

A Man Prepared to Lead God's People (#2)

Ezra 7:1-10

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There are a number of professions or callings that I think we would agree need to have a significant degree of training and qualification before one begins to practice in that profession or calling, and before people entrust their lives to such a one. I doubt any of you would want a person who *earnestly* desired to be a pilot, but who had no experience or training in aviation to try flying the plane that was taking you to your next destination. Or what about a person who *sincerely* wanted to be a surgeon, but who had no experience or training in medicine, is that the person to whom you would entrust your life in removing your ruptured appendix? And why would we be so unwilling to entrust our bodies to those who may be so sincere and willing to fly a jet or to perform a surgery (though unqualified and untrained to do so), and yet be so willing to entrust our souls (and the souls of our children) to those who may be sincere and willing to preach, teach, and govern in Christ's Church (though unqualified and untrained to do so)? Dear ones, we must have a greater care for our own souls than even that which we have for our own bodies, for the soul is immortal, whereas the body is mortal. And yet so many professing Christians seem to have so little care for their own souls and the souls of their children as evidenced by the unqualified and untrained men that they expect to feed them and lead them (simply because they can draw a big crowd and entertain the crowd with funny or interesting stories).

Dear ones, there is no lack of ministers and teachers in churches today, or on the radio and television today. The ranks of doctors may be diminishing, but not the ranks of preachers and ministers. There are ministers and ministries with huge followings (and yet we are not to follow the multitude to do evil, according to Exodus 23:2). There are ministers and teachers who appear to be very sincere (and yet there is a way which seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death, according to Proverbs 14:12). There are ministers and preachers who allegedly perform signs and wonders (and yet many ministers and preachers will say to Christ on that final day of judgment that they prophesied, casted out demons, and performed miracles in Christ's name, but Christ will say to them, "I never knew you, depart from me, ye that work iniquity", according to Matthew 7:23). However, if you care for your own soul and for the souls of your family members, you are commanded by the Lord (through His apostle), "Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone into the world" (1 John 4:1). John says in effect, "Don't be gullible and simply receive whatever the teaching or sign that one says comes from the Spirit of God, but rather test it and prove it to be from the Spirit of God" (which is one reason God has given to us the Scripture, according to 2 Timothy 3:16-17). And not only is what a minister teaches and preaches to be tested by God's Word, but the man himself is to be proven before he is ordained and sent out to preach and teach the whole counsel of God (1 Timothy 3:6,10). Dear ones, the desperate need of the present hour is not for more ministers and preachers, but rather is for more qualified, trained, and faithful ministers and preachers to feed and lead the flock of Jesus Christ.

Let us now consider once again the same text we began to consider in the previous sermon. The main points from our text are the following: (1) The Qualifications of Ezra to Lead God's People (Ezra 7:1-6,10); and (2) The Second Return of God's People to Jerusalem (Ezra 7:6-9).

I. The Qualifications of Ezra to Lead God's People (Ezra 7:1-6,10).

A. You may recall that in the previous sermon, we began our consideration of Ezra's qualifications, and noted **first** that Ezra was qualified because he had the right genealogy to be a priest (through the family of

Aaron to the tribe of Levi), according to Ezra 7:1-5. In this regard, we noted that New Covenant ministers and preachers must likewise have the right genealogy—not a family genealogy, but rather a doctrinal genealogy that can be faithfully traced back to the Scriptural doctrine, worship, and church government of Christ, and to the prophets and the apostles. In the **second** place, we noted in the previous sermon that Ezra was a “ready scribe in the law of Moses, which the LORD God of Israel had given” (Ezra 7:6). Ezra was skilled in understanding and applying the Word of Scripture to the various aspects of Israel’s religion and life. So likewise must New Covenant ministers and preachers be well-qualified in their knowledge of Scripture by which they are to judge all doctrine, worship, government, discipline, and practice (not by the rule of some alleged authoritative oral tradition of the church that allegedly preceded from Christ or the apostles, but by the only infallible and supreme rule of Holy Scripture, as it is found in the 39 Books of the Old Testament Canon and the 27 Books of the New Testament Canon).

