GENUINE REPENTANCE

Ezra 10:1-44

By

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We live in a day of glib repentance. Some years ago, an evangelical author and leader was exposed for carrying on an affair over an extended period of time. He repented, went through a year of counseling, and was publicly restored to the ministry.

I sincerely hope that his repentance was genuine. Only God knows the man’s heart. But the radio interview that I heard with him and his wife left me wondering if his repentance was genuine. The interviewer asked him how he had fallen into this sin. He used the story of the American pilot who had flown his small plane past all of the Soviet Union’s sophisticated radar and warning systems and landed in Red Square in Moscow.

This Christian leader seemed to be saying that he had all his defenses in place, but the enemy sneaked this sin into his life and there was nothing he could have done to prevent it. He was a victim of Satan’s clever tactics! His wife chimed in, making it sound as if her poor husband had caught a bad case of adultery, much like we catch the flu! It was interesting that when President Clinton was caught in his immorality, this Christian leader was one of three that he called on for spiritual counsel.

The Bible is clear that there is both genuine and false repentance. Twice Pharaoh told Moses, “I have sinned” (Exod. 9:27; 10:16), but he did not truly repent. Esau felt bad and wept over giving away his birthright, but he did not truly repent (Heb. 12:17). Judas felt remorse over betraying Jesus and even said that he had sinned (Matt. 27:4), but he did not repent.

If we want to be right before God, we must make sure that our repentance is genuine, not glib. Our text is not comprehensive, but it does give some marks of genuine repentance:

**Genuine repentance involves heartfelt sorrow before God for our sins and prompt action to correct them.**

The problem concerned the Jewish exiles who had returned to the land, but had taken pagan wives in disobedience of God’s
commandment (Deut. 7:1-4; Ezra 9:1-2). Ezra (10:11) sums up what they must do to correct the situation: “Make confession to the Lord God of your fathers, and do His will.” Their confession before God, if it was genuine, would reflect heartfelt sorrow for what they had done. That sorrow would not be words only. It would also manifest itself in obedience to do His will.

1. **Genuine repentance involves heartfelt sorrow before God for our sins.**

   Ezra’s deep mourning over the sins of the exiles led others to gather around him, see their own sins, and weep bitterly over them (10:1). A spokesman for the people, Shecaniah (10:2), confesses the sin and proposes to Ezra that the people make a covenant to correct the sin. Shecaniah himself is not in the list of offenders, but perhaps his father is the Jehiel, son of Elam, of 10:26. Six members of the clan of Elam had married foreign wives.

   Ezra acted on Shecaniah’s proposal by calling the exiles to Jerusalem, where they all shivered in the December rain (10:9). They agreed that they had sinned and, except for four men who opposed the plan (10:15), agreed to the plan of action. A commission was appointed to examine each case. Presumably if the foreign wife had put away her idols and swore allegiance to the God of Israel, nothing further was required. But in the other cases, where the wife refused to give up her idols, the marriages were dissolved, presumably with arrangements for compensation to care for the wives and children involved. I will deal with the matter of divorce in light of biblical teaching in a moment. For now, let’s look at four marks of genuine repentance:

   A. **Genuine repentance must be primarily toward God.**

   Ezra was prostrating himself and praying “before the house of God” (10:1). Shecaniah admits, “We have been unfaithful to our God” (10:2). It was with God that they made this covenant because they trembled at His commandment (10:3). They needed to confess their sins to the Lord and do His will (10:11).

   While sin always hurts other people and we need to ask their forgiveness when we sin against them, sin is first and foremost against God Himself. That is why David, after committing adultery with Bathsheba and having her husband murdered, said, “I have
sinned against the Lord” (2 Sam. 12:13). He wrote (Ps. 51:4), “Against You, You only, I have sinned and done what is evil in Your sight.” Certainly David had sinned against Bathsheba and even more so against her husband, Uriah.

But those sins were nothing in comparison with David’s offense against the holy God. When a believer sins, he gives occasion to the enemies of the Lord to blaspheme (2 Sam. 12:14). Unbelievers will mock God and justify their own sins when they hear of a believer’s sin. Thus our sin is primarily against God, which means that our repentance must be primarily toward Him also.

