

The Necessity of Godly Shame in a Biblical Reformation

Ezra 9:5-6; 1 Corinthians 15:33

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Shame over sin is no longer viewed as necessary to true reformation. In fact, shame in our society over public acts of gross indecency hardly draws a blushed face any longer. Vile acts of immorality become something at which to laugh and to joke when they are presented in skits for orientation at Universities in an effort to push the use and availability of contraception to new students. I can remember in my childhood when the ultimate consequence for our transgression was public shame. That is no longer the case. People don't care, because rebellion against parents, sexual immorality, blasphemy, Sabbath-breaking, divorce, and abortion are so commonplace and so promoted on tv, in movies, in novels and magazines, and on the news, that they are accepted in society at large. Public shame once curbed promiscuous divorce. Public shame once corralled a rowdy student in the classroom. Public shame once drove sexual immorality into the dark rather than into the light (as it now is). And you can count on it, when there is no public shame for sins committed, there will certainly be little to no private shame for sins committed.

Even in the Church of Jesus Christ, so many churches want to avoid altogether any idea of shame for sin committed against God. That is just too negative of an idea to communicate to people. In order to show that you accept the sinner, it has come to be believed that shame over sin must be downsized (if not eliminated), and only love emphasized. Thus, the subject of sin against God, guilt before God, the righteous standard of God's Law, and hell so often get pushed behind the curtain (if not off the platform altogether). It is now in this "enlightened" age believed that preaching must be positive and entertaining; otherwise people will not continue to come back to fill the auditorium and to pay for the weekly pep-talk. Likewise, prayers must not address our pride, our lust of the flesh, our unbelief, our covetousness, our lack of love in our homes, or defection from biblical doctrine and worship, but rather simply pray for God's blessing. But dear ones, the blessings of God are a broken and contrite heart and a sense of shame over how we have treated the Lord, His gracious Gospel, and His holy Law. Without a biblical shame over our sin committed against the Lord and our neighbor, there will be no reformation in our lives, our families, Christ's Church, or the nations of the world.

Ezra's public prayer has much to teach us about the necessity of shame before the Lord for sin if the Lord is to bring reformation. There are other points that we will consider in the next sermon about Ezra's prayer, but let us focus our attention upon this single main point from our text this Lord's Day: (1) The Prayer That Leads to Reformation Begins with Shame before God for Sin (Ezra 9:5-6).

I. The Prayer That Leads to Reformation Begins with Shame before God for Sin (Ezra 9:5-6).

A. In order to help us understand the historical context in which Ezra uttered this prayer, let me briefly summarize what it is that brings Ezra to this point of shame before the Lord his God. After Ezra and his reformers had safely arrived in Jerusalem, having been preserved by the Lord from the ambush of enemies as they traveled on the road to reformation, reformation in Jerusalem proceeded four days after their arrival. However, shortly after moving forward with reformation in Jerusalem, Ezra was blindsided by an altogether unexpected report that God's people (even the leadership in both church and state) had engaged in a familiar fellowship with the unbelieving people of the nations around them, even to the point of intermarrying with the unbelievers from these nations (contrary to their National Covenant with God). Upon hearing this astonishing news, Ezra was so grieved that he tore his garments, pulled out some of his hair and beard

(cultural signs of great sorrow), and was dumbfounded and unable to speak from the morning until the evening sacrifice (3 p.m. and sunset). It is at this point that we continue in our text this Lord's Day.

B. At the time of the evening sacrifice, Ezra arises from his "heaviness" (or affliction with sorrow over this astonishing news) according to Ezra 9:5. The rending of Ezra's garments mentioned in Ezra 9:5 is likely not a new tearing of his garments, but a reference back to Ezra 9:3. Then we read in Ezra 9:5: "I fell upon my knees, and spread out my hands unto the LORD my God."

1. I submit that after Ezra arose from his "heaviness", there is a gap of time that occurs before he fell upon his knees, spreading out his hands unto the Lord. For as we look ahead in the next chapter, we find that the preceding prayer offered by Ezra (in Ezra 9) was offered before the Temple (probably in the Court of the Temple) within the hearing of God's people (Read Ezra 10:1). Thus, Ezra's prayer was not a private prayer, but was rather a public prayer.

