

The Nature and Necessity of Repentance Part 3 – Turn From Your Sins

sermonaudio.com

Books of Ezra and Nehemiah

By Ty Blackburn

Bible Text: Ezra 9
Preached on: Sunday, March 8, 2020

Providence Church
2146 Buford Hwy
Buford Hwy, Duluth, GA 30097

Website: www.providenceduluth.org
Online Sermons: www.sermonaudio.com/providencechurch

Please turn with me in your Bibles to the ninth chapter of Ezra, the Old Testament book of Ezra. We should be completing it today and ready to move into Nehemiah. Note that Ezra/Nehemiah really in the Hebrew Bible are one book with two parts, Ezra, Nehemiah, and the English Bible they seem to be two separate books but in reality they're one and so we're halfway through almost. We come to the end of this first half in Ezra 9 and 10. We've considered these two chapters under, or the last three messages including today under the title, today's title is the same as the last two Sundays I preached on this, "The Nature and Necessity of Repentance." The nature and necessity of repentance and today the subtitle is "Turn From Your Sins."

We've noted that repentance is illustrated in this passage, that what's happening as we look at this narrative is God has sent spiritual awakening to his people who had returned from exile. The people of Israel had been exiled in Babylon, they had come back to the land now in two different waves, and the second wave has brought back a man named Ezra, a man skilled in the Scriptures, who is preaching the word, and his preaching results in a wonderful spiritual awakening and so we have in these two chapters a beautiful picture of what spiritual awakening really is and spiritual awakening, when God opens the eyes of our hearts to see what he sees, to see ourselves as he sees us which begins with seeing him as he is, seeing ourselves as we are, then that leads to one of the necessary fruits of spiritual awakening is repentance and so that's why the title of our message, "The Nature and Necessity of Repentance." What we have illustrated beautifully in these two chapters is the nature of repentance; that when God awakens the heart spiritually to see what he sees, then the gravity of our sin grips us and it produces, his work in our hearts produces the fruit of repentance. Repentance means to turn. The word in the Old Testament means "to turn; to return"; it means to take a 180; to be going in one direction and turn and go the other direction; to turn away from sin to God. The New Testament word we mentioned before as well means "a change of mind." So look at these two concepts together. Repentance is when God opens our eyes to see him and to see our sin and we change our minds about ourselves, about sin, and we change our heart. Our hearts are changed. Our minds are changed, our hearts are changed and then our lives are changed as we turn back to him, away from sin and back to God.

So this is what's beautifully illustrated in this passage, what repentance really looks like. There's three components that are illustrated in this passage of what it means to repent and repentance is an essential biblical concept, though many people act like it's not today, even among evangelicals, Bible-believing Christians act like repentance is not a part of the Christian life. Repentance ought to be a part of every Christian life. There's a quote by Matthew Henry's father, I forget Matthew Henry's dad's name but Matthew Henry, the Bible commentator that has the commentary on the whole Bible, his dad said, "I'm going to take my repentance all the way up to the throne of God in heaven." The salvation begins with repentance and faith and ends all the way through with repentance and faith. Conversion actually is two parts; to be changed by God and to turn to God in faith always has repentance accompanied with it. True faith and repentance go together like two sides of one coin. Conversion is characterized by two parts: repenting and believing.

So when God works in the heart and brings salvation, these two realities are there. Sometimes you may feel one a little more dominant than the other but both are there and both will be evident in the true, genuine, Christian life and this is illustrated for us even in this Old Testament passage where God is working among his people. He shows us what repentance looks like and there are three components. In the first two weeks of this passage, we've talked about the first two components. So three components. We covered three weeks ago in our first message on this topic, we covered that repentance means to mourn over your sin, that part of repenting is mourning over sin. Then last week at our second message on this passage and we said that repentance entails not just mourning but also confessing your sins. So Part 1 was the nature of repentance and the necessity of repentance is mourn over your sins. Part 2 was confess your sins. And Part 3 today, the nature and necessity of repentance, Part 3, turn from your sins. We see them make a radical turn away from sin to God, a costly turn, and this is a part of what true repentance is. It's not just godly sorrow, mourning over sin. It is that but true godly sorrow will result in action, movement away from sin. It won't be perfect. There will be still struggles but that this is the way God works, in repentance there will be turning from sin.

Now what we're gonna see is somewhat of a controversial passage because Ezra is going to encourage the Jews to basically divorce their wives. Some controversy over whether they were actually legally married. Some theologians think they weren't, that they were just living together, but the biblical words on marriage in the Old Testament are somewhat ambiguous. To be married means to have someone live with you in the text, you know, the words have a broad semantic range and so there's some disagreement but I tend to think that this is talking about, yeah, they were married and they're divorcing their wives. I think that's one of the reasons it takes so long to work through the process. We're gonna see it's a three month process they're gonna end up going through to hear each case and to help them, those who need to separate from their wives to send their wives away to do that.

