



Sermon Notes

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Title: The Peril & Pain of Pagan Partners

Series: #9 of "The Post-Exilic Community"

1. Ezra learns of the problem – Ezra 9:1-2
 - a. Ezra is probably traveling around the region visiting Governors, etc. with the King's letters. (cf. Ez. 8:36)
 - b. Upon his return to Jerusalem, about 3-4 months, he is presented with the problem of intermarriage. It's crucial that we note that this is not a racial issue but a covenant matter. The people of God called upon to be "*distinct*" and "*different*" from the nations around them.
 - c. Three dangerous instances of the power of "*romantic*" seduction.
 - i. Balaam 1 & 2:
 1. Balak, King of Moab, invites Balaam to curse Israel; this does not succeed and instead ends up as a blessing upon God's people. (cf. Numbers 22-25)
 2. Balaam returns with the counsel to seduce, thereby diluting, the Israelites with Moabite and Midianite women. This subtle attack was more effective and resulted in a divine plague that killed 24,000 Jews as punishment for their harlotry. (cf. Numbers 25, 31:8)
 - ii. Samaritans 1 & 2:
 1. The Samaritans approach Zerubbabel to join with him in the construction of the Temple arguing that they too worship the same god. However, Zerubbabel rightly refuses and maintains the legitimate separation that exists between the two peoples. (cf. Ez. 4:1-5)
 2. The Jews then proceed to intermingle with the Samaritans, taking their daughters in marriage. This places the covenant community, a mere remnant anymore, at risk of losing God's grace. (cf. Ez. 9)
 - iii. Solomon despite his incomparable wisdom married with foreign wives (a total of 700 wives and 300 concubines) and allowed his heart to turn after other gods. (cf. 1 Kings 11:1-13)
2. Ezra's response to the problem – Ezra 9:3-15, 10:1
 - a. Ezra tears his clothes, bows his knees and spreads his hands. He grieves. Then he prays. He notes (v. 8) the small window, the brief moment of God's grace, to bring back the remnant. They are "*pegged*," to the ground as a tent or to the wall for hanging something, a moment of being fixed in a history of a stormy tempest. Note that the Temple and its worship was a wall (v. 9) to them in Judah & Jerusalem.
 - b. Seeing this public display of grief moves the heart of some of the people and they gather around Ezra. (cf. Ez. 10:1) They too mourned the sin of the nation.
3. The problem of sin and the difficult challenge to address it within our culture.
 - a. Our society and we have become desensitized to sin. When we see someone responding biblically to sin, we turn and cast stones at them accusing them of intolerance, "*who are you to judge?*"
 - b. Recognize our sin through the lens of the Bible. Our conscience is only reliable to the degree that it is informed by scripture. Sin, "*chatah*" in Hebrew, means "*to miss the mark*" taken from the illustration of an arrow missing the mark – God's righteousness. It is therefore the disobedience of the will of God. To know sin we must know the Word of God and understand His will in our lives. Being in the Bible more than the TV will keep us aware of what God wants and the excruciating toll sin has upon our lives.
 - i. Many people fool themselves by defining sin by how they feel, leading many into hazardous pitfalls. It is neither our "*feelings*" nor our beliefs that define sin; it is the revealed will of God.

