

Seek repentance, not accommodation

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Preacher: Brian King

- [0 : 00] Let's pray. Heavenly Father, none of us are fit to be stewards of what you have given us.
- I am certainly not fit to be a steward of your word. And yet, Father, thank you that you are so gracious. You have given us your word, and you have given me this privilege to be able to bring this word to all of us this morning.
- And I just pray, Lord, that we would take it seriously, that your Holy Spirit would be working in my heart and our hearts all together collectively so that as we just sang, we would want to live to please you, we want to follow you, we want to give you all the glory and all the praise and all the honour.
- So help us to listen well this morning. We pray all this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.
- Now, Tom had just dropped his elderly father for a routine hospital appointment when he suddenly had a headache.
- He had been getting some migraines recently, but this one made him feel a little dizzy. So he thought he may as well get it checked out. As he was about to lie on the table, he thought, oh, I'm okay.
- [1 : 17] I can walk and talk. This is normal. There shouldn't be any real issue with me. Then he saw his blood pressure rising. And his arms and legs going numb.
- But it still didn't occur to him to assign any significance to that. Only when a neurologist burst in and told him, we're putting you on a helicopter straight away to the nearest big hospital.
- Dr. So-and-so will be there to attend to you immediately. He's the best neurosurgeon in the state. Did Tom finally realize, wait a minute, helicopter?
- Best neurosurgeon? Surgery required straight away? That's when he realized something significant had gone wrong with him. A brain aneurysm, if you must know.
- And radical action was necessary. And I think to understand what Ezra 10 is really all about this morning, that's how we need to think.
- [2 : 21] You see, this is probably the most difficult chapter of the book. I wonder if you felt that way when you heard it read. It's hard, and it seems harsh.
- And as I was looking at it this week, I was thinking I should have asked Dr. Carl Essary to preach on this instead. But if we understand something significant has gone wrong with God's people, and radical action is necessary, then I think that goes a long way in helping us to make sense of this passage.
- So what is it that has gone wrong? Well, in the Bible, the answer is almost always sin, isn't it? That's the problem.
- But our problem is that we don't think of sin as something very significant anymore. Sin is a word that is not taken very seriously in our time. It simply becomes a word for hot vacation spots.
- Just think of how Las Vegas is known as Sin City, for example. Or it's simply now a description on dessert menus to describe how tasty the dessert is.

- [3 : 33] You know, this delicious lava cake is absolutely sinful. But make no mistake, sin might occasionally feel tasty, but it is bad for you and I.
- It is a deadly and dangerous force. It threatens your entire relationship with God. It keeps you from being renewed in the image of your Creator. It comes at you not from the outside, but from the inside.
- Like a spiritual python slowly strangling your soul. And that is why God takes it seriously. He knows sin will murder you.
- And by this time in Ezra chapter 10, God's people are taking it seriously. Like Tom, they have come to the realization that something has gone significantly wrong with them.
- They have their diagnosis. In verse 2, a guy named Shachaniah steps forward and he says this, We have been unfaithful to our God by marrying foreign women from the peoples around us.
- [4 : 43] We've been unfaithful. We've broken faith. Now in doing so, Shachaniah is merely echoing what the leaders told Ezra last week, back in chapter 9 verse 2.
- He's saying what Ezra himself will directly say later in 10 verse 10. We have broken faith. That is the wrong.
- We have betrayed our covenant partner, God himself. You see, this word unfaithful gets to the root of how serious this offense is.
- Because if we go back to Exodus 19 and 20, we will understand how hurtful unfaithfulness is. Now these are foundational chapters in Israel's history.
- Back in Exodus 19, God is on a mountaintop and he's saying to his people, I've taken you out of bondage. I've carried you on eagle's wings.
- [5 : 49] You're my treasure. You're my beloved. And you're going to be my people in my promised land. Oh, listen to how God puts it at the beginning of Exodus 20.
- I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me.
- Notice what God says. God is saying, how did our relationship begin? It begins with grace. It begins with, I've rescued you. It begins with, I have freed you in order to relate to you. I've brought you into a covenant relationship with myself.
- And it is this relationship that shows us why the very first of the Ten Commandments exists. You shall have no other gods before me.
- [6 : 49] How can we go to other gods when this is our God? So, whenever we go and give our allegiance and affection somewhere else, it is striking at the very heart of this covenant relationship with God.
- We are not just breaking a rule. We are breaking faith. And the way these Israelites broke faith in particular is through interfaith marriage.
- Look again at verse 2. We've been unfaithful by marrying foreign women. Now, as Dr. Kau pointed out last week, the issue is not marriage between different ethnicities.
- I mean, you just need to look elsewhere in the Old Testament to Boaz and Ruth, for example, to know that is not the issue. No, the problem here is that they have chosen to enter into the most intimate human relationship with those who would necessarily compromise their relationship with God.
- They are marrying those who do not worship God and will pull them in the opposite direction. I mean, just imagine the conversations in such a household.
- [8 : 18] Dear, it's the seventh year and God says our land should observe a Sabbath to the Lord so that the poor should get food from it. And the reply comes, Honey, why should we?

