

## The Problem of Practice

We started a series in the Old Testament Books of Ezra and Nehemiah on July 1, and now with this 5<sup>th</sup> sermon in the series, we are *finally* introduced to the man: Ezra. It is one of the peculiarities of the Book of Ezra; Ezra is not in most of it (but, being a contemporary of Nehemiah, Ezra will be with us through the end of the series).

We are introduced to Ezra in Ezra 7:6,10

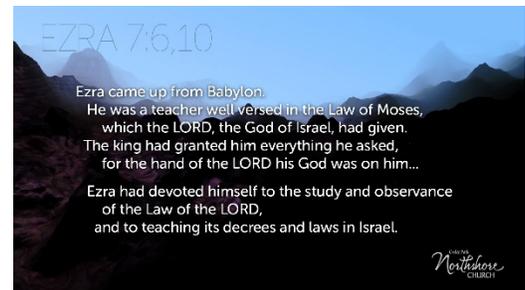
<sup>6</sup> this Ezra came up from Babylon.

At the beginning of the Book of Ezra, the People of God were allowed to go back to Jerusalem by the Persian King. They were in exile after being defeated and ransacked by Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians, but after the Persians defeated the Babylonians they thought they might please the God of the Jews by allowing people to return. They did, under a priest named Joshua and a governor named Zerubbabel. Ezra was not among that *first wave* of pioneers who returned to Jerusalem to worship Yahweh at an altar and rebuild His temple.

[Ezra] He was a teacher well versed in the Law of Moses, which the LORD, the God of Israel, had given. The king had granted him everything he asked, for the hand of the LORD his God was on him.<sup>1</sup>

This was merely a continuation of the Persians benevolence toward the People of God. God was in control. He was in control when Nebuchadnezzar destroyed the Temple and carried off His People. He was in control when the *first wave* was allowed to return, and the Persian King provided permission and even resources. He was in control when the rebuilding of the Temple stalled and prophets got the attention of Zerubbabel and the people, and once again the Persian King provided cover and resources. And, of course, God was in control, working through the Persian King, allowing Ezra to return, again with resources to aid in the work of reestablishing God's People in Jerusalem.

Ezra had devoted himself to the study and observance of the Law of the LORD, and to teaching its decrees and laws in Israel.<sup>2</sup>



<sup>1</sup> The New International Version. (2011). (Ezr 7:6). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

<sup>2</sup> The New International Version. (2011). (Ezr 7:10). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

Ezra was a teacher (perhaps your Bible translation says *scribe*). He was a **scholar** of the Word of God. He was also a priest, a descendant of Aaron. Some describe Ezra as a *second Moses*, since his primary concern was the Word of God, and Ezra, like Moses, led exiles to the Promised Land.

I'm in favor of Bible scholars, having devoted a big chunk of my life supporting them. I wouldn't call myself a scholar or academic... but I suppose I am a bit of an *egghead*. I'm looking forward to next Sunday when I'll have the privilege of introducing you to a genuine scholar and friend: Dr. Gordon Anderson. I hope you will make a priority of being with us Sunday morning, as well as a special time Sunday evening at 6:00. You won't want to miss it.

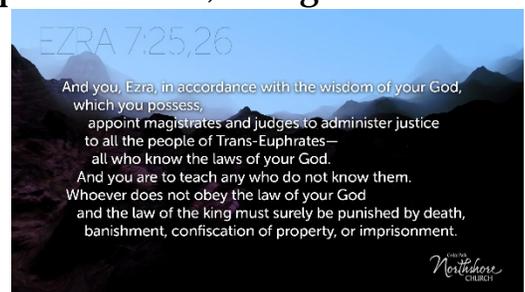
Since Ezra was a scholar, and I would say that his most important work was reestablishing the authority of the Word of God among God's People, we might assume that we would look to Ezra mostly for **orthodoxy** (right belief). There will be time for lessons of orthodoxy in future weeks... but today I want to consider lessons of **orthopraxy** (right practice) from Ezra.

I have in mind today to take these last four chapters of the Book of Ezra together, to see what we might learn from some significant examples of practice from Ezra (orthopraxy).

