

“O LORD, the God of Israel, You Are Just”

The Ninth in a Series of Sermons on Ezra-Nehemiah

Texts: Ezra 9:1-15; 2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1

Ezra has been sent to Jerusalem by Artaxerxes, the Persian king, on a fact finding mission. Ezra has been given everything he needs by the king to successfully fulfill his mission. But Ezra is also a priest who descended from Aaron, and a man skilled in the law of Moses. Ezra was well-known for his zeal for and expertise in those commandments which YHWH gave to Israel through Moses. Ezra must walk the difficult line between fulfilling his mission for Artaxerxes—reporting back to the king the status of the Jews in Jerusalem—while at the same time becoming the de-facto spiritual leader of the Jews. It is not long after his return to Jerusalem that Ezra becomes aware of Israel’s shocking indifference to the law of Moses, and accordingly, calls the nation to repentance. The Persians desire that the Jews and their pagan neighbors, the people of the land, live in peace with one another. Yet as a Jew and someone zealous for the law of Moses, Ezra knows that if the Jews become too close to their pagan neighbors, it might just be the Jews’ undoing as a people.

Ezra has been in the Jerusalem area about four months, when he is informed that a long-standing threat to Israel’s existence as YHWH’s covenant people has once again reared its ugly head. Failing to learn the painful lesson taught them by YHWH—many of the Jews were exiled from the land of Canaan for seventy years because of the people’s disobedience to their covenant with YHWH—Ezra is told that the Jews have not completely separated themselves from the people of the land, and are, in fact, intermarrying with them. As someone skilled in the Law of Moses, Ezra knows how serious this offense is. New of this sends him into a time of deep mourning and repentance—the theme of our sermon this time.

It was about this same time that God sent the prophet Malachi, who likewise called the Jews to repentance because of the same reason—a number of Jewish men were marrying pagan women (Canaanites). Some of the Jewish men were even divorcing their wives in order marry pagans! In chapter 2:10-16, the prophet laments,

Have we not all one Father? Has not one God created us? Why then are we faithless to one another, profaning the covenant of our fathers? Judah has been faithless, and abomination has been committed in Israel and in Jerusalem. For Judah has profaned the sanctuary of the LORD, which he loves, and has married the daughter of a foreign god. May the LORD cut off from the tents of Jacob any descendant of the man who does this, who brings an offering to the LORD of hosts! And this second thing you do. You cover the LORD’s altar with tears, with weeping and groaning because he no longer regards the offering or accepts it with favor from your hand. But you say, “Why does he not?” Because the LORD was witness between you and the wife of your youth, to whom you have been faithless, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant. Did he not make them one, with a portion of the Spirit in their union? And what was the one God seeking? Godly offspring. So guard yourselves in your spirit, and let none of you be faithless to the wife of your youth. “For the man who does not love his wife but divorces her, says the LORD, the God of Israel, covers his garment with violence, says the LORD of hosts. So guard yourselves in your spirit, and do not be faithless.”

The record of Israel's history in this regard has not been good. Marital infidelity became a powerful metaphor for Israel's spiritual condition—YHWH's chosen people began seeking other gods. It was Israel's failure to drive out all the Canaanites when they first entered the land of promise during the days of Joshua, which led to the terrible days depicted in the Book of Judges, followed by YHWH directing the Assyrians to defeat the northern kingdom (Israel) in 722 BC, before Nebuchadnezzar sacked Jerusalem and took a large of Jews into exile to Babylon in 586 BC.

The Canaanites, it seems, were far more effective in drawing the Israelites away from YHWH, than the Jews had been in evangelizing the Canaanites. Because YHWH is a jealous God, when he makes his covenant with Israel at Mount Sinai, he demands that his people worship him and him alone (as expressed in the first table of the law—the first four commandments). When his people seek other Gods (such as the so-called “gods” of the Canaanites), his covenant curse will indeed come down upon the Jews in the form of exile from the land of promise. It is rather ironic that Ezra has just returned from Babylon with a second group of Jewish exiles, only to learn shortly thereafter that the Jews living back in the land have not learned this vital lesson. Once again, God's people are turning to the pagan Gods, and no one seems to notice. Or care. Ezra knows that disaster will follow unless there is repentance.