Inflation is rising. Food is at the premium. I didn't sign up for this law. Yahweh is not my God. Or, dear, it's time to instruct the children in the Torah.

Not now, honey. What is more important is the mad institution. Need to know their numbers to survive in the real world. See, it would be difficult to continually live in such a situation without compromising, wouldn't it?

And just imagine if household after household in Israel were all like these. It would threaten the sanctity of the entire covenant community.

In fact, it would undermine God's mission altogether because they have compromised with the very people they were supposed to be a witness to. They would lose their very identity.

[9 : 30] So, something has gone significantly wrong. But at least God's people now recognise it. That's always the first step, isn't it?

Acknowledging something has gone wrong. A recent study in a medical journal suggests that four out of five people ignore the symptoms of an impending heart attack.

But when we acknowledge something is off, that is one step towards getting healed. I wonder if this morning there is some of us who are in denial.

We are actively persisting in some wrongdoing, something we know that is not pleasing to God, something that hurts his heart. We try to pretend it is not there or we downplay it by saying, oh, it's not that bad.

But the problem is that these things have a way of mounting up until they become overwhelming. And the longer we delay facing up to them, the longer we deny ourselves the treatment we so badly need.

[10 : 42] So this morning, if you are breaking faith, God asks you to listen especially carefully. But what are we to do when we come face to face with our sin?

Well, the Bible says, repent. That is, turn away from your sin and turn to God. That's the meaning of repentance. But then the next question comes, how do we know if we are truly repenting?

And that's where Ezra 10 comes in. Today, Ezra 10 will help us identify some of the marks of true repentance. And so, with that, let's get into the text properly now and let's discover what those are.

And here is the first mark. True repentance expresses sorrowful conviction. True repentance expresses sorrowful conviction.

As Ezra digests news of this unfaithfulness, verse 1, it literally brings him to his knees. We find him praying and confessing, weeping and throwing himself down.

[11 : 56] And Ezra lies prostrate before the house of God. You see, sin is always ultimately God's word in orientation. While sin can hurt other people, and we need to ask their forgiveness when we sin against them, sin is first and foremost against God himself.

Even when we're not consciously trying to offend God by our sin, even when in the moment of our sin, God is the very last thing on our minds, we are still sinning against him.

After all, whenever we sin, we are implicitly saying to God, we don't trust what you say. We know better than you. For example, whenever we lie, we are saying to God, we are certain lying is better than your way of truthfulness.

Or when we envy, we are saying to God, we are certain you haven't given me all that I need to be content in this moment. We know better than you.

But true repentance understands the gravity of our sin and feels its wake. a truly repentant person sheds tears, not because they have been caught in the act, or simply because they must suffer the consequences, but because they know they have not treated our good God in the way he deserves.

