THE GODLY REACTION TO SIN

Ezra 9:1-15

By

Steven J. Cole

October 13, 2002

© Steven J. Cole, 2002

Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture Quotations are from the New American Standard Bible, © The Lockman Foundation
The Godly Reaction to Sin
Ezra 9:1-15

Only twice in over 25 years of ministry have I seen a man weep genuine tears of repentance over his sin. One situation was a retired man in my church in California who worked part time as a janitor. He confessed to me how he had impulsively stolen a small item from a desk in the office he cleaned. Then he broke into tears over the sinfulness of his own heart.

I fear that in our decadent society, even we in the church have grown so used to sin that it doesn’t shock us anymore. C. H. Spurgeon (Autobiography of C. H. Spurgeon [Banner of Truth], 1:160) warned his fellow pastors of the danger of dealing with sin and sinners professionally, so that we lose our dread of evil. What at first shocked us becomes commonplace and routine. As Alexander Pope perceptively observed (Essay on Man, line 217, in Familiar Quotations, John Bartlett [Little, Brown, & Co.], 13th ed., p. 317):

Vice is a monster of so frightful mien,
As to be hated needs but to be seen;
Yet, seen too oft, familiar with her face,
We first endure, then pity, then embrace.

Because we are so desensitized toward sin, we fail to have the proper response toward it, whether it is our own sin, or sin in others. We minimize it, justify it, or ignore it and go on our way unaffected by it.

If we see someone reacting in a godly way toward sin, we think that he is a bit carried away or extreme. He is judgmental or intolerant. How dare he cast stones at others! Does he think that he is without sin? And so, by casting our stones at him, we justify our sins and go back to business as usual, wondering why God doesn’t bless our lives more than He does.

Our text relates Ezra’s reaction to the sin of the exiles who had returned to Israel after the Babylonian captivity. About four and a half months (7:9, cf. 10:9) after he led a remnant back to the land, it was reported to him that many people in Israel, including
many priests, Levites, princes, and rulers, had sinned by taking pa-
gan wives.

Ezra did not take the news in stride, chuckling, “Well, people
will be people.” Rather, he tore his clothes, pulled some hair from
his head and beard, and sat down appalled and speechless until the
time of the evening offering. By then a number of godly people
had gathered around him. Ezra arose, then fell to his knees, lifted
his hands to the Lord, and confessed the great sin of his people,
identifying himself with them, although he had not sinned in this
regard. His prayer, which ranks with Nehemiah 9 and Daniel 9 as
one of the great prayers of confession in the Bible, shows us the
godly reaction to sin:

The godly reaction to sin is to recognize it from Scripture,
to mourn over it, and to confess it without excuse
to the God of mercy.

How a person reacts to the news of sin tells a lot about that
person. If we hear about adultery and get a subtle thrill reading the
juicy details, it reveals that we do not hate that sin and are vulner-
able to it ourselves. While I confess that I have never reacted as
strongly against sin as Ezra did (I can’t afford to pull out my hair!),
and while part of his reaction may be culturally explained, we still
can learn from him that we need to abhor sin so that we do not
become desensitized to it. The first step is:

1. The godly reaction to sin is to recognize it from Scripture.

How do we know what is right and wrong? A popular song
(supposedly Christian) a few years ago asked, “How can it be
wrong when it feels so right?” I hope that most Christians know
that feelings are not a solid basis for determining right and wrong.
Yet I’ve had young ladies, purporting to be Christians, tell me that
they are going to marry a non-Christian man because they have
prayed about it and feel a peace about it. Never mind that the Bible
strongly forbids entering such a marriage! It’s how you feel about it!
I’ve had Christian spouses tell me that they feel a peace about di-
vorcing their mates for unbiblical reasons. The peace they feel is
the relief of escaping from a difficult relationship, not the peace of
God. But they often act on feelings, rather than on God’s Word.
Some say that we should follow our consciences, but the conscience is only reliable to the degree that it has been formed by Scripture. For example, I ask couples who want me to marry them to fill out a questionnaire. One question asks about the couple’s level of physical involvement, and the next question asks how they feel about their level of involvement, with the choices: Good, Concerned, Guilty, or Trapped. Sometimes I get couples who report that they have sex often and they feel good about it! That tells me that this couple doesn’t have a clue about what God’s Word says about sexual purity before marriage. Their sense of right and wrong has been formed more by the culture than by Scripture.

