

Responding to Sin and Guilt: Confession

Ezra 9

On a sunny fall day in 1972 a man stood on a street corner in the busy Chicago Loop. As people walked by he would occasionally lift his arm and point to a person and pronounce, "Guilty!" He would then resume his stance for a few moments before raising his arm again and pronouncing to someone else, "Guilty!" Apparently the effect on people was eerie. People would look at each other and at the man and hurry on their way. One man was overheard saying, "How did he know?" (Karl Menninger in *Whatever Became of Sin*, pp. 1-2)

Of course the man "knew" because we're all guilty in different ways at different times. Sometimes we have false guilt over things that we shouldn't. But today I want us to think about appropriate guilt, the guilt we have when we've sinned. Sometimes we experience guilt over the things we've done (said or done things that displease God and that hurt others); at other times we feel guilt over things we've left undone (haven't been generous in word or deed).

When you are confronted with your guilt over some specific sin, you can respond in a number of different ways. On one end of the spectrum, you can **deny** your sin (or convince ourselves that it's not that bad): "I just messed up, but at least I'm not as bad as most people I know." The goal here is to make yourself feel better as quickly as possible. The problem is that this response doesn't deal with the underlying issues; you remain unchanged.

A response at the other end of the spectrum is **self-condemnation**. You become fixated on your sin and guilt and you mull over in your mind how horrible you are and how you'll probably always be horrible. This is a very common response, but it's also a very self-centered response because it focuses only on one's self, not on God or on the implications for other people.

Today and next Sunday I want us to consider a third response to sin, a distinctively Christian response to sin: confession and repentance. This response isn't a balance between denial and self-condemnation; it is on a completely different scale altogether. Instead of being self-centered, this is a God-centered response to sin and guilt; it focuses how God views our sin and how He has dealt with our sin through the sacrifice of His Son. Confession of sins is a gift, not a punishment. Repentance is a gift, not a punishment. Through Jesus Christ, we have the freedom simply to confess our sin and guilt to God; through the power of the Holy Spirit we can repent, taking a different path in the future.

Today we will consider the response of confession from Ezra 9; next week we'll consider the continuing response of repentance from Ezra 10. As Ezra 9 begins, the Jewish people had been restored to the Land and the temple had been rebuilt. But their restoration was being threatened by sin: their intermarriage with the peoples of the surrounding lands.

Unfaithfulness in Ezra's Day (*Ezra 9:1-4*) In these verses we read about the unfaithfulness of the people in Ezra's day. The rest of the chapter records Ezra's prayer of confession.

1 Now when these things had been completed, the princes approached me, saying, "The people of Israel and the priests and the Levites have not separated themselves from the peoples of the lands, according to their abominations, those of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians and the Amorites.

Representatives of the people informed Ezra that, "The people of Israel and the priests and the Levites have not separated themselves from the peoples of the lands, according to their abominations." The returning exiles were supposed to "separate themselves from the people of the lands" in the sense of maintaining their distinct identity as the people of God. The Law stipulated that they follow a very specific calendar, a very specific diet, and a very specific morality. Instead, they joined together with the peoples of the land "according to their abominations"; they joined the people in doing things that were detestable in God's sight.

The list of "peoples" that the representatives mention are the original inhabitants of the Land when the Jews returned after their slavery in Egypt. Even though some of these peoples no longer existed as identifiable nations, the mention of these names would have prompted a memory that should serve as a warning. The children of Israel returning from slavery in Egypt were commanded to conquer all the inhabitants of the Land, but they didn't. The result was generations of conflict and a continual temptation to worship and serve other gods.

In Ezra's day the exiles returning from Babylon faced a similar threat. Specifically, verse 2 tells us, they intermarried with the peoples of the lands:

2 "For they have taken some of their daughters as wives for themselves and for their sons, so that the holy race has intermingled with the peoples of the lands; indeed, the hands of the princes and the rulers have been foremost in this unfaithfulness."

We are told here that both fathers and sons had intermarried with the peoples of the lands and that the leadership was guiltier than anybody else. It wasn't merely a few isolated people on the margins of society; the "princes and rulers" had been "foremost in this unfaithfulness."

Notice how this intermarriage is described: "the holy race as intermingled with the peoples of the lands." Israel's calling involved being a people set apart exclusively for the one, true living God. The Law's prohibition against such intermarriage (see Exodus 34:16, Deut. 7:3) had nothing to do with race/ethnicity; it had to do with purity of devotion to God. Moses, for example, in Deuteronomy 7, warned against intermarrying

with other peoples because “they would turn your sons away from following Me to serve other gods” (v. 4).

The Jewish people **couldn't** live out their calling if they intermarried with people who served other gods, people who didn't keep the Law, people who didn't teach their sons and daughters God's Word (as Deuteronomy 6:4-9 describes). This unfaithfulness threatened the entire restoration that God had promised. Ezra's response in verses 3 and 4 reflects just how devastating this sin really was.