[13 : 35] And Ezra, by falling to his knees and weeping, sets the tone. Now, he did it last week by his prayers. And this week, by the power of his spiritual example, he leads others to sorrowful conviction as well.

I mean, just look at verse 1 again. Without needing to lecture, he helps men, women, and even children fall to their knees as well. Like Ezra, they too see their sin as being against God.

look again at the way Shekinah speaks in verse 2. We have been unfaithful to our God. Or look down at verse 9, where all the people gather once again before God's house, distressed by the occasion.

Their environment mirrors their inner condition. It is raiding, so it's almost as if the sky is weeping along together with them. Or look back again at 10 verse 3, where mention is made of those who fear or literally tremble at the commands of our God.

You see, this weeping and this confessing is not something that a rigid reformer is forcing upon the people. Instead, it arises from a deep conviction brought about by the law, that is, the word of God.

[15 : 04] It is the Holy Spirit wielding his sword. And that is how God often brings about spiritual conviction. It is through his word exposing our current condition.

And we know that conviction is genuine because their spokesman, Shekinah, is very specific in his admission. We saw it already, haven't we?

He didn't just say, we have sinned. He says, we have gone wrong by marrying these unbelieving wives. You see, when we are specific in our admissions of wrongdoing, that quite likely means we are honestly facing up to what we have done.

We are not beating around the bush or being evasive. We are owning our actual wrongdoing. So, here is a question for us, myself included, this morning.

When was the last time we felt really convicted by God's word over our sin? When was the last time we trembled at God's word?

[16 : 24] Now, conviction is not merely having head knowledge of what the Bible says about sin. It is not just an awareness of what God says. Neither is conviction merely dramatic emotional expressions like crying bucket loads or hitting the wall repeatedly in anguish.

And conviction is not the same as condemnation. Condemnation leads to self-hatred and causes us to run away from God.

But conviction is when we hate not ourselves but the sin. when we hate the hurt it causes to God and it causes us to run to God for help.

That is conviction. And spiritual conviction from God is life giving. As Proverbs 28 13 says on the screen, whoever conceals their sins does not prosper, but the one who confesses and renounces them finds mercy.

Indeed, Pastor John Piper helpfully distinguishes between a superficial kind of conviction and a genuine kind of conviction. The superficial kind of conviction, he says, expresses guilt and sorrow for sinning but quietly assumes that the sin is going to happen again probably very soon.

[17 : 52] I might be sorrowful over looking at porn, but I know I will do it again. I might be sorrowful over drinking too much with my friends, but I'll probably do it the next time I'm out.

I might be sorrowful over getting excessively angry at my kids, but it's going to happen again tomorrow. And Piper says this kind of conviction is superficial because it is an excuse to be fatalistic about our sins.

We feel bad about them, but we treat them as inevitable and so we don't bother to go to God about them. But Piper says the genuine kind of conviction is where you also do feel sorrow, but your hatred of the sin is so real that you have every intention as you confess of making war on that sin.

You aim by the power of the Holy Spirit to defeat it. you don't automatically surrender because you do fear the Lord, which, by the way, is not just an old covenant thing.

Look quickly at Jeremiah 32 verse 40 with me on the screen and you will see that even in the new covenant right at the end of the sentence, God promises to put the fear of the Lord into our hearts so that we will turn to him.

[19 : 23] True spiritual conviction drives us to God. And that brings us to the second mark of true repentance. Secondly, true repentance takes radical action.

True repentance takes radical action. You see, we can tremble at God's word. We can have sorrow. But according to the Bible, that just stops short of true repentance.

True repentance is not just sorrowful conviction. It's bigger than that. It takes action. And that's exactly what the people did.

Look at verses 3 and 4 with me. Now let us make a covenant before our God to send away all these women and their children in accordance with the counsel of my Lord and of those who fear the commands of our God.