Now that's a radical situation and it's not to be something that justifies us as Christians, in fact, we'll see the New Testament makes clear this isn't an option for us. This was an option at this particular time and it was the command of God at this particular time I think because for one reason, they didn't have the Holy Spirit and they could not live with

these ungodly women and follow God. They had married outside of Israel. They had married the people of the lands who were committing abominations, who were worshipping other gods, and Ezra's calling them to put them away. We've noted it's not really about racial identity, it's about spiritual commitment, made this real clear in a couple of our messages earlier on where I showed that the Old Testament is filled with evidences of people who proselytized from the pagan religions, the other nations, to Israel, and remember I pointed out how in Matthew 1 you have four, four different Gentiles who are in the line of Christ: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and Bathsheba. What's the difference? Well, they're four women who came to God and sought refuge under God. So it's spiritual commitment and those women are in the line of Jesus. But what's happening here is they have married outside of the line of Israel to people who were committed to their own religions and this calls for a radical action because devotion to God is more important than anything else. Jesus said, "If you do not hate your father, your mother, your wife, your children, you are not worthy of Me." That is, we must love God more than we love anyone else and so far above how we love anyone else that it makes our love for others appear as hate in comparison.

So turn from your sins. We're gonna read the entire tenth chapter today and we're gonna see as we read it that we come again to a long list of names and I'm gonna read them because they're there in the text and I think the reason they're there in the text is to show us that what's happening here is God is naming names about the people who had sinned and he's recorded it for us in the Scriptures. It's part of what turning from sin means or can mean in certain circumstances. So Ezra 10:1,

1 Now while Ezra was praying and making confession, weeping and prostrating himself before the house of God, a very large assembly, men, women and children, gathered to him from Israel; for the people wept bitterly. 2 Shecaniah the son of Jehiel, one of the sons of Elam, said to Ezra, "We have been unfaithful to our God and have married foreign women from the peoples of the land; yet now there is hope for Israel in spite of this. 3 So now let us make a covenant with our God to put away all the wives and their children, according to the counsel of my lord and of those who tremble at the commandment of our God; and let it be done according to the law. 4 Arise! For this matter is your responsibility, but we will be with you; be courageous and act." 5 Then Ezra rose and made the leading priests, the Levites and all Israel, take oath that they would do according to this proposal; so they took the oath. 6 Then Ezra rose from before the house of God and went into the chamber of Jehohanan the son of Eliashib. Although he went there, he did not eat bread nor drink water, for he was mourning over the unfaithfulness of the exiles. 7 They made a proclamation throughout Judah and Jerusalem to all the exiles, that they should assemble at Jerusalem, 8 and that whoever would not come within three days, according to the counsel of the leaders and the elders, all his possessions should be forfeited and he himself excluded from the assembly of the exiles. 9 So all the men of Judah and Benjamin assembled at Jerusalem within the three days. It was the ninth month on the twentieth

