

SUNDAY SCHOOL LESSONS
Commentary by Michael Sigler
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Ezra: A Priest for the People

Ezra 9:5-11, 15

Key verse: “O my God, I am too ashamed and embarrassed 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” (Ezra 9:6)

Ezra was a spiritual leader of the Jewish exiles who were allowed to return to Jerusalem from Babylonian captivity. Ezra is believed to have returned to Jerusalem somewhere around 458 B.C.

Ezra had a keen interest in leading the returning Jewish community to be faithful to God and to God’s law. This interest was heightened because Ezra, along with his fellow Jews, believed that the Exile had come as a result of Israel’s sin and unfaithfulness.

So, when Ezra learned that a great number of the returned exiles had inter-married with non-Jewish wives, he was heart-broken. Chapter 9, then, concerns Ezra’s response of confession and repentance, on behalf of the returned Jewish community.

Ezra responded to this problem by, first, offering prayers of confession and repentance on behalf of the people for their sins (Ezra 9:5-11). Eventually, that repentance involved all the men divorcing their non-Jewish wives (Ezra 10:11).

This response may sound extreme to us today. In one sense, that may be true. Certainly, the New Testament would not call for divorce as did Ezra. See, for example 1 Corinthians 7:12-13—“If any believer has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he should not divorce her. And if any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him.”

Ezra’s response to inter-marriage must also be understood in light of God’s apparent reason for forbidding it. Mixed marriages to the Gentile inhabitants at that time usually led to those Jewish men and their children following the idolatry and immoral practices that were clearly associated with Canaanite religion. By forbidding inter-marriage, God wanted to maintain Israel’s integrity as a holy nation, set apart for God’s purposes in the world.

Having said that Ezra's response to the specific sin of that day—inter-marriage—would not be entirely normative for us today, what lessons can we take from this passage in Ezra?

This passage speaks to us today of the seriousness of sin and the importance of true confession and repentance.

Brian McLaren made that point in terms most of us can understand:

- *If life is a machine, then sin is a bad gear that makes the machine malfunction.*
- *If life is a kingdom, then sin is a terrorist movement in the kingdom.*
- *If life is a family, then sin is a feud between family members.*
- *If life is a body, then sin is an untreated disease that poisons the whole system.*
- *If life is a river, then sin is mercury or arsenic that pollutes it.*
- *If life is a garden, then sin is the army of slugs that eat your tomatoes.*
- *If life is a computer, then sin is a virus that destroys your hard drive.*

It is easy, in our day, to lose the understanding that sin matters—it matters a lot!

Jesus viewed sin as such a danger to our lives now and in eternity that He said: “If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell” (Matthew 5:29). Obviously, Jesus meant this statement figuratively, not literally. Nevertheless, it shows how Jesus viewed the serious threat of sin.

Romans 6:23 tells us “the wages of sin is death,” meaning the spiritual death that comes through separation from the life of God. James 1:14-15 gives a vivid description of the process of temptation and sin leading to “death”: “But one is tempted by one's own desire, being lured and enticed by it; then, when that desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin, and that sin, when it is fully grown, gives birth to death.”

The Methodist movement began with a clear understanding of the seriousness of sin and the importance of spreading “Scriptural holiness throughout the land.” John Wesley said: “Give me one hundred men who fear nothing but sin and desire nothing but God, and I care not whether they be clergymen or laymen, they alone will shake the gates of hell and set up the kingdom of heaven upon the earth.”

The message preached by John and Charles Wesley never dealt lightly with the problem of sin. Rather, the call to “Scriptural holiness” proclaimed that Jesus Christ can set people free from both the *penalty* and the *power* of sin.

When a person receives Christ, confessing his sin and repenting of it, God's saving grace sets that person free from the *penalty* of sin. As a person learns to walk in Christ, whenever he sins, God offers a way to be restored to right relationship: “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9).

The Methodist/Wesleyan message, however, offers an even more hopeful response to the problem of sin. It says that not only can Christ free us from sin's *penalty*; He can also free us from sin's *power*. That is, the Christian does not have to live a defeated life, under the power of habitual, willful sin. The Holy Spirit comes to live in the believer, giving power over sin and self.

So, Ezra 9 reminds us of the seriousness of sin and the importance of confession and true repentance. It is a message that needs to be heard in our day. Along with it, the world needs the message that John and Charles Wesley proclaimed: Jesus Christ can free us from both the *penalty* and the *power* of sin.

Thanks be to God!

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