Orthodoxy, what we **believe**, matters. And... Orthopraxy, what we **do**, matters (in this context, what we do *in the name of God* matters).

Of course the two ought to be bound together, that **orthopraxy ought to be rooted in orthodoxy, that what we do ought to come out of what we believe... but how many know that this is often easier said than done?**

I have three episodes in mind from these four chapters of Ezra, let's get to the first... one that is really derived from the *overall context*, but perhaps crystalized in Ezra 7:25,26. These are the last lines in the decree from the Persian King, Artaxerxes, a letter which authorized Ezra to return with those who accompanied him. It reads:



<sup>25</sup> And you, Ezra, in accordance with the wisdom of your God, which you possess, appoint magistrates and judges to administer justice to all the people of Trans-Euphrates—all who know the laws of your God. And you are to teach any who do not know them. <sup>26</sup> Whoever does not obey the law of your God and the law of the king must surely be punished by death, banishment, confiscation of property, or imprisonment. <sup>a 3</sup>

There is one phrase, that occurs several times in the passage, upon which I would like us to place our focus: ***your*** God.

In this context there is a sort of *separation of church and state*; we believers today have this in common with that ancient people. In many cultures today there is no, or far less, separation of religion and state. Many governments presume to operate as theocracies, while one of our Nation's founding principles is that the state would not impose any specific religious practice on our people.

In the times of Ezra and Nehemiah, the state permitted, and even to some extent supported, the faith of those returning to Jerusalem, but they did not share that faith. The Persians were polytheists and would not ascribe to the claims that Yahweh was the only God.

So those returning to Jerusalem were sort of *dual citizens*, accountable to “obey the law of God and the law of the king” as our text describes. They had to navigate both... which isn't always easy. In the days of David and Solomon, the *law of the king* and *the law of God* were one in the same... but those days were long past. While they may have returned from exile, they were still strangers in the land.

That condition persisted through the times of Jesus and the New Testament, when the Roman Empire ruled the region. A *sovereign Jewish state* did not really return to the land until modern-day Israel, established in 1948. And even then it was established as a democracy, not a theocracy (although there is a fair amount of debate if it is becoming one, or should become one).

Here's my point: Christians live as dual citizens, accountable to God and the Government. We navigate these Christian lives as foreigners and exiles. When it comes to orthopraxy, our actions and behavior should be distinct from the prevailing culture.

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<sup>3</sup> *The New International Version*. (2011). (Ezr 7:25–26). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

## Here's how Peter put it:

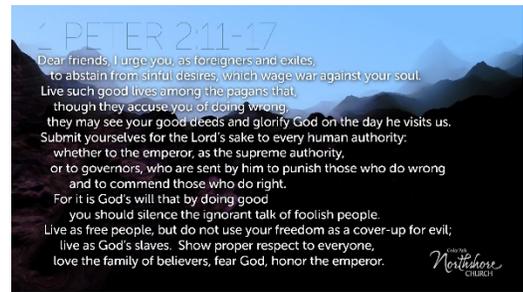
<sup>11</sup> Dear friends, I urge you, as foreigners and exiles, to abstain from sinful desires, which wage war against your soul.

<sup>12</sup> Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.

<sup>13</sup> Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human authority: whether to the emperor, as the supreme authority,

<sup>14</sup> or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right.

<sup>15</sup> For it is God's will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish people. <sup>16</sup> Live as free people, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as God's slaves. <sup>17</sup> Show proper respect to everyone, love the family of believers, fear God, honor the emperor. <sup>4</sup>

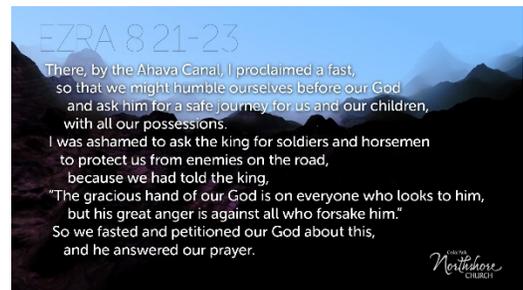


We are dual citizens, accountable to the government and to God... so when it comes to our behavior, it is **distinct**. Christians ought to be different. For example, different than mere Republicans or Democrats, Liberals or Conservatives or Libertarians. While each Christian might be aligned with one political movement or another, we who believe are citizens of God's Kingdom... and that citizenship should take precedence and shape our lives, thoughts, and actions (even in politics).