of the month, and all the people sat in the open square before the house of God, trembling because of this matter and the heavy rain. 10 Then Ezra the priest stood up and said to them, "You have been unfaithful and have married foreign wives adding to the guilt of Israel. 11 Now therefore, make confession to the LORD God of your fathers and do His will; and separate yourselves from the peoples of the land and from the foreign wives." 12 Then all the assembly replied with a loud voice, "That's right! As you have said, so it is our duty to do. 13 But there are many people; it is the rainy season and we are not able to stand in the open. Nor can the task be done in one or two days, for we have transgressed greatly in this matter. 14 Let our leaders represent the whole assembly and let all those in our cities who have married foreign wives come at appointed times, together with the elders and judges of each city, until the fierce anger of our God on account of this matter is turned away from us." 15 Only Jonathan the son of Asahel and Jahzeiah the son of Tikvah opposed this, with Meshullam and Shabbethai the Levite supporting them. 16 But the exiles did so. And Ezra the priest selected men who were heads of fathers' households for each of their father's households, all of them by name. So they convened on the first day of the tenth month to investigate the matter. 17 They finished investigating all the men who had married foreign wives by the first day of the first month. 18 Among the sons of the priests who had married foreign wives were found of the sons of Jeshua the son of Jozadak, and his brothers: Maaseiah, Eliezer, Jarib and Gedaliah. 19 They pledged to put away their wives, and being guilty, they offered a ram of the flock for their offense. 20 Of the sons of Immer there were Hanani and Zebadiah; 21 and of the sons of Harim: Maaseiah, Elijah, Shemaiah, Jehiel and Uzziyah; 22 and of the sons of Pashhur: Elioenai, Maaseiah, Ishmael, Nethanel, Jozabad and Elasah. 23 Of Levites there were Jozabad, Shimei, Kelaiah (that is, Kelita), Pethahiah, Judah and Eliezer. 24 Of the singers there was Eliashib; and of the gatekeepers: Shallum, Telem and Uri. 25 Of Israel, of the sons of Parosh there were Ramiah, Izziah, Malchijah, Mijamin, Eleazar, Malchijah and Benaiah; 26 and of the sons of Elam: Mattaniah, Zechariah, Jehiel, Abdi, Jeremoth and Elijah; 27 and of the sons of Zattu: Elioenai, Eliashib, Mattaniah, Jeremoth, Zabad and Aziza; 28 and of the sons of Bebai: Jehohanan, Hananiah, Zabbai and Athlai; 29 and of the sons of Bani: Meshullam, Malluch and Adaiah, Jashub, Sheal and Jeremoth; 30 and of the sons of Pahath-moab: Adna, Chelal, Benaiah, Maaseiah, Mattaniah, Bezalel, Binnui and Manasseh; 31 and of the sons of Harim: Eliezer, Isshijah, Malchijah, Shemaiah, Shimeon, 32 Benjamin, Malluch and Shemariah; 33 of the sons of Hashum: Mattenai, Mattattah, Zabad, Eliphelet, Jeremai, Manasseh and Shimei; 34 of the sons of Bani: Maadai, Amram, Uel, 35 Benaiah, Bedeiah, Cheluhi, 36 Vaniah, Meremoth, Eliashib, 37 Mattaniah, Mattenai, Jaasu, 38 Bani, Binnui, Shimei, 39 Shelemiah, Nathan, Adaiah, 40 Machnadebai, Shashai, Sharai, 41 Azarel, Shelemiah, Shemariah, 42 Shallum, Amariah and Joseph. 43 Of the sons of Nebo there were Jeiel, Mattithiah, Zabad, Zebina, Jaddai, Joel

and Benaiah. 44 All these had married foreign wives, and some of them had wives by whom they had children.

Wow, that was tough. Yeah, I don't think that deserves applause actually but thank you for your kindness. I mean, I think I butchered a lot of those names but if it would've been Jim, Bob, you know?

Well, let's go to the Lord and ask his blessing on his word.

Father, we thank You for Your precious word, that every jot and tittle is there by the will of the Holy Spirit for our edification, and we pray that You would help us now to hear Your word, give us hearts to understand and to obey and hearts to love our Savior. We pray this in His name. Amen.

So the nature and necessity of repentance, turn from your sins. That's the third element. Not just mourn over sin, confess your sins, but turn from your sins. There must be action that accompanies this mourning and confession. All three are essential aspects but we must follow through to decisive action and what we see in this passage is decisive action. I mean, the people of God are moved to action in an extraordinary way. I mean, just look, step back at it and you look at it, it's pretty astounding. I mean, the time that Ezra hears the news back in chapter 9, he's grieved, he begins mourning, he cries, weeps all day, he fasts and in that time of fasting, he starts confessing sin, falling down before the house of God and then as we picked up in chapter 10, as the day is drawing to an end, he's confessing before the house of God, a large crowd gathers around him and there all the people are weeping. They're convicted over their sin. What's happened is Ezra has been preaching the word of God, I've mentioned probably a passage like Deuteronomy 7 which explains the deadliness of intermarrying with people outside of your faith, how it will lead you astray, and God calls them not to do this and Ezra has probably preached that passage. I say that because they used the words of that passage in their statement in chapter 9, the first couple of verses as they come to him and tell him what is happening. They're using the language of Deuteronomy 7.

So he's burdened, he's broken-hearted, he's mourning and the people now having heard the word of God and seeing this man exemplify the brokenness, are sharing in the brokenness, they're broken-hearted over their sin. A large number of people are under conviction and then the Lord raises up this person who we've not met before in the text, Shecaniah, and he steps forward and proposes a plan, "We can make a covenant with God. We can put away our foreign wives and let's do this." And so Ezra, then, meets with the priests and they come up with a plan and they come up with the plan to call together the whole nation, and the whole nation comes together three days later, standing in the rain. They're standing in the rain. I don't think they had, I mean, I'm sure they had some way of keeping the rain off of them but, you know, it wasn't like they had the pop-up umbrellas and stuff. Maybe they had something impressive, I don't know, but you don't get that sense.

