

The Work of Beautifying God's House

Books of Ezra and Nehemiah

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I invite you to turn with me in your Bibles to Ezra 7, the seventh chapter of the book of Ezra. We're continuing our exposition of the two books of Ezra and Nehemiah which originally in the Hebrew Bible were one book, Ezra/Nehemiah, and so we came last week to the seventh chapter of Ezra and we're going to continue our exposition of that chapter focusing on one verse this morning. Ezra 7:10 is the verse we're gonna look at this morning and the title of the message is "The Work of Beautifying God's House." The work of beautifying God's house.

If you've been with us before, you remember that the books of Ezra and Nehemiah describe the return of the people of God from the Babylonian exile, return from Babylon and Persia where they had been exiled back to the land of Israel. This happened in the sixth and fifth centuries BC. One of the last events in the Old Testament is this, these returns, and so the return from the Babylonian exile took place in three installments and all three installments are discussed and revealed to us in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. It's a threefold return. The first return happened around 538 BC and the focus of that return, the purpose of that return was to build God's house, to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem. That was the purpose of that first return that happened in 538 BC. Eighty years later in 458 BC, the second return happens. God, once again, inspires the Persian king to facilitate the work of the kingdom of God and so the Persian king sends Ezra and a number of Jews back again in a second return which this is what the subject of chapters 7 through 10 are about, this second return. And where the first return had had as its focus to build God's house, the second return, and it was built, the second return is to beautify God's house. The purpose of this return of the second installment of the return from exile is to beautify God's house. We see that, we saw that last week in verse 27 where Ezra says and marvels, the Jewish priest, scribe, Ezra marvels that God had put into the heart of the Babylonian king to want to adorn the house of God. Adorn the house of God, that is beautify the house of God. That God had put in the heart of the king the desire to see that God's house, his temple in Jerusalem was beautified, adorned, and that was the reason he sent Ezra back.

And we read the whole passage last time, we're not gonna do that today, but we'll be probably there again next week, but just to remind you, the focus and purpose of beautifying God's house is seen in two ways. Practically the king of Persia sent silver and

gold to be used to beautify the house practically, outwardly, and he sent Ezra back with priests and Levites and servants to operate the working of the temple. But the spiritual focus was what was really fundamental and becomes clear and the way that you beautify God's house spiritually, the king of Persia sent Ezra back to teach the law of God. He was basically commanded to teach the law of God in the letter that the king gave him. Again, a marvel of the providential sovereign rule of God, that he would put on the heart of the king to tell Ezra, "Go back and teach the Jews the law of their God." And we're gonna see that's how essentially the house is beautified, it's through the word of God.

We've noted as we looked at this passage, the whole book, that building God's house is what we're called to do too. What they do on the first return we're called to do. We're called to build God's house. We're also called to beautify God's house which is the focus of the second return. And we've noted that for us in this point in redemptive history, the right understanding of that is not physical buildings. It's not that we're called, this is a passage that tells you to give to the building fund. This passage doesn't speak to that directly. This passage does not tell you to be involved in the next work day that we have to beautify our building. We'd love for you to be involved in that, we'd love for you to give to the building fund but that's not what this text is talking about. This text applied to us today on this side of Calvary, on this side of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, is a call to build and beautify the spiritual temple of God, the spiritual house, which is the people of God, the local church, other believers. We're called to build up one another so that true worship happens in the place where God dwells and now he doesn't dwell in buildings as he did at that point in redemptive history, he had a special sense in which he dwelt in that building, the temple. No, now he dwells in his people when they gather together.

So the spiritual building is each of the people in this room and in this body who truly know and love the Lord Jesus Christ. That is the spiritual building and so we build it by adding to that number new people who know and love Jesus Christ, and by building up each other and by beautifying each other. The Scripture makes this clear that the spiritual temple on this side of Calvary is what God is focused on, that is the people of God.

1 Corinthians 3:15 is a verse I haven't shared in a while but it's where Paul says to the church at Corinth, "You are God's temple," and that "you" there is the "you" plural, you know, in the English, you, y-o-u can be singular or plural. It's ambiguous. In the Greek not so. That's why the superiority of Southern language, y'all is not ambiguous. You and y'all, and we even have all y'all which means more than five, you know, so, you, y'all, all y'all. We cover it really well. In the Greek they don't have all y'all but they do have you and y'all.

Okay, so the focus here when he says you are God's temple in 1 Corinthians 3:15 speaking to the Corinthian church, he's not saying you individually atomistically are the temple, he's saying you plural, y'all are the temple. You together are the dwelling of God. There are a couple of passages last week which says the same thing. You can look at them later. Ephesians 2:19-22. 1 Peter 2:1-5. It's clear teaching of the New Testament.

