

Grace and disgrace

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Preacher: Kyle Essary

[0 : 00] Now, about two years ago, after the pandemic, after the lockdowns began to come up a little bit in the Kling Valley, a number of people moved out of condos and moved into landed properties.

My family was one of those. We were all locked up during, you know, MCO, FMCO, CMCO, RMCO, and we were all on top of each other.

And so we moved out of our condo and we moved into a landed property, actually right across the street from where we had previously stayed.

Now, life in a landed house is very different than life in a condo. There are different things that you have to take care of. One of those issues is pest control.

In our condo, that was all taken care of by the management. But in our home, we have to have pest control come out every other month to spray.

[1 : 04] Well, a few months back, as pest control came out, or just before they were scheduled to come out, we noticed more and more cockroaches in our wet kitchen.

So I mentioned this to our pest control services and they said, okay, this is a widespread problem. We'll send out somebody. They'll take care of the issue.

So the pest control man came out to our home. I took him to the wet kitchen. I showed him where we had found a few cockroaches. And he looked at me and he said, where is your manhole?

Now, this is not a term that I am familiar with. So I looked at him and I said, what? And he said, where is your manhole? I said, I have no idea.

He said, never mind. We'll find it. And so he starts looking around the wet kitchen floor at all the tiles. And he notices a tile where it's not sealed.

[2 : 04] And he pulls it up. And under this tile, there is a large concrete slab that he and a worker that are with him, they pull this up and they look inside.

He takes out his torch and he shines it in our septic sewage. And it is full of cockroaches.

I am not exaggerating. Whenever I say that there were hundreds of cockroaches within the view of the light of this torch, many of them were white.

And I said to him, I said, what are the white cockroaches? And he said, oh, those are the babies. He said, from here, the cockroaches are able to get into all of your piping and they can come up in any of the drains in the house.

This is the source of the problem. But I didn't even know where the source of the problem lay.

[3 : 09] I did not even know that there was septic access in our wet kitchen. The root of the problem had been covered by concrete and by tile.

And while the root of the problem was covered up, it grew worse and worse. From this source, the cockroaches could enter our pipes and come up in all of the drains in our house.

Brothers and sisters, Christians often treat our sin like this cockroach problem. We cover it up. We do not deal with it through repentance.

And sin grows under the surface before it eventually finds a way out in other areas of our lives. You see, our passage this morning in Ezra 9 describes a sin problem.

The people had ignored this sin for quite some time. The problem had grown.

[4 : 21] And now the problem was threatening Israel's relationship with the Lord. In our passage, Ezra hears of the sin, responds immediately to the sin with repentance.

And so I want us to see that this morning. And I hope that we can learn from this morning's passage that God's people must avoid sin.

But when we do sin, we must repent and respond to it. And we are able to repent because of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

So let's look together at our passage. Now, our passage this morning has two very clear sections. Verses 1 through to 2 show us where Ezra learns that Israel has provoked God's judgment through their sin.

And then in verses 3 through to 15, Ezra responds to Israel's sin with prayer and repentance. Look in your Bibles again at verses 1 and 2 where we see how the Israelites provoked God's judgment.

[5 : 40] So what we see immediately is that Ezra is informed of Israel's sin. The leaders of Israel, they come to Ezra.

They let him know, they inform him that Israel has violated God's covenant. They inform Ezra because Ezra is a recognized expert of God's law.

Furthermore, Ezra comes from a priestly lineage. We have already seen back in Ezra chapter 7 that Ezra has a heart to study God's law, a heart to obey God's law, and a heart to teach God's law.

And so he is the perfect person to inform of this issue. And we see that what Israel has done provokes God's judgment.

Now you may look at this story and you may hear of this issue and you may wonder, how does Israel provoke God's judgment? Well, look at the passage here.

[6 : 55] Israelite men had violated God's covenant by marrying women who were not in the covenant. Our passage says that they had not separated themselves from the peoples of the land who have their own abominations.

Now, notice the word there, abominations. This is a very strong word. In the NIV it says detestable practices.

This is a very strong word which usually refers to idolatry, idolatrous practices, or sexually explicit relations.

Now we see this and we may ask ourselves the question, okay, I can see that they have violated God's covenant, but why would these mixed marriages be forbidden by God?

Doesn't God love all people? Well, God's covenant with the nation of Israel banned marriages to non-Israelites.

