

Faith Walk! - Sermon Discussion

Date : 21 April 2024

Sermon Title : An Intentional Disciple

Speaker : Rev Kenneth Huang

Text : Ezra 7, 8

INTRODUCTION

Ezra was a priest from the line of Aaron the chief priest, who had returned from exile. From the Scripture Text for today, it is very clear that Ezra epitomised what An Intentional Disciple is, for the Bible records him as being “a teacher well versed in the Law of Moses, which the LORD, the God of Israel, had given” (v6). In other Bible translations, instead of “a teacher well versed”, Ezra is described as “a skilled scribe”!

Both translations are accurate, for Biblically, a teacher or scribe is supposed to be one who was “schooled” by the Law of Moses – the TORAH (esp. the 10 Commandments). Ezra was one highly trained by and in the word of God, and he had both a wide grasp, and a deep understanding, of the TORAH. All these came about only after he dedicated many hours of devoted study of the Law of Moses. That is why it is recorded in 7:10 that “Ezra had devoted himself (that is, intentionally prepared his heart) to the study and observance of the Law of the LORD, and to teaching its decrees and laws in Israel.” What An Intentional Disciple Ezra was. What we as Disciples of Jesus should also be.

The Character of an Intentional Disciple

Ezra’s example tells us that an intentional disciple would devote himself/herself to God. Being devoted is intentionally preparing one’s heart to do three fundamental things:

- A. To seek God’s Word
- B. To do God’s Word
- C. To teach God’s Word

Why do these 3 things?

Ezra knew that when, in his heart, he devotedly or intentionally:

- (1) sought God’s Word, he would come to be full of God’s truth and so, would not sin against Him. (cf. Psalm 119:11)
- (2) did or lived God’s Word, he would come to not just only be a hearer of God’s truth but also be a doer of the word and live it. (cf. James 1:22 and 25)
- (3) taught God’s Word, he would help others too likewise seek God’s word, do it and teach it to others also. (cf. Matthew 28:19-20)

For we walk by faith, not by sight. 2 Corinthians 5:7

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A man after God's own heart

Ezra knew that it is really one's heart that determines if one lives for God and His values or not. A person named Trapp rightly said that a person's heart is like "an instrument (that) must be tuned before it can be played upon."

- Our hearts need to be "*tuned by*" or more accurately, "*attuned to*" God's Word, so that we know His truth, then we live it and do the right things that God created us to do, and also, help others to know and live the same.

Without this "tuning" and "attuning" to God, our hearts will inevitably lead us to live sinfully, for, as the Prophet Jeremiah laments in Jeremiah 17:9, "*The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?*" This is the sad truth about our hearts, and we must come to realize that the way to "cure our heart" is to devote ourselves to knowing, living out, and teaching God's Word – just like Ezra did. And as we do so, our hearts will become tuned into, or attuned to, God's own heart, exactly as King David's heart was as described in Acts 13:22. This verse has one of the most beautiful descriptions of who "An Intentional Disciple" is – a man who is after God's own heart! That description of King David as a man after God's heart is special because it is the only time such is said of a Biblical character. Ezra was exactly like David in this regard, for he was definitely also a man after God's own heart as he wanted to impact others with the truth about God and help them to live by His values.

- Our hearts should also be after God's own heart so that we will be able to do everything God wants us to. And for that to happen, we like Ezra need to devote ourselves, or intentionally prepare our hearts (1) to seek God's Word, (2) to do it, and (3) to teach it.

Will we accept this challenge and commit to being the Intentional Disciple that Jesus wants us to be, just as David was, just as Ezra was? We can surely do so because we will always have God's help, just as He helped Ezra throughout his life.

The hand of the LORD his God was on him

As with king David, God's gracious hand was on Ezra as stated in Ezra 7:6, "*The hand of the LORD his God was on him.*" This phrase is repeated in Ezra 7:9 and 28. So, as we do our part and give our 100%, we can gain strength from the truth that God's gracious hand will also be with us. (cf. Psalm 90:17)

Because God's favour was upon Ezra, he was really a "3-in-1" Servant of God:

Priest --- Pastor --- Prophet

- Priest – from the line of Aaron (7:1), he re-established the worship system of God in the rebuilt temple in Jerusalem for the returning Exiles from Babylon after 70 years.

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- Pastor – a teacher well versed in the Law of Moses (7:6, 10) he re-established the importance of the TORAH in the lives of the Israelites upon their return to the Holy Land.
- Prophet – spoke out forth-rightly against the sins of the Israelites (10:10-11) as they struggled to live according to God’s values.

Ezra is considered by rabbis as 2nd only to Moses for his sure handling of God’s Word and godly leadership of God’s people, as God’s hand rested upon him. Ezra was faithful to the three roles above and to God’s Word by heart, in deed and service.

Call to sure handling of God’s word and godly leadership of God’s people

An important matter of concern in this area is the very low number of persons currently applying to serve as ordained Methodist Pastors in the Trinity Annual Conference (TRAC). In the last 5 years, the average number of applicants per year is only two (2). This is a very low number and is below the replacement rate of current pastors who will be retiring from this pastoral ministry. A worse-case scenario paints a situation of less than 40 pastors to serve TRAC’s 21 churches with over 30,000 members in 2032. Hence there is an urgent call to seriously consider if God might be calling you to full-time ministry as a Methodist Pastor in TRAC. Even if it does not apply directly to you, you could encourage those who might “fit the bill” to step forward.