2. What is the significance of the "evening sacrifice" (the time in which Ezra's prayer was offered) and of Ezra uttering this prayer in the Court of the Temple, where the people could hear his prayer?

a. First with regard to the evening sacrifice, God had commanded His people to offer two daily sacrifices (morning and evening) as an ongoing burnt offering to the Lord (Exodus 29:38-43). The whole burnt offering that God commanded every morning and evening consisted of a lamb, which after the skin was removed was not divided into parts (as other sacrifices for sin and trespasses were), but was offered entirely unto the Lord. The whole burnt offering was not a sacrifice that pointed to the atonement of Christ for the forgiveness of sins (the sin offering and the trespass offerings of the Old Testament pointed to Christ's atonement for sin). The whole burnt offering pointed to Christ as being entirely set apart unto God and performing the will of God with joy, even to the point of death (the most cruel form of death—crucifixion). Christ as God's Lamb followed the Father in every aspect of God's Law without exception ("Not my will, but thine be done"). Thus, the whole burnt offering was a time in which God's people looked not particularly to Christ for justification before God (through God's forgiveness and the imputation of Christ's righteousness), but was rather a time in which God's people looked particularly to Christ for sanctification in offering their entire lives as a living sacrifice to the Lord (Romans 12:1-2). Christ is our righteousness before a holy God, but Christ is also our sanctification within the world to live a life that trusts in His promises, loves His commandments, and seeks to bring Him glory above all else. God's people desperately needed to remember the meaning of the evening sacrifice. The outward form of the evening sacrifice continued in spite of the gross sin and covenant-breaking, but the meaning of the evening sacrifice had lost its power in the lives of God's people. How often that is true in our lives in simply going through the outward forms of godliness, but denying the power thereof.

b. Secondly, rather than Ezra entering into the Holy Place (which as a Priest he could do), he rather goes into the Court of the Temple (where the people gathered to pray) and lifts up his voice to the Lord in the presence of God's people (which was the hour of prayer, Acts 3:1). What could be more appropriate and more needful than for Ezra to offer this prayer at the time of the evening sacrifice? The people of God have fallen into grievous sin and are in need of God's grace to be a holy people unto the Lord. Dear ones, a biblical reformation is indeed founded upon the once and for all judicial act of God in justifying sinners by faith alone, but a biblical reformation continues to be built upon that foundation of justification by way of the progressive, ongoing work of sanctification in taking our sins to the cross and nailing them there every day and offering our lives to Christ to be used for His glory every day.

3. Ezra then kneels before the Lord in the Court of the Temple as a token of humble submission, and he spreads out his open and empty hand to the Lord to indicate that he has nothing in his hand to change his own heart or to change the hearts of others. The open and empty hand indicates that only God has the power to save and to sanctify. But though Ezra did not have the power to save and to sanctify, he offered himself and God's people to the Lord.

a. I have heard people make excuses that God just hasn't given me the desire to be faithful, to be obedient, to deny myself, take up my cross and follow Christ.

b. Certainly, the power to change one's heart or the hearts of others doesn't come from man, but do you even desire and want God to change your heart, or the heart of your spouse, or the heart of your parents, or the heart of your children, or the heart of your friends and co-workers? Beloved, that is the open, empty hand that you offer to the Lord for Him to fill.

4. Ezra prays publicly here as God's minister on behalf of himself and on behalf of all of God's people. That is why he left his private residence in Ezra 9:1-4, and went to the House of God. The primary duties of Christ's minister are summarized in Acts 6:4.

a. Dear ones, some of you might think that the sermon is a highlight of worship, or others might think that Psalm singing is a highlight of worship, but how many think that the prayer of Christ's minister is a highlight of worship and can hardly wait to hear and join in the prayers of Christ's minister as he offers to God through Christ prayers on behalf of the congregation of God's people? Beloved, joining the minister of Christ in prayer is not optional. It is not a time to turn down the volume, tune out, think about everything else, or to doze off. It was not a sermon, dear ones, but a prayer that God used here to bring repentance and to advance reformation.

b. Listen to the words of *The Westminster Directory for the Public Worship of God* (one of our Subordinate Standards) as to the importance of the public prayer of Christ's minister:

After reading of the word, (and singing of the psalm,) the minister who is to preach, is to endeavour to get his own and his hearers hearts to be rightly affected with their sins, that they may all mourn in sense thereof before the Lord, and hunger and thirst after the grace of God in Jesus Christ, by proceeding to a more full confession of sin, with shame and holy confusion of face, and to call upon the Lord . . .

C. But that which especially characterizes Ezra's public prayer is the shame for sin that he expresses before the Lord, who is the Holy God, and the Gracious God, who in love entered into a matrimonial covenant with His people, so that they became His people, and He became their God. The Lord is the One who has been chiefly offended by the covenant-breaking of Israel in their intermarrying with unbelievers (Psalm 51:4). And the same of this sin overwhelms and breaks the heart of Ezra.

