

How Our Sin Is Aggravated

Ezra 10:1-5

January 5, 2014

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Lying to a friend is a sin, but lying under oath is even a more aggravated sin. Why? Because one has bound himself/herself by oath to tell the truth.

Robbing a neighbor is a sin, but robbing one whose life's savings has been entrusted to you to manage is even a more aggravated sin. Why? Because one has bound himself/herself by contract/promise to honestly manage the funds that belong to another.

Committing fornication before marriage is a sin, but committing adultery after marriage is even a more aggravated sin. Why? Because one has bound himself/herself by covenant promises to be faithful till death.

Abusing the moral rights of a neighbor is a sin, but abusing the moral rights of a nation by the father of a nation (whether a king or president) is even a more aggravated sin. Why? Because the father of a nation (whether king or president) has bound himself by a solemn oath to protect (not tyrannize) those who have placed him into office.

A nation unjustly attacking another nation is a sin, but a nation unjustly attacking another nation with whom a treaty of peace exists is even a more aggravated sin. Why? Because that nation has bound itself by means of a binding treaty to promote peace (rather than to initiate an unjust war) with a neighboring nation.

What does each of these examples demonstrate? That sin becomes more heinous and even more aggravated when a solemn covenant, oath, or

vow binds us to perform a moral duty that is ours. Dear ones, that is why God has ordained and instituted covenants, oaths, and vows to be used in our relationship with Him and in our relationships with our fellow man—to impose a superadded obligation—not only the moral obligation to perform our duty, but the added obligation to do so because we are bound to do so by a solemn covenant, oath, or vow. The superadded obligation of a covenant, oath, or vow is intended for our help in persevering in our moral duties to God and to our fellow man, and to restrain us from unfaithfulness to what we are obligated by God’s Law to do. What is truly amazing and unfathomable is that God Himself condescends to place Himself under oath in swearing by His own name to fulfill all that He has promised (Hebrews 6:16-17).

This Lord’s Day, as we continue our study of Biblical reformation in the Book of Ezra, we observe that Israel’s sin was more aggravated because she had violated her matrimonial and national covenant with the Lord. Let us consider the following main points from our text: (1) How Israel’s Sin Was Aggravated (Ezra 5:1-5); and (2) How Our Sin Is Aggravated.

I. How Israel’s Sin Was Aggravated (Ezra 5:1-5).

A. We have now come to the aftermath of Ezra’s public prayer which God used to bring shame and sorrow to God’s people over their sin in having united in marriage with the idolatrous people within the land. As I indicated in a previous sermon, God did not forbid marriage with these people because they were of a different nationality or ethnic group, but rather because idolatry and mixture of the one true religion revealed in the Bible with various false religions had permeated the cultures of those people for generations (Deuteronomy 7:4; 2 Kings 17:33; Ezra 9:1-2). In other words, this was not a prohibition of what is

called today, “interracial marriage”, but rather of what might be called, “interreligious marriage”.

1. Rahab, the harlot of the Canaanite city of Jericho, and Ruth, the Moabitess, became believers and entered into the covenant promises of God, even becoming chosen mothers in the line that led to Christ (Matthew 1:5). I submit that it is humanistic anthropologists that have invented many “races” within the world. Scripture only knows of one race—the human race (Acts 17:26). When Moses remarried, he married an Ethiopian woman according to Numbers 12:1 (literally, a Cushite, whose skin was black, cp. Jeremiah 13:23). Aaron and Miriam disapproved of this marriage and spoke against Moses—Miriam was stricken with leprosy until Moses prayed for her. Thus, the sin prohibited is not actually “interracial marriage”, but “interreligious marriage” with those who do not share the same Biblical faith or Terms of Communion (1 Corinthians 7:39—“in the Lord”—in the covenant revealed by the Lord in Scripture and summarized in our Terms of Communion).

