

Ezra 9 – A Culture of Compromise
April 3, 2022
Mesa Church

INTRO

Good Morning Mesa Church! [**Online guests as well**]

Over the past several weeks, we've been working through the Book of Ezra. We've learned that Ezra was a priest and scribe that lived in the 4th century B.C. as an exiled Jew who ultimately left Babylon and traveled to Jerusalem with nearly 1,500 other men and likely 5,000 to 6,000 people in total. Ezra's mission was largely to reestablish or revive the preeminence of the Law in the lives of the Jewish people who had returned to Jerusalem over the past several decades, perhaps 60 years after the Temple was rebuilt. Part of that revival involved restoring many of the Temple treasures that had been confiscated by the Babylonians when they overthrew Israel and forced the Jews into exile.

As Ezra finishes restoring the Temple treasures, he learns that his fellow Jews have made some serious missteps over the years. They had compromised in an area that God had specifically warned them against by taking foreign wives and adopting their customs. This compromise undoubtedly led to a dilution of the sacred trust God had placed upon His people to be set apart to honor and glorify Him.

What was even worse was that the Jewish leaders who were supposed to safeguard the very things that mattered to God the most, were described as being the ones who led the way in this moral failure.

Several questions surface as we look more closely at this topic:

- *Why was intermarriage such a big deal to God?*
- *Was this prohibition primarily due to an ethnic issue, or a spiritual issue?*
- *How does Ezra react to the spiritual condition of the people?*
- *Although this prohibition against intermarriage is targeted at the Jews, are Christians warned to follow a similar mandate?*
- *What are the differences between cultural Christianity and biblical Christianity?*

PRAYER

Ezra 9:1-15 (NLT)

When these things had been done, the Jewish leaders came to me and said, “Many of the people of Israel, and even some of the priests and Levites, have not kept themselves separate from the other peoples living in the land. They have taken up the detestable practices of the Canaanites, Hittites, Perizzites, Jebusites, Ammonites, Moabites, Egyptians, and Amorites. ²For the men of Israel have married women from these people and have taken them as wives for their sons. So the holy race has become polluted by these mixed marriages. Worse yet, the leaders and officials have led the way in this outrage.”

³When I heard this, I tore my cloak and my shirt, pulled hair from my head and beard, and sat down utterly shocked. ⁴Then all who trembled at the words of the God of Israel came and sat with me because of this outrage committed by the returned exiles. And I sat there utterly appalled until the time of the evening sacrifice.

⁵At the time of the sacrifice, I stood up from where I had sat in mourning with my clothes torn. I fell to my knees and lifted my hands to the Lord my God. ⁶I prayed,

“O my God, I am utterly ashamed; I blush to lift up my face to you. For our sins are piled higher than our heads, and our guilt has reached to the heavens. ⁷From the days of our ancestors until now, we have been steeped in sin. That is why we and our kings and our priests have been at the mercy of the pagan kings of the land. We have been killed, captured, robbed, and disgraced, just as we are today.

⁸“But now we have been given a brief moment of grace, for the Lord our God has allowed a few of us to survive as a remnant. He has given us security in this holy place. Our God has brightened our eyes and granted us some relief from our slavery. ⁹For we were slaves, but in his unfailing love our God did not abandon us in our slavery. Instead, he caused the kings of Persia to treat us favorably. He revived us so we could rebuild the Temple of our God and repair its ruins. He has given us a protective wall in Judah and Jerusalem.

¹⁰“And now, O our God, what can we say after all of this? For once again we have abandoned your commands! ¹¹Your servants the prophets warned us when they said, ‘The land you are entering to possess is totally defiled by the detestable practices of the people living there. From one end to the

other, the land is filled with corruption. ¹² Don't let your daughters marry their sons! Don't take their daughters as wives for your sons. Don't ever promote the peace and prosperity of those nations. If you follow these instructions, you will be strong and will enjoy the good things the land produces, and you will leave this prosperity to your children forever.'