1. Biblical shame is a sense of disgrace and sorrow over the violation of God's good and holy Law and over the reproach this against the honor and glory of such a righteous yet loving God and Savior. Biblical shame is an aspect of our repentance for sin. Shame directs our attention to the fact that it is God's honor, God's holiness, and God's grace that we have offended by our sin. Biblical shame will not manifest itself the same way in every Christian, but without biblical shame, there is no biblical repentance, and there will be no biblical reformation. A true change of heart must begin with our offense against the Lord, before that change can evidence the reality of change in our lives.

2. Shame before God for sin may not be evident in contemporary churches, but it certainly was evident in biblical religion and in the Church of the Old Testament and in the Church of the New Testament (Jeremiah 3:25; 1 Corinthians 15:33, literally, "evil company [associations] corrupt good habits"). Contrary to the pop religion of today, biblical Christianity has always taught there is a necessary place in our lives for shame before the Lord for our sin (even as forgiven and justified Christians—especially as forgiven and justified Christians). Dear ones, shame for sin is not merely the duty of those who are first coming to Christ in justification, but is the duty of those who continue to come to Christ in ongoing sanctification. Without this shame in the life of the Christian, there will be no true inward reformation.

a. Ezra, himself, is a forgiven and justified believer who is overcome with this godly shame for sin, for he says, "I fell upon my knees, and spread out my hands unto the LORD **my** God" (Ezra 9:5),

and then Ezra begins his prayer with words that indicate he is such a forgiven and justified believer, for he prays, “O my God”.

(1) How does God become Ezra’s God, or anyone else’s God? For God to become Ezra’s God (or our God), the Lord must offer Himself to us in the Covenant of Grace as our Savior and Lord. As sinners, who have incurred the just wrath of a holy God, we cannot presume to take God as our God on our own terms. We must receive the Lord Jesus Christ by faith alone on His terms, as He who kept the Law of God perfectly for all who trust Him and died to atone for the sins of all who trust Him (Psalm 18:2 is the Gospel).

(2) We cannot take God as our God, if we come to Him thinking we have something in our hands to offer Him (by way of our own good works or by way of some grace worked within us). No we must come with open and empty hands (like Ezra), receiving by faith forgiveness and Christ’s imputed righteousness, receiving by faith sanctification and perseverance unto the end, and receiving by faith final glorification in heaven, all of which God freely offers to us in the Gospel.

(3) Dear ones, to say God is mine (or Christ is mine) is not to be a spectator who simply knows of God and hears of God, but rather to say God is mine (or Christ is mine) is to say that I have appropriated and received by faith alone the Lord Jesus Christ as my own personal Savior. I have not merely eyed the food that gives life, but have eaten of the food that gives life. I ask all within the sound of my voice, have you come to Christ with that open and empty hand to receive by faith alone Christ and the glories of His eternal salvation? You can, right now, as you call out to the Lord to fill that empty hand with everlasting treasures about which the world knows nothing (Mark 8:36).

3. Ezra now gives in his prayer the reason for his approaching the Lord blushing with shame: “for our iniquities are increased over our head, and our trespass is grown up unto the heavens” (Ezra 9:6). Ezra prays, “Like a flood our sins have overwhelmed us, and like a tree that doesn’t stop growing our trespasses have reached to the very heavens” (Psalm 38:4; Psalm 130:3-4). We do not see our sins as we ought to see them and are not ashamed of our sins as we ought to be because we make excuses for our sin, because we have become so accustomed to living comfortably with our sins, because we refuse to forsake our sin (and God has blinded our eyes) in order that we might maintain the relationships that continue to lead us away from him, and because we are too far away from the light of God’s Word and God’s Law to reveal the dirt and grime we have been living in for such a long time.

a. Ezra was not directly responsible for the sin of God’s people in intermarrying with unbelievers, nor had he committed any personal sin in doing so himself, and yet Ezra (a forgiven and justified believer) cries out to God, “for **our** iniquities are increased over our head, and **our** trespass is grown up unto the heavens” (Ezra 9:6). If Ezra was not personally responsible for the sin of intermarrying with unbelievers, why does he not say, “for their iniquities are increased over their head, and their trespass is grown up unto the heavens”? Because God’s people, Israel, were engaged to God by way of a covenant that united them together as one moral person. That is the way a covenant works. It makes the many into one— one moral person.

b. The marriage covenant makes a man and woman one flesh (Genesis 2:24). The Church covenant (the Covenant of Grace) makes many members into one body (1 Corinthians 12:12). Therefore, though Ezra did not personally sin in regard to intermarrying with unbelievers, yet he confesses his collective sin as being a member of Israel (as a church and nation). Instead of Ezra merely pointing the finger at those who were guilty, he says, I am one with them, and thus this is our sin.