So we are called to build the spiritual house which is one another and to beautify the spiritual house which is one another, and what does it mean to beautify God's house? What makes God's house beautiful? What makes God's house beautiful is when God's people worship him truly from the heart, and when we help one another to offer true worship from the heart, we are beautifying one another. So we are called to beautify God's house by seeking to offer true worship from the heart ourselves and to live our lives more and more in a spirit of worship, true worship from the heart, that we on a daily basis, we try to obey the Lord, we try to walk with the Lord, we try to bring everything that we're doing into conformity with his will as an act of worship to him. And we're doing that individually and we're trying to do that corporately by helping one another to do the same thing because we need help. We need help and God has given us help.

I mentioned that it's interesting, Ezra's name actually means help in Hebrew. The verb *azar* from which the word *azar* noun comes help, aid, is the noun, and Ezra means help, help from God. And so he is the helper that God sends to the people, his divine help, to help them offer true worship, to beautify God's house. He's the one that is sent and he, in a sense, is a model for us of how to offer true worship ourselves and a model of how to foster true worship in our brothers and sisters. He's really presented as the model priest which is a type of Christ. But he's presented as someone, "Follow this example. This is what it means to live a life of worship. This is what it means to beautify God's house."

So let's read, we're focusing on one verse, we'll read a few verses to lead up into it, though. We'll read verses 6 to 10, our focus is verse 10. Ezra 7:6,

6 This Ezra went up from Babylon, and he was a scribe skilled in the law of Moses, which the LORD God of Israel had given; and the king granted him all he requested because the hand of the LORD his God was upon him. 7 Some of the sons of Israel and some of the priests, the Levites, the singers, the gatekeepers and the temple servants went up to Jerusalem in the seventh year of King Artaxerxes. 8 He came to Jerusalem in the fifth month, which was in the seventh year of the king. 9 For on the first of the first month he began to go up from Babylon; and on the first of the fifth month he came to Jerusalem, because the good hand of his God was upon him. 10 For Ezra had set his heart to study the law of the LORD and to practice it, and to teach His statutes and ordinances in Israel.

Let's pray together.

Father, we ask now that You might grant us grace to direct our hearts to the law of the Lord, that You might even now by Your Spirit fix in us even more a focused earnest seeking of Your word and a willingness to submit and have Your way in our hearts. We pray this in the name of Jesus. Amen.

The work of beautifying God's house to which we are all called. The work of beautifying God's house. Ezra's a model for us of how to offer true worship, oneself, and how to be a help to others that they would offer true worship, increasingly godly worship. So he's

really a model of how to do the work of beautifying God's house and I think verse 10 is really a distilled encapsulation of the work. This is the essence of what it means to be about building and beautifying God's house. If we get his focus and we live by this, we will be of great help to one another. This would be a great help to our own souls and great help to one another.

Two points this morning. We're gonna have, the second point will have several subpoints or three subpoints, but the two main points, that I think the text could help us look at this passage and apply it to our hearts, and the first is that how do you go about beautifying God's house, offering true worship, helping others to offer true worship, how do you do that? The first, these two points will be answered in the question how we do that and the first is: focus on the heart. Focus on the heart. That's the first point.

"For Ezra had set his heart," very important clause here, he had set his heart. The idea of the word "set" here means "to establish; to fix." It's a word which pictures an overall process where you direct something, you aim at something. In fact, the word was originally used in the sense of like aiming an arrow, but then it became to be much more than that, it means much more than just aiming, it means aiming and then setting and then fixing so that something is established. So this is saying that Ezra had attended to his heart in such a way that he aimed and he set and he fixed his heart on this focus.