[8 : 14] There are several passages that are worth mentioning in this regard, but Deuteronomy chapter 7 verses 1 through to 4 is representative. Let me turn to that and read it to us briefly.

Deuteronomy 7 verses 1 through to 4 say, When the Lord your God brings you into the land you are entering to possess and drives out before you many nations, the Hittites, Girgashites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites, seven nations larger and stronger than you, and when the Lord your God has delivered them over to you and you have defeated them, then you must destroy them totally.

Make no treaty with them and show them no mercy. Do not intermarry with them. Do not give your daughters to their sons or take their daughters for your sons, for they will turn your children away from following me to serve other gods.

And the Lord's anger will burn against you and will quickly destroy you. The danger in mixed marriages was not a loss of ethnic purity.

The danger in mixed marriages was not a loss of cultural heritage. The danger in mixed marriages was the threat of idolatry.

[9 : 55] No king represents this threat better than King Solomon. Wise and blessed in many ways, the Bible tells us that King Solomon married many unbelieving wives.

This led to him building altars and worship places for the idols of his wives. It even led to Solomon himself worshipping the idols.

The Bible describes the end of Solomon's life by saying that he did evil in the eyes of the Lord. The Bible says, They must take God's people to do what God had commanded them to do.

To become a priestly kingdom. To become a holy nation. They must take God's holiness seriously. I praise God for the songs that Allison led us in worship to sing this morning because they emphasize this theme. We must fear the Lord.

[11 : 36] We must take his holiness seriously. According to 2 Kings chapter 17 and then 2 Kings chapter 25, God sent Israel and Judah into exile because of idolatry.

To allow unbelieving wives and their idolatry into the midst of God's people threatened that God would judge the nation once again in the same way.

What it showed was that God's people lacked covenantal faithfulness and that they were not taking God's holiness seriously.

They were on the verge of falling into the exact same sins that their ancestors had committed which necessitated the Lord removing them from the promised land.

Now once again I want to emphasize in this passage the problem is not ethnicity. King David and Jesus both had ancestors who were not Israelites by ethnicity.

[12:57] We think of people like Ruth the Moabitess or Rahab the Canaanite. These are examples of non-Israelites who trusted in Israel's God and were integrated into Israel.

But in our passage, these foreign wives do not appear to have integrated into Israel. They are still associated with their former identities.

They are still seen as a threat to leading the people away from worshiping the Lord. Even though they are married, the marriage must be annulled.

Israelite holiness depends on their faithfulness to God's covenant. Israelite holiness is a threat to God's covenant. These foreign wives are not a threat because of their ethnicity, but because of their idolatry.

Their idolatry poses an active threat to the faith of their husbands and children. And why is this?

Well, it's simply because of this.

[14:14] Marriage shapes us. My wife and I have been married for 22 years. 23 years at this point.

Jamie, my wife, has shaped me in ways for which I am immensely thankful. Her faithfulness has set an example for me.

Her commitment to the Lord has given me confidence when my faith was weak. I cannot express how different a person I would be without my marriage to Jamie for these past 23 years.

I act in certain ways, and I do not act in certain ways, because I love my wife, and our marriage has shaped me.

Who we date and whom we eventually marry factors into many aspects of our lives.

[15:18] This is one of the reasons that we as Christians must take marriage seriously. We believe that Scripture teaches that marriage is a lifelong covenant between one man and one woman who are both followers of Jesus.

This is why things like premarital counseling are often very important for Christians. It's why many times Christians will encourage couples to start in premarital counseling long before they've even set a date for the marriage.

Because we know how much marriage shapes us. Now as brothers and sisters, we hold each other accountable in our marriages.

As Christians, we cannot allow the low view of marriage that is prevalent in our society because human marriage depicts the relationship of Christ and His church.

It shows the world how Christ loves the church and how the church and how the church honors Christ. And so we must uphold marriage.

[16:39] There are many reasons, practical reasons, why we must uphold marriage. As between a man and a woman together for life.

A man and a woman who both love and honor Jesus. Think of it this way. If you marry someone who does not agree with you on who God is or how we honor God, then it will be hard for you to develop a deep relationship with them.

The things that are most important to you will not be most important to them. The Bible says that husbands should love their wives as Christ loves the church and that wives should submit to their husbands as the church submits to Christ.

But if only one of you knows Christ, what does this mean for your marriage? Either one of you will not love the other as you are supposed to or the other won't submit to the other as the Scripture teaches.