And the other thing about it is they're doing this in December. The timing of this, the Jewish calendar, this would have been probably late December, maybe the 19th of December is a guess that some theologians have based on looking at the old calendars and stuff of how it would have fallen that year, this particular month of Kislev would have been around December 19th. When they're standing in the rain, the average temperature in Jerusalem is 57 degrees in December which is almost identical to the average high temperature in Atlanta in February. Our average temperature, high temperature is 58 degrees in Atlanta. It doesn't feel like that a lot though, does it? That's the average high, at least that's what the internet says so it has to be true. And so think about some of those February rains though. It's cold. Standing out in the rain in the cold, these people are standing out in the rain in the cold waiting for Ezra. Here they are and he begins preaching the word, sharing with them what they must do and they're standing in the rain shivering the text says, because they're trembling because of this matter. Spiritually they're trembling and then physically they're trembling because of the cold, and in the midst of all this, he challenges them and they respond as one man and say, "We will do what you're saying," and the Spirit of God is at work in all of this.

Then they set up a process that is gonna end up taking three months to investigate all of the different issues, and then these men who are guilty, many of them leaders, agree to put away their foreign wives, and some even have to separate from children. Great pain. A lot of complexity to this issue that had to be worked through and when the Spirit of God works on the people of God, there comes in the heart not just mourning over sin, not just a willingness to confess, that is to call sin what God calls it, there's more than that, there's a willingness to turn from sin.

There's an energy in the passage that really is illustrated vividly in this passage and what I want us to see this morning, I want us to consider our time under five points that make up the ways that we turn from sin or ways that they illustrate that we can turn from sin. Five things that turning from sin does or looks like when someone's genuinely turning from sin and the first thing that we see in the passage is that a person who turns from sin is evidencing the grace of God, evidencing the grace of God in an inward urgency of heart or an inward energy that's the fruit of grace. You can't manufacture this. What I'm saying is that a person who's turning from sin does it from the heart because God has done something in their heart and it's a mark of the grace of God. God must do this. It's an inner motivation of the heart, you could say, and we see this in a really striking way in the fact that as Ezra has started this revival, this spiritual awakening by the preaching of the word, if you read carefully in the passage, he's not the one that's doing a lot of the initiating in the passage. I mean, he started things by preaching and then by mourning and then by confessing, right? But the people gather around him. He didn't send out word, "Gather everybody." The people gather spontaneously and then this guy Shecaniah out of his own heart is bold and comes forward to speak to Ezra and what he says to Ezra is pretty bold. He confesses, "We've been unfaithful to our God and have married foreign women from the peoples of the land yet now there is hope for Israel in spite of this." Interesting to note: Shecaniah is not on the list of people who actually had done this. He's being like Ezra, he's identifying with the people. He's not sinned himself. Read the list carefully though, apparently his father had and he stands and he says just like Ezra did,

"We have sinned," the Spirit of God moving him, "We have sinned. We've been unfaithful to God yet now there is hope for Israel in spite of this." And so he comes up with this bold idea, "Let us make a covenant with our God to put away all the wives and their children. Let us obey His word," basically, "according to the counsel of my lord and of those who tremble at the commandment of our God; and let it be done according to the law."

Look what he says next in verse 4. This is Shecaniah speaking to Ezra, "Arise! For this matter is your responsibility. You must act but we will be with you. Be courageous and act." In fact, that word "be courageous," interesting verb. It means, some translations say, "be strong," and it literally, that's the normal meaning of this word is "to strengthen; to make strong; to harden." The dominant usage of this word in the Scriptures is to speak of being strong in the face of battle. Be strong as you move into battle. Harden yourselves. Be ready. Steel your will to fight. This is the idea. And so in a sense he's calling Ezra to fight. Be courageous and act. Truly repentance is spiritual warfare. When you're turning from sin, you are fighting a battle against the evil one. You're fighting a battle against Satan, you're fighting a battle against the world, and you're fighting a battle against your flesh so we need to be strong.

So what you see, though, is here that the motivation is happening because the Spirit is working in the hearts of the people and they're gladly responding. It's interesting, it just keeps on like in verse... Ezra then responds to that. He said, "Arise! For this matter is your responsibility," then in verse 5 it says Ezra rose and he goes and talks to the leading priests and the Levites and all Israel take an oath. Then verse 6, then he rose and went to the house of God to pray more. Then it says in verse 7 they made a proclamation throughout the land and that they should assemble at Jerusalem. Verse 8, "that whoever would not come within three days, according to the counsel of the leaders and the elders, all his possessions should be forfeited and he himself excluded." This is the people now are taking the leadership. The leaders have made a decree that everyone must come to Jerusalem to the house of God, and if someone doesn't come, they lose everything they have, it'll be confiscated.

