

True Confessions, Part II

Ezra – Under the Good Hand of God – Part XII

Ezra 9-10

Introduction

In our last discussion, we began an in-depth look at true confession. Most importantly, in this study, we want to understand what the Bible says about the subject.

Our society at large often uses the word “confession,” but the truth about the average confession is that it falls far short of biblical confession. People may admit to something; people may be coerced into some sort of plea bargain; people may acknowledge some sort of wrong doing, but usually they do not really consider themselves guilty. They had reasons for what they did. They were the victims of something or someone that caused them to do it. So, while the tabloids whisper, “True Confessions,” and some television personality, sports star, or civil leader confesses to something, it sounds and looks totally different than biblical confession.

Further complicating the issue is the loss in our society, and perhaps in our own lives, of the sense of shame. A sense of shame today is considered silly, old fashioned, prudish. Even when someone admits to sin, he is not really ashamed or embarrassed. There is no embarrassment or humiliation. No one today, even if caught in a terrible crime or sin, would ever say, “I am so ashamed for what I did or said.”

The truth is, the natural inclination of the depraved heart does everything to resist confession, not because it does not want to admit to sin, but because it wants to sin!

The Mirage Hotel and Casino in Las Vegas recently ran a full page advertisement in a business magazine. The page was black with four words, written in white, across the center of the page. The words read, “Lead yourself into temptation.”

Believe me, you will not have any trouble at all doing that. Because of it, our society at large is a guilt-ridden, sin-laden society that constantly attempts to cover up, to lessen, and to silence the inner guilt brought about by sin and the absence of true confession.

The answer to guilt, the answer to a troubled conscience, and the answer to a heart and mind in anguish over sin, is true confession.

In the book of Ezra, we have discovered a man who illustrates for us what true confession is. And, we have already looked at the first three ingredients of true confession.

Before we begin, let us look at our definition of true confession:

Confession: to simply admit unfaithfulness to God through your specific sinful thoughts and actions; to totally agree with God’s point of view regarding your thoughts and actions as inexcusable; to humbly accept any consequences brought about by those thoughts and actions; to diligently act in renewed faithfulness toward your gracious, forgiving God.

Ezra has just learned that one hundred thirteen spiritual and political leaders in Jerusalem are guilty of marrying unbelieving, pagan, idolatrous women. Malachi sheds additional light on the subject by telling us that many of these men had divorced their Jewish wives and married Ammonite, Hittite and Egyptian women.

The purpose of Israel was at great risk. Idolatry would be taught to the children. Israel’s past revealed they were vulnerable to gods they could see and touch. The remnant of Jews that had come to Jerusalem to restore the city and its worship of the one and only true and living God was now guilty of violating the Law of Moses.

Ezra’s response to the news of sin provides, for all time, the ingredients of true confession.

Admission

1. The first ingredient is admission.

Look at chapter 9, verse 6b.

. . . my God, for our iniquities have risen above our heads, and our guilt has grown even to the heavens.

Look further at verses 10 to 12.

And now, our God, what shall we say after this? For we have forsaken Thy commandments, which Thou has commanded by Thy servants the prophets, saying, "The land which you are entering to possess is an unclean land with the uncleanness of the peoples of the lands, with their abominations which have filled it from end to end and with their impurity. So now do not give your daughters to their sons nor take their daughters to your sons, and never seek their peace or their prosperity, that you may be strong and eat the good things of the land and leave it as an inheritance to your sons forever."

Ezra admitted the sin as sin. He made no excuse or rationale, he simply said, "Oh God, we have sinned."

Aversion

2. The second ingredient of true confession is aversion to sin. There was shame and embarrassment over sin.

Awareness

3. Then there is, thirdly, an awareness of God's grace!

I love verse 13.

And after all that has come upon us for our evil deeds and our great guilt, since Thou our God has requited us less than our iniquities deserve, and hast given us an escaped remnant as this

False confession would never say verse 13, "Lord you've treated us better than we deserve . . .".

No. Someone falsely confessing minimizes his sin and usually exaggerates how tough God is, how demanding the church is, and how difficult the consequences are.

True confession magnifies our sin and magnifies the grace of God, Who gives us what we do not deserve by His grace and then keeps us from what we do deserve by His mercy.

So true confession involves admission, but admission is not enough. It involves aversion, but that is not enough. True confession involves awareness, but even the awareness of God's grace is not enough.

More is needed, more must be evidenced to reveal true confession. In fact, we could arrange the five ingredients in two parts. The first three words, that we have studied and just reviewed, reflect the private nature of confession. The final two ingredients reveal the public nature of confession.