2. Thus, dear ones, this is the danger of intermingling by way of close and familiar relationships with those who do not share the same Biblical faith (summarized in Terms of Communion). Gradually, such close relationships develop into romantic relationships, which lead to marriage, which eventually lead to a compromised faith for subsequent generations that follow. It happened in the time of Ezra, and it continues even to this day.

B. We note from our text (in Ezra 10:1) that when Ezra had finished this convicting and pride-crushing prayer, there were assembled “a very great congregation of men and women and children”, that had been brought by the Holy Spirit to weep greatly over the seriousness of their sin. Dear ones, whether there are actual tears or not that are shed over sin in our lives, if there is no godly sorrow, grief, and shame over our sins, I submit there will be no godly repentance in seeking the mercy of

God in Christ Jesus. There will only be regret for the consequences that follow our sin, but not sorrow and shame over the offense of our sin against such a holy and gracious God.

B. We then note from our text that when Ezra had ended his public prayer that one of the chief men who joined with Ezra on the road to reformation from Babylon to Jerusalem (by the name of Shechaniah) approached Ezra with the words that we find in Ezra 10:2-4.

1. First, Shechaniah humbly includes himself among God's people ("We"), as he acknowledges and confesses the sin of the people (though he has not listed among those later on in this chapter who were guilty of this sin): "We have transgressed against our God, and have taken strange wives of the people of the land" (Ezra 10:2).

2. Second, Shechaniah's broken heart over the sins of God's people moves him to eye the mercy of God in Christ and to look beyond his grief and sorrow for the hope found in the promises of God: "yet now there is hope in Israel concerning these things" (Ezra 10:2). Jesus said, "Blessed are they who mourn: for they shall be comforted" (Matthew 5:4).

3. Third, Shechaniah proposes that God's people engage in a renewal of their matrimonial and national covenant with the Lord (which was originally made at Mt. Sinai and which was renewed in Moab before entering the Promise Land in the Book of Deuteronomy): "Now therefore let us make a covenant with our God to put away all the wives, and such as are born of them, according to the counsel of my lord, and of those that tremble at the commandment of our God; and let it be done according to the law" (Ezra 10:3). This Lord's Day we will only focus on the matter of this covenant renewal, and next Lord's Day we will look more closely at the matter of putting away the wives and children from these unlawful marriages. Let us then consider briefly this covenant renewal and how the flagrant violation of this covenant aggravated the

sin of God's people. Shechaniah states (in Ezra 10:3), "Now therefore let us make a covenant with our God."

a. The English phrase, "let us make a covenant", literally means, "let us cut a covenant". For covenants were not confirmed by mere words and a handshake, but were confirmed and ratified by blood (as we see in Jeremiah 34:17-20—in cutting an animal into pieces, separating the bloody pieces opposite one another, and then walking through the midst of the pieces, thus indicating that if I do not walk in accordance with this covenant, let the blood of this covenant fall upon my own head). I wonder if marriage covenants and promises made in the presence of God and witnesses would be taken more seriously, if an animal was slain and the bloody parts spread apart, and the couple walked together through the midst of those parts. Even without such a bloody ratification of the marriage covenant, the promises made in the presence of God and witnesses are no less binding ("till death us do part").

b. What Shechaniah proposed to Ezra was not actually the making (or cutting) of a new covenant that had not been previously made (or cut), but rather it was the renewing of a covenant that had been previously made (or cut) with God's people. Though the words "covenant renewal" are not explicitly found in Ezra 10, they are nevertheless implicitly found (for this prohibition against "interreligious marriages" is clearly stated in Israel's covenant with the Lord at Moab in Deuteronomy 7:3; Deuteronomy 29:1,10-15). Carefully note that a covenant made with God not only binds the immediate generation that swears the covenant, but also binds the ecclesiastical/national posterity that follows by way of a perpetual and descending obligation (at least until the posterity no longer exists; cp. 2 Samuel 21:1 [500 years after the covenant made with the Gibeonites, who were Gentiles, in Joshua 9]; Jeremiah 11:10). In other passages of Scripture, God likewise makes it clear that ecclesiastical/national covenanting with God pertains not only

to the Jewish church and state, but to Gentile churches and states as well (Isaiah 19:21-25; Zechariah 2:11; Amos 1:9-10).