A. Scripture reveals to us what sin is.

Ezra was appalled when he heard about these Jews marrying pagans because he knew that God’s Word condemns it. He laments (9:10), “For we have forsaken Your commandments,” and he goes on to cite God’s prohibition against intermarriage with the pagans of the land. His citations are not an exact quote, but rather a summary of passages such as Exodus 34:11-16 and Deuteronomy 7:1-4. The reporting of this sin to Ezra (9:1) reflects the biblical language, in that these are the people groups that inhabited the land before the conquest under Joshua. Only the Ammonites, Moabites, and Egyptians were still extant. But the point is, Ezra and the leaders who reported this sin to him knew that it was sin because God’s Word declared it to be sin.

When the princes reported that the holy seed had been intermingled with the peoples of the land (9:2), their concern was not racial corruption, but rather, moral corruption. In the original command, God explained the reason for the prohibition: “For they will turn your sons away from following Me to serve other gods” (Deut. 7:4; see Exod. 34:16). God knew the tendency of fallen hearts. Rather than influencing their mates to abandon their idols and follow the one true God, the Israelites would be prone to mingle pagan idolatry with their worship of God.

This is called syncretism, and it always has been a major problem for God’s people. We don’t blatantly deny Christianity. Rather, we add to our faith the beliefs and practices of the world, so that in a short time, we are virtually indistinguishable from the world in our thinking and in the way we live. Because of this pro-
pensity, God forbade intermarriage and He even prohibited the Jews from seeking the peace and prosperity of the pagans in their pagan ways (Deut. 23:6; contrast Jer. 29:7). There had to be a clear separation of God’s people from the pagans or God’s people would be drawn into the pagan practices.

Blending in with the world rather than being distinct from it has plagued the church down through the centuries. Monasticism was an attempt to escape worldly influence by withdrawing from the world. I was surprised a few years ago to read some leading evangelicals who were suggesting a revival of monasticism as a way to stem the current flood of worldliness in the church! The problem with monasticism is that Jesus wants His followers to be in the world as salt and light, but not to be of the world (Matt. 5:13-16; John 17:14-18). He calls us to go into the world with a distinct mission, to reach the world with the gospel. But to do that effectively, we must remain unstained from the world. The way we think and the way we live must be shaped by Scripture, not by the world.

James 4:4 bluntly says, “You adulteresses, do you not know that friendship with the world is hostility toward God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.” First John 2:15 is no less strong: “Do not love the world nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.” Or, as Paul puts it with regard to seeking worldly riches: “But those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a snare and many foolish and harmful desires which plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil, and some by longing for it have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs” (1 Tim. 6:9-10).

Since we have so many college age people in our church, and since our text specifically warns about intermarriage with pagans, I want to underscore that application. I have seen many Christian young people fall in love with unbelievers and consequently either fall away from their faith or have their zeal for the Lord greatly diluted. If you know and love Jesus Christ, the most important thing to look for in a mate is a person who loves Christ and is devoted to following Him. A believer and an unbeliever have totally different values and goals. An unbeliever is living for pleasure and
the things of this world. A believer lives to seek first God’s kingdom and righteousness. To join the two is a built-in formula for conflict and misery in the home. Your children also will suffer.

Be on your guard! Satan uses the tool of an unbelieving or worldly mate to ensnare many Christian young people. “Do not be bound together with unbelievers” (2 Cor. 6:14)!

B. Scripture reveals to us what sin does to people.

Satan always sugarcoats sin to make it look appealing. We mistakenly think that sin will get us what we want, but it always leads to bondage and ruin. Ezra’s prayer reveals where the nation’s sins had led them (9:7): “... on account of our iniquities we, our kings and our priests have been given into the hand of the kings of the lands, to the sword, to captivity, and to plunder and to open shame ....” Four times he refers to the people as an escaped remnant (9:8, 13, 14, 15), showing how the formerly strong nation had been decimated. He repeatedly uses words like “slaves,” “bondage,” and “ruins” (9:8-9) to describe the condition of the people. He acknowledges that if they do not repent, God may destroy them so that no remnant survives or escapes (9:14).