¹³ "Now we are being punished because of our wickedness and our great guilt. But we have actually been punished far less than we deserve, for you, our God, have allowed some of us to survive as a remnant. ¹⁴ But even so, we are again breaking your commands and intermarrying with people who do these detestable things. Won't your anger be enough to destroy us, so that even this little remnant no longer survives? ¹⁵ O Lord, God of Israel, you are just. We come before you in our guilt as nothing but an escaped remnant, though in such a condition none of us can stand in your presence."

➤ *Why was intermarriage prohibited by God for these Jews?*

The answer to that question lies in a host of important passages. The first is:

Exodus 34:10-16:

¹⁰ The Lord replied, "Listen, I am making a covenant with you in the presence of all your people. I will perform miracles that have never been performed anywhere in all the earth or in any nation. And all the people around you will see the power of the Lord—the awesome power I will display for you. ¹¹ But listen carefully to everything I command you today. Then I will go ahead of you and drive out the Amorites, Canaanites, Hittites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites.

¹² "Be very careful never to make a treaty with the people who live in the land where you are going. If you do, you will follow their evil ways and be trapped. ¹³ Instead, you must break down their pagan altars, smash their sacred pillars, and cut down their Asherah poles. ¹⁴ You must worship no other gods, for the Lord, whose very name is Jealous, is a God who is jealous about his relationship with you.

¹⁵ “You must not make a treaty of any kind with the people living in the land. They lust after their gods, offering sacrifices to them. They will invite you to join them in their sacrificial meals, and you will go with them. ¹⁶ Then you will accept their daughters, who sacrifice to other gods, as wives for your sons. And they will seduce your sons to commit adultery against me by worshiping other gods.

Deuteronomy 7:1-6:

“When the Lord your God brings you into the land you are about to enter and occupy, he will clear away many nations ahead of you: the Hittites, Girgashites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites. These seven nations are greater and more numerous than you. ² When the Lord your God hands these nations over to you and you conquer them, you must completely destroy them. Make no treaties with them and show them no mercy. ³ You must not intermarry with them. Do not let your daughters and sons marry their sons and daughters, ⁴ for they will lead your children away from me to worship other gods. Then the anger of the Lord will burn against you, and he will quickly destroy you. ⁵ This is what you must do. You must break down their pagan altars and shatter their sacred pillars. Cut down their Asherah poles and burn their idols. ⁶ For you are a holy people, who belong to the Lord your God. Of all the people on earth, the Lord your God has chosen you to be his own special treasure.

1 Kings 11:1-6:

Now King Solomon loved many foreign women. Besides Pharaoh’s daughter, he married women from Moab, Ammon, Edom, Sidon, and from among the Hittites. ² The Lord had clearly instructed the people of Israel, “You must not marry them, because they will turn your hearts to their gods.” Yet Solomon insisted on loving them anyway. ³ He had 700 wives of royal birth and 300 concubines. And in fact, they did turn his heart away from the Lord.

⁴ In Solomon’s old age, they turned his heart to worship other gods instead of being completely faithful to the Lord his God, as his father, David, had been. ⁵ Solomon worshiped Ashtoreth, the goddess of the Sidonians, and Molech,^[a] the detestable god of the Ammonites. ⁶ In this way, Solomon did what was evil in the Lord’s sight; he refused to follow the Lord completely, as his father, David, had done.

➤ *Intermarriage led to the adoption of detestable pagan practices.*

God knew that the Jewish people did not possess the strength to influence the culture around them, rather the culture would influence them.

➤ *Was this prohibition primarily due to an ethnic issue, or a spiritual issue?*

In other words, does God institute a blanket prohibition against His people intermarrying with any other race? I don't believe so.

In Numbers 12, we see God defend Moses to his siblings, Miriam and Aaron, because Moses had married a woman from the land of Cush (modern day Sudan).

David had a wife named Maacah – a non-Jewish woman who became the mother of Absalom, a son of David. In fact, in Deuteronomy 21, instructions are given for how non-Jewish women are to be prepared for marriage to Jewish men.

Clearly, the prohibition against intermarriage was specific to the people groups listed in each of the accounts in Exodus, Deuteronomy, and 1 Kings, and only applied to the Jews. God stated that His people shall not marry these because they would be enticed to adopt their cultural and religious practices, which were in opposition to the practices the Lord desired for His people.