He saw that true religion comes from the heart. God is interested in the heart. Remember how he makes this point vividly clear in 1 Samuel. You remember where the people wanted a king and God gives them a king according to their own desires, Saul. You remember if you've read 1 Samuel recently, you may remember that Saul was, he was basically a head taller than all of his brethren. He was a tall man. He was a physical specimen. He was like that's the guy that looks like he should be king. But Saul was not a man after God's heart and so God rejected him as king, he gave them that king to show them, "This is what you want. This is your problem, you want the wrong things but I have chosen for Myself," when he rejected Saul, Saul didn't obey him, Saul didn't follow him, when he rejected Saul he tells through Samuel that, "I have chosen a man after My own heart." That's David. And remember what Samuel found out when he went to anoint David? He didn't know he was anointing David, he knew he was anointing one of Jesse's sons, Jesse had seven sons. "Go to Jesse's home and anoint the king," God tells him, and so he goes and Samuel, even, can't help but be swayed a little bit. The first son comes in and he says to himself, "Surely the Lord's anointed is before me." He looks at the guy outwardly and thinks, "That's gotta be the man," Jesse's firstborn son. And the Lord says, "No, I have rejected him. He's not the one." So the next one comes in. No. The next one. The next one. All through those six sons and he says, "Hey, none of these. Do you have any other sons? The Lord told me to come here and none of these is the king." And his dad says, Jesse says, "Yeah, I do have one more son. I didn't think to bring him in, didn't think it was necessary, the youngest," and he was out keeping the sheep. So they called David in and as David walks in he says, "This is the Lord's anointed." And he anoints him king.

What was he looking at? And he says in that passage, God says to Samuel, "Man looks at the outward appearance," God looks on the heart. David had a heart after God. Ezra realized that the most important thing about a person is the heart. Outward appearances mean, relatively speaking, nothing. I mean, they don't totally mean nothing but relatively. It's the heart. God looks on the heart and so Ezra's focus was on his heart and was on the hearts of the people to whom he ministered. He realized that, "The Lord looks at the heart, I need to look at the heart, myself and others."

Isaiah points out the foolishness of dealing just with outward worship when he says, the prophet, God speaking through the prophet says basically, "Shut down the temple," is essentially his message, "because these people worship Me with their lips but their hearts are far from Me. It's not what they're saying, they're saying the right things, but their hearts are not in it. They're not worshiping Me from the heart therefore their worship is worthless. Better not to have anything like that going on, better to be true to your hearts than to offer feigned worship when their hearts are far from Me."

We talked a lot about the heart a while back and I had a series of messages on the heart and you may remember but just to review, the heart biblically is the inner man. The Bible uses a lot of different terms because it's such an important emphasis in Scripture and these terms tend to lay over one another synonymously and sometimes they have a little bit, you know, like semantic range of one word is like this and another one is like this, so you have some area that's outside that's not the same. It gives a little different emphasis. Like "soul" is one of the words for the inner man. "Spirit" is one of the words for the inner man. "Heart" is one of the words for the inner man. Heart is a word that's used more than any other to describe the inner man and it's good because our hearts are inside our bodies, and the Lord is using the physical heart is just a metaphor for the spiritual inner man.

And when you look at how the Bible uses the word "heart," you see that the heart does essentially three things and we can think of three components of the heart of the inner man, of the soul, you could say, the same three components. That is, number one, thinking. "As a man thinketh in his heart, so is he." The thinking, the heart is the place of thinking. The thoughts. The thoughts and intentions of the heart, Hebrews 4:12. So the heart is the place where thinking happens but it's not merely thinking, it goes beyond that, the heart is also the place where wanting and desiring happen. So the second part is our desires or our wants or our affections. So you could say the mind was the first part, thinking is the mind, and wanting, desiring, his affections. The desires of the heart. The Scripture talks about that so much, you know, the longings of the heart. So the heart not only thinks, it desires, it longs, thirdly, there's a third aspect, the heart chooses. The purposes of the heart, the purposes of a man's heart are deep waters. The intentions, the acts of the will, the determination.

So you can say that the heart is made up of the mind, the affections and the will and Ezra is focused on directing his heart in a certain way. He's determined to aim his heart, to set his heart, to fix his heart on something. Now what that means is he's aimed at determining to aim and set and establish his thoughts, his thinking. He wants to think

God's thoughts after him. He wants to want what God wants and value what God values, the affections, and he wants to choose what God chooses in his will. This is the path to godliness is through the heart. We have to have a renewed heart. We have to be born again in the inner man and then the focus of the person who's born again is to try to bring their heart more and more into conformity to God's will so that more and more you're renewing your mind, Romans 12:2. You're learning to, you're replacing ungodly desires with holy desires. You're putting off bad habits and bad choices and developing new choices, new purposes, new habits.

So this is the focus and this means, then, that we're to focus on our own hearts and we're to focus on one another's hearts. We're to help each other remember that it's all about the heart. "Guard your heart with all diligence, for out of it are the issues of life," Proverbs 4:23. The heart is the wellspring of life. If you get the heart right, you get everything right eventually, and this is the way God wants us to live, to focus on our hearts. Not outward external things. Now there is a place for developing habits and all that, it actually impacts the heart, but it should always be aimed at the inner man and Ezra was. Ezra 7:10, he had set his heart, he had established his heart, he had prepared his heart.

