

Renewal: The Gift of Repentance

Ezra 10

Ezra 10 continues to address Israel's sinful intermarriage with unbelieving peoples. In chapter 9 we saw that the reason God prohibited intermarriage with other races was not because he is racist but because he loves people enough to keep them from idolatry, from worshipping a false god. To intermarry was to introduce idolatry into Israel. As Ezra led the people into an encounter with the holiness of God, they joined him in confessing their sin. But where do they go after that, after they confess? What do we do with our sin? Perhaps you have struggled to understand what to do with your sin? Ever get tripped up by the same old failures? The way forward is *repentance*. In chapter 10, we see Israel move from *Confession* into full blown *Repentance*. Repentance is the fourth means of grace in renewal. We've seen the Word (7), Prayer (8), Holiness of God (9), and now Repentance (10). Two big questions: What is repentance? And how do we do it?

What is Repentance?

Well, what comes to your mind when you think of "repentance"? Guilt, shame, religion? For years I thought of repentance as an onerous task, a religious burden, something I was glad to bear in order to get rid of my guilt. If I say sorry enough, if I feel miserable enough, if I promise never to do it again...that's repentance. Maybe you can relate? Is this how you perceive repentance? Self-humiliation, a spiritual beating to atone for your sin? Perhaps it's your view, not one you like but one you hold. This is actually penance not repentance. Penance has to do with performance or payment, but repentance is something different altogether. One of the problems with penance is that it is **utterly self-reliant**. This self-reliant view of repentance reduces us to spiritual customer before the Divine Seller of forgiveness. It depends on an exchange with God that goes deep, deep into yourself, into your own spiritual pockets to pay for your own forgiveness. And let's face it, none of us are wealthy enough to pay for crimes against the Creator, nor do we want to! This self-reliant approach to repentance is tiresome and costly. Perhaps a different image comes to mind. Consider the image of a confessional booth. A place where we can purge our consciences and depart absolved of guilt. A sin safely device. Sin as much as you want, just be sure to confess your sin regularly, and you're safe from God's wrath. We slip into prayer and say sorry to God for doing X, and then slip out guilt-free. One of the problems with this understanding of repentance is that it's **very superficial**. The exchange between us and God stays on the surface. It doesn't go beneath, where sin hides out and where God wants to live—in the heart. It's a spiritual show, a superficial approach to repentance that doesn't get to the heart, draw us into communion with God, or produce real change. Where self-reliant repentance is costly and tiresome, superficial repentance is cheap and shallow. Neither deal adequately with sin or God. Neither produce real change, but we drift to one or the other. Where do you drift? Self-reliance repentance? Or superficial repentance? What is repentance? Well, Ezra 10 actually *shows us* repentance in two different places, once from Israel and once from Ezra. We'll draw on both instances in order to get a full picture of middle of the road repentance.

How to Repent

Consider v. 10: *"And Ezra the priest stood up and said to them, "You have broken faith and married foreign women, and so increased the guilt of Israel. Now then make confession to the LORD, the God of your fathers and do his will. Separate yourselves from the peoples of the land and from the foreign wives."* We're going to pull out three elements of repentance. In this passage we see two of the three elements.