God’s Word plainly warns that sin not only enslaves and eventually destroys the sinner; it also takes a toll on others. Marvin Breneman (The New American Commentary, Ezra Nehemiah, Esther [Broadman], p. 149) writes, “Christians who adopt a life-style that negates Jesus’ commands are sacrificing both the future of the church and that of the peoples it should be reaching with the gospel.” If we blend into the world, lost peoples will not hear the gospel through our witness and our support of missionaries. Our children will grow up thinking that Christianity has nothing to do with how we live, and they will reject the faith altogether.

Thus we must steep ourselves in God’s Word so that we instantly recognize sin in ourselves and can turn from it. And being in the Bible more than we are in TV and other worldly media will keep us aware of the devastating toll of sin.

2. The godly reaction to sin is to mourn over it.

When Ezra heard of this sin of God’s people, he tore his garment and robe, pulled some hair from his head and beard, and sat down appalled for hours. His reaction probably seems extreme to
us, and in part it may be culturally determined. But, as Edwin Ya-
mauchi observes, “Rare is the soul who is so shocked at disobedie-
ence that he is appalled (Expositor’s Bible Commentary [Zondervan],
4:664). R. W. Dale said, “It is partly because sin does not provoke
our own wrath, that we do not believe that sin provokes the wrath
35).

Jesus said, “Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be
comforted” (Matt. 5:4). In his sermon on that text, Martyn Lloyd-
Jones says, “I cannot help feeling that the final explanation of the
state of the Church today is a defective sense of sin and a defective
doctrine of sin” (The Sermon on the Mount [Eerdmans], p. 55). He
goes on to say that the reason so many professing Christians lack
joy is that they have never experienced a real, deep conviction of
sin, which is the essence of the gospel. He says (ibid., pp. 55-56),

They have failed to see that they must be convicted of sin be-
fore they can ever experience joy. They do not like the doc-
trine of sin. They dislike it intensely and they object to its be-
ing preached. They want joy apart from the conviction of sin.
But that is impossible; it can never be obtained. ... Conviction
is an essential preliminary to true conversion.

C. H. Spurgeon saw the same thing in his day. (In the follo-
wing quote, he mentions “revivalism,” which refers to those who
used the new methods of Charles Finney, calling people to a “decis-
ion” for Christ by going forward. It was a man-centered approach
to evangelism that denied the necessity of God’s sovereign power
in the conversion of sinners. See Revival & Revivalism, by Iain
Murray [Banner of Truth] for an excellent treatment of this.) Spu-
geon wrote (source unknown),

A very great portion of modern revivalism has been more a
curse than a blessing, because it has led thousands to a kind of
peace before they have known their misery; restoring the
prodigal to the Father’s house, and never making him say,
“Father, I have sinned.” How can he be healed who is not
sick, or he be satisfied with the bread of life who is not hun-
gry? The old-fashioned sense of sin is despised.... The conse-
quence is that men leap into religion, and then leap out again.
Unhumbled they came to the church, unhumbled they remained in it, and unhumbled they go from it.

In his great work, A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections, Jonathan Edwards rightly argued, “True religion [he meant genuine Christianity], in great part, consists in holy affections” [= emotions] ([Banner of Truth], 1:236). When God changes our hearts through the new birth, He gives us new desires for holiness and a hatred toward sin. These emotional qualities (and many others) will increase over time. But a distinguishing mark of a true Christian is that he mourns over sin, both his own sins and the sins of others.

Ezra was so steeped in God’s Word and the history of God’s ways with His errant people that he knew that God’s severe discipline would fall again if the people did not repent. Even though Ezra himself had not committed this particular sin, he identified himself with the sin of the people and mourned over it.

What would you think of a doctor, who upon discovering that you had cancer, gave you a hug and said, “Take two aspirin and you’ll be just fine”? How about a fireman who responded to a report of a house on fire by saying, “It will burn itself out soon”? How about a policeman who arrived at the scene of a robbery, shook his head and said, “Boys will be boys”? In each case, the response is inappropriate to the situation.

A Christian’s response to sin, whether his own or the sin of other believers, should be to mourn. That attitude stems from trembling at the words of God (9:4). The godly reaction to sin is first to recognize it from Scripture, and then to mourn over it.