So this, again this isn't Ezra directing at this point, it's the people responding to the word. I mentioned they're trembling in a heavy rain. They're gathered together in a heavy rain. All the assembly replies and then all the assembly makes a suggestion. It's not just that we want to get out of the rain and they say, "It's hard. We're standing in this rain but this task can't be done in one or two days. This is too much work. There's too much sin." And so they make the suggestion, the crowd itself makes the suggestion, "We need you to appoint leaders over us to hear these cases." Do you see how the Spirit is working in the people who were repenting? It's really instructive. This means that in our own lives if we're going to turn from sin, we need to look to God to do a work in us and sometimes our work is to stay in the word, looking at our sin, looking at who God is, looking at Christ and asking him to give us, "Grant me more repentance. Give me energy, Lord." It's not an excuse not to do it, you don't sit there, "I don't have the energy." No. Stay in the word. Keep praying, crying out to him. Fast and pray. Whatever it takes, keep seeking

him. But the real energy for turning from sin comes from the grace of God. It's not something you can drum up in yourself. It's an inward energy of the heart.

In fact it's interesting that the connection between mourning for sin and this kind of energy, inner drive, is really illustrated well in 2 Corinthians 7. I mentioned this passage a little bit when we were talking about mourning over sin. In 2 Corinthians 7, Paul talks about godly sorrow and worldly sorrow. He's made the Corinthians, he's caused them sorrow by a particularly direct, difficult letter he wrote them; between 1 Corinthians and 2 Corinthians he writes them a letter exhorting them to repent of some things they need to repent of and he says in 2 Corinthians 7:8, "For though I caused you sorrow by my letter, I do not regret it; though I did regret it--for I see that that letter caused you sorrow, though only for a while--I now rejoice, not that you were made sorrowful, but that you were made sorrowful to the point of repentance." You see, sorrow is a key part of repentance. He goes on to explain, "you were made sorrowful to the point of repentance; for you were made sorrowful according to the will of God, so that you might not suffer loss in anything through us. For the sorrow that is according to the will of God produces a repentance without regret, leading to salvation, but the sorrow of the world produces death." Now look what he says, he's talking about repentance now, godly sorrow that's produced repentance and look, he's gonna say, "Look, here are the fruits of repentance." What does he say, verse 11? He's basically proving to them that they have repented because of his letter he sent them. The Lord used it to create in them godly sorrow and they truly repented and he shows them the evidence in seven different character qualities and five particularly are about emotions or affections. Look verse 11, "For behold what earnestness this very thing, this godly sorrow, has produced in you: what vindication of yourselves, what indignation, what fear, what longing, what zeal, what avenging of wrong! In everything you demonstrated yourselves to be innocent in the matter." What he's saying is, "Listen, I made you sorrowful by telling you the truth that you didn't want to hear but it was a godly sorrow because the godly sorrow resulted in these fruits. It resulted in an earnestness." That word comes from a word which normally it's translated "speed or haste; a zeal to move quickly." It resulted not just in earnestness, he says, but in vindication of yourselves, the desire to deal with your sin. What indignation, you were indignant about your sin. What fear, you had a new understanding of the fear of God. You saw yourself before the Lord. What longing, you were longing to be freed from your sin. You were hungering and thirsting after righteousness. What zeal, what energy, what avenging of wrong. You wanted to make things right. You see, all of those things are evidences of true repentance Paul says and that's what we're seeing really lived out before us in the lives of the people in Ezra's day, an inner drive, an emotional intensity, an inward energy of the heart that is movement from within the soul away from sin to God.

So this first element of repentance is the fruit of grace that shows itself in an inward, an inner energy of the heart. That's what we must look for in our lives. That's what we need to look for when we're trying to bless and help a brother who needs to repent, or a sister who needs to repent. You can't make them repent. In fact, one of the things that I was thinking about related to this was I would be prone to maybe give some steps that they should do quicker than Ezra did. Ezra doesn't really give any steps initially. He just

mourns over sin, he cries out to God confessing sin, and they start acting. So it shows that we need to really work at mourning over sin and confessing sin thoroughly before we jump ahead to the actions. Now there are actions that need to be...there's a balance here. It just shows, though, that the actions need to come from and be accompanied by true heartfelt motivation or it won't last.

So the first component of a heart that's turning from sin is this inner motivation. The second thing that we see in the passage is that if a person who really is turning from sin is willing to commit to a process, they're willing to commit to a process. It's not something they want to get done quickly. Let's get this thing done right now. I just want to confess. I want to turn from it. I want to commit and let's just get past it. No, they're willing to engage in a process. They're like, "We can't get this done in one or two days. We need to..." And they're telling Ezra that. "We've gotta go deeper." You see, they understand the depth of sin and they know that true repentance, turning from sin is going to involve a systematic process, three month process.