The first element is Confession. "They made confession to the Lord." Most of us don't get beyond this element. To confess your sin is to know your sin and name it before God. What is Israel's sin? Marrying foreign wives. Ezra declares it and Israel confesses it to the Lord (10:2). They had disobeyed God, introduced idolatry into Israel. In order to confess our sin, we have to know our sin. If we're not looking for it, then we don't know it, and we can't confess it. Why should we confess? Sin festers, burrows deep down into our souls and we become worse because of it. When we hide sin, we become trapped by it. It corners us in the dark. Confession allows us to bring it out into the light, expose it, to escape its clutches. Confession breaks the power of private sin. This is why James tells us to share our sin with others. James 5:16: *"Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed."* Confession and prayer should go hand in hand. Praying with others brings healing. Here's an example: since the publication of my recent book *Fight Clubs*, receiving a string of speaking invitations, I have been tempted to think highly of myself. Tempted to pride. So, I noticed this trend. I was *lingering* over what people said about the book. Looking for blog comments and reviews. Now, this isn't inherently bad, but when I felt my heart begin to cling to the comments, to relish the praise, I knew sin was beginning to burrow. Pride was festering. So what did I do? I brought it out into the light. I confessed it to God and to my Fight Club partner, Juan Sanchez, pastor of High Pointe Church. He is praying for me regularly and checking in on me to see if I am fighting pride well. What would have happened if I didn't confess it? It would have festered, burrowed deeper. I would begin writing for myself, for my fame, instead of for others and for God's fame. I'd begin to see ministry as a way to serve myself instead of to serve others. Very dangerous. Confession brought my sin out in the light. Exposed it so I can fight it. The first rule of *Fight Clubs* is *"Know your Sin."* It's a call to confession, the first element of repentance. Once we know our sin and confess it, we can move ahead in repentance. But how do we move ahead? Ever encounter sins that won't seem to go away? You cut off its head and it grows back a week later? Like the Twins in *The Matrix: Reloaded*, you slash at them and they simply reappear. Once we drag sin out into the light, how in the world do we beat it? We fight it—the second rule in Fight Club. Fighting sin is a lifelong calling. Sin doesn't give up easily. It's set against us. It wants to steal our joy, to kill us. We must take up arms against it. As Owen said, we must *"Be killing sin lest it be killing you."*

The second element of repentance is Mortification, an old word that means to put to death, to mortify or to fight. Romans 8:13 *"For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live."* The King James says if you "mortify the flesh." Mortification is an active approach to repentance. It's what we do once we've got sin out in the light. It is putting sin to death. So how do we do it? In order to fight sin, we have to understand what makes it tick, what gives it life. We have to figure out where it gets its strength, its power. If we are going to mortify, we have to move beyond the superficial

performances of the confessional booth, and into the depths of our hearts, where sin sinks its roots. You might say we need to get to the sin beneath our sin, to its root. In order to get underneath our sin, we have to ask the question "Why?" Why do I choose pride over humility, lust over love, gossip over encouragement, envy over empathy? Why do we sin? Well, fundamentally it's because we believe something about sin. That it is more compelling, more attractive, more satisfying, more trustworthy than Jesus. Underneath every sin there is an idol. It's down there, fueling our sin, giving it power over us. How? It lies to us. How do we uncover it? Mortify it? Here's how. Expose its lies. Just ask the question: "What lie am I believing when I do X? For example, when I choose pride over humility, I am believing the lie that *my worth comes from the praise of others*. This kind of pride approaches others from above, seeks applause, wants others to look up. I believe the lie that gaining applause makes me somebody. I believe the lie that if others think highly of me I have worth. The truth is that I have worth because God made me and remade me in Jesus. Christ is my worth, not the praise of other. The truth is that the only One truly deserving of applause is God. Anything good in my life is a direct result of God making or remaking me. To mortify sin is to find the sin beneath the sin—the idol—and expose its lies. Now, the tricky about idols is that very often what they promise is good, like worth, acceptance, meaning. Those things are good! But when those good, true things become ultimate things, we corrupt them, make them into idols, and we worship them. So, if I believe the lie that my worth comes from the praise of others, I make an idol out of worth, esteem, and sin by being proud. So the second element in repentance is mortification. The second rule in Fight Club is "Fight your Sin." We fight our sin by getting underneath it, exposing the lies that fuel it. What was underneath Israel's sin of intermarrying? Well, Israel probably intermarried for sex or wealth. Marrying forbidden women of another race probably intrigued them. What are they like? But by intermarrying they could also become more upwardly mobile. Although we don't have a lot of information about the economic status of Israel and the peoples of the lands at the time, the general impression is that the peoples of the land were better off than the exiles, and they were certainly greater in number. So what was the sin beneath Israel's sin? What lie were they tempted to believe? It was probably more complicated than sex and money. Sin always is. Israel probably believed a couple lies. Here's one: The wealth obtained through intermarriage will bring me more security than God can provide. They were tricked into thinking that God was holding out on them. So, in pursuit of the idols of pleasure and security, they hopped in bed with other gods and married foreign wives. Now did Israel figure this all out? I think they did on some level because after confessing their sin, they didn't carry on superficially or self-reliantly. Instead, they exposed the root of their sin—faithlessness—"*We have broken faith with our God and have married foreign women from the peoples of the land*" (10:2) "Broken faith" is literally "faithlessness." Faithlessness in what? I thought it was just disobedient sex. No, Israel goes much deeper. They mortify sin by exposing their lie. Faith in the idol of pleasure or security, not faith in God. They knew that at the bottom of sin was faith, faith in an idol, in a lie, not in God. See, they knew that in order to defeat sin, they had to get to the idol, to the root. So when they confess, they don't just say sorry for intermarrying. They mortify their sin by calling it what it was, faithlessness. Trust in security instead of trust in God. So you can see repentance isn't superficial, but it also isn't self-reliance. Repentance is an act of faith, a turning away from the false promises of sin and a turning to the true promises of God. So often we get stuck in confession and don't make it to mortification.

