

“Three Words for Leaders”

*For Ezra had devoted himself to the **study** and **observance** of the Law of the LORD, and to **teaching** its decrees and laws in Israel (Ezra 7:10).*

Ezra 7:8-10 ¹

I experienced something this week that I believe has only happened once before during our years together. I finished the first draft of this week’s message on Tuesday afternoon, which is unusual, but not unheard of. I had a pretty clear idea of what I wanted to accomplish, but I wasn’t sure that I had pulled it off. When I asked Jill to read it and opine, she agreed that what I had put together didn’t work. So . . . I dumped the sermon and started over.

My problem had to do with my desire to take a text from the book of Ezra, which is our next book to consider, and to also have something to say related to our focus on our Deacons this morning. This was harder than I expected, and I didn’t actually make progress until Friday afternoon. I guess you’ll have to determine the extent to which this second effort succeeded or sank . . . so here we go!

The year was 458 B.C. Cyrus II, also known as Cyrus the Great, was King of Persia and of most of what we know today as the Middle East. The great battles of Marathon, Thermopylae, and Salamis were now over and peace was the order of the day in that part of the world.

Cyrus, revered even today for his benevolent reign,² made his way into the biblical story by allowing the Jewish exiles who wished to do so to return home to Jerusalem, something his grandfather, Cyrus I, had also done.

According to Ezra 2:64-65, the first group of exiles to return, in 538 B.C., numbered about 50,000; and Cyrus I had also returned to them 5,400 vessels of gold and silver that Nebuchadnezzar had taken from the Temple when he destroyed it in 587 B.C. This first group of exiles was led by Zerubbabel, and one of the important things they accomplished upon their return was the rebuilding of the Temple; though what they built wasn’t really worth comparing with the Temple that had been destroyed.

Now, eighty years later, another group of exiles was preparing to return, this group led by a priest named Ezra. The text tells us there were about 1,600 men in this group, plus their families, so this may have been a group of about 5,000 altogether.

Ezra gathered the people by the Ahava River to get them organized for the 700-mile journey, and then the text notes something interesting. Here’s how Ezra described it:

Then I proclaimed a fast there at the Ahava River so that we might humble ourselves before our God and seek from Him a straight way for us, our little ones, and all of our possessions. For I was ashamed to ask the king for soldiers and cavalry to protect us from the enemy along the way, because we had spoken to the king saying, “The gracious hand of our God is upon everyone who seeks Him, but His great anger is against everyone who forsakes Him.” So we fasted and sought our God about this, and He responded to our plea (Ezra 8:21-23).

There in the court of the king the idea of the journey had seemed so easy. It was a bold and brave idea, a real adventure that God would surely bless. But now, things looked quite different down beside the river. Now, with all of their possessions packed up, with their jobs resigned, their houses sold, with the desert before them and with no military escort, things somehow didn’t look as promising.

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on October 20, 2019.

² <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/culture/people/reference/cyrus-the-great/>

Ezra had boldly told the king that God would take care of the travelers – they needed no military escort. Now he was not so sure, and he asked himself, “Do I believe it, or not?”

“Believe it, or not?” It’s the persistent, troublesome, nagging question that stalks our faith. Can our high-sounding religious theories prove themselves in real life?

The psalmist wrote, “*God is our refuge and strength, an ever present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way in the mountains fall into the heart of the sea*” (Psalm 46:1-2). But when push comes to shove, do we really believe it? Things look different down by the riverside.

This is the difference between our experience at a retreat center and how things look back in a high school classroom. This is the difference between how things seem in a revival meeting and how they look later, on the third shift. This is the difference between Sunday morning worship and Monday morning washing as we ask ourselves whether our faith is really *real*?

In the push and shove of daily life, it’s hard for us to believe that those things that are most surely Real are unseen. It seems unnatural, strange, and maybe foolish, to think that God offers us another sphere of existence, spiritual power for living meaningfully, and peace in the midst of turmoil. Do we dare to believe it? It all sounds pretty risky. *What might happen* if we opened ourselves to it?

God has told us that He will reveal himself to us: “*Behold, I stand at the door and knock*” (Revelation 3:20); “*You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart*” (Jeremiah 29:13). Ezra believed in God – but when he stood face to face with the river and with the desert beyond, he wondered whether God was good for all of that trouble and danger . . . and we wonder, too.

Happily, as you and I also do when we’re at our best, Ezra chose to believe God, and the group set out on their four-month hike. Here’s part of what happened after that:

Ezra arrived in Jerusalem in the fifth month of the seventh year of the king. He had begun his journey from Babylon on the first day of the first month, and he arrived in Jerusalem on the first day of the fifth month, for the gracious hand of his God was on him. For Ezra had devoted himself to the study and observance of the Law of the LORD, and to teaching its decrees and laws in Israel (Ezra 7:8-10).

It’s that last sentence on which I wish to focus for the rest of our time together this morning: *For Ezra had devoted himself to the **study** and **observance** of the Law of the LORD, and to **teaching** its decrees and laws in Israel.* Actually, I want to focus on just three words: study; observance; and teaching, because these three words are important words for those who serve God’s people as Deacons.

