

Gospel Identity: Being Faithful in our Calling without Going Crazy

Ezra 7

This morning I'd like us to look at Ezra 7 and consider three questions: 1) What are the **roles** that God has called us to? 2) What happens when we distort these roles into **extremes**? 3) What has the power to both keep us from the extremes and keep us faithful? Our Calling-what are our roles? Correction-how do we get off? Power-how do we remain faithful?

Ezra, Exemplary Disciple

As we reach chapter seven, fifty-seven years have passed since the temple was rebuilt. Chapter seven introduces Ezra, who made the dangerous 3.5 month trek from Babylon to Jerusalem, in order to teach the Law to the Jews who have returned from exile. You may recall that the Jews were not taught the law for over 70 years during the captivity. A generation has emerged that knows very little about God or his Word. Enter Ezra. Who was Ezra? Well, let's consider his roles. We know from verse 6 that he was a scribe, a kind of expert lawyer (7:5-6). He likely served on Artaxerxes legal counsel in Babylon. We are told that the king granted him "all he asked for." This tells us that Ezra had great favor with the king of Persia. Can you imagine, having the ear of Barack Obama? You'd have to be a pretty good lawyer. Ezra was given the authority to appoint politicians, judges and city officials (25). He was also given blessing to return to Jerusalem, authority to teach God's Word there, and silver and gold to finance his return. This speaks volumes about Ezra, about his reputation among the fellow citizens of Babylon. He was an exemplary citizen who used his gifts, education, and skills for the good of the city. *Ezra's first role was that of exemplary Citizen*. In addition, we are told he was "*a scribe skilled in the Law of Moses*" and that he was "*a man learned in matters of the commandments of the LORD and his statutes for Israel*" (6:6, 11). Verse 10 tells us that he not only knew the Law but that he set his heart *to do it*. Ezra was a peculiar saint, following God's law while living in Babylonian culture. He fasted (8:21), prayed, studied, and obeyed God (7:10). *His second role is that of exemplary Exile*. Somehow he was able to flourish as a very successful lawyer, with political influence, and not compromise his faith. So many Christians today choose one or the other, Citizen or Exile. How did Ezra do it? Finally, we are told that he also taught the Word of God with clarity (Neh 8:3, 8-12). He spoke the truth in love to his people and to those around him. *His third role was that of an exemplary Missionary*, a prophetic voice speaking the truth in love among his people and across cultures. Ezra played the roles of Citizen, Exile, and Missionary and played them well. As did many of the Jews. As public servants, they sought the peace of the city. As peculiar saints, they obeyed and worshipped God. As prophetic voices they spoke the truth in love to one another and their neighbors. Citizen, Exile, & Missionary. How do we remain faithful in all three of these roles without being overwhelmed? If we try to balance the roles of Citizen, Exile and Missionary we'll drive ourselves mad. Consider again your calling as Citizen—working, living, and playing for the good of the city. Supporting local business and arts, serving socially through your City Group and churchwide mission. Exile—living an obedient life to God in all your other roles as parent, spouse, friend. Fighting the fight of faith with your Fight Club. Oh, and then there is our role as Missionary—speaking the truth in love to your friends and fellow citizens, praying for your neighbors, sharing the gospel with our city! Sundays, City Groups, and Fight Clubs? Citizen, Exile, & Missionary. These are the roles God has

called us to. On top of all this we have the demands of everyday life. How are we supposed to manage our calling in all of this?

Role Extremes: *Hypocrites and Idolaters*

I have two suggestions. First, *we must recognize the difference between our Roles and Identities*. What is the difference between our role and our identity? Very simply, a role is something we do but an identity is who we are. An identity is who we are, it essentially defines and shapes us. This all brings us to our second question: "*What happens when we distort these roles?*" We end up with **extremes**. Anyone watch the British spy show *MI-5 aka Spooks*? In an episode of *MI-5*, the lead spy Adam Carter loses his wife, Fiona. Fiona is shot in the back by an X-husband/double agent. Adam's response is unusual. He refuses to stop working, to grieve, or to tell his son and in-laws that she is dead. The *MI-5* Director asks him to go to a Psych Center for counseling. While in a counseling session, the counselor asks Adam an important question: "*Do you lie to yourself?*" He responds without hesitation: "*Of course, you lie every time you go into the field; you keep your real self in a box.*" Notice that Adam makes a distinction between his real self and his role as a spy. He isolates his role from his identity, his real self. Many of us do the same thing with our roles and our identity. We keep our Christian identity in a box, separated from our roles a citizen, exile, and missionary. Our faith doesn't affect life. The way we behave in a car, a bar, at work, or at home is isolated from our belief in Jesus. We claim Jesus but show very little sign of serving the city, imitating Christ, redeeming the culture, or joining his mission. Our so-called identity as Christians is boxed up, restricted from our roles. Why? Maybe it's because Christian isn't our identity, it's just another role. It's not our real self. We're deriving our identity from something else, like how successful, creative, or well-liked we are. We need correction, correction from distorting our roles into extremes. What extreme? The extreme of *Hypocrisy. Living a double life. Living in contradiction to your beliefs. Isolating identity from roles*. You don't have to be a Christian to go to this extreme. Think about the politicians and businessmen who have played themselves off as upstanding family men while having affairs and embezzling money. They isolate their so-called identity (family man) from their role (businessman, politician). Madoff, Martha Stewart, Mark Sanford, governor of South Carolina. When we isolate our identity from our roles we become *hypocrites*. We keep our real self in a box while playing wildly outside the box. We say one thing and do another. Hypocrisy. This is one extreme.