B. Genuine repentance feels deeply the wrong of our sins.

Paul says that godly sorrow “produces a repentance without regret, leading to salvation, but the sorrow of the world produces death” (2 Cor. 7:10). Both Ezra and those who gathered around him wept bitterly because they saw how unfaithful God’s people had been and they trembled at God’s word that warns of His righteous judgment on sin (9:4; 10:3, 14).

Our sorrow should be proportional to the magnitude of our sin. It would not be appropriate or necessary to weep over relatively minor sins, although we should keep a tender conscience toward all sins. We should confess such sins to the Lord and move on, praying for strength to avoid these sins in the future. But, if we have sinned in a major way, it is appropriate to be deeply grieved over what we have done. After denying that he knew Jesus, Peter went out into the night and wept bitterly (Luke 22:62).

Our grief over major sins should also stem from our understanding of the serious consequences that our sins bring both on ourselves and on others. Even though we are God’s people, our sins can arouse His “fierce anger” (10:14; 9:14) on us and on our children. I fear that too many Christians view God only as loving and forgiving, so that we have lost our fear of Him. It is worth pondering that when Moses asked to see God’s face, “the Lord passed by in front of him and proclaimed, The Lord, the Lord God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth; who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression, and sin” (Exod. 34:6-7). We all like this picture so far!
But God doesn’t stop there. He continues (and we must continue also), “yet He will by no means leave the guilty unpunished, visiting the iniquity of fathers on the children and on the grandchildren to the third and fourth generations.” The realization that my sins get visited on my children and grandchildren should cause me to feel them deeply and turn from them.

C. Genuine repentance accepts the responsibility for what we have done.

If there is any blaming, it is not genuine repentance. If there are any excuses, it is not genuine repentance. Genuine repentance says, “I have sinned,” or “we have been unfaithful” (10:2). Genuine repentance exonerates God as David did (Ps. 51:4b), “So that You are justified when You speak and blameless when You judge.”

Marion Barry, the former mayor of Washington, D.C., who was caught on videotape using cocaine in a prostitute’s room, “admitted that his cocaine problem came about because he cared too deeply, for too long, about too many other people’s needs” (cited by George Will, Newsweek [12/31/90], p. 72)! In the recent trial of the Yosemite serial killer, his attorney argued that he was not responsible for his atrocious crimes because of his difficult childhood. Thankfully, the jurors rejected that reasoning. But as you know, we live in a culture where everyone is a victim because of some psychological “disease” for which they are not responsible. But genuine repentance always accepts full responsibility for what we have done. But there is a fourth mark:

D. Genuine repentance sees hope in the midst of despair.

After confessing the unfaithfulness of the people in marrying foreign women, Shecaniah interjects, “Yet now there is hope for Israel in spite of this” (10:2). The reason that there is hope is because our God is “compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth; who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression, and sin” (Exod. 34:6-7). That is how God reveals Himself to us! David quotes those words of hope in Psalm 103 and then goes on to say, “Just as a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear Him, for He Himself knows our frame; He is mindful that we are but dust” (Ps. 103:8-9, 13-14). Because God
is always ready to forgive and restore the repentant sinner, the thought of repentance opens a door of hope to those who are suffering the consequences of their sins.

Thus the first mark of genuine repentance is heartfelt sorrow before God for our sins. But sorrow alone is not enough:

2. **Genuine repentance takes prompt action to correct our sins.**

True repentance requires not only admitting our wrong to God and others, but also taking practical steps of obedience to correct our wrongs. With some sins, such as murdering or permanently injuring someone, we can never fix the wrong we committed. Some problems are so complex that they cannot be corrected instantly. But that should not be an excuse for not taking action at all. We should devise a plan that can lead us into full obedience to Christ. Repentance should take place as quickly as possible in light of the complexity of the problem.

A. Genuine repentance takes the necessary action to correct our sins, even when it is personally difficult to do so.

Sometimes our sin results in problems for which are no easy solutions. This was one of those situations. To allow those in mixed marriages to continue in them would seemingly condone such behavior and would draw many Jews into religious syncretism right at the time that purity and separation were essential.