## For another episode from Ezra, let's look to chapter 8, starting with verse 21.

<sup>21</sup> There, by the Ahava Canal, I proclaimed a fast, so that we might humble ourselves before our God and ask him for a safe journey for us and our children, with all our possessions. <sup>22</sup> I was ashamed to ask the king for soldiers and horsemen to protect us from enemies on the road, because we had told the king,

"The gracious hand of our God is on everyone who looks to him, but his great anger is against all who forsake him." <sup>23</sup> So we fasted and petitioned our God about this, and he answered our prayer. <sup>5</sup>



This is a really interesting predicament. Ezra had the King's permission and decree. Ezra gathered a band of people to go with him, perhaps most importantly *Levites* so that they could worship in strict accordance with the Law of Moses. And Ezra had treasure. Elements of precious metals for worship in the Temple, as well as cash to fund the ongoing work. But Ezra didn't have an army, not even bodyguards (not even some mall cops).

<sup>4</sup> The New International Version. (2011). (1 Pe 2:11–17). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

<sup>5</sup> The New International Version. (2011). (Ezr 8:21–23). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

That seems fairly foolish, since the route from Babylon to Jerusalem was long (requiring months of travel) and treacherous. They were prime targets to be robbed or conquered in battle... even with an army. But Ezra was confident in God.

There are many commentators that have determined that Ezra made a huge mistake... that he had acted and spoken with presumption when he made such outlandish claims about God's protection. They make a lot out of the admission that Ezra was *ashamed*. Personally, I think they make too much out of that one word. I'm not so sure it was a mistake for at least three reasons:

1. I'm careful to be too quick to call an action recorded in the Bible an error if the Bible doesn't clearly indicate that it was an error. There are all sorts of episodes of wrong action in the Bible; more often than not, the Bible clearly indicates that mistakes were just that, making it clear that sin is sin.
2. It seems to me that there our emotions routinely accompany our steps of faith. Perhaps I shouldn't admit it, but sometimes there is doubt, and even regret, along the way when I am taking steps of faith. It seems to me that the most significant steps of faith are mixed with emotions like doubt, concern, trepidation and such... that might be part of what makes such steps actions based in faith.
3. It worked. God did, indeed, by His gracious hand, guide and protect the pilgrims.

Here's the point: Our behavior matters to those watching. Our actions should match our words; our steps should be according to our statements of faith.

One last thing before we leave this passage; you might have noticed that there was fasting involved. Fasting is not *magic*. Nor is fasting part of some sort of formula or spell that conjures up miracles. **Fasting is not intended to impress God, to somehow get His attention or force His hand. Fasting is not so that we will impress God; it is so that we can be impressed by God.** Fasting is for humbling ourselves, putting ourselves in a perspective that magnifies the greatness of God.

If there was presumption involved, and there was clearly emotions involved, fasting put God's people in the right perspective. Fasting reminded them of their dependence on God.

## Recapping:

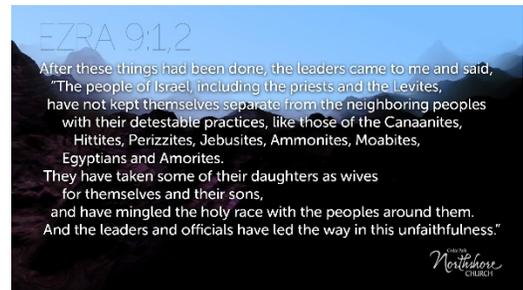
1. our behavior ought to be distinct because we are dual citizens,
2. our behavior matters to those watching, and finally...
3. Our behavior matters to us and our faith.

Chapters 9 and 10 of Ezra is a particularly difficult passage in the Bible.

Allow me to set the scene. Ezra arrived in Jerusalem with his fellow pilgrims and treasure to be added to the Temple and fund the ongoing work of worship. He was received well by the people and Ezra began to do what Ezra was called and equipped to do, to teach and preach the Word of God (most likely the Pentateuch, the first 5 books of the Bible, the law of Moses).