Let it be done according to the law. Rise up. This matter is in your hands. We will support you, so take courage and do it.

[20 : 31] We are going to make a pledge, the people said. We are going to make a serious commitment. And this is what it will involve. It will mean separating ourselves from our wives.

radical. Now that is radical. And notice that this suggestion comes from the grassroots. This is not a command from Ezra.

Rather, the people simply took stock of where they were at and they said, we are not just sad and convicted. We know we must take radical action.

Now this immediately raises some questions for us. The remedy here sounds like mass divorce. I mean, how can that be? There is no doubt that figuring out what is happening here exactly is difficult.

And here is how some resolve this. One possibility is suggested by the book of Malachi. It seems as if during this time, the Israelites were already pretty lax in their attitude to divorce.

[21 : 41] So it's possible that they had by this time already openly divorce their Jewish wives in order to marry their new foreign wives. So their previous sin means that they now have no properly good options to move forward.

In a fallen world, this is the best remedy available to them. It's not ideal, but it's the only one available. So that's one possibility.

Another suggestion, which I think is quite plausible, and I slightly prefer, is this. A few commentators have observed that the word translated married in this chapter is not the customary word for marriage in Hebrew.

So it could be what we have here is not technically marriages. These Israelites might not be married in any proper sense of the word because these marriages were actually illegal.

It's like someone having a family in Cebu but leading a double life by secretly marrying his mistress here in Kuching. And this is supported by the fact that the word translated foreign in verse 2 is usually translated as adulteress in the book of Proverbs.

[23 : 00] So it's quite possible what is happening here is not so much the dissolution of marriages but calling out its sham nature in the first place and that would still be consistent with the Jewish law.

So that could be what's happening but it is hard to be absolutely certain and none of these options present a solution that neatly ties up every question.

For instance some of us might want to know what happened to these women and children. The text doesn't tell us.

But I think I can take comfort when I look at both the cultural and the biblical contexts. Culturally speaking, we know that ladies in such situations during that time would naturally have returned to their father's household.

So they were not simply cast out into the cold. But perhaps more importantly, biblically speaking, we can remember the story of Hagar and Ishmael back in Genesis 16 and 21.

[24 : 11] I wonder if you remember that story. Just like here, because of the sin of others, namely Abraham and Sarai, Hagar and Ishmael are forcibly sent away.

They are victims in a sense. But in that story, God makes clear he has not forgotten them. He still takes care of them.

So it seems to me that whatever happens, we can be sure God will look after these women and children. But Ezra 10 is not focused on that. And so what is Ezra 10 concerned about?

Well, the very fact that the solution being put forward is so shocking seems to me to be exactly the point. Ezra 10 wants us to focus on the fact that the action taken is radical in nature.

And so the point is not so much that we must follow exactly what they did. We are not under the same covenantal arrangements as national Israel back in the Old Testament. In fact, in 1 Corinthians 7, Paul encourages those in a marriage with an unbelieving spouse not to divorce them.

[25 : 31] But the point here is to follow the heart behind the actions. Repentance takes radical action. As Jesus himself will say centuries later, if your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off.

If your eye causes you to stumble, pluck it out. take radical action against your sin. And this is also seen in the way the community gathers.

In verses 7 and 8, we see that everyone must show up. If not, the penalties are serious. For one thing, your property will be confiscated if you don't.

But perhaps even more seriously, you would yourself become an exile among the exiles. you would be effectively banished from the covenant community and become just like those wives, foreigners.

Once again, the seriousness of what is about to take place is underlined. The radicalness of these actions that will be undertaken cannot be understated.

[26 : 44] And when the people finally gather verse 10, Ezra once again names their guilt and in verse 11, he urges decisive action. Now, honour the Lord, he says, the God of your ancestors and do his will.

Separate yourselves from the peoples around you and from your foreign wives. And that helps us see the nature of the radical action we have to perform whenever we repent.

In the end, it is about separating ourselves from what is unholy. Or to put it more positively, it is about setting ourselves apart wholly for a holy God.