Only 111 Jewish men are listed as guilty of this sin, which was only 0.4 percent of the 28,774 exiles who had returned under Zerubbabel (Edwin Yamauchi, *Expositor’s Bible Commentary* [Zondervan], 4:676). The list may be representative of classes of people, rather than a list of every man who had sinned, in which case it would be much larger. Even so, we may be inclined to think that Ezra was making a mountain out of a molehill.

But as Paul said with reference to tolerating sin in the Corinthian church, “a little leaven leavens the whole lump” (1 Cor. 5:6). If the problem had not been confronted, it would have spread even farther. Since the Jewish exiles who had returned were so few in number, to allow this sin to continue could have effectively diluted their distinctiveness as God’s people. In His righteous anger, God could have destroyed the people until there was no remnant left
Thus Ezra believed that it was necessary to break up these wrongful marriages, in spite of God’s declared hatred of divorce (Mal. 2:16). The fact that he fasted and prayed before acting on this argues that he did the right thing, although it was not easy.

To break up these marriages meant separating fathers from their wives and children, who would be sent back to their pagan roots, which was not good either. I think that Ezra believed that breaking up these marriages and restoring purity to the nations was a lesser evil than allowing the mixed marriages to continue and thereby threatening the spiritual purity of the nation in both the present and the future. Either way was difficult and painful.

Walter Kaiser, Jr. (Hard Sayings of the Old Testament [IVP], p. 142) argues that when our text says that these wives should be put away “according to the law” (10:3), it refers back to Deuteronomy 24:1-4, which permits divorce if the husband finds “some indecency” in his wife. He says that this could not refer to adultery, which was punishable by death. “Thus it had to be something else that brought shame on God’s people. What could bring greater shame than the breaking of the covenant relationship and the ultimate judgment of God on all the people?”

Should believers today who find themselves in mixed marriages divorce their mates? Clearly not! The New Testament commands that a believer should not enter such a relationship (2 Cor. 6:14-7:1). But it is also clear that if a believer is already in such a relationship, he or she should live in a godly manner, seeking to be a testimony of Christ by his or her behavior (1 Cor. 7:12-16; 1 Pet. 3:1-6), in hopes that God will save the unbelieving mate. If the unbeliever chooses to leave, the believer is not bound by the marriage and, as I understand it, is free to remarry. The only other biblical ground that permits (not requires) divorce is the sexual immorality of one of the partners (Matt. 5:32; 19:8-9). In such cases, I always counsel repentance and reconciliation, because it glorifies God more than divorce does.

But there is another way that our text applies to us today: Just as separating from their pagan wives (and, in some cases, children) was a difficult and painful thing to do, so we must separate ourselves from our sins, no matter how difficult or painful. Jesus said,
If your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it from you; it is better for you to enter life crippled or lame, than to have two hands or two feet and be cast into the eternal fire. If your eye causes you to stumble, pluck it out and throw it from you. It is better for you to enter life with one eye, than to have two eyes and be cast into the fiery hell (Matt. 18:8-9).

Jesus was using shocking language to get us to see how serious sin is and that we must take radical action to get it out of our lives, even when it is very difficult. Sometimes, as in the situation in Ezra’s day, there are no easy solutions.

Years ago, a young woman who had recently started attending my church in California told me that she wanted to be baptized, but she had a problem. She had been living with a man for 12 years and they had a seven-year-old daughter together. She knew that it was not right to give a confession of faith through baptism and continue living with a man outside of marriage. But he was her daughter’s father, and she did not know if it was right to leave him.

At first I assumed that they must fall under common-law marriage laws, but I discovered that California does not recognize common-law marriage. So I was not sure what to do. I could not marry a believer to an unbeliever or I would be disobeying 2 Corinthians 6:14. Yet in another sense, they were already a family unit, and I didn’t want to pull the little girl away from her daddy.

I sought counsel from several pastors and seminary professors. The general consensus was that they were in all respects (except legally) married, and thus she should get the marriage legalized before a justice of the peace. But then I found out that the husband was a libertarian who took great pride in the fact that he didn’t need a piece of paper from the government to tell him that he was married. He yelled and cussed at me on the phone for over an hour, accusing me of breaking up his family.