After these things had been done, the leaders came to me and said, “The people of Israel, including the priests and the Levites, have not kept themselves separate from the neighboring peoples with their detestable practices, like those of the Canaanites, Hittites, Perizzites, Jebusites, Ammonites, Moabites, Egyptians and Amorites. <sup>2</sup> They have taken some of their daughters as wives for themselves and their sons, and have mingled the holy race with the peoples around them.

And the leaders and officials have led the way in this unfaithfulness.” <sup>6</sup>



God’s Word was clear; it was strictly prohibited to assimilate with the others occupying the land. The People of God were to be separate; they were to only worship the One True God. The rules of the law were meant to keep them reserved only for Yahweh. They lived differently, ate differently, worked differently... they even abided by different economic rules, all to keep them preserved (holy) for God.

Our text says **detestable practices**, and then specifically points to the problem of **intermarriage**... especially among their leaders, officials, priests, and Levites.

Marrying a foreigner was not necessarily prohibited. There are a number of cases in the Old Testament of marriage outside of the Jewish people (race); one example is so pronounced that her name is carried onto a book of the Old Testament: Ruth. What was prohibited was intermarriage that brought with it assimilation of other religions, and all that went with it. These were marriages, not merely of a man and woman, but marriages of culture, economies, lifestyles, and religions.

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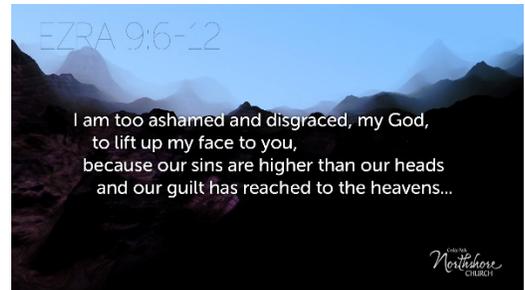
<sup>6</sup> The New International Version. (2011). (Ezr 9:1–2). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

Ezra responded first with repentance. We can be fairly certain that Ezra, himself, was not guilty of any of these specific offenses, but he repented on behalf of his people. As their leader and priest, he carried this responsibility to repent. Here is some of his prayer:

“I am too ashamed and disgraced, my God, to lift up my face to you, because our sins are higher than our heads and our guilt has reached to the heavens.<sup>7</sup> From the days of our ancestors until now, our guilt has been great. Because of our sins, we and our kings and our priests have been subjected to the sword and captivity, to pillage and humiliation at the hand of foreign kings, as it is today.

<sup>8</sup>“But now, for a brief moment, the LORD our God has been gracious in leaving us a remnant and giving us a firm place<sup>k</sup> in his sanctuary, and so our God gives light to our eyes and a little relief in our bondage.<sup>9</sup> Though we are slaves, our God has not forsaken us in our bondage. He has shown us kindness in the sight of the kings of Persia: He has granted us new life to rebuild the house of our God and repair its ruins, and he has given us a wall of protection in Judah and Jerusalem.

<sup>10</sup>“But now, our God, what can we say after this? For we have forsaken the commands<sup>11</sup> you gave through your servants the prophets when you said: ‘The land you are entering to possess is a land polluted by the corruption of its peoples. By their detestable practices they have filled it with their impurity from one end to the other.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, do not give your daughters in marriage to their sons or take their daughters for your sons. Do not seek a treaty of friendship with them at any time, that you may be strong and eat the good things of the land and leave it to your children as an everlasting inheritance.’<sup>7</sup>



There is a pattern worth noting here. The New Testament refers to all believers *priests*; it seems that part of that priestly responsibility is to repent on behalf of our people. Believers, we are not called to scold our culture; we are called to repent on their behalf, living lives that point to The Way.

I was reading in the Journal of Contemporary Theology (Twitter) and I paraphrase: “rarely does anyone come to faith in Christ because they were scolded by Christians.” Perhaps *in spite of* being scolded by Christians, but not because of being scolded by Christians.

