

Sermon – 21/12/2008 am

Unholy Marriage

Study Text: Ezra 9

The covenant people of God were expressly forbidden to take pagan wives in marriage. This was the law that God gave through Moses for the children of Israel as they entered Canaan. Canaan was occupied by idol worshippers whom God had condemned to destruction. Their idol worship was an abomination from which God's people were to flee. Intermarriage would pose a great threat to the purity of worship in Israel.

This command continued in force, but it also continued to be broken. King Solomon took many foreign wives from among the very people groups referred to by Ezra (I Kings 11:1). These pagan wives turned his heart away from the Lord (Nehemiah 13:26). King Ahab is known in history because of his foreign wife Jezebel. She was a Baal worshipper who led her husband into Baal worship. He in turn led the whole nation into idolatry. That is why intermarriage with pagans was forbidden.

'Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers' is a command in the New Testament (II Corinthians 6:14). It is rightly applied to marriage. Paul also wrote under divine inspiration that a person is free to marry whomever they wish – but *only in the Lord* (I Corinthians 7:39). Marriage with unbelievers threatened the very community of God's people in Ezra's day. It has continued as one of the greatest threats to the kingdom of God till today. Those who marry unbelievers contrary to this clear command of God often fall away or struggle greatly to maintain their faith in God.

Worship is compromised through an unholy alliance. To please the unbelieving spouse, or to keep the peace, the believer will be called to worship in a pagan temple be it Westfield's Telstra stadium, a club or a mosque – one week there and one week to the house of God. Is this pleasing to God?

Ezra Preaches

Ezra was a scribe, a teacher of the law of God. He came to Jerusalem to reform worship and teach the law of God – even to enforce it by the decree of King Artaxerxes. On arrival his party of exiles joined him in making sacrifices and burnt offerings to the Lord.

Ezra began preaching and teaching the law of God, although this is not stated in the text. Chapter 9 begins with the words *when these things were done* (9:1). These words indicate the passing of some time, time in which Ezra would have commenced his ministry. Various scholars think that Nehemiah 8, a chapter telling how Ezra stood on a platform to read the law, should be placed before Ezra 9. They have no authority to propose such a change, but clearly Ezra was engaged in preaching and teaching from the outset.

The leaders who came to Ezra to report the prevalence of mixed marriages did so in response to hearing or reading the law of God. In Deuteronomy 7 Moses declared 'you shall not give your daughters to their (Canaanite) sons or take their daughters for your sons'. This was not to maintain racial purity but religious purity. *You are a holy people to the Lord* (Deuteronomy 7:6). Pagan wives would *turn your sons away from following me to serve other gods*, so arousing the anger of the Lord (Deuteronomy 7:4).

Some Christians fall into the devil's trap of thinking they will be able to convert the unbeliever after they are married. They think this way after 'falling in love' with the unbeliever. While such a method of evangelism is promoted in some religions it is not sanctioned in the Bible. Evangelism is enjoined on all Christians but marriage with an unbeliever is not a permitted strategy.

The leaders told Ezra that the people of Israel, including the priests and Levites, had taken women from among their pagan neighbours to be their wives. There is no mention of them giving their daughters in marriage indicating that men were most likely lusting after foreign women rather than making some sort of peace pact. God's command was being broken – widely broken as will be revealed.

The holy seed is being mixed with the peoples of those lands (9: 2). They were not maintaining separation from the pagan people. This is what 'holy' means – to be separated unto the Lord. God's people were, and are, called to be holy, to be separate from the pagans around them.

Whilst many Christians – but not all – would balk at going into a temple to worship an idol or into a mosque, they too often follow their unbelieving materialistic spouse or friends in worshipping the great god 'mammon' or his partner god called 'the flesh'. Getting money or satisfying the flesh is more important than attending the house of God. They thus arouse the wrath of God.