- c. Mourn over our sin. Listen to a few voices on the subject of sin...
 - i. RC Sproul has said, *"It is partly because sin does not provoke our own wrath, that we do not believe that sin provokes the wrath of God."*
 - ii. Martyn Lloyd Jones said, *"I cannot help feeling that the final explanation of the state of the Church today is a defective sense of sin and a defective doctrine of sin. They have failed to see that they must be convicted of sin before they can ever experience joy. They do not like the doctrine of sin. They dislike it intensely and they object to its being preached. They want joy apart from the conviction of sin. But that is impossible; it can never be obtained. ... Conviction is an essential preliminary to true conversion."*
 - iii. Charles Spurgeon observed, *"The old-fashioned sense of sin is despised.... The consequence is that men leap into religion, and then leap out again. Unhumbled they came to the church, unhumbled they remained in it, and unhumbled they go from it."*
 - iv. There is hope for those that mourn. Is. 66:2 says, *"For all those things My hand has made, and all those things exist," says the LORD. "But on this one will I look: On him who is poor and of a contrite spirit, and who trembles at My word."* Followed up by Jesus in the beatitudes in Mt. 5:4, *"Blessed are those that mourn, for they shall be comforted."*
- d. Confess our sin before God without excuse. When we confess our sin we acknowledge that God is just & right, we agree with His view of sin. It then throws us upon God's unmerited mercy based upon our atonement in the sacrifice of Jesus alone. When we make excuses, we are contending that God's law is less than just in that it did not provide for our unique caveat. We don't read in our story any of the "typical" excuses one would expect like there weren't enough women for the number of men, etc.
- 4. The proclamation and the putting away. Although God detests divorce (cf. Mal. 2:16), in this case the purity, and thus the future, of the nation was at stake. Divorce was permitted under the Law (cf. Dt. 24:1-4) in certain circumstances; this later became exaggerated by legalist Jews and Christ then addresses it in Mt. 5:32 and Mt. 19:8-9 restricting it to sexual infidelity.
 - a. The people respond by drawing close to Ezra, and then Shechaniah proposes a public covenant to put away the pagan wives (v. 2-3) and then urges Ezra to act because it is his responsibility but that they are with him. They agree to have a mandatory assembly 3 days later; all of the Jews are within a 30-50 mile radius of Jerusalem. (v. 6-10) Recognizing that this is a big problem that is going to take some time, they adjourned the meeting for a second which lasted 3 months so that they could study each of the 111 cases listed and determine what should be done. (v. 16-44)
- 5. What is "true repentance"? True repentance requires both genuine sorrow for our sin and prompt action to put right our sin.
 - a. Genuine sorrow is first and foremost toward God, Ps. 51:4, *"Against You, You only, have I sinned, and done this evil in Your sight – that You may be found just when You speak, and blameless when You judge."* 2 Cor. 7:10 states, *"For godly sorrow produces repentance leading to salvation, not to be regretted; but the sorrow of the world produces death."* Our sorrow then should be proportional to the sin.
 - i. Keep in mind that despite being His children, we can provoke His anger. Ex. 34:6-7, *"And the LORD passed before him [Moses] and proclaimed, 'The LORD, the LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abounding in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, by no means clearing the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and the children's children to the third and the fourth generation.'"*
 - ii. But even in the midst of sorrow, we are faced with a hope. Ez. 10:2, *"...yet now there is hope in Israel in spite of this."* Ps. 103:8-14, *"The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in mercy."*

He will not always strive with us, nor will He keep His anger forever. He has not dealt with us according to our sins, nor punished us according to our iniquities. For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is His mercy toward those who fear Him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us. As a father pities his children, so the LORD pities those who fear Him. For He knows our frame; He remembers that we are dust. "

- b. Prompt action to put right our sin even when it is personally difficult to do so. Sin is insidious, 1 Cor. 5:6-7, *"Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? Therefore purge out the old leaven, that you may be a new lump, since you truly are unleavened."* That said this text encourages us to separate ourselves from that that would cause us to separate from God. Mt. 18:8-9, *"If your hand or foot causes you to sin, cut it off and cast it from you. It is better for you to enter into life lame or maimed, rather than having two hands or two feet, to be cast into the everlasting fire. And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you. It is better for you to enter into life with one eye, rather than having two eyes, to be cast into hell fire."* The language is very strong because the consequences of sin are very serious. Ez. 33:14-19, *"Again, when I say to the wicked, 'You shall surely die,' if he turns from his sin and does what is lawful and right, if the wicked restores the pledge, gives back what he has stolen, and walks in the statutes of life without committing iniquity, he shall surely live; he shall not die. None of his sins which he has committed shall be remembered against him; he has done what is lawful and right; he shall surely live. 'Yet the children of your people say, 'The way of the LORD is not fair.' But it is their way which is not fair! When the righteous turns from his righteousness and commits iniquity, he shall die because of it. But when the wicked turns from his wickedness and does what is lawful and right, he shall live because of it."*
- c. Prompt action even when it is divisive to do so. In Ezra's case, not everyone agreed but they still knew they had to act. Church discipline is a difficult issue, but when members of the body refuse God's standards of holiness then the Church as a whole must act. (cf. our own Relationship to Commitment) We are enjoined by the Word to separate ourselves from the sinning brother (cf. Mt. 18:15-17, Gal. 6:1, 1 Cor. 5:1-13, 2 Thess. 3:6, 14-15, Tit. 3:10-11, Rom. 16:17-18, 1 Tim. 1:3-11, 19-20, 2 Cor. 2:6-11) Maintaining the purity of the church is more important than the potential strife and division that can erupt in the process of church discipline. To not conform to the rules of relationship meant that the troublemakers were to be excluded from the company. (cf. Ez. 10:8)
 - i. As we saw in v. 4 Shechaniah exhorts Ezra to rise and do this difficult task; it was his responsibility. This was a heavy burden upon him and his response was to withdraw from the people in order to fast, pray and mourn. (v. 6) The sin of the people is a heavy burden upon the leadership who must then enact God's just law upon beloved members of the community; some don't and their laxness results in further judgment (i.e. Eli), some do so from hard & judgmental hearts which creates fear and anger in the hearts, and some do to the loss of human friendship in exchange for God's pleasure. Shechaniah also assures Ezra that they are with him.
 - ii. If Ezra is the author of Psalms 119 as many believe, we read many verses that reflect attacks on him. He was the object of reproach and contempt (119:22, 39, 42), Princes were talking against him (119:23), the arrogant derided him and forged lies against him (119:51, 69, 86), many persecuted him, dug pits for him, and waited to destroy him (119:84, 85, 95, 110). He had many persecutors and adversaries (119:157) so that even though he was obeying God's Word, he was not necessarily a popular, well-loved guy.
- d. This reformation of the people was personally very costly but proved to make the community stronger in their faith and more resistant to temptations. This root of sacrifice and full-on commitment to Yahweh