As we continue our series on the Books of Ezra-Nehemiah, we come to Ezra 9, and Ezra's call for repentance on behalf of his people after his arrival in Jerusalem. Ezra must walk a tight line between his political mission—to report back to the Persian king about the current state of the rebuilding of Jerusalem and its defenses (walls)—and his duties as a priest and teacher of the law of Moses. Artaxerses wanted to Jews to thrive as a people, so that his own Persian empire would not have to garrison the Jerusalem area with troops, and so that once prosperous, the Persians might receive tribute (tax revenue) from the Jews, who, presumably, would be grateful to their Persian overseers for being so generous toward them.

The problem the Jews face is seen in the tension within Ezra's own mission. Ezra has been sent by Artaxerses to Jerusalem on a mission for the Persian government. But Ezra is a Jew, zealous to teach his people the law and ensure that everything is done in conformity with God's word. If the Jews are obedient to the law, this means that while the Jews dwell in Canaan, they cannot participate in the religious elements of Canaanite life (fertility rites, pagan feasts, sacrifices, etc.). The Jews must remain distinct from the Canaanites, so as to fulfill the role to which God has called them. But the Jews live under Persian domination in a land which the Persians expect will be shared by the various tribes living under Persian rule. Like the Canaanites (to whom Ezra has referred earlier as “the people of the land”), the Jews are also expected to conform to the Persian policy that they engage in trade and live in peace with their Canaanite neighbors—who controlled much of the land in the area, where, no doubt, a number of apostate Jews, or Jewish people not taken in exile, still lived, and who had developed friendly ties with the pagan people of the land. It is through these local ties that the Jews slowly embrace Canaanite syncretism—the practice of worshiping all the local “gods” of the various peoples living in the land.

As I mentioned several weeks ago, this would be like a member of a Bible believing church, attending a Mormon “family home evening,” the JW Bible study, the Mosque on Friday, the synagogue on Saturday, and the Roman Mass on Saturday night. If we confess Jesus as Lord, we are also confessing that Christianity is true to the exclusion of all other religions—something which the confession “Jesus is Lord” at the very least implies. Jesus cannot be Lord if Muhammad is “the Prophet.” This is what many Jews were doing. They worshiped YHWH at the temple and offered sacrifices, yet attended pagan festivals, participated in pagan rituals, and even married pagan spouses—the surest way for a Jew to embrace false gods, and something sure to provoke YHWH's covenant curse—exile from the land.

Now that several generations have gone by since the temple has been rebuilt, the sacrifices have been re-instituted, and a whole new group of exiles have arrived from Persia, Ezra gets the shocking word that many Jews living in the area have not only made peace with their neighbors, they have begun to intermarry with them, an act which was tantamount to apostasy. The law of Moses flatly forbade this practice on the basis that as his people, Israel is to serve as a holy theocracy (a holy nation in which church and state are one), they are to be that people who are given the word of God (the books of the Old Testament) so as to be a light to the nations, and they are that people who will bring forth God's Messiah, who, as a biological ancestor of David, will be the Savior of the world. The sanction against intermarriage with a non-Jew is not a racial prohibition, but a theological one.

This is clear from the fact that Moses married a Midian woman (the Midians were non-Jewish descendants of Abraham's wife Keturah, according to Genesis 25:1-2). Aaron married a Cushite woman (Nubian-African). Joseph married an Egyptian woman, and according to the Book of Ruth, David had Gentile ancestry.¹ These Gentile wives and ancestors of biblical notables all worshiped YHWH in accordance with his word. The issue is not one of race—i.e., that if you are a Jew you cannot marry someone who is of a different race (a Gentile), but rather one of religion. You cannot marry a Canaanite, because the Canaanites worship false gods. This prohibition is spelled out in Deuteronomy 7:1-8:

“When the LORD your God brings you into the land that you are entering to take possession of it, and clears away many nations before you, the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, seven nations more numerous and mightier than you, and when the LORD your God gives them over to you, and you defeat them, then you must devote them to complete destruction. You shall make no covenant with them and show no mercy to them. You shall not intermarry with them, giving your daughters to their sons or taking their daughters for your sons, for they would turn away your sons from following me, to serve other gods. Then the anger of the LORD would be kindled against you, and he would destroy you quickly. But thus shall you deal with them: you shall break down their altars and dash in pieces their pillars and chop down their Asherim and burn their carved images with fire. For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the LORD set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but it is because the LORD loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers, that the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt.