Study. Half a millennium after Ezra, Paul admonished the Corinthians to “*stop thinking like children. In regard to evil be infants, but in your thinking be adults*” (1 Corinthians 14:20). And the author of Hebrews, who might have been Paul as well, added that “*We have much to say about this, but it is hard to make it clear to you because you no longer try to understand. In fact, though **by this time you ought to be teachers**, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God’s word all over again. You need milk, not solid food!*”

“*Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. **But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil***” (Hebrews 5:11-14).

You'll realize, of course, that what I'm saying this morning applies to every one of us, not just to Deacons. But you may not have stopped to think about the fact that even if you're in Bible study and worship every single week of the year, that only amounts to four days' worth of exposure to God's Word. If you were trying to accomplish something significant in any other area of your life, do you think you'd gain much with just four days of practice in a year?

During the years when I was playing the trumpet all the time, I knew that if I missed one day of practice, it would take me three days of practice to get back just what I had lost in that one day. That principle may not be exactly the same in every area of life, but I suspect that there's some similarity. Achieving excellence, achieving maturity, requires constant training and practice.

Even if you take advantage of weekly Bible Study, weekly worship, and the special studies that we have from time to time, those will not be enough to develop spiritual maturity in your life. Being born again is not a complicated enterprise, but its result is a baby Christian, not a mature one.

It's not enough merely to accept the Bible as God's Word. If we're going to experience the Bible's transforming power in our lives, we've got to learn how to understand and apply it. That's why Paul told Timothy to "*Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth*" (2 Timothy 2:15).³

There is no one perfect strategy by which to study God's Word, but every successful strategy will have one common characteristic: it is practiced every day. The great London preacher, Charles Spurgeon, noted that **Bibles that are falling apart usually belong to people who are not falling apart**. What does the condition of your Bible suggest about the seriousness of your own study?

Well, time gets away. Let's look at the second word, which is **Obey**.

We're told that Ezra *devoted* himself to study of God's Word. Being "devoted" to something or to someone is not a happenstance enterprise. Being devoted is something that requires passion and persistence. And we're told that Ezra *devoted himself to observance of the Law of the LORD*, which means he was very careful to understand and to obey that Law.

Like study, obedience is an ongoing, every-day kind of undertaking. I once heard a missionary tell about going back to visit a place where she had previously planted a church. One of the things she had worked hard to achieve in that assignment had been teaching the local folk how to live healthier lives.

Like the folk in the African villages where we've dug wells for water, this missionary's villagers did not have safe water to drink, and she had taught them to always boil their water before drinking it. On this return visit, she asked whether they were still boiling their water, to which they replied, "Oh, yes, Ma'am. We boil our water on Sundays in memory of you!"

Just as drinking safe water only one day out of seven does virtually nothing to improve health, so haphazard obedience to God's commands does little to advance our spiritual maturity or to strengthen our witness for Jesus. I hope it's obvious that we won't even know what God's commands *are* unless we've given ourselves to serious study of God's Word; but knowledge means little if it isn't put into practice.

³ It's also an excellent strategy to memorize Scripture: *I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you* (Psalm 119:11).

In His famous command that we call the Great Commission, Jesus told His disciples that *“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and **teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.** And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age”* (Matthew 28:18-20).

I expect that most of us would say that we “love Jesus.” Here’s what Jesus said about that: *“**If you love me, obey my commandments.** . . . Those who accept my commandments **and obey them** are the ones who love me”* (John 14:15, 21).

In the end, no matter what we *say* we believe, we only *really* believe those parts of God’s Word that we DO. Such obedience isn’t always easy, but it’s not rocket science, either. As Yoda of *Star Wars* once told Luke Skywalker, “Do, or do not. There is no ‘try.’”

We’ve looked quickly at STUDY and OBEY; now we turn to the third of our “Three Words for Leaders,” **TEACH**.

We’ve just seen that Jesus told us to make disciples—learners, students, imitators of Him—and to **teach them** to **obey** everything He has previously taught **us**. Paul put that slightly differently when he wrote to Timothy, *“And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable people who will also be qualified to **teach** others”* (2 Timothy 2:2).

Teaching is replication, and that replication is exponential if it includes the expectation that those taught will teach others also. This is actually God’s central strategy for the redemption of humankind, *that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people’s sins against them. **And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation*** (2 Corinthians 5:19).

One way to describe the development of spiritual maturity is to delineate four stages in that process: Being Fed; Feeding Self; Feeding Others; and Reproducing. “Being Fed” and “Feeding Self” have to do with **study** and **obedience**. “Feeding Others” and “Reproducing” have to do with **teaching**.

Deacons, on whom we’re focusing in this service, are spiritual leaders who Study, Obey, and Teach. Spiritual Leaders today, like Ezra of old, lead by example as they guide God’s people forward into God’s purposes for our time. Ezra’s leadership was grounded in prayer, and spiritual leadership today must also be grounded in fervent and perpetual prayer, which is the heartbeat and the life blood of the spiritual life.

And there’s one more thing I need to mention about spiritual leadership. Spiritual leaders love the people they serve. As I used to tell seminary students, “If you’re sitting on the platform on Sunday morning and look out over your people—some of whom may not even like you very much—if you look out over those people and don’t find your heart overflowing with love for them, then you need to find something else to do. Shepherds love their flock, and they teach them and serve them out of that love.”

And that’s all I have to say about that.

Amen, and Amen.