We know our sin, but don't know how to kill it. Now we know how to fight. Expose the lie. But is that enough?

This brings us to **the third element, Faith**. How do we defeat those cyclical sins? We turn to something not merely from something. The first two elements of repentance—Confession and Mortification—are a *turning from* sin, but complete repentance also includes a *turning to*. We turn from sin to faith, from our idols to our God, from lies and turn to truths. This is repentance, a constant turning away from sin and turning to Christ. Repentance is **an act of faith**. Faith in what? Faith in God's promises. Owen: "*Set faith on work on these promises of God...it is not easily conceived what a train of graces is attended withal, when it goes forth to meet Christ in the promises...*" (126). Set faith on these promises because when we go out to meet Jesus he brings a "train of graces." See, ultimately repentance is about trusting Jesus. It's about grace. It's about believing the gospel, not the lies of idols. How can we get in on this train of graces? Trust Christ. Set faith on the promises. Tim Chester helpfully points us to four basic promises. The 4 Gs:

1. **God is great** – so we don't have to be in control
2. **God is glorious** – so we don't have to fear others
3. **God is good** – so we don't have to look elsewhere
4. **God is gracious** – so we don't have to prove ourselves

When I believe the lie that my worth comes from others thinking well of me, I refuse to believe the truth that God is glorious. Instead, fearing the loss of praise from others, I try to be glorious. But the gospel tells me that God is my glory, my worth, not what others think of me. "Humble yourself before the Lord and he will exalt you at the proper time" (1 Pet 5). God is glorious and lifts us up, and God is gracious. We don't have to prove ourselves through self-reliant, tiresome repentance because God is gracious and is always working for us in the Spirit and the Son. Israel looked to a gracious God, a merciful God. In Nehemiah 9 we find a more complete record of how Israel repented. The leaders rehearse the redemptive history of Israel, from exodus to return from exile, each time noting **God's mercy**. The word "mercy" or "according to your mercies" is used at least five times (9:17, 19, 27, 29, 31). What gave Israel the assurance of God's forgiveness when they repented? Faith in the promise of God's great mercy. He had compassion on their struggle, forgiveness for their sin, and promises hitched to a train of graces for their faith.

- "But you are a God ready to forgive, gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and did not forsake them." Neh 9:17
- "Nevertheless, in your great mercies you did not make an end of them or forsake them, for you are a gracious and merciful God. Now, therefore, our God, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who keeps covenant and steadfast love, let not all the hardship seem little to you that has come upon us." Neh 9:31-32

Israel's repentance was faith-filled in God's promise to be merciful. Their repentance was neither legalistic nor loose, self-reliant or superficial. Instead, it was a progression of confession, mortification, and faith. They turned from trusting in the idol of security, and turned to the promise of God's mercy and greatness. He is their security! All of life is repentance, a constant, gracious repetition of turning from sin and turning to Christ. For every look at sin, we should take ten looks at Christ and his grace-laden promises. Set your faith on Christ.