We're told in verse 16 they convene on the first day of the tenth month to investigate the matter. They finish investigating all the men who had married foreign wives by the first day of the first month, 90 days. Key word there, "investigate." This word means "to diligently inquire; to seek with care; to search out." It comes from a word, the etymology of the word is from if you frequent an area, you tread a path, you tread down. This is the root idea of this word and so it means to be looking so much that you're creating a path, you're treading it down. That's really the kind of searching that needs to happen. You're not just quickly, a cursory look into the matter. This is searching it out and when someone wants to really turn from their sin and caught in sin and they're repenting from it, there's a willingness to engage in a process to deal with it. "Lord, root this out." They see the depth of sin and they want to get it out by the roots. It's not easy.

So they're willing to commit to learning God's word, memorizing Scripture, studying the word. Meditation is a key element to really getting to the depth of sin, the process of meditation on the word as it relates to the sin struggles that you have. Accountability. Having people in your life who hold you accountable because the goal is to form new patterns of thinking and acting.

So you're willing to commit to a process, you're willing to involve yourself and be committed to a long-term approach to dealing with sin. This is one of the things that really is lacking in our day. We don't understand sanctification the way the Bible does. We think it's all about let go and let God and that's just not the way the Scripture works. Everything is of grace but God gives his grace through means and you must put yourself in the means of grace. You must study the word of God. You must memorize Scripture. You must let your mind continue to dwell on the things of God. You must pray. You must at times fast. You have to exhort one another. You've got to be willing to listen to other people. These are the things that you must build into your life if you want to turn from sin. Without that kind of commitment there will not be the kind of victory and we live in a day that everything's easy. We want everything to be easy. Microwave generation, not even microwave doesn't even make sense now, I mean, that's like old hat.

But everything, you Google it immediately. Isn't that amazing? Think of something, I think this is really actually not a good thing for us, our minds. I'm saying that sometime before long people are going to say it's not good that everything, all the data that you get is out there on the internet somewhere. It's not in a book. It's not learned that way and so it's like everything is just disconnected but it's instant though, isn't it? And so we're used to instant knowledge, instant gratification but life transformation doesn't happen like that. It happens through disciplined effort, depending on the grace of God, empowered by the Spirit of God, effected by the power of all that Christ has done, united to him, it's all about him, but it takes work and someone who turns from sin is willing to commit to a process.

The third thing that we see in this passage, though, that those who are willing to turn from sin not only have an inner motivation, not only are willing to commit to a process, thirdly, they're willing to submit to others. They're willing to submit to others. The idea they had is let our leaders represent the whole assembly and let all those in our cities who have married foreign wives come at appointed times with elders and judges and let them search it out. Put them, put us under godly authority.

There were a lot of good reasons for this in this particular situation. This was a complex issue. I mean, basically 90 days would be 77 working days because of the Sabbaths. Seventy-seven working days to hear these cases. There was 113 names. There's actually a few more names than that but it was like, you know, the father, this is the father here of his sons. Only 113 people were actually found guilty of marrying foreign wives. So they had at least 113 cases. This isn't the guys who were declared innocent. So basically 77 working days, they're getting like 1½ cases a day. They're not like running them through. It's not like a drive-through situation. They're getting into the nitty-gritty of the details of the circumstances.

What are they asking? I think one of the things that we could infer from the rest of the Old Testament is they're asking is it possible this wife is genuinely a proselyte? Does this woman that you've married want to follow Yahweh? Did you marry her like, I mean think about it, Boaz married Ruth, the Moabitess, and he wasn't condemned for that. Why? Because Ruth, remember what she said to Naomi, "Where you lodge, I will lodge. Your people will be my people. Your God will be my God." So they would be examining are the, maybe some of these men have married genuine women who wanted to proselytize. Apparently that's not happening much because it's not even mentioned that any of those are found. That would be something they would have investigated.

And a second thing would be given that they are not, they're gonna have to put them away, there would have been some financial issues that needed to be dealt with. It was apparently common practice in this time in Israel and in the surrounding nations for fathers of brides to give a dowry to the husband as an encouragement for him to take the daughter as a wife, and so it was customary. So this would have been one of the reasons possibly that they married foreign women is not just because they were attractive, but that they could get financial blessings and standing in the community, and to put them away now would mean to give back the dowry and so the judges would have to work through

that. You've got to do what is right. You've got to send these women away with the provision that they need and that's one of the reasons the dowry was given too. If the man dies, the money is there for the woman to care for her.

