

The Old Hickory Bulletin

Old Hickory Church of Christ

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The Prepared Heart

“For Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the Law of the LORD, and to do it, and to teach statutes and ordinances in Israel” (Ezra 7:10).

Our “nature” is given to us by God, but our “character” is created by our choices. What we do with the raw materials of our created nature brings into being a character that is either good or bad. Of course, the fact that character is a matter of choice does not mean the choices are always carefully made. Indeed, many people simply live by default, going with the flow and ending up with a character that has been chosen haphazardly. But haphazard choices are still choices. Whether we’ve been careful or not, we’ll still have to account to God for our decisions.

Ezra is said to have “prepared his heart”. Apparently he had given some thought to the sort of man he wanted to be. Surely he was aware of what the major alternatives are that lie before a human being, and his choice to pursue godliness seems to have been a deliberate decision. It’s not unlikely that Ezra had given some consideration to the matter of consequences. There is no more “consequential” choice than the choice of one’s character, and Ezra had no doubt considered that some kinds of character would take him places he didn’t want to go.

It is worth noting the particular character Ezra prepared himself to have. This wise man determined that he would: (1) seek God’s will, (2) do whatever he learned, and (3) teach to others the things that he had both learned and lived. We could look a long time and not find a better three-point program for character development. Seeking, doing, and teaching... the will of God. These things point to the very heart of what human existence is all about.

If we’ve not already done so, it’s urgent that we prepare our hearts. It’s time to think seriously about what matters most to us. What kind of people do we intend to be, anyway? “When a man does not know what harbor he is making for, no wind is the right

wind" (Seneca). But preparing our hearts requires more than charting our course. We must also count the cost and resolve that we'll pay the price to have a character that's worth having. The devil is eager to test how well prepared our hearts really are.

"You cannot dream yourself into a character; you must hammer and forge yourself one" (James Anthony Froude).

- Gary Henry

CONTEMPLATING: THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS (Part 1)

WHAT IS SIN? The word that is translated into the English word "sin" literally means, "to miss the mark" (W.E. Vine, *An Expository Dictionary Of New Testament Words*, Sec. IV, pp. 32, 33). Synonyms of this word are: error, disobedience, fault, iniquity, transgression, and ungodliness. Describing sin, John writes, "Everyone who practices sin also practices lawlessness; and sin is lawlessness." (1 John 3:4), and also, "All unrighteousness is sin, ..." (1 John 5:17a). Thus we can sum up our definition by saying that sin is the failure of mankind to live in a manner that is acceptable to God our Creator.

WHO SINS? "Indeed, there is not a righteous man on earth who continually does good and who never sins." (Eccl. 7:20); "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God," (Rom. 3:23). In these passages we can realize the universality of sin. Jesus Christ is the only man that can be described as "sinless" (1 Peter 2:22).

WHAT IS FORGIVENESS? There are several passages of scripture that describe for us the concept of forgiveness. "I, even I, am the one who wipes out your transgressions for My own sake, And I will not remember your sins." (Isa. 43:25). "Let the wicked forsake his way And the unrighteous man his thoughts; And let him return to the LORD, And He will have compassion on him, And to our God, For He will abundantly pardon." (Isa. 55:7). "for this is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for forgiveness of sins." (Matt. 26:28). When God forgives the sins of men, he removes them from his remembrance, thereby releasing man from the guilt and consequences of sin.

WHO NEEDS FORGIVENESS? Common sense can be used to answer the question raised here based upon what we have already stated. Those that need forgiveness are those who are guilty of sin in the eyes of God. It is appropriate at this point to consider the answer to the question from another point of view. Forgiveness of sins is conditional. Man must meet certain conditions that God has specified in order to be forgiven of sin. Because of the fact that God is no respecter of persons (Acts 10:34), it must be possible

for all those that are in need of forgiveness to obtain it by meeting the conditions. If it is impossible for an individual to comply with the conditions through no fault of his own, he must be removed from the sphere of those that need forgiveness. For example, consider the infant. Forgiveness cannot be obtained by one who does not believe that God exists (Heb. 11:6). Infants cannot understand the gospel, nor can they believe it. Hence, they are not in need of God's forgiveness; they are SAFE. Every responsible, accountable being that can understand the gospel (one to whom it is not impossible to meet God's conditions for pardon) is one that needs his forgiveness.