So the focus, focus on the heart. If you want to beautify God's house, you must focus on the heart. Now secondly, to beautify God's house, what do you do? I mean, you know where to go is the heart, focus on the heart, secondly, focus on the word. He focuses on the heart and he focuses on the word. How do we go about changing our hearts, redirecting our hearts? It's through the word of God.

The word is everything in the Christian life. The Bible is everything. I mean, the Holy Spirit using the Scriptures is how everything happens. That's how we're born again. That's how we're sanctified. That is everything. The Christian life always is the word. That's why Jesus put such great emphasis on it. Remember when he was tempted, he'd been fasting for 40 days, the man Christ Jesus living a perfect human life, he fasts for 40 days, he begins, the hunger pangs come back which is what they say about fasting is, you know, if you've ever had an extended fast, after about three days the hunger pangs tend to subside and they go away and it gets much easier to fast after three days. The first three days are really tough, but then at some point when the hunger pangs return, you're about to die. Your body is now telling you, "You must eat. All the reserves are used up. If you don't eat, you're going to die." And so Jesus after 40 days, the hunger pangs have returned and Satan at the opportune moment says to him, "If You are the Son of God, turn these stones into bread."

And what does Jesus say? "Man shall not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God." Satan was tempting him to use his deity to make his human life easier which would have been a complete surrender of the mission. The whole mission of God in saving the world hung at that moment. If Jesus did not obey the Father, our salvation would have been lost. But what does he do? He identifies with humanity and says, "No, I am living as true man and true man doesn't need bread as much as he needs the word of God. Man shall not live by bread alone but by every word that

proceeds from the mouth of God." What we need more than bread, what we need more than our food is the word of God.

Focus on the word, and that's exactly what Ezra does. He sets his heart to study the law of the Lord. So there are three things we're to do with the law. How do you focus on the word? There are three ways. These are the three subpoints under number 2. Focus on the heart, secondly, focus on the word, three ways to focus on the word.

The first subpoint, A, 2A is: study. He had set his heart to study the law of the Lord. This word "study" means "to seek with care; to inquire in a precise and thorough manner." A word that would be used to like search out. There's some mystery, we don't know what happened, you search out the answer. What is it that happened here? Where is the problem? There's a problem, you know, that needs to be fixed. Maybe you have someone come to your house, you know, to fix your air conditioners out and they have to then go through a process of investigating to see what's wrong. Is it a problem with your compressor? Is it a problem, hopefully it's not, hopefully it's a problem with something much less than that. You know, you hope that the investigation comes out and they say, "Hey, it's only gonna be \$50." You might have had one of those lately. If you do, please write me, I'd love to be encouraged with that, you know, "Hey, they came out and it only cost \$50." Anyway, moving on.

The point is we must seek with care, inquire diligently. This is what this word means. He didn't set his heart just to kind of casually look into the Scriptures, he set his heart, he knew that what's gonna happen, "My heart's gonna be changed by a vigorous intentional investigation into the law of the Lord, where I'm searching out what it has to say. I'm not just merely reading over it." And this is how a lot of people read the Bible, read over it and kind of at a glance sort of take something and then twist it to their own desires and says, "This is what I'm gonna apply today to my life."

That's not what Ezra did. Ezra didn't just open his Bible and say, "Here, this is what God has for me today." He studied it. He sought it with care because this is the way God has given his word. He intends for us to study to show ourselves approved. 2 Timothy 2:15, "to be approved, a workman who need not be ashamed, correctly handling the word of truth." If you're going to correctly handle the word of truth, you must study, apply your heart to it, think carefully about it, use the principles of sound interpretation. And you've got to learn how to do that, you've got to gain the skills for that. That's one of the reasons we're teaching on Wednesday nights our children in the Wednesday evening workshops, kids grade kindergarten to grade 6 are going through how to study the Bible in the book of Genesis. They're learning how to do inductive Bible study, that is, how to read the text and to carefully observe the text so that you see what does the text say. That's observation. You're asking, "What does the text say?" Too often what people do is they go to application, "What does the text mean to me?" They read a passage and they are looking so quickly for what does the text mean to me, and it's very easy to twist the Scriptures to your own harm. But if you do sound hermeneutics, it begins with observation, "What does the text say?" And they're learning that on Wednesday evenings,

to look at the words that the Scripture uses. What is the repetition? What's the emphasis? What's the author saying?