3 When I heard about this matter, I tore my garment and my robe, and pulled some of the hair from my head and my beard, and sat down appalled.

Ezra had a visceral response to what he'd heard. Normally people take great care when it comes to clothing and grooming. But Ezra reversed this normal pattern by intentionally tearing his garment/robe and pulling hair out of his head and beard. His response reflected how devastated he was to learn of the people's sin.

In verse 4 we're told the effect that Ezra's response had on those who revered God:

4 Then everyone who trembled at the words of the God of Israel on account of the unfaithfulness of the exiles gathered to me, and I sat appalled until the evening offering.

The expression to “tremble at God's word” is found in several other places in Scripture (e.g., Isaiah 66:2); it describes an attitude of reverence for God and His Word. The opposite would be carelessness or indifference toward God - a take-it-or-leave-it attitude toward His desires. Notice that Ezra considered the exiles' disobedience as “unfaithfulness”; it's as if the people had been cheating on God.

There will be times when you and I realize that we have been unfaithful to God. Perhaps even now you can think of things you've said or done that you shouldn't have. It could be a sinful habit or it could be a sinful attitude. When you are convicted of some sin, you don't have to condemn yourself, and you don't have to deny that it's a big deal. You can do what Ezra did: you can confess your sin to God.

Elements of Confession from Ezra's Prayer (Ezra 9:5-15) Verses 5 through 15 record Ezra's prayer of confession. This prayer is a great example of deep, substantive confession of sin. Ezra's prayer gives us a tangible example of how we can express ourselves to God when we become convicted of some sin. We'll notice four elements of his confession that we would do well to imitate.

Confess Sin and Guilt (Ezra 9:5-7) Ezra's confession begins in verse 5:

5 But at the evening offering I arose from my humiliation, even with my garment and my robe torn, and I fell on my knees and stretched out my hands to the Lord my God; 6 and I said, “O my God, I am ashamed and embarrassed to lift up my face to

You, my God, for our iniquities have risen above our heads and our guilt has grown even to the heavens.

Instead of standing back in self-righteousness and saying, “The people have sinned, but I am blameless,” Ezra identifies with the people and confesses their sin as his own. This only makes sense when we understand the unity of the people of God (whether the Jewish nation in the old covenant or the body of Christ in the new covenant).

The imagery is graphic: “our iniquities have risen above our heads and our guilt has grown even to the heavens.” They weren’t merely knee-deep in sin; they weren’t merely waist-deep in sin. They were drowning in their own iniquities; they were submerged in their guilt. For that reason Ezra was “ashamed and embarrassed to lift up [his] face” to God. There is a healthy type of shame that is appropriate in light of a sinful condition. In contrast with toxic shame that leaves us feeling condemned and worthless, healthy shame leads us to humility and confession (as here).

Ezra also acknowledges their history of unfaithfulness:

7 “Since the days of our fathers to this day we have been in great guilt, and 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, as it is this day.

In the old covenant, God promised that they would dwell securely in the Land if they sought after and followed Him. If they didn’t, God promised dire consequences. Ezra acknowledges that they had received what they deserved for their sin.

When God convicts us of some sin, we would do well to imitate Ezra’s prayer of confession. Sometimes I know I’ve sinned but I don’t want to make eye contact with God. I don’t want to look Him in the face and admit that I’ve been unfaithful. But Ezra reminds us that the first, best response to sin is simple, honest admission of guilt and shame.

Edward Welch (*Shame Interrupted*, p. 16) writes that, “No one tells you that when you fall in love with [some sin] you also say ‘I do’ to shame.” Are you experiencing shame and guilt over some sin? In a few minutes we’re going to celebrate the Lord’s Table. The Lord’s Table provides a time when we can remember that Jesus bore our sin and guilt on the cross. If you’re a follower of Jesus you can simply confess your sin, thanking Jesus for bearing it on the cross.

Acknowledge God’s Grace/Mercy (Ezra 9:8-9) In verses 8 and 9 Ezra acknowledges how God had been gracious and merciful toward them in the past. He’s implicitly admitting that the exiles who returned had squandered what God had done for them; they had presumed upon His patience and kindness. He is referring to everything we’ve seen in Ezra - God returning them to the Land and providing for the temple to be rebuilt - when he prays:

8 “But now for a brief moment grace has been shown from the Lord our God, to leave us an escaped remnant and to give us a peg in His holy place, that our God may enlighten our eyes and grant us a little reviving in our bondage. 9 “For we are slaves; yet in our bondage our God has not forsaken us, but has extended lovingkindness to us in the sight of the kings of Persia, to give us reviving to raise up the house of our God, to restore its ruins and to give us a wall in Judah and Jerusalem.

Ezra acknowledged that God had allowed them to return and rebuild the temple. This background of God’s grace makes the people’s sin all the more pronounced. They couldn’t accuse God of not caring about them or providing for them.