B. We now continue with two more qualifications that are noted in Ezra, which made him a capable and faithful minister of the Lord in leading God’s people. Dear ones, it is important that you hear and understand these qualifications for several reasons: (1) So that you men in the congregation may examine your own hearts and lives by these standards from God’s Word as you seek to discern whether the Lord is calling you to be a minister of the gospel—though the thrust of what I will say pertains to a minister many of the principles would also apply to an elder or deacon in Christ’s Church; (2) So that all of you who are members of Christ’s Church may have the tools by which to judge whether a man who says God has called him to be a minister of Jesus Christ does in fact have the qualifications to be a minister of the glorious gospel of Jesus Christ; and (3) So that all of God’s people may seek to grow in their own lives by applying the moral principles that follow. Dear ones, you cannot simply tune out of such a sermon because you are not a man (as women are not to exercise authority over men according to 1 Timothy 2:11-12 and 1 Timothy 3:1), or because you are not called to be a minister or elder. The moral principles that ought especially to be manifested in the lives of ministers and elders ought also to be ever growing in the lives of all Christians, as we shall see. Having considered the first two qualifications of a faithful minister in the previous sermon, let us now proceed to the next two qualifications that are mentioned in our text concerning Ezra and that should likewise be present in ministers of Jesus Christ under the New Covenant.

1. **A third qualification** was that “Ezra had **prepared** his heart to seek the law of the LORD”, according Ezra 7:10.

a. Dear ones, faithful ministers do not just fall out of the sky or simply decide one day that God has called them to be a minister, and then immediately step into that holy office. No, godly ministers are years in preparation (by God’s grace) to be fit and capable to feed and lead God’s people. The Olympics have just begun in London, and I dare say that most (if not all) of those who are competing in the Olympics have spent years in sacrificial preparation for their particular event in order to win a gold, silver, or bronze medallion that is perishable. They did not just decide to be an Olympic athlete and show up to receive a medal. They endured hardships and trials along the years of training, but persevered through it all. Now if that is the necessary preparation needed for an athletic event, how much more sacrificial preparation, training, and persevering through many temptations, hardships, and trials should we expect to be found in the life of one who is a faithful minister and ambassador of Jesus, who with the Apostle Paul can declare at the end of his life, “I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith; Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness” (2 Timothy 4:7-8)?

b. In fact, the Apostle Paul exhorts a young minister by the name of Timothy to “exercise” himself unto godliness (1 Timothy 4:7, where the Greek word for “exercise” is that word from which we get our word *gymnasium*). That strenuous, sacrificial preparation for the ministry (or for whatever God intends for your life) will require certain qualities, some of which I will mention at this time.

(1) **Growing** (this is not sinless perfection), but growing in the grace of the Lord in order to know Christ more, to trust Christ more, to love Christ more, and to obey Christ more (even when it is hard, even when it costs us family, friends, jobs, possessions, and the applause of men).

(2) **Growing in the grace of God so as to put off fleshly lusts** in what we choose to look at on the internet, in magazines, and on movies (for how many ministers have fallen into sexual temptations that have brought shame upon the name of Christ and scattered Christ's flock who looked up to such a man); **to put off the fear of man** in what man can do to us if we do not please man (this inevitably leads to compromise of the truth); **to put off vain confidence** in one's abilities and resources, as if Christ's kingdom depended for its success and accomplishment upon us (this inevitably leads to pride and haughtiness); **to put off sinful anger** toward God and our fellow man (this inevitably leads to a lack of self-control); **to put off discontentment** with what God has brought into our lives (this inevitably leads to discouragement and despair); and **to put off a spiritual lukewarmness** that is neither hot nor cold (this inevitably leads to a mere going through the motions of ministry and the Christian life and following Christ with a begrudging obedience, rather than a joyful obedience).