c. Shechaniah rightly proposed to Ezra a covenant renewal, not only because it was a sin of disobedience for Israel to practice “interreligious marriage”, but also because it was a greatly aggravated sin in flagrantly violating their covenant with God (2 Kings 18:12; Psalm 78:36-40).

d. Shechaniah rightly declares that such a covenant must be according to the Law of God: “and let it be done according to the law” (Ezra 10:3). A covenant that is not according to (or agreeable to) God’s Law is not a lawful covenant (for example a national constitution or covenant that makes the people the source of authority rather than the Triune God, that makes the elected officials the supreme rulers rather than Christ who is King of kings and Lord of lords, that makes the constitution, laws, and treaties of the nation the supreme law of the land rather than the Law of God, and that places the one true Biblical Religion of Reformed Christianity alongside with every false religion imaginable as equally tolerated (and therefore equally promoted in the pantheon of gods, when God commands, “Thou shalt have no other gods before me” Exodus 20:3).

4. Lastly, Shechaniah encourages Ezra to be courageous and to take up the covenanted cause of the Lord, as the chief ruler appointed by King Artaxerxes to oversee ecclesiastical and civil matters in Israel: “Arise; for this matter belongeth unto thee: we also will be with thee: be of good courage, and do it” (Ezra 10:4). What a blessing it is to have God’s people encouraging rulers in church and state to be courageous and to follow the right ways of the Lord revealed in Scripture, regardless of the opposition they may face. Those are a people who will lift up the arms of their rulers in prayer, and will not desert them when opposition comes their way. Ezra then secured the oath of the chief rulers in church and state, that they would resolve to put away the wives and children

from these interreligious marriages and renew the covenant of the Lord (Ezra 10:5). If Ezra did not have the support of the chief rulers (a number of whom were guilty of this flagrant covenant-breaking), there would not be a united effort among God's people in renewing their covenant with the Lord. A covenant renewal requires the humbling of all the people before the Lord, with the rulers leading in being broken and contrite and in trembling before the Word of the Lord. Leaders must lead, even when they have sinned.

II. How Our Sin Is Aggravated.

A. Dear ones, the remnant of Israel here in Ezra 10 could never have entered into or renewed a covenant with the Lord had the Lord not first taken the initiative on His part to graciously covenant with Israel to be her God and to be her salvation.

1. For God initiated a gracious covenant with the first man while Adam was yet in a state of knowledge in knowing the will of God and of righteousness in being able to obey the will of God and of holiness in wanting to do the will of God. The Lord who lovingly fashioned Adam and breathed into Adam the breath of life engaged Adam in a gracious covenant (by some called a covenant of life that was intended to lead to everlasting life, by others called a covenant of works that would be realized by Adam's perfect obedience to God's commandment). In this blessed covenant Adam not only represented himself or Eve (his wife), but he represented all his posterity by ordinary generation. In this covenant which God initiated with man, the Lord offered everlasting life upon the condition of perfect obedience to the Lord (which Adam had the ability to perform at that time), and prohibited Adam from eating the forbidden fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil upon the pain of death (spiritual, physical, and eternal). Adam not only disobeyed the Lord by eating of the forbidden fruit, but he also violated that good

covenant with the Lord that had brought Adam into a relationship of love and fellowship with God (Hosea 6:7). As a result of his violation of the good and blessed covenant God initiated with him, Adam plunged himself and all his posterity (by ordinary generation) into sin, misery, death, and eternal condemnation (Romans 5:17-19). Whereas this good covenant was to issue forth in blessing to Adam and all mankind, it issued forth unto the death of all mankind through Adam's disobedience and covenant-breaking.