Acknowledging God’s mercy and grace puts our sin in its proper context. Instead of accusing God of abandoning us and being indifferent to our turmoil, we notice ways that God has been good to us. At the very least we acknowledge God’s goodness in bringing us to our senses to even turn back to Him in confession. The more clearly we see God’s goodness the more clearly we see our sin in relational terms. Instead of thinking, “I broke a rule,” we’ll realize, “I have taken for granted God’s mercy and grace. I have failed to respond with devotion to Him.”

Confess Specific Sins (Ezra 9:10-12) In verses 10 through 12 Ezra mentions the specific ways that they had disobeyed God. Instead of a vague, “Sorry we’ve blown it again,” Ezra will admit to God, “You specifically told us not to intermarry with the people of the land, but we did anyway.” As we’ll discuss, this specificity is important for a number of different reasons.

10 “Now, our God, what shall we say after this? For we have forsaken Your commandments, 11 which You have commanded by Your servants the prophets, saying, ‘The land which you are entering to possess is an unclean land with the uncleanness of the peoples of the lands, with their abominations which have filled it from end to end and with their impurity. 12 ‘So now do not give your daughters to their sons nor take their daughters to your sons, and never seek their peace or their prosperity, that you may be strong and eat the good things of the land and leave it as an inheritance to your sons forever.’

Ezra made reference to the specific command God had given (see Deut. 7:1-6) to not intermarry with the peoples of the lands and to not participate in their sinful practices (whether idolatry or child sacrifice or whatever). Ezra plainly admits, “We have forsaken” these specific commands. There was no doubt in anybody’s mind (including God’s) what sins Ezra was confessing.

Why was it important for Ezra to confess specific sins? Consider this example. . . Let’s say that someone has said something very hurtful to you (not a stretch, right?). One apology might be, “Hey, I’m sorry for what I said to you the other day.” That would be good, but you might walk away wondering, “Did they really understand how painful their words were for me? Have they really considered how they might speak differently next time?”

A second apology might be, “I’d like to apologize for what I said and how I said it the other day. Instead of being ‘quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger,’ I said the first thing that came to mind. The words I spoke were angry and unkind. I realize that my anger didn’t accomplish God’s purposes. My mouth spoke what filled my heart; and my heart was full of anger and impatience. Will you forgive me?”

You would receive that second apology very differently, wouldn’t you. That type of apology takes time and energy; it takes self-reflection and even courage. You would walk away knowing that the person values you and his/her relationship with you. Ezra’s prayer of confession communicated those things to God. He expressed to God that they had violated specific commands that God had given.

In the same way you and I need to express to God the specific ways that we have sinned. This specificity sets us up for genuine repentance (which involves actually pursuing a different path). If we’re vague in our confession, it’s highly unlikely that we’ll actually repent. As we’ve seen throughout Ezra, God’s Word is central to any restoration we experience. God’s Word gives us vocabulary and insight that inform our confession and repentance.

- If you are confessing anger, Matthew 5:21-22 will help you express yourself to God: anger leaves us as guilty as murder.
- If you are confessing sexual impurity, 1 Thessalonians 4 will give insight into what you might need to express: immorality violates our calling and reflects a rejection of God who gives His Spirit to all who believe.
- If you haven’t been doing your best in the workplace, look to Colossians 3:23 which says to “do your work heartily as for the Lord rather than for men.”

Appeal to God’s Mercy and Grace. (Ezra 9:13-15) In verses 13-15 Ezra continues to express that God hadn’t judged them as severely as He could have. And then he basically appeals to God to show them more grace and mercy in the future.

13 “After all that has come upon us for our evil deeds and our great guilt, since You our God have requited us less than our iniquities deserve, and have given us an escaped remnant as this, 14 shall we again break Your commandments and intermarry with the peoples who commit these abominations? Would You not be angry with us to the point of destruction, until there is no remnant nor any who escape? 15 “O Lord God of Israel, You are righteous, for we have been left an escaped remnant, as it is this day; behold, we are before You in our guilt, for no one can stand before You because of this.”

Ezra acknowledges that God would be fully justified if He wiped them out completely. But perhaps God would show them mercy and grace in the future just as He had in the past.

Like the Jewish nation in Ezra’s day, we can’t control the consequences of our sins (you’ve probably noticed that). But we can confess our sin and appeal to God’s mercy. The Lord’s Table reminds us that God didn’t spare His one and only Son, but gave Him

up for us all. If God has done the greatest thing, surely He will do the lesser things we need to thrive in our relationship with Him. One of those things involves a fresh cleansing from sin.

I would encourage you during our time at the Lord's table to be honest with God about your sin and guilt and shame. Admit to God any specific ways that you have been unfaithful to Him. In 1 Corinthians 11:28 Paul actually encouraged this type of self-examination:

28 But a man must examine himself, and in so doing he is to eat of the bread and drink of the cup.