Let me add that, while all confession will not be public, it is very easy to say you are confessing privately and not really mean it. It is easy to say, "That sin is disgusting . . . I'm appalled by that behavior . . . I admit I'm a sinner . . . Isn't God's grace wonderful . . .".

One of our presidential candidates gave a big speech about how God, values, and his faith were so important to him. In his attempt to convince the American people that we should consider him for president because of his claim to biblical values, he announced that his favorite Bible verse was John, chapter 16, verse 3. Of course, what he meant to say was John chapter 3, verse 16.

For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life.

The problem was, neither his speech writer nor he knew enough about what he was claiming. He was not familiar enough with scripture to catch the typographical error. So this presidential candidate, in claiming his adoration of biblical faith, said, "My favorite Bible verse is John 16:3."

How ironic that John, chapter 16, verse 3, has Jesus referring to hypocrites saying,

And these things they will do, because they have not known the Father.

It is easy to say, "I believe in confession . . . I believe in God's grace . . . I'm appalled by the sin in our society."

The Final Ingredients of True Confession

It is the following two ingredients that reveal whether or not you really mean it.

Action

4. The next ingredient that reveals true confession is bound up in the word action!

Look at chapter 10, verses 1 and 2.

Now while Ezra was praying and making confession, weeping and prostrating himself before the house of God, a very large

assembly, men, women, and children, gathered to him from Israel; for the people wept bitterly. And Shecaniah the son of Jehiel, one of the sons of Elam, answered and said to Ezra, “We have been unfaithful to our God, and have married foreign women from the peoples of the land; yet now there is hope for Israel in spite of this.”

Did you notice the elements of true confession?

There is admission,

We have been unfaithful to our God . . .

There is aversion,

. . . and have married foreign women from the peoples of the land . . .

There is awareness of God’s grace,

. . . yet now there is hope for Israel in spite of this.

Then, there is a call to action, in verses 3 and

4.

So now let us make a covenant with our God to put away all the wives and their children, according to the counsel of my lord and of those who tremble at the commandment of our God; and let it be done according to the law. Arise! For this matter is your responsibility, but we will be with you; be courageous and act.

I want to say something on behalf of every pastor on staff, every elder who leads, every Sunday school teacher, every Bible study leader, every one of the families in the congregation who are involved in full time ministry – there is not anything more encouraging or more wonderful than someone coming up to you and saying, like Shecaniah, “Listen, I know you’re leading our group – our study, our class, our church – and you’ve got responsibilities, and I want you to know, I am behind you. So, be courageous as you lead – as you teach, as you make decisions. I just want you to know, I’m out here and you are not alone.”

May the tribe of Shecaniah increase! People who say to those in leadership over them, “Don’t lose heart, act with courage.”

Watch what happens next. Look at verses 9 through 12.

So all the men of Judah and Benjamin assembled at Jerusalem within the three days. It was the ninth month on the twentieth of the month, and all the people sat in the

open square before the house of God, trembling because of this matter and the heavy rain. Then Ezra the priest stood up and said to them, “You have been unfaithful and have married foreign wives adding to the guilt of Israel. Now, therefore, make confession to the Lord God of your fathers, and do His will; and separate yourselves from the peoples of the land and from the foreign wives.” Then all the assembly answered and said with a loud voice, “That’s right! As you have said, so it is our duty to do.”

No wonder Ezra, and Nehemiah after him, will succeed. Can you see this scene? Ezra, their leader, stands and courageously declares the will of God. The people shout, “That’s right,” and they bind themselves to the will of God as their own personal duty.

Any church, any missions organization, any cause for Christ is incredibly blessed to have leaders that declare the Word of God, and people, within and affected by that organization, who respond with, “That’s it! Ezra, you’re right. We need to deal with sin; we will obey the Word of God as our sacred duty.”

Now this passage raises the question of divorcing these pagan wives. Was divorce right or wrong?

Divorce had become common among the community in Judah and Jerusalem following the exile. Many Jewish men had divorced their wives in order to marry wealthy, pagan women. Rabbinical tradition commented that these divorces occurred because the Jewish women had lost their beauty toiling in the sun to rebuild their homes and farms. Trophy wives are nothing new.

One author wrote,

While divorce is never God’s ideal, in the book of Ezra it was the lesser of two evils. Idol worship was far worse than divorcing idolaters who would have ultimately [diluted, or even] destroyed the restored Jewish community and God’s special plan for them as a nation.

