

## **Sin and Shepherding**

Ezra 9-10

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Sin comes with a natural stigma, the pain reflex of our conscience against what is wrong, which can often be abused by legalistic people to judge others, causing them to hide their sin. On the other hand, society portrays sin as natural, defending sin and stigmatizing any attempt to address it. When I was young I struggled with lust and pornography, and this struggle was made harder by friends who openly joked about this sin as if it were completely normal, and even worse by my Sunday school teacher who said that it was natural for adolescents to fall into it. This normalization of sin led me to rationalize my sin as natural and immutable, to become callous to it, until God made me realize that in Christ sin has no dominion, that I am under grace, and that I have a new life (Romans 6). As Christians we must encourage each other to walk in this new life. We must talk about sin honestly. We must understand sin's gravity and learn to meet sin with grace.

Ezra is an exemplary shepherd who knows how to deal with sin. When Ezra comes to Jerusalem, he finds that the Israelites have intermarried with their idolatrous neighbors. The command against intermarriage isn't about race but rather about faithfulness to God (Deuteronomy 7:3-5). Foreign women led Israelite men into idolatry, as we see with Solomon. In Ezra's day, even the leaders, priests, and Levites intermarried. They made this sin completely normal. But Ezra provides us with an example of how to understand the gravity of sin. First, Ezra understands sinfulness in light of God's goodness. In 9:6-10 we see that God showed His goodness and grace to Israel by bringing a remnant out of exile back to Jerusalem. So Ezra basically asks how they could sin against God after what He has done for them (v. 10). It's just like in *Les Misérables*, when Jean Valjean stole the bishop's silver, after the bishop had been so hospitable to him. How ungrateful must we be to sin against God without remorse after what He has done for us? Second, Ezra understands that flagrant and rebellious sin is a presumption on God's grace. Those who normalize sin take God's grace for granted and forget the severity of sin, as we see in vv.13-15. As we continue in sin, the sting upon our conscience lessens as we grow callous. Only when the callous is torn do we again feel the gravity of sin. This conviction is what Ezra expresses in v. 15, and prays for the people to experience. Let us also not run from the pain of this conviction, but respond by turning to God, who never gives up on us. Third, we must

understand at grave sin requires a serious personal response. We see that this response in 10:10-11 is to confess and repent. Ezra confesses the sin not in general terms but specifically. So we also must confess our sin for what it is. I used to generally call my sin lust, which is an impersonal term. But when I finally confessed it for what it was, an adulterous heart, it was transformative. Though it hurt, it caused me to be completely open and receptive to God's grace and transforming power. But admitting sin is only the first step, we must also turn from it. Verse 11 tells us what the response of repentance was for Israel, to separate themselves from the idolatry around them. If we don't turn from sin, we are still in love with it. Ask God for grace to help turn away from sin.

In addition to understanding sin's gravity, we must meet it with grace, not giving a free pass but addressing it honestly, compassionately, and empathetically, without passing judgment. Ezra shows us this first in 9:3 by responding not with judgment, disgust, or indignation, but with grief, distress, mourning, and heartbreak. He is empathetic and saddened that Israel once again was led astray. Second, Ezra meets sinners in their sin. In 9:6 he refers to "our" sin and iniquity. He doesn't distance himself from sinners but confesses in solidarity with them. This attitude promotes unity rather than division, and doesn't elevate the leader above the congregation. Jesus is the best example of this. He ate with sinners and tax-collectors, and in death He was numbered with the transgressors. He united Himself with us sinners, taking all our sin upon Himself, and brought us all out of sin and death through His death and resurrection. Through Jesus alone can we truly repent. And Ezra also leads in repentance. Because he stood with Israel, confessed, and repented on their behalf, Israel followed. In 10:2 we see Shekariah, probably a lay person or at least not a notable leader, follows Ezra in repentance and calls others to do so as well, turning to God and trusting and hoping in His compassion. So for us, although the pastoral staff are tasked with leading the congregation in repentance, all of you like Shekariah should also lead each other in confession and repentance. In church and in your families, you should be the first to admit when you do wrong and not the first to judge others for their sin. When we address sin honestly and compassionately, God will help us to grow together.