It is because YHWH loved this people (the Jews), called them out of Egypt (the Exodus), made them a great nation and gave them his law (the Sinai covenant), and then settled them the land of promise (under Joshua during the conquest), that his people were, in turn, to be devoted to YHWH and to the covenant he made with them through Moses. To intermarry with the Canaanites is a step on the way to the embrace of pagan religion. For an Israelite to marry a pagan Gentile, is in most circumstances, to marry a non-Jew who expects you to worship the Canaanite gods, even if you also worship YHWH.

In the first two verses of chapter 9, Ezra gets word that the Jews were ignoring this prohibition. “*After these things had been done, [i.e., the gold and silver placed in the temple, and the correspondence from Artaxerxes delivered to the local officials] the officials approached me and said, ‘The people of Israel*

¹ Breneman, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Logos, on Ezra 9:1.

and the priests and the Levites have not separated themselves from the peoples of the lands with their abominations, from the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians, and the Amorites. For they have taken some of their daughters to be wives for themselves and for their sons, so that the holy race has mixed itself with the peoples of the lands. And in this faithlessness the hand of the officials and chief men has been foremost.”

It strikes us that it took some time for Ezra to become aware of Israel’s true spiritual condition. How could Ezra not know that such deplorable things were going on? Well, according to Ezra 8:36, Ezra did not stay in Jerusalem upon arrival from Babylon, but “*delivered the king’s commissions to the king’s satraps and to the governors of the province Beyond the River.*” Ezra had to finish the king’s business before he could concentrate on Jewish religious matters. The specific issue is that “*The people of Israel and the priests and the Levites have not separated themselves from the peoples of the lands with their abominations.*” The problem is one of sanctification—the set-apartness required of the Israelites under the terms of the covenant God had made with them at Mount Sinai. Even the priests and Levites thought nothing of the practice of intermarriage—the sad proof that ministers are often the first to commit apostasy. Elders need to watch their ministers closely!

As one zealous for the Law, Ezra describes intermarriage between Jews and the peoples of the land in terms used during the time of the original conquest of the promised land in the days of Joshua. Ezra speaks of the people of the land using their original Canaanite names—the *Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites*. The Amorites, Moabites, and Egyptians are added to the list found in Deuteronomy because these are well-known peoples, while the rest had been assimilated into “the people of the land.” Again the issue is not that the Jews were marrying non-Jews. The issue is that the Jews were marrying Canaanites—non Jews who practiced paganism, polytheism, and some of whom, before the days of the conquest, practiced child sacrifice. God had called his people into a covenant which requires that the Jews separate themselves as a holy race (i.e., set apart), from the pagan Canaanites, so that YHWH’s covenant people do not worship or serve other gods (their undoing as a people). To paraphrase one writer, “when the people of God lose their distinctiveness they cease to be his people, at least in any tangible, visible way. The church must always be a different people, we can never, we dare never, fit in this world.”²

Even after returning from exile, the Jews are falling right back into their same old ways, by not seeking to remain distinct from the Canaanites. Ezra immediately grasps the severity of the situation. Israel is on the road to ruin (a new exile), with the priests and Levites leading the way. We read in verses 3-4, “*as soon as I heard this, I tore my garment and my cloak and pulled hair from my head and beard and sat appalled. Then all who trembled at the words of the God of Israel, because of the faithlessness of the returned exiles, gathered around me while I sat appalled until the evening sacrifice.*” Ezra’s reaction is to go into mourning. He pulled out hair, and tore his clothes—an act of mourning often associated with burial.³ Ezra’s act of repentance is such that others realized the gravity of Israel’s offense against YHWH, joined him, trembling, because they knew what God’s word says about such things. They gather for the evening sacrifice under great conviction of sin. Perhaps they mediate on the words of Isaiah (66:2). “*All these things my hand has made, and so all these things came to be, declares the LORD. But this is the one to whom I will look: he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word.*” As

² Davis, Ezra-Nehemiah (part eight)

³ Williamson, Ezra, Nehemiah, 133.