Then if you do sound observation, then you can do proper interpretation. That's the second step in hermeneutics, observation, then interpretation, which answers the question, if observation answers the question, "What does the text say," interpretation answers the question, "What does the text mean?" This is where you begin, you see what it says, now you put it in light of the context of the book. You think about the original audience, the author. You look at the whole of Scripture, how it fits into that and you understand what does the text mean?

When you've done that, you're ready to take the third step of sound hermeneutics which is application. Now you're ready to answer the question application answers, "What does the text mean to me?" You can only know that when you know what the text means.

So Ezra was a man who determined to handle the word accurately, and this made him the great help to the people of God. This was what they needed, someone who could come and teach them how to handle the word accurately because if the word is more precious to us than our food, we must know how to take the word and bring it and ingest it into our hearts. So that's Ezra's role. He studied the law of the Lord.

Actually, the word "study" it comes from a root, the root idea of the word, the etymology was to beat a path. Like to walk over an area so much that you beat a path. So the idea is you're continually in the Scriptures, beating a path, and then you become a man like he said in verse 6, skilled in the Scriptures. Remember last week when we talked about that word "skilled" in Ezra 7:6, he was a scribe skilled in the law of the Lord. Skilled meant to have a quickness of grasp and an ease of movement in the word. We all need to be moving to be more and more like that and we all need to have people in our lives who are like that, who are ministering to us and we're ministering to them.

And he was studying the law of the Lord. This is important for us to take note of something. A lot of times people today, there is a tendency to want to de-emphasize the importance of the Old Testament in general, and particularly the law. That is an ungodly perversion of the truth. The law of God is holy and good. Read Romans 7. When Paul talks about the law being an occasion of death, he makes clear, no, the law is holy and good and the problem is me, the sinner. But the law remains to be holy and good and the law has a place in the life of the believer. I'm talking about the law now in its strict sense of the commands of God, the requirements of God, the holy standards of God. When you lift these things up, what happens, why is it good? Well, it's good because, first of all, it tells you what God is like. The law is the revelation of his character therefore it can be nothing but good and we should love it for that. It shows us who God is.

Now the second part of it is it shows you not only who God is, it shows you his glory, his majesty, his holiness, his goodness, but it has a second necessary effect, it shows us our own ugly, sinful, wayward hearts. So the law shows you at the same time the glory and beauty and goodness of God and it shows you your own poverty spiritually before him.

You see this illustrated in Isaiah 6. Remember when he saw the Lord high and lifted up, the train of his robe filled the temple, the seraphim were singing, "Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of Hosts and the whole earth is full of His glory." Isaiah sees that and what's his response? "Woe is me for I am undone, for I am a man of unclean lips and I dwell among people of unclean lips." He's saying, "I've seen God now."

And when he said, "unclean lips," he wasn't saying he had a problem with profanity, that he, you know, had curse words that came out when he hit his thumb with a hammer or something. No, he's not saying that. He's saying as probably a priest himself, he's saying when he saw the Lord, he saw his lips as unclean because everything he'd ever said about God was unworthy of how glorious and beautiful and wonderful God is. And he says, "Our people, I am unclean because I thought I was praising Him and talking about Him rightly, but I was not. My lips are filthy. They cannot say how glorious and wonderful He is. And the people around me, we have no idea how wonderful He is." And he was undone, literally coming apart at the seams. He felt like he was disintegrating in the presence of God under the weight of God's glorious beauty and holiness.

Now in doing that, he saw himself and the wonder of it is when you're broken before the Lord, then you're ready to be healed by the Lord, and so the Lord as Isaiah is sitting there under the weight of God's glory, the Lord directs one of the seraphs to go and take a coal from the altar and touch his lips with that hot coal and now you're clean. Now the function of the law, then, is to show you who God is in all of his resplendent beauty and glory and to show you yourself and that is good and necessary. It remains necessary throughout the Christian life. You will need the law until you go home to be with Jesus. And people who tell you you don't, are misinformed lying to you.

We need the word of God, all of it, because the law drives you to Christ. That's what Paul says in Galatians 3, the law is a tutor to lead you to Christ. It's like, and he was using imagery that was very vivid in the Greco-Roman world where wealthy men would take their sons and entrust them to a tutor who would teach them basically what it means to be a man, and all they needed to know to be an intellectual contributing member of society at the highest level. Alexander the Great, for instance, his father Philip enlisted an okay tutor, guy that knew a little bit, Aristotle, to teach Alexander, and Alexander was brought up under him until he became a man. So the tutor leads you from boyhood all the way up to manhood until you're ready. So he's saying the law is a tutor like that, it takes a person who knows nothing about himself or about life, and it brings you to the point and where does it bring you? It brings you to Christ and to the foot of the cross.