So this was a complex situation so they needed to submit to other people. The complexity of the issue called for help. But one of the things that they also, it illustrates is that we should understand the deceitfulness of sin enough to know that I must be willing to submit to other people. If you really understand the deceitfulness of sin, then you know you cannot be trusted by yourself to figure out how to get out of really deep sin. We need someone else to help us. This is why all those "one anothers" are in the New Testament. When we were looking at the book of James before we moved into Ezra, James 5:16, "Confess your sins to one another." We're to confess our sins to one another. Why? Because we're supposed to be accountable to each other. We need help. Hebrews 3:12-13, an important passage where we're exhorted by the author of Hebrews, "Take care, brethren, that there not be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God." Listen to this, verse 13, "But encourage one another day after day, as long as it is still called 'Today,' so that none of you will be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin." We need to be in community where we are being encouraged by our brothers and sisters to walk in purity and holiness and a heart that wants to turn from sin will be willing to do that. One of the marks of grace that is really energizing the heart is there will be a humility and a willingness to submit. Are you willing to submit to others in the area in your life that you need to be repenting of? Are you willing to humble yourself and make yourself accountable? If not, then you are not exhibiting the fruits of real repentance right now so you need to ask God for grace and follow his word and do what he says. Ask for help. One of the ways that even when you see that there's not the kind of energy in your heart to repent, sharing that with another brother, "I feel like I'm not as broken as I need to be. Pray for me." The Lord blesses that kind of humility." He resists the proud, he gives grace to the humble and there's power in confession. We saw it last time when we talked about confession. Remember I said that what you cover, God will uncover, but what you uncover, God will cover. The God of grace and mercy.

So a person who's turning from sin is motivated from an inner drive in the heart. They're willing to commit to a process, secondly. Thirdly, they're willing to submit to others. And fourthly, they're willing to count the cost and separate from sin. Counting the cost, they're willing to separate from sin. Key word in the passage is verse 11, "Now therefore, make confession to the LORD God of your fathers and do His will; and separate yourselves from the people." Divide yourself from the peoples of the lands that are living in ungodliness. Bring about a separation. You're called to be a separate and distinct people. That call that was there for the physical nation of Israel is there for you if you belong to Jesus Christ. Peter says in 1 Peter 2 that you are a chosen race, a holy nation. Holy means set apart. You're a people for God's own possession, a royal priesthood. We're to be set apart from the world.

So these people were willing to even though it was costly, to separate themselves from the sin, to make the decisive changes that needed to happen. They went through the pain of a public trial. They went through the pain of publicly having their names recorded so

that we read their names today in 2020, we read the names of these guys. You know, when you really repent, though, it's not – now listen, this is important – the confession is not to go beyond the circle but here we had public sin. I mean, these guys are marrying, everybody knows when he brings his wife to the barbecue, or it wouldn't be, there was no pork, of course, just chicken, I guess, brings his wife to the barbecue, that she's a woman, an Egyptian who worships her foreign gods. So it's public so then the confession needs to be public. But there's a sense in which when you've really repented, that the person who's really repentant isn't so concerned about how many people know. I'm saying this wisely, we should keep the circle as small as possible, as big as necessary.

So the one who's helping shepherd them needs to guard that because there are implications. You know, if you share your sin in too far circles and sometimes it creates more damage and pain for other people, perhaps family members of the person that has sinned. So it's not that but the person who has sinned, that's really motivated by this inner motivation, that's willing to commit to a process and submit to others is also willing to be separate from sin and they're so glad to be putting sin behind them that they, in a sense, don't care who knows.

Psalms 51 is basically David's public testimony of his sin with Bathsheba. He's so moved by the grace of God, broken over his sin, so wants to be free from his sin, is so rejoicing in God's grace that he tells us of how ugly his sin was. "A Psalm of David, when Nathan the prophet came to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba." That's the first verse in the Hebrew. In the English Bible it comes as like a prelude but it's the first verse actually in the Hebrew Bible. So David writes this Psalm and says, "Let's use this to worship God." And now we have this verse, you see, you don't care and in one sense you don't care. Why? Because you're so grateful to be forgiven, you're so grateful for grace that you realize and in Psalm 51, what a tremendous treasure. It magnifies God and his grace.