God's people who confess our faith in Christ is Lord, we too ought be contrite before the face of the Lord, and well aware of the awesome things we find in God's word—things which cause us to tremble.

The lesson for us is one found throughout the New Testament in the form of multiple warnings about the rise of false teachers in the church and ever-present reality of apostasy—professing Christians falling away, joining false religions, or leaving the faith altogether. It is not a matter of *if* professing Christians will embrace false teaching and flock toward false teachers, but *when*. Like the Jews, we find ourselves, and especially our own teens and young adults becoming increasingly open toward non-Christian ways of thinking and doing, and thinking little about the biblical prohibition against marrying non-Christians or the consequences of doing so. We too are sinful and are no different than the Jews of that day. Sadly, we easily lose our love for God and his word, perhaps because of the stigma of holding views so different from those of our contemporaries. We must be candid that, at times, it is hard to believe the things God requires of us. Often times non-Christians are wonderful people (often putting Christians to shame), often times physically attractive, and often times interested in relationships with nice Christian people. But apart from faith in Jesus Christ, non-Christians do not, and cannot understand the problem with their intermarriage with God's people who have a completely different perspective on the matter of sin and grace, as well as completely different ethical views. Because of this fact, Paul puts the matter quite plainly in 2 Corinthians 6:14–7:1 (our New Testament lesson)

Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? Or what fellowship has light with darkness? What accord has Christ with Belial? Or what portion does a believer share with an unbeliever? What agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; as God said, "I will make my dwelling among them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Therefore go out from their midst, and be separate from them, says the Lord, and touch no unclean thing; then I will welcome you, and I will be a father to you, and you shall be sons and daughters to me, says the Lord Almighty." Since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God.

Ezra saw intermarriage with pagans as such a threat to the nation that he immediately entered into a state of mourning. One writer points out the difficulties associated with Ezra's reaction. "We usually cannot understand a genuinely holy reaction to sin, as for example the violence and intensity of Ezra's response in verse 3. That says more about us, sadly, than about anything else."⁴ Notice too, that Ezra prays first for himself during the evening sacrifice, but as we see in verses 5-7, he also begins to pray for the nation. "*And at the evening sacrifice I rose from my fasting, with my garment and my cloak torn, and fell upon my knees and spread out my hands to the LORD my God, saying: 'O my God, I am ashamed and blush to lift my face to you, my God, for our iniquities have risen higher than our heads, and our guilt has mounted up to the heavens. From the days of our fathers to this day we have been in great guilt. And for 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, to plundering, and to utter shame, as it is today.'*" Ezra is utterly "ashamed," falls on his knees in humiliation, in a state of mourning, acknowledging the sins of his people (note the use of "our" in verse 6), as well as the guilt of his people. Ezra goes all the way back to Israel's earliest history, acknowledging the sins of "our fathers," which continue all the way down to Ezra's time in 458 BC.

⁴ Davis, Ezra-Nehemiah (part eight)

In verse 8-9, Ezra continues his prayer. *“But now for a brief moment favor has been shown by the LORD our God, to leave us a remnant and to give us a secure hold within his holy place, that our God may brighten our eyes and grant us a little reviving in our slavery. For we are slaves. Yet our God has not forsaken us in our slavery, but has extended to us his steadfast love before the kings of Persia, to grant us some reviving to set up the house of our God, to repair its ruins, and to give us protection in Judea and Jerusalem.”* Because YHWH is merciful he does not cast his people immediately into exile again. Because he is merciful, YHWH opens the door to repentance. He revives his dying people. *“For a brief moment,”* indicates that there is a window of time for Israel to repent and renounce the practice of intermarrying with pagans. God has shown his favor to Israel by returning the remnant (exiles) to the land, giving his people a secure place within the midst of huge Persian empire which allowed them to return, rebuild their temple, and sacrifice to YHWH according to his word. The Jews were taken captive and held as slaves in Babylon as a covenant curse, but YHWH has returned them to the land, as well as provided everything necessary for the temple to be rebuilt. He has accepted their sacrifices for sin.