leads to the incredible character of the Jewish community that the nations of the world, ancient and modern, learned to respect and fear.

6. What's it mean today?

- a. We too need to recognize sin through the lenses of the Bible (*chatah*), as opposed to the lens of our culture or our feelings. C. S. Lewis wrote, *"When a man is getting better, he understands more and more clearly the evil that is still in him. When a man is getting worse, he understands his own badness less and less."* And J. C. Ryle said, *"Christ is never fully valued, until sin is clearly seen."* Then we need to mourn and grieve over sin as is appropriate. There is comfort for those that mourn, for godly sorrow produces repentance which leads to salvation. And true repentance requires that we do something about it.
- b. We must be vigilant to put it right even when it is personal or divisive. We must value righteousness and purity before God over and above any other earthly treasure, even that of family. Jesus said in Mt. 10:32-39, *"Therefore whoever confesses Me before men, him I will also confess before My Father who is in heaven. But whoever denies Me before men, him I will also deny before My Father who is in heaven. "Do not think that I came to bring peace on earth. I did not come to bring peace but a sword. For I have come to 'SET A MAN AGAINST HIS FATHER, A DAUGHTER AGAINST HER MOTHER, AND A DAUGHTER-IN-LAW AGAINST HER MOTHER-IN-LAW'; and 'A MAN'S ENEMIES WILL BE THOSE OF HIS OWN HOUSEHOLD.' He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me. He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for My sake will find it."*
- c. And although we have instances in the Old Testament where divorce was permitted say for the purity of the community, today in the New Testament we have a deeper and more costly cross to carry. Except in cases of sexual infidelity, divorce is not permitted. (cf. Mt. 5:32, Mt. 19:8-9) There are numerous verses that exhort the believer to neither leave the unbeliever nor give up hope that their witness may indeed bring about the other's salvation. (cf. 1 Cor. 7:12-16, 1 Pet. 3:1-6). Also think on Mt. 5:31-32, Mt. 19:8-9, Rom. 7:2-3, and 1 Cor. 7:10-11 which addresses the question of whether one can re-marry after divorce.
- d. Marrying an unbeliever is wrong, as is missionary dating. The Bible commands us in 1 Cor. 6:14-7:1 to not be unequally yoked with non-believers. It may *"feel"* right at the beginning, but without a core set of absolute values to work from, there will be a lot of grief as two imperfect people work to become one-flesh. This is arguably impossible in the end without a unifying spiritual element between them.
- e. Church discipline is appropriate under certain conditions, and should be a real instrument within the Church's arsenal to combat sin. (cf. Mt. 18:15-17, Gal. 6:1, 1 Cor. 5:1-13, 2 Thess. 3:6, 14-15, Tit. 3:10-11, Rom. 16:17-18, 1 Tim. 1:3-11, 19-20, 2 Cor. 2:6-11)