I told him that I was not breaking up his family, since I advised her to marry him. He was breaking up his own family by fighting the law of the state. If he really loved her, he would provide her the legal protection of marriage, so that she at least had property rights. It turned out that he loved his libertarian opinions
more than he loved his live-in partner. When he adamantly refused to marry her, she took their daughter and left him. I then baptized her. It was certainly not an easy, neat solution. But I believe that she demonstrated true repentance by being obedient to God in spite of the personal difficulties.

B. Genuine repentance takes the necessary action to correct our sins, even when it is potentially divisive to do so.

Verse 15 mentions in passing that four men opposed the proposed covenant to divorce these pagan women. But I’m sure that there was far more angry dissension than is recorded here. Ezra would have been attacked as being an insensitive, unloving, self-righteous man who had no compassion for all these hurting people.

If Ezra is the author of Psalm 119 (as many scholars believe), many verses in that psalm reflect attacks on the author. He was the object of reproach and contempt (119:22, 39, 42). Princes were talking against him (119:23). The arrogant derided him and forged lies against him (119:51, 69, 86). Many persecuted him, dug pits for him, and waited to destroy him (119:84, 85, 95, 110). He had many persecutors and adversaries (119:157). Even though he was obeying God’s Word, he was not a popular, well-loved guy!

Some may think that Ezra was wrong to force all the Jews into the covenant under the threat of confiscating their property and excluding them from the assembly (10:8). Wasn’t he just getting outward conformity without genuine heartfelt repentance?

In one sense, I’m sure that Ezra hoped that every man would take the necessary action to correct his sins out of a personal, uncoerced repentance toward God. But in another sense, as a leader of God’s covenant people, Ezra had to maintain certain minimum standards of biblical righteousness or the whole community would become tainted by sin and the testimony of God would be diluted to the point of uselessness. So he imposed the covenant on all.

The application for us is that God’s desire for His church is that every member would correct his sins because of heartfelt repentance before God. But even if some members strongly disagree, the leaders must enforce holy standards on the whole body, or the testimony of Christ will be destroyed.
Whenever church discipline gets to the whole church level, it is potentially divisive. Those who are inclined toward mercy or who do not understand God’s standards of holiness will complain that the leaders lack compassion, that they are not practicing grace, and that they are being judgmental and unloving.

But if a sinning member refuses to repent after the biblical steps are followed (Matt. 18:15-17; Gal. 6:1), the Bible is clear that he must be publicly removed from the fellowship and that other members are not to associate with him, except to exhort him to repentance (1 Cor. 5:1-13). Maintaining the purity of the church is more important than the potential strife and division that can erupt in the process of church discipline. Paul’s command is not fuzzy: “Remove the wicked man from among yourselves” (1 Cor. 5:13).

**Conclusion**

Thus genuine repentance involves heartfelt sorrow before God for our sins and prompt action to correct them, even when it is difficult and potentially divisive.

There are many today who teach that all that a sinner has to do is to believe in Jesus, and that repentance has nothing to do with salvation. It should come later, they would say, but to call sinners to repentance is to confuse faith and works. But Jesus said that He came to call sinners to repentance (Luke 5:32). In the Great Commission Jesus said “that repentance for forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed in His name to all the nations” (Luke 24:47). Paul summed up his gospel as “solemnly testifying ... of repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ” (Acts 20:21). We must begin the Christian life by repentance and faith.

But repentance is not just something that we must do at the beginning of salvation. It is something that should characterize believers all of their lives. As the Holy Spirit convicts us through God’s Word of our sins, we should go on repenting. In Eastern Europe, those who are nominal Christians in the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches have a word for those who are true Christians: “Repenters.” I think that we need to adopt that term in America. True Christians should be genuine, lifelong “Repenters.” May it be so of each of us!
Discussion Questions

1. What should we do if we do not feel sorrow for our sins? We can’t fake it or work it up. So what should we do?

2. Why should we see repentance as a source of hope rather than as a matter of despair?

3. Does repentance mean that God removes the consequences of our sins? If He does not, why should we repent?

4. Do you think Ezra was right or wrong to require these men to divorce their wives? Support your answer biblically. Why are believers today to remain with unbelieving mates?

5. When and for what sins should church discipline be exercised? How should we respond to the charge that it is judgmental? Support your answer biblically.

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