(3) But at the same time **growing in the grace of God so as to put on joy in the Lord** in our worship and service; **to put on delight in spending time with our Savior** in secret, family, and corporate worship; **to put on diligence in studying** (as did Ezra in becoming a faithful scribe and master of orthodox doctrine, of the original languages, and a master in the practice of godliness in order to demonstrate ourselves approved unto God, a workman that needs not to be ashamed when standing before the enemies of Christ's truth); **to put on being a faithful and humble teacher of God's truth** to those who will hear it (looking for every opportunity God gives in order to humbly instruct those who will hear you); and **to put on being an active servant of Christ** who is zealous for God's house (the greatest in the kingdom of God is the one who is most willing to serve others, not most willing to rule over others and to control others—one who is faithful in little will be faithful in much).

c. That preparation to be a faithful minister in Christ's Church will issue forth in being a witness for Christ who is unwilling to compromise Christ's truth even at the cost of his own life (Revelation 12:11: a justifying testimony, a confessing testimony, and a dying testimony). These are ministers who cannot be overcome by the devil or any other enemy, even if their very life is snuffed out from them. Such ministers cannot lose—they are victors and overcomers through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. How we need faithful ministers who will stand boldly (like a Daniel in the lion's den) against the heresies that plague and cripple Christ's Church today (heresies such as **federal vision** which compromises justification by faith alone in the righteousness of Jesus Christ alone, or heresies such as **a radical two-kingdom view** of church and state which teaches that Jesus Christ is not Lord and the Scripture is not supreme over every area of life and over every institution, whether family, church, or state, or heresies such as **open theism** which denies that God is absolutely sovereign in eternally decreeing all that comes to pass according to His own good and wise pleasure, as if God were answerable to man and no longer to be held in great awe and wonder for His almighty power, His sovereign will, His unfathomable love, and His unchangeable character). Dear ones, how does a minister have confidence that he will not desert and forsake His faithful testimony for Christ when persecution or tribulation comes his way? He can only have such a confidence as he presently perseveres in trusting, loving, and obeying Christ in the midst of the hardships, afflictions, ridicule, and opposition that he faces for His uncompromising stand for Christ and His truth. If he is willing to compromise now when there is relatively little heat coming by way of persecution, what confidence will he have that he will not compromise His testimony for Christ when the heat is turned up significantly? The same is true for each of you, dear ones. How we need more faithful ministers like Rev. James Gurthrie (*Scots Worthies*, p. 266).

d. Finally on the matter of preparation for the ministry, let me say that all those men who have been prepared by the Lord and have prepared themselves for service in the ministry must have a two-fold calling from God.

(1) The first aspect of God's calling to serve Christ as a minister is an **inward call**, wherein a man is given by God an insatiable desire and unquenchable zeal to faithfully preach, teach, and lead God's people. And yet he senses his own inherent inadequacies to fulfill such an impossible calling in his own human strength—he confesses with the Apostle, "And who is sufficient for these things?" 2 Corinthians 2:16. And therefore, he falls entirely upon the mercy of God declaring, "Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think any thing as of ourselves; but our sufficiency is of God" 2 Corinthians 3:5. Like Jeremiah, there is a fire that burns in the heart of one whom God calls to faithfully preach (on behalf of Christ) the Word of God (Jeremiah 20:9). Or like Paul, the inward call comes not by way of a mere inward suggestion to a man whom God calls to be a minister of Jesus Christ, but rather comes by way of a Divine necessity that cries out within his innermost being, "Woe is unto me, if I preach not the gospel" (1 Corinthians 9:16). There is a heavy burden to preach the good news of Christ's salvation to sinners and to preach the whole counsel of God to Christ's flock that cannot be lifted from his soul. He must do it.

(2) The second aspect of God's calling to serve Christ as a minister is an **outward call**, wherein a man has the inward call confirmed by means of the testimony of other ministers, elders, family members, and mature Christians who have known and observed him up close for an extended period of time; and can testify concerning his **moral character and integrity**, concerning his **communion with Christ**, concerning his **loving leadership of his own family** in feeding and guiding them in the righteousness and truth of Christ, his **unfeigned love for and uncompromising obedience to Christ's pure doctrine, worship, and government**, and his evident **care for the flock of Jesus Christ**. This outward call is finally evidenced in the ordination by the presbytery (who have conscientiously interviewed, investigated, and examined the man in regard to his character, family, communion with Christ, doctrine, the original languages, and aptness to faithfully preach and teach God's people as a good shepherd).