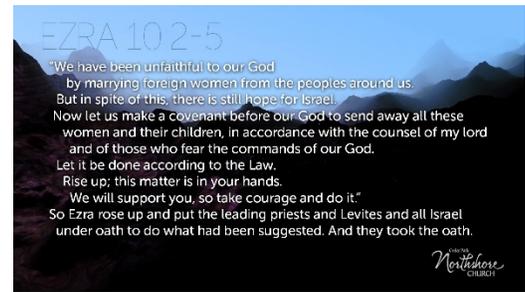
Chapter 10 reveals that the leaders joined Ezra in repentance, and they proposed a plan, saying:

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<sup>7</sup> The New International Version. (2011). (Ezr 9:6–12). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

“We have been unfaithful to our God by marrying foreign women from the peoples around us. But in spite of this, there is still hope for Israel. <sup>3</sup> Now let us make a covenant before our God to send away all these women and their children, in accordance with the counsel of my lord and of those who fear the commands of our God. Let it be done according to the Law. <sup>4</sup> Rise up; this matter is in your hands. We will support you, so take courage and do it.”

<sup>5</sup> So Ezra rose up and put the leading priests and Levites and all Israel under oath to do what had been suggested. And they took the oath.<sup>8</sup>



And that is what they did. The last several verses of the Book of Ezra list the leaders who sent away (divorced) their foreign wives and children.

How does that sit with us?

While the text doesn't say how they did this, whether they were sent back to their families with resources or otherwise, it still seems pretty brutal and heartless. Was it the fault of these wives? Doesn't God hate divorce? Perhaps the wives were partly at fault... but the **children** seemed completely innocent. How was this just?

And then there is the matter of how **racist** this seems. Was this merely a matter of punishing interracial marriage? Isn't *love* love? Is this okay?

Didn't they know that two wrongs don't make a right? (That is in the Bible somewhere, right?)

Many scholars have determined that this was **not** okay. That the punishment of these wives and children, and the racism evident, clearly makes this one of the examples of failure in the Bible. It was just wrong.

That is a reasonable, and even fair assessment... but the Bible, itself, does not specify this solution in this episode as a failure or mistake. And, again, I think we ought to be careful about identifying something in the Bible as a mistake or sin when the Bible doesn't necessarily agree with that conclusion.

Here's what I think. I don't think it was okay... but that doesn't necessarily mean that it wasn't right.

I've observed that divorce is messy and complicated, and innocent bystanders are hurt (especially kids).

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<sup>8</sup> *The New International Version*. (2011). (Ezr 10:2–5). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

These were particularly complex circumstances, not merely a matter of a man and wife falling in love and marrying. In our culture, we have stripped away many of the complexities of marriage; we don't typically arrange marriages for reasons of economic or social status. For us, marriage is about a man and a woman falling in love and choosing to commit to one another for life.

But in Ezra's times, these were marriages more likely for the purposes of combining economies and cultures. It was likely that many of these marriages were polygamist; these wives in many cases were likely among a number of wives kept by these leaders.

Here is what was most important, that God was restoring and rebuilding a People in Jerusalem to bear His Name and carryout His Work. This restoration and rebuilding required a devout people, those who worshipped Yahweh alone, in the way that He prescribed.

While this solution may have not been the perfect solution (as if there was a perfect solution), it was *their* solution.

Again, here's the point: Our behavior matters to us, and our faith.

It wasn't long ago this morning that we celebrated Communion together. It reminds us that we did not and could not earn our salvation; we cannot *behave* our way into salvation. Nevertheless, our behavior matters to our faith. What we do, the decisions we make and the actions we take, matters to the strength and depth of our faith. It matters to how we can best love, serve, and worship God.

We can debate whether that solution carried out under Ezra's leadership was right and just... but we all ought to be able to agree that our faith often requires us to dramatically change our behavior. The furtherance and impact of our faith requires lives that reflect our faith. If our practice does not align with our belief, then we are not doing it right.

So today, let's consider our orthopraxy. Let's take a step today aligning how we behave by what we believe. Let's allow the Holy Spirit to speak to our hearts, perhaps revealing some change required in our behavior, or perhaps just giving us the courage and faith to make the change that we already know is required.



Our behavior is distinct, as dual citizens.

Our behavior matters to those watching; our behavior usually testifies louder than our words.

Our behavior matters to us and our faith.