In verses 10-12, Ezra continues his prayer of repentance. *“And now, O our God, what shall we say after this? For we have forsaken your commandments, which you commanded by your servants the prophets, saying, ‘The land that you are entering, to take possession of it, is a land impure with the impurity of the peoples of the lands, with their abominations that have filled it from end to end with their uncleanness. Therefore do not give your daughters to their sons, neither take their daughters for your sons, and never seek their peace or prosperity, that you may be strong and eat the good of the land and leave it for an inheritance to your children forever.’”* Ezra’s words echo those we read earlier from verses 1-3 of Deuteronomy 7, and his reference to “the prophets” is perhaps a reference to Malachi, whose prophecy we have already noted, and who was active in the same period of time.⁵ Ezra laments Israel’s sin, and then recites YHWH’s promise that his people will inherit the land. Ezra is certainly echoing the prophet Malachi by exhorting the people of God to repent of the practice of intermarriage before the covenant curses come upon Israel again.

In verses 14-15, Ezra calls attention to the fact that the people of Israel deserve God’s punishment, even though YHWH has been merciful to them. *“And after all that has come upon us for our evil deeds and for our great guilt, seeing that you, our God, have punished us less than our iniquities deserved and have given us such a remnant as this, shall we break your commandments again and intermarry with the peoples who practice these abominations? Would you not be angry with us until you consumed us, so that there should be no remnant, nor any to escape?”* Israel’s current situation—the nation is back in the land after seventy years in exile—is tangible proof that God can and does judge his disobedient people, and yet remains merciful. God has not punished them to the full extent. His people are back in the land with a rebuilt temple, and offering sacrifices. But Ezra knows that God’s merciful patience may be coming to an end. Ezra asks, “will you judge us we deserve?” “Will you destroy us and be done with us for good?” One commentator describes the situation well when he writes, “the prayer ends with clear recognition that God has every reason to wash His hands of this community as he had once threatened to do with an earlier generation (Ex. 32:10). This was no exaggerated fancy. There were other Israelites scattered abroad, through whom the promises could be fulfilled.”⁶ Should Israel fail to repent, Ezra knows that YHWH can simply call another group of exiles to take their place.

⁵ Kidner, Ezra and Nehemiah, 69.

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Ezra concludes his prayer of repentance by acknowledging that YHWH's ways are altogether righteous. YHWH judges with absolute integrity. "*O LORD, the God of Israel, you are just, for we are left a remnant that has escaped, as it is today. Behold, we are before you in our guilt, for none can stand before you because of this.*" Ezra's words recall to mind verses 3-4 of Psalm 130. "*If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness, that you may be feared.*" The situation is dire. YHWH is holy and must punish all sin. The Israelites are truly guilty of sin and they deserve God's punishment. How can such a dire predicament be resolved? Ezra knows that the only hope is YHWH's mercy—YHWH will forgive his people, accepting their sacrifices, and if the Israelites demonstrate true repentance by breaking off from their sinful practices and indifference toward the word of the Lord. One commentator points out, "as we look back on the book of Ezra, we must say that it is a wonder there is an escaped remnant in light of the enemies who hate us (Ezra 1-6) and the sins we love (Ezra 9-10)."⁷ How true.

The application for us is two-fold. First, believers must remain distinct from unbelievers—we cannot believe what non-Christian do, we must not think like they do, nor do act as non-Christians do. We cannot confess Jesus as Lord, and then worship pagan gods, intermarry with those who worship other gods, or act as though the things we believe about God and his word are really not that much different from non-Christian points of view. God calls us to be in the world (to live among non-Christians), but not of the world (to remain faithful to Christ and his word while in the world). The difference between a Christian and a non-Christian is that we are "holy." By this, we do not mean that we are "better" than they, but we are set apart by God for his purposes, and are therefore, in that sense, to be separate from non-Christians. To those of you not yet married, the most basic application is that there is no biblical justification whatsoever for marrying non-Christians. In fact, the Bible forbids it.

The second point of application is that Jesus himself has borne the covenant curses for us, and in our place. Jesus has died for all of those times we have committed spiritual adultery, by serving idols or false gods in our hearts. While there is much to learn from Ezra's grief at his own sin and the sins of his people, let us never forget that our own sins have been nailed to the cross with our blessed Savior. As forgiven, and now free from the guilt and power of these sins, let us learn to both hate our sins and acknowledge that, "O LORD God of Israel, you are just," and in the person and work of Jesus, "you are merciful."

⁷ Davis, Ezra-Nehemiah (part eight)