That's what the law does and we need that every day. The Christian never stops needing the Gospel. You never stop needing the cross. You never stop needing to trust in the finished work of Jesus Christ and what will make you continue to trust in the finished work of Christ? Nothing except the law of God. The law must break you down, break me down so that we find ourselves at the foot of the cross savoring the Gospel.

So he set his heart to study the law of the Lord. The law shows you, you are nothing and the law shows you Jesus is everything that you need. He lived the law. When you look at the righteous demands of the law and you see how far you've come from it and Isaiah said, "I'm a man of unclean lips," Jesus was not. Every word Jesus ever spoke rightly honored his Father, rightly represented him. He never spoke a careless word that dishonored God.

When he said what he said about the Father, it was always from the heart. It was perfectly righteous, everything about him, so whatever areas we struggle in, whatever areas we find ourselves convicted and weighed down by the weight of God's law, we must run to Christ. He was holy and spotless in that area and he offered to God a perfect righteousness, and not only that, he satisfied, so he satisfied the positive demands of the law. This is called by theologians the active obedience of Christ. He obeyed the law fully, actively. Every command. Every time it says do not do something, he did not do it. In heart, he never did it. But there's also not, he also not only didn't do the negatives, he did all the positives actively. When the law says love your neighbor as yourself, there was never a moment in which Jesus of Nazareth did not love his neighbor as himself. Every moment of every day for more than 30 years, the man Christ Jesus obeyed the law fully and perfectly.

So wherever you are deficient, he is sufficient and he offers to God that righteousness. That's his active obedience but his obedience to the cross, his fulfillment of the law, his fulfillment of the law does not end with his active obedience, it's his passive obedience which is the cross. His passive obedience theologians refer to is when Jesus satisfied the demands of the law for wrath upon sin. He not only satisfied every positive demand of the law in righteousness, he satisfied every negative demand of the law in exercising God's holy wrath in justice. He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross. Every sin ever committed by everyone who would ever believe, Jesus suffered for it. And when he said, "It is finished," it is finished. It was finished. That's why there is therefore now no condemnation for them that are in Christ Jesus. He's finished with it.

So you see the law drives you to the cross, to remember that, to savor that, to stand in awe of that, and that then in turn motivates you to obedience. The law drives you to Christ, to the cross, and the cross enables you to keep the law. That's the wonder of it. We don't keep the law to be pleasing to God. No, you can't. You trust in the finished work of Christ. But because you now trust in the finished work of Christ by the power of his Spirit, you're conforming your heart so that you can live out the obedience of the law. Romans 8:1-4 makes this really clear. When I said Romans 8:1, "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus," he goes on to say, "for what the law could not do, weak that it is through the flesh, the law could not make righteous people, sinners, but what the law could not do, Christ did coming as an offering for sin, and he did this so that the righteous requirement of the law," this is what he says, "so that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us who walk not after the flesh but after the Spirit." The wonder is the law is what we're supposed to be looking like. That's why the law needs to be in your life. This is the standard but you don't try to fulfill the standard in your own strength. You look at the standard and you run to Christ and after

you run to Christ, by his power you look back at the standard and you live the standard by his power and by helping one another.

So that first point: study. How do we focus on the word, how do you go about building through the word? You study. That's what Ezra did. But secondly, practice, and that's where we just were a moment ago. He set his heart not just to study it but to practice it. Your translation may say "do it," or the NIV says I think "the observance of the law." Literally the Hebrew word means "to do; to make; to accomplish." It pictures action. It means to act with effect. It's not just action that doesn't do anything, it's to act and accomplish what you're trying to do.

So Ezra had set his heart not just to study, to apply the word to his heart, but to do it. God wants us to be doers of the word. We saw that when we worked through the book of James. That's the whole theme of the book. Don't be merely hearers of the word but doers. So don't just hear and agree in your mind and your heart, but do in your life. Ezra had set his heart not just to study but to do. He realized that true worship is obedience.

This is what Samuel told Saul. Remember we said Saul was a man not after God's heart. David was a man after God's heart. When Saul failed to obey the Lord in 1 Samuel 15, Samuel rebuked him. Saul offered a sacrifice that Samuel had said, "Wait until I get there to offer the sacrifice," and Saul did not wait on Samuel to offer it but offered it himself and Samuel said, "Do you not understand that obedience is better than sacrifice?" What God desires is obedience more than a burnt offering or sacrifice. You see, obedience truly is the essence of worship. When you hear the word and you do it, that is worship. That's where you're saying, "I love You so much, I value You so much that I submit my will to You to do what You have called me to do."