WHY IS FORGIVENESS NEEDED? "Behold, the LORD's hand is not so short That it cannot save; Nor is His ear so dull That it cannot hear. But your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, And your sins have hidden His face from you so that He does not hear." (Isa. 59:1-2).

"Do you not know that when you present yourselves to someone as slaves for obedience, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin resulting in death, or of obedience resulting in righteousness? But thanks be to God that though you were slaves of sin, you became obedient from the heart to that form of teaching to which you were committed, and having been freed from sin, you became slaves of righteousness. I am speaking in human terms because of the weakness of your flesh. For just as you presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness, resulting in further lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness, resulting in sanctification. For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. Therefore what benefit were you then deriving from the things of which you are now ashamed? For the outcome of those things is death. But now having been freed from sin and enslaved to God, you derive your benefit, resulting in sanctification, and the outcome, eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Rom. 6:16-23).

The death that sin brings, as described here, is not physical death. It is the death that is described in Revelation 21:8; "But for the cowardly and unbelieving and abominable and murderers and immoral persons and sorcerers and idolaters and all liars, their part will be in the lake that burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death."

Forgiveness is needed so that we can escape from the consequences of sin in this life and the punishment for sin in the life which follows physical death. We need the forgiveness that God has made available so we will not be excluded from heaven (1 Cor. 6:9-10; Gal. 5:19-21; Eph. 5:5). People that are accountable to God for their sins are the people that need His forgiveness. Without that forgiveness, we are deceived if we entertain the expectation of going to heaven when we die. Without the forgiveness that is

available from God to accomplish the remission of our sins, we will be confined to hell eternally. Because so many people find this Bible teaching so difficult to accept, they do all kinds of things and entertain all kinds of vain imaginations to deny or in some way get around that God-revealed truth. Some deny that there is a hell. (How inviting, but how FALSE!) Some maintain that souls will be in torment until such time as they have been purged of sins, after which they can be released and enter heaven. Some say that Christ's death on the cross brought forgiveness to all men regardless of whether or not they want it, regardless of whether or not they meet any condition in order to receive it. Others would have us believe that we can be forgiven by meeting only a portion of God's requirements. Others place too many conditions on man. There are even some who say that men cannot be forgiven, no matter what they do. Would it not be best to rely upon what the Bible teaches?

Acts 13 records the fact that Paul and Barnabas entered a synagogue of the Jews in Antioch of Pisidia to preach to them. "The next Sabbath nearly the whole city assembled to hear the word of the Lord. But when the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy and began contradicting the things spoken by Paul, and were blaspheming. Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly and said, "It was necessary that the word of God be spoken to you first; since you repudiate it and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we are turning to the Gentiles." (Acts 13:44-46). It was necessary that the Jews hear the word of God first, but they thrust it from themselves, they rejected it. By so doing, they judged themselves unworthy of eternal life. Why then did Paul and Barnabas turn to the Gentiles? Because the Gentiles would not repudiate the word of God, they would hear it: "Therefore let it be known to you that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will also listen." (Acts 28:28). Paul, speaking of the Jews in 1 Thess. 2:16, says, "hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved;"

By this example we can clearly see that being worthy of eternal life or being saved is conditional upon receiving the word of God. If these passages teach anything, they teach that! God used Paul to deliver the means of salvation to the Gentiles (Acts 26:18). Two things were necessary (conditions) before they could have that salvation: (1) The word of God must be spoken to them, and (2) They had to hear (accept) the word of God.

- Gary Smalley

> "Since your life is your message, what message are you sending?"

> "The love of money does more to a man than it does for a man!"

> "When success turns a man's head, it always leaves him looking in the wrong direction!"

> “Forbidden *fruit* is responsible for many a bad *jam!*”

> “A mistake is evidence that someone has tried to do something!”

What Must I Do To Be Saved?

HEAR THE GOSPEL

(Romans 10:14-17; John 20:30-31; Romans 1:15-17)

BELIEVE IN JESUS CHRIST

(Acts 8:37; John 8:24; Hebrews 11:6)

REPENT OF PAST SINS

(Luke 13:3; Acts 2:38; Acts 17:30)

CONFESS CHRIST

(Romans 10:9-10; Acts 8:37)

BE BAPTIZED

(Romans 6:3-4; Mark 16:15-16; Acts 2:38; Acts 8:36-39; 1 Peter 3:21)

LIVE A FAITHFUL LIFE

(Revelation 2:10; 2 Peter 1:5-11; John 15:1-8; Hebrews 10:23-25)