2. But God being rich in mercy and grace initiated another covenant (called a covenant of grace), wherein the second Adam (the Son of God) would become flesh and dwell among us, perfectly keeping God's Law in every detail (in thought, word, and deed) for His people (which obedience would be imputed to His people as their righteousness before God through faith alone), and He would suffer the wrath of God upon the cursed cross for the guilt and condemnation of His people (which sacrifice would become their forgiveness of all their sin through faith alone). God made Christ who knew no sin to become sin for us (His chosen people) that we might become the righteousness of God in Christ, our Covenant-keeper (2 Corinthians 5:21). The wonder of this covenant of grace is particularly demonstrated in the covenant God initiated with Abraham, who is the father of all of us who believe in the Lord for our justification (Genesis 15:8-18). Dear ones, the covenant of grace God initiated with Abraham (and his seed) was essentially the same covenant of grace God initiated with Israel (and her seed) and is essentially the same covenant of grace God initiated with us, who trust alone in Christ alone by grace alone for our eternal justification before God (Galatians 3:6-9).

B. Now that we enjoy the blessedness of this covenant of grace, how ought we to live? In sinful neglect and forgetfulness of all that our loving and gracious God has done for us and continues to do for us in the covenant of grace, in stubborn disobedience against His good and holy

commandments which direct our lives in the paths of truth and righteousness? No, absolutely not! This, dear ones, is why our sin and rebellion against the Lord and against His holy Law becomes even more aggravated, for we are bound to the Lord our God by way of a covenant of grace. Our sins are not only disobedience against God's Law, but are sins against God's love, God's grace, and God's mercy exhibited to us in the Covenant of Grace. Israel's sin against God and His holy Law was aggravated because of God's good and gracious covenant with Israel to be His people. So our stubbornness, our excuses for our sinful pride, our fears, our unbelief, our discontentment, our idols to whom we give our chief affections in this life, and our lusts of the flesh are an aggravation of our sin, because we are bound by a gracious covenant to be the Lord's people.

C. How do we view our baptism? Do we understand that our baptism is a sign and seal of the Covenant of Grace wherein God's gracious promises to us are signified and confirmed? Dear children and young people, your baptism is not an empty sign, but rather binds you to trust Christ, to love Christ, and to live for Christ all the days of your life. To not do so is to aggravate your sin against the Lord as did Israel, and is to call upon yourself the judgment of God as God brought upon Israel. Dear ones, your baptism (whether you were baptized as a child or as an adult) calls you to faith, love, and obedience for the merciful promises freely offered to you in the Covenant of Grace.

D. How do you view your marriage covenant? Do you not see, men, that the self-centeredness, the lack of leadership, the lack of love and service, the lack of patience, the anger, the harsh words, and unforgiving heart are aggravated by the fact that you are bound to your wife by a solemn covenant (and God takes note of that and will not hear your prayers for it, 1 Peter 3:7)? Do you not see, women, that the rivalry

and vying for leadership in the home, the lack of care for the children and for the home, the bitterness and losing your temper when a decision does not go your way is an aggravation of those sins because you are bound to your husband by a solemn covenant? Does not the lust of the heart and of the eyes by us who are married not make those sins even more heinous in the sight of God?

E. How do you view the solemn covenants of our forefathers by which we as their posterity are likewise bound (like the Solemn League and Covenant)? Yes, we are bound to promote unity in doctrine, worship, and church government. However, we are also bound by solemn covenant to uproot in our own lives profaneness (which is to treat as something common that which God calls holy). We are also bound by solemn covenant to uproot whatever is contrary in our lives to the power of godliness.

Dear ones, are our solemn covenants by which we are bound driving us to Christ for His continued grace and help, or are they merely historical artifacts that we occasionally pull out of the archives and look upon in pride, but which have no present or lasting effect upon our faith, love, and obedience to Jesus Christ and to our neighbor? God have mercy upon us that they may lived by God's grace and not forgotten, neglected, and disobeyed to the aggravation of our sin.

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