Interesting too, I was thinking about this related to Ezra the scribe. He's called a scribe, the scribe 10 times in the books of Ezra/Nehemiah. He's called the priest eight times, "Ezra the priest. Ezra the scribe." And five times it's together, "Ezra the priest and the scribe." And he needed to be a priest to minister in God's house and the scribe and it's used completely positively. Now you may have as you first hear that term, you may because of the New Testament readings, you know, the New Testament word "scribe" is not usually a good term. Now it referred to those people who were experts in the law, interpreting the law and teaching the law in Jesus' day. What we learn about them, though, is that they were not faithful. In fact, what you find over and over, Matthew 23, seven times you have this phrase, "Jesus pronounces woe," that is judgment is coming. He says, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees," seven times. Exactly what he says is, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites." Seven different times and what he says is, "You wash the outside of the cup but inside the cup is a mess. You're like whited sepulchres. You're like whited gravestones. On the outside you paint it white so it looks pretty, but on the inside is dead men's bones. In other words, you're concerned about the outward appearance but you're not concerned about the heart. You're hypocrites, that is, you're actors, you're pretenders. You say that you want to love God but your hearts are far from Him. What's the difference? You're not obeying. You're not doing what you are calling the people to do."

So Ezra is not like those ungodly scribes. He is a man who understands and studies the law in order to practice it. This is the missing link for so many and this is really a challenge for I think us in Reformed circles. There is such a delight, if you think about it, there's the third point in a minute, I will touch on it now, the third point is teach, obviously. You can tell. The outline is pretty easy to follow, isn't it? Study, practice, teach. How do you do this? How do you go about ministering the word to your heart and to other's hearts? Well, you study, you practice and you teach. It's so easy to go from study to teach, to skip practice. That's what James was saying. "You guys, you know, you love to agree with the word, you're hearers of the word but you're not doing it. You're hearers of the word who like to tell other people about what you heard. You hear the word and you think, 'Well, I wish Jim was here. He should have heard that.'" And sometimes there's some validity to that but we should always be first, we're hearing the word for us. "Lord, change me through Your word and not just that I hear it, but that I do it." And he's saying that Ezra set his heart, he fixed his heart, he directed his heart not just to hear, not just to study but to do, to practice.

This is an area of great import for us to work on. A lot of it has to do with just kind of the way that we think in the West as Americans. We come out mainly kind of the Greco-Roman thought processes rather than Eastern. The Hebrew mindset was different. In the Greco-Roman, you know, Greek and Romans, they thought about knowledge for the sake of knowledge. It's wonderful just to know something. You see this when you look at Paul in Acts 17. Read the account of Paul at the Areopagus in Athens and what it talks about is there were people that just loved to get together and hear the latest ideas and thoughts. They loved to talk about philosophy and hearing different philosophies but it didn't impact their life, and it's easy to get comfortable in loving truth in a detached way, keeping it at a distance. That's deadly.

Ezra didn't just set his heart to study and understand but he set his heart to apply and to do, by God's grace to change his heart, his thinking and his wanting and his choosing. So how do you do that? Well, one of the things the Bible talks a lot about is meditation. Meditation. It's not just that you hear a truth and you let it come in but that you meditate on it, and meditate biblically is very important for us to understand this, Christian meditation, biblical meditation is very different than the idea of meditation out there in the world. Meditation today in our society has come to mean empty the mind. You know, yoga, stuff like that, meditation is emptying the mind and allowing yourself to kind of get in touch with the spiritual world. Sometimes they say that, sometimes they don't but that's what they're doing. Empty the mind and sort of yield to the spirit, yield to your heart, and that's insanity.

Biblical meditation is not emptying the mind, it's filling the mind with the word of God. It's to fill the mind, to fill the thoughts. Like Paul says in 1 Corinthians 4, we'll probably read this passage next week, "Let your mind dwell on these things, the things that are true and noble and good and lovely. Let your mind dwell on these things, keep thinking on these things." And you find that phrase over and over, that word over and over in the Old Testament, "meditate." Psalm 1, "How blessed is the man who does not walk in the

counsel of the ungodly or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of scoffers but his delight is in the law of the Lord and in His law he mediates day and night. He will be like a tree planted by rivers of water." Meditate, he's thinking and the idea a couple of different that the Bible uses for meditation in the Old Testament basically have the idea of talking to yourself, kind of mumbling to yourself under your breath.

