

Sermon – 28/12/2008 am

Repentance and Restitution

Study Text: Ezra 10

Abraham rose early in the morning and took bread and a skin of water; and putting it on her shoulder, he gave it and the boy to Hagar and sent her away (Genesis 21:14). Abraham sent away the woman who had born him a son. He sent away Hagar and his son Ishmael. It must have been one of the most difficult things Abraham ever did. But God told him to do this in accordance with the bitter wishes of his wife Sarah. Hagar was not of Israel; she was an Egyptian and her son would not have an inheritance among the holy people of God.

Putting right the consequences of sin requires drastic action. Putting right the consequences of sin is often painful. But Abraham acted according to God's word. He acted trusting God to care for his son born to Hagar.

Repentance

Ezra came to Jerusalem to preach and teach the Scriptures. He came with the authority of King Artaxerxes, authority to impose punishment on any who refused to observe the law of God. But Ezra was more concerned with the authority of the sovereign God. He was concerned for reformation in life and worship among the remnant community, reformation according to the word of God.

The teaching of Ezra shed light on a common practice within this community, the practice of taking foreign wives. It seems that no one questioned this practice, presumably because they were not reading the word of God.

Because of this ignorance the ways of the world became accepted among the people of God. Every man did what was right in his own eyes. The situation is much the same in the church today. Did you hear the outrage when it was declared that the Bible teaches that the practice of homosexuality is sin? Such teaching is not accepted by society so many chose to ignore the word of God. Many of course are simply ignorant of what the Bible teaches.

Ignorance of the absolute and unchanging commands of God leads to this relativity, to every man doing what is right in his own eyes. Without God's word we are dependant upon human reason, the reasoning of hearts corrupted by sin. Without the word of God we are like ships sailing without a compass. We keep changing course according to the latest whim of man's reason. We are lost. We are without hope; we are helpless.

Do you remember living like this? Is your life still one of going around in circles? Jesus saw us in such a state. He said he came to seek and to save the lost. Jesus is like a compass directing us in the way that we should go – directing us by the absolute and unchanging word of God.

The law of God that Ezra preached penetrated to the hearts of the people. The leaders came to him telling how many of them had taken foreign wives. Ezra was horrified. He humbled himself before the Lord and cried out to the Lord in prayer. Word of his weeping and praying

quickly spread, and a large crowd gathered. It was a crowd including women and children (10:1). The people who gathered were soon weeping bitterly also because of their sin.

Was this a revival in Jerusalem? The Spirit of God is not mentioned but the response of the people is indicative of the work of the Holy Spirit. Revival occurs when the word of God is preached with power and authority, and when the Holy Spirit applies that word to the hearts of the people. Repentance and confession of sin, often accompanied by weeping, is what happens in revivals even today. Are you praying for such a revival?

As Ezra was fervently praying and the people were weeping over their sin, a young man called Shechaniah stepped forward to speak on behalf of the assembly. He was the son of Jehiel who was the son of Elam (10:2). He was a descendant of the first group to return from exile. His father was guilty of taking a pagan wife (10:26) but there is no indication Shechaniah himself was guilty. Yet, like Ezra, he identified with the people in this sin.

Shechaniah admitted the guilt of the people but did not lose hope. Unlike Judas who was filled with remorse and went and hanged himself, this man acknowledge his sin but was filled with hope rather than despair – *yet now there is hope in Israel*(10:2). This is the wonderful thing about a child of God – there is always hope. Hope in God and do not give way to despair. No matter what the sin there is always hope because God promises to forgive those who repent (I John 1:9).

Faith, hope and love are central to the life of a believer. We can lose all our worldly possessions, we can suffer the most terrible persecution, we can sink into the deepest sin, but there is always hope for a child of God. Satan will tell us otherwise and accuse us all the day, but our hope in God remains just as it did for Shechaniah and the people of God in Ezra's day.

Restitution

Ezra read and expounded the Scriptures. The people saw how they had sinned against God. Ezra tore his clothes and cried out in prayer. The people were cut to the heart and confessed their sin. Ezra did not order them to do anything. He waited for the word of God to do its work, the word that is like a double edged sword piercing the heart. The response came with Shechaniah leading the people in repentance and then in restitution. This is what every preacher of the word of God prays for – a response in the heart of the people.

Confession of sin must be accompanied by restitution when possible. Not only must the thief stop stealing but he must return what he has stolen – remember Zacchaeus (Luke 19:8). What was to be done in the case of those with foreign wives? Was restitution possible? Was it possible to right the wrong that they had done?

Some claim that it would be wrong for these men to put away their pagan wives. What about human rights and common decency? What about common sense? Does not God forgive? 'This is just another case of Old Testament practice which finds no place in the New Testament' they will say.

Others might even argue that since God hates divorce it would be wrong for them to put away their pagan wives. God certainly does hate divorce, but the evil of impure worship is understood to be an even greater abomination before the Lord. It may have been that these

foreign wives were somewhat like Hagar, although in Malachi it seems they were divorcing their Jewish wives in order to marry pagan women (Malachi 2).

It was Shechaniah not Ezra who called upon the people to put away their foreign wives (10:3). The law did not stipulate what was to be done by way of restitution, and Ezra was not quick to dictate. He waited for the Holy Spirit to work in the hearts of the people. They understood that they had broken the covenant God made with them when he called them to himself. They, like David, knew they had sinned against God. David could not undo his sin (having had Uriah killed) but they could. They could put away their foreign wives. And as painful as this would be they knew they must put God first and observe his word.

Ezra agreed with Shechaniah's call to put away their foreign wives and made them confirm this decision by swearing an oath (10:5). He withdrew for a night of private mourning for the sin of the people before an announcement was made. All men in Judah and Benjamin were summoned to appear in Jerusalem within three days. Those who did not come would be excommunicated and their property forfeited.

They all obeyed and gathered in the open court of the temple. Here Ezra called for them to confess their sin and put away their foreign wives (10:11). They agreed to do so but asked for an extension of time – firstly because they were standing in the pouring rain, and secondly because there were so many who were guilty. For Ezra, or anyone for that matter, to examine each case would take a very long time. They agreed, apart from the four named in verse 15, to allow the elders and judges in all the cities to examine each case thoroughly.

After three months the task was completed. Some 110 men were found guilty, men from priests to paupers, men whose names are all recorded in this book. All put away their foreign wives. Where did these women and children go you might ask? Probably back to their family home – but we are not told this. Rather we are told that the fierce wrath of God was turned away (10:14).

With faithful preaching, with trembling before the Lord and commitment to obey the commands of God, the fierce wrath of God was turned away. Many think such ideas are not part of New Testament teaching. They think Jesus spoke only about love, and that love would dictate these men keep their wives even if they were idolaters. But Jesus spoke at length about the wrath of God, as did the apostle Paul. Let us be as committed as Ezra and the exiles were to putting God and his word first in our lives. Repent and turn from sin, and in the power of God set right whatever wrongs you can.

Rev. Dr. Dennis K. Muldoon