned. God had been gracious to them, brought them back to their land, and allowed them to rebuild the temple. Then, far from suggesting he's not sure it's actually sin; he quotes God's commandment and acknowledges that they did the very thing he'd forbidden. Again, this is confession, and it's what confession must be.

Moreover, when you combine these first two, they necessarily fit together. If you feel the weight of your sin and acknowledge it for what it is, then you don't confess it by trying to take the edge off of it or make excuses. If you find yourself wanting to explain why you've sinned, then you're not properly confessing and haven't sufficiently weighed the reality of what you've done. We realize the gravity of our sin, mourning over it, and then we confess our sin to the Lord. Third, we must look to the grace of God.

Look to the grace of God

After seeing Ezra's mourning over sin and confession of sin in chapter 9, chapter 10 begins with the arrival of a new character—a man named Shecaniah. He comes to Ezra with a proposal for what they should do in light of their sin—a proposal that we'll think through in our last point. But right now I want to note how he frames it. We read in 10:2, "And Shecaniah the son of Jehiel, of the sons of Elam, addressed Ezra: 'We have broken faith with our God and have married foreign women of the peoples of the land, but even now there is hope for Israel in spite of this.'" Then, he goes on with his proposal.

Do you hear that note of hope? "Even now there is hope for Israel in spite of this." Now, why would he say that? You've just acknowledged that the people have rebelled against God and broken his laws. Why think there's hope? It's because he's thinking of the grace and mercy of God. If God were unwilling to show grace and mercy, then there's no talking like this. If we had a king who told us, "You violate any law and you get the death penalty, no exceptions," then if you or I violated a law, we wouldn't say to one another, "Even now there is hope for us." We'd say, "Even now we are hopelessly awaiting our execution."

But Shecaniah knows that with the Lord there is hope because our God is merciful and gracious. One need only think of David, his adultery with Bathsheba and murder of Uriah. When David prayed his prayer of confession in Psalm 51—a psalm we sang earlier in the service—he prays this prayer with hope. He believes that God can forgive him, showing him grace and mercy.

We too can pray this way. In fact, we actually have a promise from the Lord in 1 John 1:9 that we heard read earlier: “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” As we recognize our sin, see it for what it is, and confess it, we can then say more than Shecaniah. We can say, “We are certain that God will forgive if we confess our sin. He has promised it.”

Brothers and sisters, there may be no more precious promise for the humbled sinner than this one: God forgives those who confess their sins. He is faithful to do so. He is just to do so. The reason it is just for God to forgive us as we confess is because Christ has paid the penalty for our sins. He lived, died, and rose for us so that we might be able to say that though our sins deserve nothing less than to bring the wrath of God down on our heads, Christ has borne that wrath in our place. He drank down the cup of the wine of God’s wrath to the last drop. And so our just God counts the sacrifice of our Lord on our behalf so that we are forgiven. Our God hears our confession, and his response—without exception—is to forgive us of our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. That’s the promise of 1 John 1:9.

Let me say this to you now. If you walked into this building today, having confessed your sins but still feeling like they’re hanging around your neck like an albatross and your condemnation with it, don’t believe it. Look to the grace of God. Hold on to this promises. And hear this: if you confess your sins to the Lord (or have done so), you are forgiven and cleansed. Believe this because it is actually key to our pursuit of holiness, which we’ll discuss next. If you try to motivate yourself to holiness by heaping condemnation on yourself, well, it just doesn’t work out. If you’ve tried it, you know it’s not working out too well for you. And what makes it more dangerous is (as we’ve noted) that it can feel like holiness. What you want to do instead is confess your sin and look to the gospel as that which is sufficient to remove your guilt and condemnation and then turn to the pursuit of holiness, which is our next point. We must repent and pursue holiness.

Repent and pursue holiness

As Shecaniah came to Ezra with hope in his heart, here was the proposal he made. He said to Ezra, “Therefore let us make a covenant with our God to put away all these wives and their children, according to the counsel of my lord and of those who tremble at the commandment of our God, and let it be done according to the Law. Arise, for it is your task, and we are with you; be strong and do it” (10:3-4). That is, Shecaniah laid out a plan for how they could turn from their sin (repent) and pursue holiness, and he charged Ezra to lead them in this task.

And Ezra did so. We’re told that Ezra charges the people to gather together from all over the land within three days, and the people did so. And Ezra stood before them and said, “You have

broken faith and married foreign women, and so increased the guilt of Israel. Now then make confession to the LORD, the God of your fathers and do his will. Separate yourselves from the peoples of the land and from the foreign wives” (10:10-11). And the people declared they would do so.

However, there was a problem. It was raining and cold, and there were a bunch of them, so this would take a while to sort out, and these were tough conditions to do so. Therefore, they proposed that Ezra establish some elders and judges who could sort through each person’s situation and judge what to do. After all, some of these supposedly foreign women could have been women who were actually converted to worship the God of Israel—like Rahab and Ruth. But this would need sorted out. So that’s what they did. And the elders and judges examined each case, and as needed, the people put away their foreign wives. Again, they repented and pursued obedience to the Lord.

Now, we could parse out how things are a bit different when you get to the new covenant and Paul gives specific instructions for how a believer who is married to an unbeliever handles the marriage. If the unbeliever is willing to live with you in peace, then you should stay married. But if they’re not, then you’re not bound, but free to be released from that marriage (1 Cor 7:12-16). Moreover, Nehemiah will actually handle this situation differently when he encounters the same thing about thirteen years later. But the key is not to get bogged down in parsing out if Ezra took the perfect path or Nehemiah did or precisely how this should have worked out under the old covenant. The key is to see that both Ezra and Nehemiah sought to lead the people to repent and pursue holiness. And this is our final response to sin. We repent and pursue holiness.

After seeing the weight of our sin and mourning appropriately for it, we confess it, and look to the grace of God in the gospel of Jesus Christ, trusting that we’re forgiven and cleansed. And at that point, we turn away from the sin and run after holiness. Now, as we’ve noted, this order is crucial. We don’t recognize our sin, mourn over it, and then run after holiness, pledging we’ll do better. We must first run to the cross, remembering the grace of God. Just trying to do better will eventually leave us not wanting to try any more. Our strength for obedience comes from the gospel. And our appropriate response to the gospel is to walk in obedience to the one who loves us and gave himself for us.

Therefore, what we see in Ezra 9-10 is a roadmap for dealing with sin. Realize the gravity of it and mourn. Confess it and realize you’re forgiven. And then turn from it and chase after holiness. And the whole time we’re pursuing holiness, remind ourselves that the God who has forgiven us and cleansed us by his grace is so utterly deserving of our love and obedience. Let’s give thanks to him now as we come to the table. Amen.