You know, like you're, if you remember, you may do this when you go to the store, Ah, I did this yesterday. I'm trying to remember what was I supposed to get? I go to the grocery store and I get distracted. There's so many good options. You know, I came for two things and I come home with 12, and a lot of times the 12 I have are not including the two that I was originally sent for. So I was thinking, "Wait a minute, what did Patti say?" And at some point I was probably mumbling. Hopefully I didn't make a scene, but the idea is you're calling to mind something that you want to remember.

So that's what meditation is, call to mind something that you want to remember, that you want to think about. And meditation, then, is thinking about it, how does this apply to me? Am I understanding it correctly? Talking to the Lord about it. It's kind of a dialogue with yourself and God. It's like this, the inner dialogue and then it turns into prayer and meditation and prayer. "Lord, what does this mean? How do I do this?" And sometimes you're meditating to understand, that's a valid part of meditation but it should always go to the farthest level and the completion of meditation is, "How do I do this? How do I need to change in light of this? What can I do to make this real in my life?" That's a part of meditation that we must get to. Like this, how do we make the word and the study of the word and the practice of the word part of our life?

I think one of the other things that the New Testament teaches us that adds to this is how do you really make the word a part of your life? How do you do it, become a doer of the word? Well, you meditate upon it and you also, you do it with others. An interesting verse that sometimes is used for meditation and it's really not quite accurate, this again, the problem with you and y'all, Colossians 3:16. It keeps coming up, doesn't it? Colossians 3:16, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly." For years I thought that was about, hey, an exhortation to letting the word of Christ dwell in my mind and my heart richly. That's certainly something the Bible teaches but just not there. That's not what it's teaching there. How do you know? Well, look at the context. What does he say next? "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching one another and admonishing one another." Do you see that? How does it, that's a "you" plural and that's what it is in the Greek. It's a y'all. "Let the word of Christ dwell in y'all richly, teaching one another and admonishing one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs." So how does the word of Christ dwell in you all? It is that you're talking about the word to each other. In a sense, you're corporately meditating on it. You're talking, "How do I put this into my life?" You're asking someone else, "What do I do with this? What does this mean?" And you're helping one another do that. That's all the "one anothers" in the New Testament.

So we need to be about beautifying God's house by applying the word in that kind of intentional way Ezra was, and then when you do that, you're ready to teach it. Study, practice and teach. I'm gonna quickly just summarize this. This is one of 12 words in the

Old Testament that are translated "teach," one of 12 different Hebrew words that are translated "teach." There's a lot of Hebrew words for "teach." This one, this one emphasizes training, disciplining. It's actually a word, the root idea is "chastise." In fact, a form of this particular Hebrew word is another Hebrew word formed off of it is the word "ox goad," comes from this word. An ox goad is like a pointed stick that you use to keep the ox going the right direction, pulling straight ahead or whatever. The ox goad trains him to do what you're telling him to do.

So it's like the teaching that has a very pointed and determined to see application happen. This is what Ezra is about. He's not just about teaching, "Let's talk about some philosophical things that will really make us feel good and go home and just then live the rest of your life for yourself." No, let's teach the word of God so that we live it. That's just what we're called to. This is what beautifies God's house. The goal is not merely knowledge but a changed life.

Focus on application. This is why home groups are so important. We're trying to encourage more and more people to be involved in those. If you're not involved in a home group, you should really seriously consider that as a way you could make application of this sermon and we will start more home groups. We are ready to start more as soon as we have people and if you would like to host a home group, you don't have to lead it, you can host it. Or we have groups that move around from different houses and that's good too.

But home groups are where people talk about the sermons and talk about how to apply them and that's a great way to do what we are called to do, to beautify God's house, and when you do that, when you're investing, taking time to go and spend, we know we don't have much time, right, but what are you giving your time to? Are you investing in the things of this life like we read earlier from Philippians? Or are you focused on the fact that your citizenship is in heaven and I don't have time not to be building and beautifying God's house. I only have so much time left, how much time can I give to that? If we are seeing rightly, that's how we would see it.

And when this happens, when we become like this, the hand of God is upon us. That's a key phrase that we're gonna look at in weeks to come, "the hand of his God was upon him." The mighty hand of God is upon people who live like that. May the Lord help us be people like that.

Let's pray together.

Father, we thank You for Your word, for its sufficiency. We confess, Lord, our great need of grace and forgiveness for how neglectful we are. We are people of unclean lips. We want our thinking and our desires and our will to conform to Your image, the image of Christ. It can only happen by Your power through the Gospel. Lord, help us. Help us now apply these things by really digging into Your word, meditating, talking among ourselves one another, and obeying and help us keep fighting sin and keep loving Christ. We pray this in his name. Amen.