➤ *We can conclude that God's prohibition against intermarriage for the Jews was primarily directed at the inhabitants of Canaan out of concerns for their spiritual well-being and was not a blanket edict.*

The Canaanites and the other opposing groups occupied the land that God had promised to Israel. God had waited patiently for 400 years for them to accept His desire of blessing as evidenced by the Lord sending Abraham to that land. Yet, the people there rejected God's blessing and instead, incurred His wrath.

➤ *How does Ezra react to the spiritual condition of the people?*

Ezra is clearly shaken by this news. In fact, the text says he was utterly shocked or astonished. Had he made the mistake of over-estimating the spiritual condition of the people he had longed to see for months as he traveled from Babylon? Have you ever over-romanticized a relationship with someone as you first got to know them, only to find out later that they weren't quite who you expected them to be?

Ezra was appalled at what he heard not only because his image of the returned remnant was shattered to pieces, but also because he discovered that the very people who should have safeguarded the people from stepping into this mess were also complicit in the same sin! The leaders...the shepherds failed in their responsibility to guard the flock from the danger.

In response, Ezra did a few things, some of which we can learn from. First, he tore his garment (or cloak) and his robe (or his shirt) and then pulled hair out from his head and his beard. Have you ever been so distraught that you resorted to pulling out your hair?

Next, he sat down and took it all in. He did his best to absorb the gravity of the news he'd received. He obviously remembered that it was the same kind of sin that got Israel in trouble with God in the first place! It was what led them to become exiled. Now God shows them mercy by allowing them to return to their homeland and they show their gratitude by giving themselves to heathen practices.

Have you ever felt like you've been exiled at some point in your life? If so, and God extended His mercy toward you, don't return to the things that got your life messed up in the first place! We ought to respond to God's mercy with obedience and gratitude. For it is the kindness of God that leads us to repentance.

Next, we see Ezra surround himself with others who grieved as he did. There's something powerful about being in community. It's in community where we gain perspective...find forgiveness...affirm our own feelings...and are challenged to question our feelings.

Finally, and most importantly, it was in community that Ezra fasted and prayed. Not only did he pray, notice how he prayed. He did not pray an accusatory prayer. He did not speak condemnation or judgment to the people who violated God's Law. In fact, he takes on a posture of humiliation, as if he were guilty of an offense. "For our sins are piled higher than our heads, and our guilt has reached to the heavens."

In other words, the people despised the great mercy God had shown them. Friends...Mesa Church family, please don't mimic this mistake. Don't despise the mercy God has shown you. Rather, rise up in praise and adoration to the One who has bound your sins and set you free!

Ezra cries out to God to extend mercy once again toward His people, though they did nothing to deserve it. They had compromised in bowing to the demands of their culture and polluted what was supposed to be set apart and holy. And that is the beauty of mercy...it is God not giving us what we truly deserve.

➤ *Ezra responds with righteous indignation but calls on God to show mercy upon His people.*

So Ezra's response gets the attention of many of God's people and that will become more evident next week in chapter 10. But there are some things we need to examine as we look at Ezra chapter 9 that have significant relevance to our lives today. The first question we ought to ask ourselves is this:

➤ *Although this prohibition against intermarriage is targeted at the Jews, are Christians warned to follow a similar mandate?*

2 Corinthians 6:14 says to believers, "Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness?" NKJV

Pastor Dave Guzik wrote this about this subject: "The idea of do not be unequally yoked together is based on [Deuteronomy 22:9](#), which prohibited yoking together two different animals. It speaks of joining two things that

should not be joined. This could mean a believer marrying a non-believer. But more than that, it really applies to any environment where we let the world influence our thinking. When we are being conformed to this world and are not being transformed by the renewing of your mind ([Romans 12:2](#)), we join together with unbelievers in an ungodly way.”

Is our culture influencing us or are we influencing our culture? Paul does not mean that Christians shouldn't associate with unbelievers. But he does warn us, “Do not be deceived: ‘Evil company corrupts good habits’” ([1 Corinthians 15:33](#))

We are to be like a ship...ships are designed to be in the water, but water is not meant to be inside the ship. These worldly influences come through media...through books we read...or worldly or nominal Christians. Who or what is influencing you? Would you even recognize what that influence looks like?