3. The godly reaction to sin is to confess it without excuse to the God of mercy.

Ezra’s prayer is a model of confession. It has four elements:

A. Confession acknowledges the absolute righteousness of God in all His dealings with us.

Ezra affirms God’s righteousness in His past punishment of Israel by sending them into captivity: “O Lord God of Israel, You are righteous” (9:15). In 9:13 he acknowledges that God has given them less than their sins deserve. The implication of 9:14 is that if God were to give them what they deserved now, He would totally
wipe them out. Ezra exonerates God, while accepting the blame for what the people have done.

B. Confession submits to God’s righteous dealings without complaint or excuse.

There is not even a hint of complaint on Ezra’s part that God has not been fair. He does not point to any extenuating circumstances. Perhaps there was not an adequate supply of Jewish women for these exiles to marry, which led them to marry foreign wives. Perhaps the men rationalized by saying, “But our wives promised to worship at the temple with us.” But Ezra laid aside any and all excuses. Rather than complaining about God’s judgment, Ezra readily acknowledged that God would be justified to inflict much more punishment than He had.

Ezra’s identification with the people, in spite of his own innocence in this sin, shows that he knew the evil that lurked in his own heart. If he had been self-righteous, he would have prayed, “Lord, these people of Yours are obstinate and wicked. You are righteous to judge them. But I’m not like they are.” But instead, he included himself when he confessed the sins of the people.

Many years ago, a correspondent of the London Times was reporting on many of the same problems that we now have. He ended every article with the question, “What’s wrong with the world?”


C. Confession agrees with God concerning His view of our sin.

We are prone to minimize our sin by calling it a shortcoming, a fault, a tendency, or other benign terms. Ezra admits his shame because “our iniquities have risen over our heads” (9:6). In other words, “We’re drowning in a flood of our sins.” He refers to their “great guilt” because of their iniquities that led to the captivity (9:7). He admits to forsaking God’s commandments by joining with the uncleanness, abominations, and impurity of the peoples of the land (9:10-11). He refers again to their “evil deeds” and “great guilt” (9:13) for breaking God’s commandments and committing
these abominations (9:14). He does not gloss over their sins as no big deal. He calls it what it is.

D. Confession casts the sinner on God’s undeserved mercy, based on the sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

Ezra’s prayer makes no petition, but rather, he implicitly casts himself and the nation on God’s undeserved mercy. He acknowledges that the current return from exile and the building of the temple are a gracious “little reviving” from God (9:8-9), which those who have sinned have ungratefully disregarded.

Ezra made his prayer at the time of the evening offering (9:5). Perhaps the smell of the sacrifice encouraged his heart that God has made a way for sinners to be reconciled to Him, namely, through the shedding of the blood of a substitute. The Old Testament sacrifices pointed ahead to the shed blood of God’s perfect and final sacrifice, the Lord Jesus Christ. Through faith in Christ’s blood applied to our hearts, we can draw near to God for cleansing from all our sins.

Conclusion

J. C. Ryle said, “Christ is never fully valued, until sin is clearly seen” (Expository Thoughts on the Gospels [Baker], on Luke 20:9-19, p. 326). Thus our first reaction to sin must be to see it clearly from the Scriptures. Then, realizing that it put our Savior on the cross, we should mourn over it. Finally, we should confess it without excuse to the God of mercy, appropriating His cleansing for our consciences, that we might be renewed to serve Him in purity.

C. S. Lewis observed, “When a man is getting better, he understands more and more clearly the evil that is still in him. When a man is getting worse, he understands his own badness less and less” (cited by Nathan Hatch, Christianity Today [3/2/79], p. 14). As we grow in godliness, with Ezra we will react more strongly to our own sins and to the sins of God’s people. We will dwell more consistently at the foot of the cross of Jesus Christ, where God’s mercy flows to repentant sinners.
Discussion Questions

1. Why is it essential that we go to the Bible as our only authoritative source of right and wrong?

2. Why do we need to keep before us the Bible’s picture of the devastating effects of sin?

3. Some argue that confession does not involve feelings, but only faith. Why is this unbiblical? What should we do if we lack the proper emotional reaction to sin?

4. To what degree should we mourn over the sins of others? Are we supposed to go around depressed all the time?

Copyright, Steven J. Cole, 2002, All Rights Reserved.