Now you may look at this and you may say, well, it's not that big a deal. I mean, what does it matter? But think about this.

[18:05] If only one of you knows and loves the Lord, what do you do on Sunday mornings? What do your kids do? Where do you take them?

Where do you go? Are you able to raise them in the teaching and admonition of the Lord as we are commanded? If you say that it is not a big deal and that it only affects, you know, what you do on a Sunday morning, then I want to ask a question.

You might want to think about this more deeply. Have you truly submitted every aspect of your life to Christ? because marriage shapes us.

And so for the sake of Christ, we must only be in marriages of believer to unbeliever. Now, the Bible talks about those marriages where someone comes to Christ later or maybe there was a situation early on before you were fully walking with the Lord and maybe you are in a marriage where there is a believer and there is an unbeliever.

The Lord is a gracious God. He will continue to love you and care for you. He is not asking you to annul your marriage because we are in a different situation today.

[19 : 32] We pray that as the New Testament talks about, maybe by your faith in this marriage, which will be difficult, maybe by your faith, the unbelieving spouse will come to the Lord.

But for those who are not yet in marriages, this is something we must take seriously. As a church, the Christian view of marriage is something that we must take seriously.

Now, let's look at the passage again. I mentioned to you that there are two sections. verses 3 through to 15 are the second section where we see Ezra's response to this sin.

Ezra responds with prayer and repentance. I want you to look in your Bibles. We just read this passage a minute ago, but I want you to look here and notice that Ezra confessed both Israel's sin on the one hand, but also God's grace on the other.

Ezra mourns. And during their schedule of worship, he leads the people in a time of communal repentance. Ezra sets an example for the people by reading and teaching the law, even in this prayer.

[20 : 58] And he shows the people an example of how God's people should repent for breaking that law and how they should start to obey it.

I find it fascinating that Ezra highlights the significance of sin and the community's complicity. Notice the words that Ezra uses throughout this prayer of repentance.

29 times, Ezra uses a first-person plural verb or pronoun. We.

Us. Our. Ezra interprets this sin not only as something between an individual and God, not only as something between that individual who married an unbelieving wife and God, but as a representative of sin within the entire community.

Notice that everything that God does in this prayer is gracious and good. But everything that Israel has done, both in their time, the time of Ezra, and in the time of their ancestors, has been sinful.

[22 : 25] Ezra, as that representative priest, he bears the shame of his people. But their shame does not diminish God's honor.

Ezra never blames God. He never says, what kind of a God are you that you would allow these people to do this? What kind of a God are you that you would make this rule on whom they could marry?

No, he confesses their complete guilt before God. Israel has sinned. But as he confesses their complete guilt, he confesses God's complete innocence.

Israel deserves punishment. But he confesses that God has continued to time after time show them mercy and grace.

He confesses that God has every right to punish them again just as he punished them before with the exile. But he begs for God to once more show them mercy.

[23 : 41] What we see in this prayer from Ezra is a beautiful example of repentance. He confesses that God has been good. He confesses that God's people have been sinful.

And he looks to God for forgiveness and a future. Now you may be asking yourselves, why would Ezra need to repent?

The narrative makes it clear that before chapter 9 verse 1, Ezra was unaware of this situation.

Furthermore, Ezra did not marry an unbelieving wife.

Ezra had been in Babylon when all of these things happened. So why would Ezra need to repent for other people's sins? Now, on the one hand, I think that we can all understand this.

So think about it this way. When one member of our family makes a mistake, it can bring shame on our entire family.

[24 : 52] How many of us remember our childhood days when we would go to a friend's house and our parents would tell us not to do anything stupid because we would make our parents look like bad parents?

How many of us have told our kids that same thing? Right? It's just what we do. We understand from one level that whenever one member of our community makes a mistake or in this situation sins, it can bring shame on the entire community.

So we can understand communal shame before God because of the sin of some within God's people. The same would be true for most of our churches. when a Christian unfortunately gets caught in a scandal, we often immediately ask the question, hey, what church do they attend?

Because we associate that individual with their church and we might think differently about that church because of the sins of that individual.

[26 : 04] But Ezra's role is more than this. I've mentioned that Ezra comes from a priestly family. By bearing the sins of God's people before God, he is serving in a priestly role.

He is mediating between God and God's people. He brings the sins of the people before the Lord and pleads for the Lord to bring restoration to his people.