Another author comments,

A desperate situation called for a desperate remedy. An evil had been done which jeopardized the very existence of the people of God and the only right course to bring the people back into alignment with the purpose of God.

The point I will leave with you is that true confession is willing to do whatever it takes to bring a person back into fellowship with God and God's will. Many people will claim to confess, but few will be willing to act.

True confession gets up off its knees and makes things right. The runaway returns home. The thief makes restitution. The adulterer severs the relationship. The cheater retakes the exam. The gossip retraces his steps. The liar tells the truth. True confession reveals itself in action.

Accountability

5. There is one more ingredient of true confession, it is the word accountability.

A total of one-hundred thirteen Jewish men were involved in the sin of intermarriage. Seventeen of them were priests; ten were Levites, which included the singers and gatekeepers; and eighty-six were tribesmen. They became accountable to one another as they met with Ezra in the remaining verses of chapter 10.

And, they were ultimately accountable to God. That was revealed in a powerful way. Notice that the last portion of the book of Ezra (chapter 10, beginning with verse 18 and ending with verse 44), is simply a list of names. It is the list of one-hundred thirteen men who had sinned against God and their nation.

Can you imagine being in a list of offenders? Can you imagine your sin being recorded by God in the Bible?

My friend, there are other passages of scripture that let us know that God forgets our sins and iniquities. And there are passages that tell us that every idle word is recorded; every unprofitable deed is listed; and there is coming a day when we will stand before God.

One judgement will involve Christians who will give an account for how they lived their lives and used their gifts and opportunities. That judgement (we call it the bema seat or the judgement seat), is recorded in the book of II Corinthians, chapter 5.

Another judgement will involve only non-Christians or unbelievers. The great white throne judgement is revealed in terrifying detail in the book of Revelation, chapter 20, where all of unbelieving humanity will be judged according to every deed they ever did. Every thought they ever had has been recorded by God.

The thought occurred to me that the difference between the believers, who are judged and then rewarded, and the unbelievers, who are judged and then condemned, is this word, "confession". It is the difference in those who confessed Christ and those who did not; those who confessed their sin and those who did not. To put it simply, those who have experienced true confession go to heaven, and those who have refused to admit their sin go to hell.

Dear friends, it is never too early to confess, but one day it will be too late.

Application: True Confession

I want to make three closing statements about true confession.

Reveals . . .

1. True confession reveals the sincerity of the heart.

Max Lucado wrote in his book, *The Applause of Heaven*,

"If we confess our sins . . ." The biggest word in scripture just might be that two letter one, "if". For confessing sins – admitting failure – is exactly what prisoners of pride refuse to do.

"Well, I may not be perfect, but I'm better than Hitler and certainly kinder than Idi Amin!"

"Me a sinner? Oh, sure, I get rowdy every so often, but I'm a pretty good ol' boy."

"Listen, I'm just as good as the next guy. I pay my taxes. I coach the Little League team. I even make donations to Red Cross. Why, God's probably proud to have someone like me on his team."

Justification. Rationalization. Comparison. These are the tools of the jailbird. They sound good. They sound familiar. They even sound American. But in the kingdom, they sound hollow.

Well put. False confession reveals the pride and self-sufficiency of the heart. True confession reveals the sincerity of the heart.

Requires . . .

2. True confession requires the submission of the believer.

That is another way of saying you are truly interested in true confession when your confession produces action.

I read a description of the Welsh revivals of the last century,

As people confessed their sin and pleaded for the controlling of the Spirit of God, they did all they could to confess wrong doings and to make restitution. This unexpectedly created severe problems for the shipyards along the coast of Wales. Over the years workers had pilfered all kinds of things. Everything from wheelbarrows to hammers had been stolen. However, as people sought to be right with God, they started to return what they had taken, with the result that soon the shipyards of Wales were overwhelmed with returned property. There were such huge piles of returned tools that several of the yards had to put up signs that read: If you have been led by God to return what you have stolen, please know that the management forgives you and wishes you to keep what you have taken.

Revives . . .

3. True confession revives the spiritual passion for God.

David, in his prayer of confession in Psalm 51, pled with God to restore to him the joy of his salvation.

Maybe what you need to revive your faltering, listless, inconsistent relationship with Jesus Christ is, not a better study Bible, not a new church, not a new schedule, not a more positive attitude, what you need is a new awareness of your sin, an open confession of your sin, a new aversion to sin, followed by action and accountability.

And, that which follows will be a fresh perspective of the grace of God and an intimate, transparent relationship with your Heavenly Father, Who, on behalf of your confession, restores to you the joy of your salvation.