Friends, anything that sets you at odds with biblical values, principals, and truth is worldly by definition. So when we twist biblical truths to fit our personal paradigm of how we want to live and how we believe the world ought to respond to God, we are responding in a worldly manner.

When we re-interpret the plain meaning of God's Word in order to avoid accountability to it, we're responding in a worldly manner. When we justify sin because we are convinced God will forgive us anyway, we are responding in a worldly manner.

Followers of Christ must remain vigilant in not compromising the truth of God's word for the supposed benefit of fitting in to our culture. It is becoming more common to see well-intentioned Christians succumb to the pressure of getting along...of fitting in! Are we sacrificing biblical truth for cultural comfort? That's exactly what this remnant of Jews had done in Jerusalem.

So that begs the question:

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- *What are the differences between cultural Christianity and biblical Christianity?*
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It seems apparent that there is a shift in American culture toward a more relaxed perspective about the person and character of God than in years past. Look at all of the beautifully adorned, but empty churches across Europe! Just like the

Jews in Ezra's time had bowed to cultural values by compromising their status as God's chosen people, today, it has become fashionable for Christians to do the same.

We could do an entire series on this topic, but I found a great article that sums up the differences between cultural Christianity and biblical Christianity in a modern context. The writer of this article is a young lady, Alyssa Roat, who has published scores of articles on a variety of subjects, does a great job of summarizing this topic by listing five ways cultural and biblical Christianity differ:

1. Anyone can be a cultural Christian

Anyone can recognize the cultural or moral benefits of Christianity without embracing Christ or even belief in God at all.

Biblical Christianity is nothing less than a commitment to serving Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, the Son of God, and surrendering oneself to Him for salvation and forgiveness.

2. Cultural Christianity is comfortable

In a "Christian" nation that generally adheres to Christian principles of treating people well and striving for peace and justice, it's comfortable to claim Christianity. There are no downsides socially, and it means that one can look to religion for comfort when necessary.

In contrast, Biblical Christianity requires something of believers. God is not a genie who grants wishes when needed and spends the rest of his time happily in the lamp. He is an immense, powerful God intimately involved in the minutiae of the world who places demands on His people.

3. Cultural Christianity is more about outward appearance than personal relationship with Christ

Cultural Christianity embraces being pleasant, gathering with other friendly people, and enjoying the benefits of a comfortable social environment.

Biblical Christianity emphasizes a relationship with Christ.

4. Cultural Christianity picks and chooses

Cultural Christianity focuses on passages about loving everyone and a caring God and ignores passages about sin, death, and repentance. When directives in the Bible don't line up with what the cultural Christian wants to do, a person will rationalize that God doesn't care, as long as they're a nice person.

Biblical Christianity embraces the fullness of the Bible, even when it is unpopular or uncomfortable. Biblical Christianity puts the Bible first, culture second.

5. Cultural Christianity requires little sacrifice

It doesn't take much to claim the label of Christianity. Being a "nice person" doesn't take much either; a nice person tends to get what he or she wants. Being nice and tolerant leads to acceptance from culture, as does putting in the occasional hours of community service or donating a few dollars to a worthy cause.

Being a Biblical Christian is more than believing; it means giving up everything to God. Though God may require different things from different people, He will never accept being an afterthought. God demands to be the center of our lives. All actions and thoughts are to be informed by allegiance to Him; He is to be our greatest joy and fulfillment.

https://www.crosswalk.com/faith/spiritual-life/what-s-the-difference-between-biblical-and-cultural-christianity.html#google_vignette

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Ezra recognized the fracture that his fellow Jews created by giving in to their culture. They valued their comfort above their commitment. That compromise would have ramifications for centuries to come. Let us learn from them not to waiver in embracing obedience to the Lord.

Let's be mindful of how we engage in culture, remembering that we are to be the influencers and not the other way around. The days are coming when our faith will be challenged as it was for first century Christians. May we stand in the confidence that true, biblical Christianity remains the standard by which we all find hope and joy!

PRAY