He prays that the Lord will withhold his judgment against them and that the Lord will bring about repentance among the people. Ezra serves as Israel's priest, should have served in this situation. And so he leads the people in repentance and brings their sins to God. Something that we see in this passage very clearly through this prayer is that true repentance requires more than an apology. When we sin, we need to mourn our sin. We need to meditate on the depth and history of the sin and bring it to God.

[27 : 26] We need to feel sorrow because of what our sin has done to God, to others, and to ourselves. Even if nobody ever finds out about your sin, you should feel sorrow that it corrupts your conscience and your soul.

And so we see here that the appropriate response to our sin is more than just telling God that we are sorry. What we need is godly sorrow.

In 1 Corinthians, the Apostle Paul had called out the Corinthian church for various sins. He reflects on this, and in 2 Corinthians chapter 7 verses 8 through to 11, he says, For even if I grieved you with my letter, I don't regret it.

And I regretted it since I saw that the letter grieved you yet only for a while. I now rejoice, not because you were grieved, but because your grief led to repentance.

For you were grieved as God willed, so that you did not experience any loss from us. For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, but worldly grief produces death.

[28 : 57] For consider how much diligence this very thing, this grieving as God wills, has produced in you. What a desire to clear yourselves.

What indignation, what fear, what deep longing, what zeal, what justice. They had a sorrow over their sin that led to true repentance.

repentance. That repentance in 1 Corinthians led to growth in the gospel as they understood more deeply what the Lord had done for them through the gospel.

And so whenever we look at Ezra 9, we see a true sorrow on behalf of God's people that leads to true repentance.

repentance. When presented with Israel's sin, Ezra mourned, Ezra returned to the Lord in repentance. Brothers and sisters, we must avoid sin.

[30 : 06] But when we do, we must repent and respond. And we can do this because of the gospel. The gospel tells us, as we have proclaimed over and over this morning, that Jesus Christ, our Lord, lived a perfect life of obedience.

The gospel tells us that he died on the cross in the place of sinners and that he rose from the dead to defeat both the power of sin and the power of death.

We often emphasize the power of the gospel to forgive our sin. this is true and good. But in Christ, all of our sin has been removed and our relationship with God has been restored.

In our passage, Ezra served as a priest bringing Israel's sins before God. In the same way, Jesus is our perfect high priest.

In a recent book which you may have read called Gentle and Lowly, Pastor Dane Ortlund says this, and I quote, Jesus is the high priest to end all high priests.

[31 : 33] He has made the final atoning sacrifice to completely cover the sins of his people so that they are provided for to the uttermost.

End quote. It is important to know both that God has saved us, but also to experience the power of that salvation.

We need to both know good theology, but also to experience the benefits of the gospel and knowing that good theology.

God's grace in the gospel empowers us to experience forgiveness but also to live out our salvation. Pastor Heath Lambert says, quote, forgiving grace is only one part of the power Jesus gives. God's powerful grace also gives us strength to live in new ways.

[32 : 41] forgiveness for giving grace is wonderful and essential, but sinners need more than forgiveness. It's not enough that our record of debt is paid.

We also need grace to live like Jesus. We need grace that changes us so that we can be like him in holiness and love.

End quote. those in Ezra's day could repent and they could respond to sin. In the face of this sin, they were able to remove their sin before God by performing certain rituals, certain sacrifices. But every time they sinned, they had to go back and do it again. The Old Testament shows us that God faithfully forgave their sin over and over and over again as they came to him. But brothers, you and I, brothers and sisters, you and I are in a different situation today. We have the gospel of Jesus Christ.

[33 : 58] We know Christ's finished work on the cross. We know that Jesus has defeated the power of sin completely.

Jesus has paid the full payment for our sin. And the grace that flows from these truths should empower us to repent of our sin, but also empower us to respond to our sin by living faithfully, by living holy lives, by being able to sacrifice of our worldly desires for the sake of following him. Because of the gospel of God's grace, we can experience the power of the gospel. We can cut sin out of our lives, and we can live joyfully in Christ.

Christ. So how does this look like in our day-to-day lives? Let me consider a rampant sin in our community.

Pornography. How should you respond if you look at pornography yet again after committing to stop looking at pornography over and over and over again in the past?

[35 : 31] First, you must truly repent. You must turn to the Lord in prayer. You must mourn over the depths of your sin.