Now, that is the nature of true repentance. But radical action needs to be paired with patient wisdom. Look at how Ezra reacts to Shekinah's original proposal in verses 5 and 6.

He recognises that he is in an unprecedented situation here. This proposal is a brand new one. And while the law, specifically Deuteronomy 24, regulated what should happen in the event of a divorce, it offered no guidance or prescription for those seeking a divorce.

[28 : 07] And so Ezra cannot just look up a Bible verse and say, you're right, that's what we should do. Or, you're wrong, that is not what we should do. He can't do that. He can only reason and make sure what is being proposed here is not contrary to God's law.

It's not contrary to God's will. And so Ezra knows he needs wisdom. And that's why he makes sure in verse 5, first of all, that there is a clear consensus from the community.

And that's why verse 6, he continues to mournfully pray and meditate. And then look at the process that is set up in verses 14 to 17.

Ezra recognizes that the magnitude of the people's sin means that it cannot be easily resolved in a day or two. In that, given that there are so many cases to decide, and some of them might be complicated, it would be unwise to be hasty, to draw premature conclusions, and bring about a result of injustice.

And so, he suggests appointing the appropriate people to carefully carry out the investigations. And that's exactly what the people did, verse 16.

[29 : 27] Notice it took several months to carry out. Radical action was paired with patient wisdom. They need not be opposed to one another.

this week, I was just chatting to someone about what it really means for him to obey God's command to be more loving.

And I'm sure he was earnest, he is earnest, but we just needed to chat and take some time to work out what were the concrete steps he had to take in order to obey God's word in this area.

And that is just one little example of wanting to take radical action for God and yet needing patient wisdom to know what are the right steps to take.

But there is one more crucial ingredient of repentance. And so thirdly, repentance clings to hope amidst the cost. Repentance clings to hope amidst the cost.

[30 : 37] the priests. In verses 18 to 44, for the very last time in the book of Ezra, we find a list. But this list of names is different.

This time it names all those who have broken faith. And once again, it is the priests that are named first. They are the spiritual leaders, and so like it or not, when they do wrong, they too have to take the lead in bearing the shame.

whenever we sin, there is a cost, and we have to bear them. And perhaps that's how the priests and the others chose to bear the cost, in this way, by having it on the record.

They know an investigation has been done, they know due process has been followed, they know they have been found guilty of the charge, and they complied with the verified findings.

They didn't dispute it, they put it on the record. They accepted the shame it brought them. And perhaps the suggestion of the Old Testament theologian John Goldingay is also right.

[31 : 48] He tells a story of how when he was a boy on a family trip, his father got frustrated because they got stuck behind a slow-moving truck, and so he decided to overtake, even though there was clearly no overtaking line in the middle of the road.

and sure enough, there was another car coming as he tried to overtake, and they crashed into it. Thankfully, no one was hurt, but his father was taken to court, fined, and the incident, along with the penalty points, was put on his driving record.

Now, after a certain number of years, you can apply for that to be removed from the record if you have done nothing else wrong, of course. And so Goldigay asked his dad why he didn't apply to do this.

His answer? Son, to remind myself of my past mistake, and also to remind you. And perhaps that is also what is going on here.

Perhaps the priests wanted this to be recorded as a reminder to themselves, and to others. And perhaps they saw the positive side as well.

[33 : 02] If you look at verse 19, and the footnote of verse 44, you would notice that these priests and these men carried through with their radical action.

They sent away their wives. They did what was asked of them. There was genuine repentance. And so perhaps they wanted to use this also as a teaching moment.

for ultimately, despite the cause, true repentance is founded on hope.

Come back with me one more time, back to verse 2 for a moment. And I want you to notice what Shekinah says. We have been unfaithful to our God by marrying foreign women from the peoples around us.

But in spite of this, there is still hope for Israel. There is still hope. Israel knew, based on God's record and character, that God was full of mercy.