Interestingly, as it turns out, *MI-5* Adam Carter isn't as good at keeping his real self in a box as he thinks. The counselor persists with her questions: "But do you lie to yourself?" "Do you lie to yourself about your love for your dead wife?" "I don't lie about that." 3xs. "But you lie to yourself about her being dead." She replies. Adam is lying to himself (and his son and his in-laws) about his wife's death. He is acting as if Fiona didn't die. He hasn't grieved or held a funeral. Adam's *role* as a lying spy is so strong it has become his *identity*. Now he is deceiving himself! If hypocrite is one extreme of focusing on our roles, idolater is the other extreme. Instead of *isolating* our identity from our roles, we *integrate* our roles with our identity. Like Adam, we become idolater, confusing who we are with what we do. Role becomes identity. The agent becomes Adam. The deceiver becomes the deceived. When we idolize or build our identity on our role (spying). We construct ourselves on a lie. So, we may construct our identity

upon the belief that our ultimate value comes from being a good parent, a successful artist or professional, or even a good Citizen, Exile or Missionary. All of these roles are good, but they aren't designed to carry the weight of a person's *entire* identity. They are just roles. The human spirit needs more than a role to have a stable identity. If we place the weight of identity upon something as fragile and finite as a role, we will go nuts, crazy, idolater. Think about it. If we go to this extreme, all our worth and value is based on our performance in that role. If our kids behave, we feel high value as **parents** but if they misbehave our worth bottoms out. If our **colleagues** perceive us as successful, we feel worthwhile but if they frown on our work we feel worthless. So it is with the Christian roles of citizen, exile, or missionary. If we mistake them for our identity we will go mad. Our thinking will go something like: "If I am socially active, morally upright, and missionally faithful I have value, worth, acceptance." BUT if we don't go to Africa, visit a Nursing Home, walk in perfect holiness, or always speak the truth in love, our self-worth goes down. Don't you see, this will drive you mad! And we do it. We put ourselves down and lift ourselves up based on how well we perform in our roles. We idolater, religious nuts that believe our sense of worth comes from how well we perform our Christian roles. How do we escape these extremes, real self in a box, (hypocrite) and real self in a role (idolater), and still remain faithful in our callings?

Gospel Identity

First we must identify and correct our extreme. We all lean towards hypocrite or idolater, Christian identity in a box or Christian identity in a role. How are we being hypocritical? Are we compromising morally, ethically, socially, culturally? What role are we worshipping? Finding our identity as a public servant, peculiar saint, or missionary? We must first identify *and confess* our extreme to God. In either extreme we exchange the truth for a lie. We come to believe that who we are doesn't have to affect what we do. Or we believe that our worth is determined by how well we play our role. Identify and Confess. *Second*, we need some power to help us escape this maddening, deceptive cycle. Instead of believing lies, we need to believe the Truth. Re-enter Ezra. Remember Ezra was a man who "*set his heart to study the Law of the LORD, and to do it and to teach his statutes and rules in Israel*" (7:10). Ezra studied, obeyed, and taught the God's Word, the Truth. The Bible tells us the truth about who we are, where to find our identity. Ezra set his *Heart* to study the *Truth*. The heart is the place where our identity is forged. It is a brewery for identity. What we brew determines who we are. Are we brewing truth and grace? Or are we brewing hypocrisy and idolatry? Are we drinking deeply of the gospel? Or are drinking deeply from religion or irreligion? Do our hearts believe that our value comes from Christ OR from what roles we play and how well we play them? Colossians 3:3 tells us that we "*have died, and our life is hidden with Christ in God.*" Are we hiding *in Christ* for life and value and identity OR are we hiding *from Christ*, from truth, and from grace? Your identity is Christ, your role citizen, exile, missionary. Your identity is Son/Daughter, your role is parent, friend. Your identity is disciple, your role is deacon. Your identity is sinner redeemed by grace, your role is to pastor by grace! Brew the gospel. Get drunk on It. All of our hearts are intoxicated, but are they intoxicated with Christ? Our inebriation determines our identity. What we drink makes us who we are. How do we remain faithful in our roles without becoming hypocrites or idolaters? We get drunk on the gospel of grace. We take in Christ, Christ crucified for our sin and raised for our life. Take in Christ. Drink deeply.