Mourn over how that sin has brought shame upon you, how it has dishonored God. Mourn over how that sin has hurt other people, if nothing more than devaluing people as you objectify them through that pornography.

Mourn over how it has hurt your relationships with others, how it has caused you to turn in on yourself, and to turn away from God, and mourn what that sin has done to your soul, how it has seared your conscience, so that you see it less and less as the evil that it is.

Turn to the Lord in prayer, and mourn over the depths of your sin. Take full responsibility for your sin.

Notice how Ezra, he does not say, well, we tried, or, you know, I made a mistake again. No, he takes full responsibility for the depths of the sins of his people, even whenever he personally was not complicit in that sin.

[37 : 05] sin. There are several reasons why someone might say that they look at pornography, but regardless of those reasons, recognize that you still chose to indulge in that sin once again.

Confess that you are unable to deliver yourself from that sin, and confess that God has been merciful to you many times in the past.

I love the depiction of Ezra here. He confesses that this is not their first time to commit this sin. They as a people have done it over and over and over again.

He confesses that God has been gracious many times before, and then he pleads for God, be gracious once more. Confess your guilt and admit that you do not deserve God's mercy, mercy. But then remember 1 John 1 verse 9. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and righteous to forgive us of our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

[38 : 22] And then confess the truths of the gospel. Confess that your sin has been paid for fully at the cross. Confess that because of Jesus you have been declared righteous.

Confess that this righteousness is not because of anything you have done, but because of everything that Jesus has done for you. Confess that God has done everything necessary to forgive your sin and to empower you to live for him.

Meditate on the truth that there is no sin that can outweigh the depth of God's grace for you because of the gospel.

Turn your heart away from this sin and turn to Christ. Ask that God will give you the grace needed to live free of pornography from now until Christ returns.

And then respond. There are various things you can do. I mean, there are apps. Put covenant eyes on your phone. Ask someone to be your accountability partner.

[39 : 42] Talk to a friend about your struggle and tell them how you desire to live free of pornography. Come to your pastors and elders and ask them to pray for you, to commit to keep you accountable in this sin.

Walk by the Spirit and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. And while you do these things, remember that you are not saved because of your obedience, but you are saved because of the gospel.

But through this gospel, you have been given the grace necessary to flee from sin and respond in faith.

This is how repentance and faith looks like in our day-to-day struggles with sin. We are constantly repenting and believing the truths of the gospel.

We are constantly preaching the gospel to ourselves that we are sinners in need of God's grace, but that God has done everything for us in the gospel.

[40 : 57] In Ezra's day, the people were longing for a rebuilt Jerusalem. They longed for a day when God's people would truly keep his covenant and they would truly live as his people.

Brothers and sisters, we too are longing for a new Jerusalem. We are longing for the day when the Lord will return. We are longing for a day when people of every tongue and nation and tribe and all the peoples of Malaysia are worshiping the Lord in his covenant, in the new covenant.

And so as we long for that new Jerusalem, we need to live lives of renewal, today. As Ezra is bringing this sin before the Lord and seeking that the people have renewed lives so that they might rightly rebuild Jerusalem, so we must live in repentance and faith and renewal, repenting and responding to sin, declaring God's holiness, declaring how God alone can make us holy, resting in knowing that Christ has promised that he will deliver us and he will make all things new.

Sin has been defeated for us in Christ, but we live in that already-not-yet time. as such, we must avoid sin, but when we do, we must repent and respond, and I hope we have seen this morning that we can respond because of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Let's pray. Amen. Father, what a morning to take the Lord's Supper together.

[43 : 08] What a morning to remember the depths of our own sin, to recognize that we as a church are a sinful people, to recognize that we have sinned over and over and over again, but also to proclaim that you have been gracious and merciful time and time again.

Father, as Ezra led the people to repent, to turn to you, to do the things that they needed to do, to perform the rituals that they needed to perform, to find forgiveness and to live within your covenant, I pray that we as new covenant people, will remember that you have done everything for us.

You have given us the perfect sacrifice. Your blood has cleansed us from all sin. And so because of this, we can live rightly for you.

So help us, Lord, by your grace and by your spirit. Help us to constantly live lives where we repent of our sin but turn to you in faith.

And by your grace, help us to pursue holiness as individuals and as a church. And to remember that that only comes as a gift because of your grace and mercy.

[44 : 50] Through our Lord Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray, Amen.