[34 : 09] And we know too today, based on what God has done in human history, that there is hope. You see, we are all guilty.

We all have broken faith. And we are utterly deserving of God's wrath. We could never complain that any punishment we receive is not justified. Our record clearly shows we are in the wrong.

And yet, there is still hope. Why? Because God has intervened. Because God came in the person of Jesus to die on the cross for us so that we do not have to fear the wrath of God.

He has taken our punishment in our place. He absorbed the cost. He has cleaned up our record. And that is why God wants us to repent.

Because repenting is about running to God and taking hold of the cross of Christ. Sometimes we hear the word repent and we associate it with fire and brimstone street preachers screaming about how the whole world is going to hell.

[35 : 22] And yes, it is true that the word repent is associated with judgment. But in the end, repentance is all about love. Remember, to repent is literally to turn.

Repenting isn't just about stopping an action but still facing the same direction. No, it is about turning from what brings about God's judgment.

It is about turning from what is bad for us to what is ultimately satisfying and joyful. It is about turning and changing direction so that we can face God.

And what do we see when we see God's face? We see God shining his face upon us because he has sent his son for us.

Now, is that not love in action? When God causes us to repent, he isn't being a killjoy. He is being a father who wants to see his children enjoy the best he can give.

[36 : 29] And that is why it is not anger in the voice of God that says repent. It is love. This week, I listened to a great story of repentance.

It's a true story. There was a young woman who had a tough life and she made some poor choices which led her down a path of abuse to the point where she even had to give up her child.

This ended with her being put in prison for drug possession. But she was eventually released and came to know the Lord in a profound way.

But one day she approached her pastor and she said, I need to go back to the police. And the pastor asked, why?

She replied, I need to turn myself in because there is another previous warrant for my arrest and there was a court date and I missed it and I've been completely avoiding it ever since.

[37 : 37] Now, no one had ever said anything about this to her. But under the influence of the Holy Spirit, she was convicted. As she lined up her thoughts and her heart with God, she felt that this radical action was necessary.

She felt she needed to make right what was wrong. And for her, she felt that man turning herself in. She was truly repenting.

And so the pastor got in touch with the police to get some advice. And the police captain came back and said, I've looked into the matter, I found the records, and you know what?

the case has been dismissed, and the warrant has been revoked. Your friend is free. And isn't that an amazing picture of God's grace?

It was God's kindness that led this young woman to repentance. And as she repented, she found herself experiencing more of God's kindness towards her.

[38 : 44] She found herself free. And isn't that an amazing picture of the gospel? We think repentance is about boxing ourselves in, but God says true repentance is really about freedom.

And so today let us hear God's voice. Our God is a God who is in control. Our God is a God who moves hearts. Our God is a God who can overcome opposition. These are all lessons that the book of Ezra have been teaching us.

And our God is a God who is utterly committed to the reformatory of his people. He is a God who has sent his priests to cleanse us, to sanctify us, and to bring us back to him.

So let us not harden our hearts today, but turn to him in repentance and faith. So I'm going to give us a moment of silence now for us to do exactly that, and then we will pray.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

[40 : 20] menite passage, but we pray that you have spoken to us through this passage today. We pray, Father, that if we are in denial about our sin, we will stop doing that.

We will be honest before you and admit specifically where we have gone wrong in our lives. But Father, we pray that as your Holy Spirit brings conviction, we pray that that would in turn help us to turn, not away from you, but to you, to the God who is good, to the God who is gracious, to the God who is all merciful.

Thank you, Lord, for the great high priest we have in the Lord Jesus that enables us to draw near to you. But in the meantime, help us to take radical action. Maybe we don't know what that radical action is. Help us to talk over with other Christians that we trust, to know what steps we have to take, what wisdom we require so that we might live a life that is pleasing to you, a life that is ready to follow you, and a life that is ready to glorify you.

Thank you, Lord. Please help us to obey your word today. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.