(a) God is not calling sinlessly perfect men into His ministry (but rather men who at times become discouraged like the Prophet Jeremiah, men who at times flee from the commission God has given to them as did Jonah, men who are subject to doubt like John the Baptist who while in prison asked Jesus if He was the Lord's Messiah and Savior or whether God's people should wait for someone else, men who struggle with pride like the disciples who argued among themselves who would be the greatest in Christ's kingdom, men who were subject at times to the fear of men as was Peter who denied the Lord 3 times, and men who battled against the lusts of the flesh as did Paul according to Romans 7).

(b) God calls imperfect clay vessels to be His ministers in order that all may see more clearly that the glory resides not in the vessel (i.e. in the messenger), but rather in the precious treasure of the gospel that is contained in and proclaimed by the minister, so that when the minister is broken the fragrance of Christ's undeserved mercy might be heard and seen by sinners (2 Corinthians 4:7).

(3) Dear ones, in all honesty (and my wife will confirm this), there have been those times in my ministry when I sinfully said and felt as though I could not take any more hostility from the devil, any more struggling with my own fears, sins, and inadequacies, and any more from the opposition of people. And I testify before you that the Lord at such times has brought me back to these two aspects of His call to me to be His minister: (1) the reality of that inward call that a fire burns within me to preach and teach the gospel of Jesus Christ, and I cannot quench it; and (2) the reality of that outward call, that despite my own inadequacies the Lord has raised up those near and far away who confirm by their testimony that God has called me to be His ambassador and to preach the whole counsel of God to His people. Dear ones, it was not only Ezra that prepared himself to seek the law of God so as to be a ready scribe and faithful minister of the Lord, but that same principle is true of every man who is called by Christ in the New Covenant to be His ambassador in proclaiming to all sinners that Jesus Christ saves sinners freely now and for all eternity.

2. **A fourth qualification** on the part of Ezra was that he not only knew and taught the Law of Moses, but that he himself also practiced the Law of Moses in his own life ("For Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the law of the LORD, **and to do it, and to teach in Israel statutes and judgments**" Ezra 7:10).

a. Ezra was a ready scribe who was greatly skilled in his knowledge of the doctrine, worship, government, and ethical standards found in God's holy law. He was (if you will) a doctor or master of theology. He had prepared himself through years of diligent study of God's Word. Yet, dear ones, his preparation was not complete and he was not ready to authoritatively teach God's people as God's minister until he himself was observing and practicing God's law in his own life and in his own family. Note carefully the order laid out here by the Lord, (1) Ezra prepared his heart; (2) Ezra diligently sought out the truth from God's law; (3) Ezra faithfully practiced the law of God (not perfectly, but faithfully, confessing his sin and falling upon God's mercy and grace when he failed, as we see in Ezra 9:6-9); and (4) Ezra faithfully taught others the truth God had revealed to him and which he also practiced in his own life. In other words, Ezra shunned hypocrisy and pretense in feigning obedience. Rather he practiced from a heart of love and joy the commandments of the Lord.

b. Dear ones, never call a man to be a minister, elder, or deacon if he does not practice in his own life and in the life of his family what he professes to believe and to teach to others, no matter how much he may know about theology and biblical truth. If there is an obvious disconnect between what a man teaches and professes to believe and what he lives out in his own life and in the life of his family, there is every reason to delay calling such a man to be a minister, elder, or deacon. Christ told us that we would be able to discern faithful ministers from unfaithful ministers by their fruit in Matthew 7:16 (by their fruit you shall know them): by the fruit of their pure and faithful doctrine of Holy Scripture (as summarized in faithful Confessions like the Westminster Confession of Faith), and the fruit of their practice in godliness. Paul does not state that pure doctrine is an end in itself, but rather that the end or goal of God's commandments (and all pure doctrine) is the practice of love from a pure conscience and unfeigned faith (1 Timothy 1:5). Dear ones, if you are not striving (by God's grace) to live day to day what you profess to be true and what you teach others to be true, it would be wise (if you really want others to listen to you) for you to first evidence the practice of love for God, love for His truth, and love for your neighbor. Otherwise, you will simply be spinning your wheels and getting nowhere with others, giving off a lot of heat, but very little light.