Ezra Pulls Out His Hair

What was Ezra's response when he heard about this disregard for the law of God? The people of God were no longer in the majority in their own land. Should they not relax this command and be good neighbours? This is the response we expect from those who sit above the law of God. They reason and decide which commands are valid and which no longer apply. But Ezra sat under the law of God. He humbled himself before the Lord accepting the whole word of God as divinely inspired and infallible, and taking seriously his ministry to teach the word of God.

When Ezra heard this thing he was shocked and horrified. He tore his clothes and pulled hair from his head and beard (9:3). Many preachers often feel like Ezra but do not go quite so far in their reaction – not in public anyway. Ministers often tear their hair out as it were at seeing Christians ignoring the word of God preached to them. Nehemiah was Ezra's contemporary and faced a similar situation. He took a somewhat different approach which we will look at another time (Nehemiah 13:25).

As Ezra sat there in his state of humiliation the people who gathered around realised that intermarriage was a serious sin. Intermarriage led to the corruption (abomination) of their worship. They realised they had aroused the wrath of God. Remember Haggai and the poor harvests the people were having before he preached. Let us remember that God honours those who honour him.

Ezra Prays

All morning and into the afternoon, Ezra sat there in severe shock. At three o'clock he got up briefly before falling to his knees in prayer. The rest of the chapter, which is most of the chapter, is a record of Ezra's prayer.

Nehemiah's prayer (Nehemiah 1) and Daniel's prayer (Daniel 9) are often noted as examples of prayer in the Bible, but this prayer of Ezra is equally impressive and instructive. All three were praying for the people of God not just themselves. They identified with the people in their sin and confessed this sin before the Lord. Ezra's prayer was very public as the people gathered around him.

This prayer is a prayer of confession. Ezra makes no requests apart from forgiveness and certainly demands nothing from God. He tells God how utterly ashamed and humiliated he is as he comes before him in prayer. Ezra had no doubt about the righteousness and holiness of God (9:15). The people trembled at the words of God as did Ezra. His name is above every name in heaven and on earth. 'His name is higher than any other, his name is Jesus his name is Lord' are the words of a chorus.

Ezra's prayer contrasts with many prayers uttered today. The righteousness and holiness of God is not remembered in many of our prayers. Ezra was on his knees with his hands spread out to heaven. Today people complain when you ask them simply to stand for prayer.

As Ezra confessed the sins of the people he felt like a worm. He could not lift up his head before God. He could not look God in the face as it were because of the shame of sin. He looked back to the days before the exile and the sin of the people from the king down. God punished them by sending them off into captivity.

And now they were sinning again. *For we have forsaken your commandments* (9:10) – specifically the commandment prohibiting marriage with pagans, with people who will bring the abomination of idol worship into the community of God's people. They were a holy nation, a royal priesthood, a people belonging to God (I Peter 2:9).

God had every right to punish the people for their sin, just as he did through Nebuchadnezzar. Ezra does not mention the covenant, as Nehemiah and Daniel did, but the covenant concept is behind his prayer. God gave commands along with consequences for obedience or disobedience. It was all laid out so they had no right to complain if God judged them. Ezra acknowledges that God had not punished them as they deserved (9:13). God had every right to destroy them, just as he might have done in the exile.

But God is merciful and gracious. In his grace he preserved a remnant that had returned to rebuild the temple and resume pure worship. Ezra prayed *give us a peg in the holy place... and a measure of revival in our bondage* (9:8). A tent peg holds up the tent and secures it. Ezra thought of God's house being a place of security, as indeed it was. It was where God's presence resided.

No longer does God's presence reside in an earthly temple. We have a heavenly temple, we have the Lord Jesus Christ as the anchor for our soul (Heb 6:19). In Jesus we see the wonderful mercy and grace of God revealed. In the Cross we see the depth of our sin – or as Ezra puts it *our sin has risen over our heads* (9:6). In the Cross we see the even greater depth of God's love.

It was sin and not any merit of his own that filled the heart and mind of Ezra as he prayed. *Here we are before you in our guilt* (9:15). He could say no more. His plea was like that of the tax collector – *God have mercy on me a sinner* (Luke 18:13). That man went home justified.

Rev. Dr. Dennis K. Muldoon