So the penitent sinner who's really repentant wants to magnify the grace of God and give glory to God so they're willing to accept the cost. The other thing that they're willing to experience, though, this willingness to separate from sin is seen in the painful separation from their wives. I'm sure many of these men loved these women. You hope most would have or all would have, really, except that to love them as they should as a husband would mean to turn away from God and so they must put them away and a really striking verse is the last verse in the chapter, chapter 10, verse 44, "All these had married foreign wives, and some of them had wives by whom they had children." Ezra doesn't really unpack for us the pain that must have been for these men to send away their foreign wives and their children. How agonizing it must have been. But to see what they had done to God and to see that God is more precious at this particular point in history, this was what God called them to do.

Now this doesn't apply to us the same way today. You can't make a justification for divorcing your unbelieving spouse from this passage. You cannot do that. Why? Because 1 Corinthians 7 says you can't do that, that on this side of Calvary and what Christ has done for us, the gift of the Holy Spirit that we now have, he says in 1 Corinthians 7:12-14 that a believing husband who is married to an unbelieving wife, you shall not send her

away. If she consents to live with you, you must not send her away. An unbelieving woman who lives, I mean a believing woman who lives with an unbelieving man, the same thing is true. But we have the Spirit of God, we have the word of God, we have the ability to stand up before this kind of temptation. 1 Peter 3:1-6, particularly verse 1 says that a woman who lives with an unbelieving husband, many of the translations say disobedient. The idea is respect your husband even if they're disobedient. Disobedient though really could be translated unbelieving because it means literally not persuaded. You live with a man who's not persuaded to the truth, who's not submitted to the Gospel, who is not believing in Christ. The exhortation there is live in such a way, gentle and quiet spirit that your husband is won without a word by the character, the godly character.

So it doesn't apply the same way but I think there is some area where it would apply with some pain. Let me give you one example. We don't have time to do much more than that but let's think about one example of how I think the passage in Ezra would apply in kind of a surprising way, that might be surprising for some of us. Normally we would say that a woman who marries a man, they're believers, you know, it's right for the man in leading his family to be, he's responsible to choose the church. Now a wise husband should realize his wife is his helper, should listen to her, they should confer about it, they should talk about it, they should pray about it. He should really value her counsel more than anybody else's in his life, after all, she is his helper suitable, but he makes a decision. Now think about a Christian woman who's married to a man that says he's a believer but doesn't really demonstrate that he's a believer and wants to go to a bad church, an obvious example would be a Catholic church. A godly Christian woman should not go with her husband to a Catholic church based on even what we're seeing in Ezra because you would be following him into the worship of a false god. The Catholic church, the Gospel is not there except maybe on some rare occasions if you find a certain Catholic priest who knows Christ, but that normally it's a false religion and so you would not go there. I don't think it would be wise to go to a liberal Protestant church either for the same reason, the Gospel's not there, Christ is not there, and it would be appropriate for a woman to say, "I cannot follow you to that church. I want to follow your leadership but I cannot follow you to that church because my heart belongs to Jesus. I must be where the word of God is preached, where Jesus Christ is truly lifted up." But that goes against the grain. You see the responsibility of submitting to your husband has to bow to your responsibility to submit to Christ. In fact, wives are called to submit to your husbands as to the Lord, that is, submit to your husband trusting that God's working through him, but when you clearly know God's not working through him, you don't submit to that in that sense, like clear obvious leadership like that. A lot of other things you submit to even if you don't think it's a good idea.

So the point though is the nature and necessity of repentance, turning from sin, there's an inner motivation that has to happen that the grace of God creates in someone, and when someone is willing, has that in their heart, they're willing to commit to a process, they're willing to submit to others and they're willing to take drastic acts of separation. Change jobs so that you're not tempted anymore. Get rid of your computer, your smartphone if necessary. Do whatever it takes to separate from sin. These are the kind of things that this

passage is telling us to do, even painful things. If we love Christ and we want him, that's what we're to do.

Let's go to the Lord in prayer.

Father, we thank You for the grace of repentance that You grant to sinners. Lord, we know that we confess in line with Your word that repentance is not something that we can gin up but we should seek it from You, we should seek it in the means that You've appointed in Your word through prayer through our interaction with our brothers and sisters in Christ. Father, grant that we might ever be repenting, that we might take our repentance all the way up to the throne room of God, continually turning from sin and continually turning to Jesus. We thank You, Lord, that the sacrifice that Christ made is what these men trusted in. They offered a sacrifice. That was their only hope and You have offered a sacrifice in Your Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, and He is our only hope. His death, his resurrection are the only thing that can truly separate us from sin, uniting ourselves to Him, believing into Him, receiving Him as our Lord and Master. That is where freedom comes. Help us, O Lord. We pray that You would work in our hearts. Those here who need to take decisive steps today to repent, grant them grace to follow through. And all of us, Lord, help us be more broken over our sin and help us be more committed to walking in truth for the glory of our Savior. We pray in His name. Amen.