II. The Second Return of God's People to Jerusalem (Ezra 7:6-9).

A. We find in this Second Return of God's people from Babylon under Ezra that the good hand of the Lord prospered Ezra's plans and journey at every point.

1. Dear ones, God rightly receives all glory and honor for having turned the heart of King Artaxerxes (by way of His governing hand of providence) toward the requests of Ezra to leave Babylon and to continue the reformation of religion in Israel (as we see in Ezra 7:6, "and the king granted him all his request, **according to the hand of the LORD his God upon him**"; and Ezra 7:9, "**according to the good hand of his God upon him**"). Herein we are taught to be ever so careful about our own sinful pride and conceit in robbing God of His glory by attributing the blessings we enjoy and the accomplishments we realize in this life to ourselves, to our gifts, or to our own hard work. Beloved, even when we have done what God has commanded us to do (to the best of our ability), we still do not **deserve** His blessings (for we are sinners and are unprofitable servants, who have simply done what was our duty to do, according to Luke 17:7-10). His blessings to us are ever all of free grace and undeserved mercy. That means rather than boasting in what we have accomplished by our gifts and resources, we are to boast in what the Lord has done through us ("He that glorieth, let him glory in the Lord" 1 Corinthians 1:31).

2. Now although God wonderfully and providentially directed King Artaxerxes to supply the requests of Ezra, nevertheless, I would submit that the due preparation of Ezra in working hard to develop and improve (by God's grace) the gifts, graces, and abilities God had given to him were the means which the Lord used in leading the King to acquiesce to the requests of Ezra to continue the work of reformation in Israel. When King Artaxerxes beheld in Ezra such a capable, knowledgeable, wise, and godly scribe, he believed

that Ezra was one in whom he could place his confidence in diligently fulfilling God's mission to continue reformation in Israel. In other words, if Ezra had squandered and wasted the time, gifts, and resources God had given to him, it is not likely that the Lord would have turned the heart of the King to hear and to favor the supplication of Ezra (for people do not ordinarily put confidence in the lazy, the wasteful, or the irresponsible). But because Ezra had been preparing himself (by God's grace) to be used by the Lord in whatever way God chose to use him, the King recognized here a prepared and faithful servant of the Lord, as one who could be trusted. Here, I submit, we see the perfect working out of God's sovereign decree in providence and a redeemed man's true freedom in preparing his heart (by God's grace) to be faithful without diminishing in the least the absolute sovereignty of God or the moral responsibility of man to faithfully and lovingly obey God.

c. However, I also want to be very clear here that I am not espousing a heretical view of preparationism, which teaches that the unregenerate must wait to sense inward evidence of grief and sorrow over sin, must wait until tears are shed over sin, must wait until repentance and desire to love and obey God is evidenced in one's heart that God is calling him/her to trust in the righteousness of Christ as one's only ground of justification. Dear ones, the warrant to come to Christ by faith alone is the gospel of Christ (Christ will save all sinners who trust alone in Him and His righteousness alone). You are not to look inward to find the qualification or the preparation to come to Christ, but rather you are to look by faith to Christ and eye His mercy who came to save sinners (1 Timothy 1:15). Yes, the law of God drives the sinner to see his/her need of Christ, but we as sinners are never to look at such legal works of the law in our hearts as our warrant to come to Christ. Christ as He is offered to us in the gospel is our only warrant to come to Him and to rest in Him for our righteousness, justification, and sanctification.

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