(1) Dear ones, how we need to have more of that attitude in our prayers and in our speech as we plead with the Lord to bring reformation. There is certainly a faithful trunk to the tree of Christ’s Church with many schismatic branches that have broken away from the faithful trunk. We cannot follow the unfaithful branches in breaking away from the faithful trunk of Christ’s Church, but we can and ought to pray for the whole tree of Christ’s Church of which we are apart that the Lord would bring us all to

shame for whatever sins are in our hearts, speech, conduct, and defections from Christ's truth (for they have grown to the heavens). All self-righteousness and pride in our hearts is contrary to biblical shame for our own sins and corporate shame for the sins of Christ's Church (of which we are a part). Compare the Pharisee and the tax collector in Luke 18:10.

(2) Dear ones, the Lord's Prayer calls us to pray not only for ourselves, but for others and collectively ("Our"). The Lord's Prayer emphasizes not only the personal nature of prayer, but the collective nature of prayer as well. *The Westminster Shorter Catechism* (Question 100) asks,

Q. 100. What doth the preface of the Lord's prayer teach us?

A. The preface of the Lord's prayer (which is, *Our Father which art in heaven*) teacheth us to draw near to God with all holy reverence and confidence, as children to a father, able and ready to help us; **and that we should pray with and for others.**

c. But if we are to approach the Lord with shame and blushing over our sins, how are we to come with confidence, as a children to a father? If we are to approach the Lord with blushful shame over our sins, how are to come boldly unto the throne of grace, as we are commanded to do in Hebrews 4:16?

(1) Dear ones, coming with a biblical sense of shame for sins committed against the Lord, and yet being confident that God has opened wide the door for us to come to a throne of grace, wherein Christ our Advocate is God's right hand, is in no wise contradictory to or in conflict with biblical shame. Biblical shame does not drive us to despair and hopelessness, but rather drives us to the mercy of God in Christ Jesus. For our sins in no way exclude us in coming to our Heavenly Father through Jesus Christ (and neither does our shame for those sins), because it is not a throne of judgment and condemnation, but a throne of grace, wherein the Covenant of Grace and salvation rules and reigns rather than the Covenant of Works and condemnation.

(2) Dear ones, our confidence and boldness in coming to Christ is not founded upon our ability to be worthy or our ability to be qualified by anything we do, but is founded upon God's grace and promise of access to the Father through the finished work of Jesus Christ. Period! Since we are to bring our sins to the throne of grace, we ought to likewise bring our shame for those sins. If shame for our sins is not appropriate for Christ, then are we to be proud over our sins against the Lord, or to be indifferent about our sins before the Lord? Shame and humility are the Christian graces with which we are to adorn our confession of sin before the Lord.

(3) In fact, it is only through a biblical sense of shame for our sin, committed against such a righteous yet such a loving God and Savior that we come to know with a joy unspeakable, the glories of God's mercy and grace shown to such undeserving sinners. There is more joy in heaven over one sinner that repents in shame over his/her sin than for all of the righteous (Luke 15:7).

In conclusion, if shame over our sin before God (against whom our sin is committed) is necessary, how am I to see it evidenced in my life? I can't work it up and force myself to shed tears can I? No you can't. But you can go sincerely before the Lord and cry out to Him with an open and empty hand (like Ezra) to grant you a shame and blushing over your sin committed against the most High God, or to grant that shame to others. You can pray that the Lord would work within you (or within others) both to will and to do His good pleasure (Philippians 2:13). You can look at the trial of Christ, as He is mocked, cursed, spat upon, beaten to bloody pulp, and crowned with thorns. You can look at the cross of Christ and behold the sinless Lamb of God suffering as no man has ever suffered. If you have witnessed the chronic suffering of a loved one who is dying, and within your heart you cry, "Please, God stop the suffering!" If you or I had witnessed the suffering of Christ, we would be tempted to say, "Stop. I cannot bear to see one so righteous, loving, and merciful suffer." But then we are reminded why He suffered. He suffered in order to take upon Himself the just punishment

and to pay the everlasting debt which we as sinners owed to an absolutely holy God for having broken His law. The sin of all sinners who would trust in Christ sent the blessed Lord Jesus Christ to that cruel cross. Christ did not die for His shame, but He took my shame and guilt of sin upon Himself and died as my substitute calling my shame and guilt of sin His shame and guilt of sin. Dear ones, if we truly understand the Gospel, how can we not have shame over our sin committed against such a God and Savior?

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