- ***From what we learnt today, “Is there anyone who is willing to have your heart tuned to, or attuned with, God’s heart, and be trained to become very sure in your handling of God’s word and in your godly leadership of God’s people, as God’s hand rests upon you, to become a Methodist Pastor in TRAC?”***

The journey to qualify as an ordained Methodist Elder in our Methodist System is long because it is an important life decision. Once admitted, a “Member on Trial” (MOT) will be on probation for 4 years regarding his/her character, communication (preaching) and competency as a pastor. This applies for those already with theological training. For one without theological training, this process to be a fully qualified Methodist Pastor with TRAC may take 7 years as it takes a minimum of 3 years to graduate with such a degree.

In Para 568 of The Methodist Book of Discipline, on the Responsibilities and Duties of a Pastor, Point 10, Pastors are to search “*among the membership and constituency men and women for pastoral ministry and other church-related vocations:*

- i) to help them interpret the meaning of the call of God,
- ii) to advise and assist when they commit themselves thereto,
- iii) to counsel with them concerning the course of their preparation,
- iv) and to keep a careful record of such decisions.”

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4 Considerations to help one discern if God is calling him/her to serve Him as an ordained Methodist Pastor

- (I) COME before God – acknowledge that, by God’s grace, I want to be An Intentional Disciple, whose heart is after God’s own heart, and will be available for God’s service full-time, 365/24/7.
- (II) COUNT the Cost – Am I willing to COMMIT my life to:
1. Publicly CONFESSING Christ and the Christian faith – willing to speak in front of people in any setting or opportunity?
 2. COMFORTING and COUNSELLING – willing to be with people and listen to their troubles, and offering God’s truth and love?
 3. caringly CONFRONTING others, as needed for the Gospel’s sake – willing to stand up for the truth and values of God?
 4. receiving CRITICISM, both helpful and unhelpful about ministry?
- (III) Am I ALREADY:
1. CULTIVATING Jesus’ character in my life daily - practicing Spiritual Disciplines of Prayer, Bible Reading, Fellowship etc.
 2. SERVING in my CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY so as to receive its CONFIRMATION of my call – have a good track record of dedicated, humble and effective service of God and of being a blessing to others.
 3. COMPETENT enough with sharing, defending and teaching the Scriptures – able to help others understand what the Bible teaches about God, about People, and about the relationship between God and People.
 4. WILLING to live with less CASH - live more simply.
- (IV) CHECK my personal CONVICTION – should I be married, my spouse must concur.

Points of Advice

There is a posture and attitude to be taken should a decision be taken to be a Methodist Pastor. This posture will reflect a considered prayerful decision.

1. NEVER ever say, “I gave up my occupation to go full-time ...” (*if you do, then God owes you*)
2. ONLY ever say, “*God is giving me the privilege to be His servant.*”
3. MORE important to be REVERENT than to be called “REVEREND”!
4. It is a SIN not to obey God’s call.

CONCLUSION

Let us commit to be intentional disciples who devote ourselves to God, preparing our hearts to seek, do and teach God’s Word. As we seek to be after God’s own heart, God’s hand will be upon us to help us. If anyone has heard God’s call to serve in the sure handling of God’s Word and godly leadership of God’s people as an ordained

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Methodist Pastor in TRAC, may you obey His call for, *“it is a great deal easier to do that which God gives you to do, no matter how hard it is, than to face the responsibilities of not doing it”* (JR Miller).

Lastly, let us remember, *“The Christian is a person who makes it easy for others to believe in God.”* (Robert M McCheyne). That is what Ezra was and did. That is what An Intentional Disciple of Jesus is and does. Will we be and do the same?

A. Review Sermon Application

Purpose: Reflect on how you have been embodying God’s truth.

- 1a. How successful have you been in fulfilling what you/your group had committed to do for the last FaithWalk?
- 1b. What were some challenges you faced and what would you like to celebrate?

2. An intentional disciple would devote himself/herself to God by preparing his/her heart to do three fundamental things.
 - a. What are these three fundamental things?
 - b. Which of these things do you face challenges in doing?
 - c. How can your group members pray and assist you in this?

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B. Relate Sermon Content

Purpose: Relate with the Truth and Resolve for Transformation.

3. Ezra knew that it is really one's heart that determines if one lives for God and His values or not. Sadly, Jeremiah 17:9 describes the human heart as deceitful and beyond cure.
 - a. Do you acknowledge that your heart is deceitful when it is not attuned to God?
 - b. Do you believe that it can be cured and how willing are you to have your deceitful heart cured?
 - c. What are some practical things you can do to intentionally be "tuned by" God's Word?

4. As a man after God's heart, God's hand was on Ezra to help him fulfill his roles as a servant of God.
 - a. How has knowing this impacted you as you serve God?
 - b. Ezra was highly regarded for his sure handling of God's Word and godly leadership of God's people as God's hand rested upon him. In your own roles as members/leaders of the church, in ministry, Life Group or your family, have you stayed faithful to the handling of God's Word and godly leadership of God's people?
 - c. How can your group members help or encourage you to do better in 4b above?

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C. Testimonies, Prayers and Action

Purpose: Give glory to God, seek Him and embody His Word.

5. Share if you have heard God's call to serve Him in the Pastoral Ministry or as an ordained Methodist Pastor in TRAC. Have the 4 considerations to help discern your call confirmed it? If yes, please speak to a Pastor for him/her to help you interpret your call.

OR

Give thanks to God that we can gain strength from the truth that His gracious hand will be with us as we do our part and commit to be an Intentional Disciple of Jesus Christ.

6. Consider your group and personal devotion to God i.e. how serious is your group, and are you, in seeking, doing and teaching God's Word to others. Ask the Holy Spirit to reveal if any is lacking and seek His empowerment to commit to be intentional disciples after God's own heart. Pray for those who have been called to be ordained Methodist Pastors in TRAC to obey God's call to the sure handling of God's word and godly leadership of God's people to lead the generations to come.

For your group's prayerful consideration:

- 1) Is there a course that you can sign up for or a devotional you can start on to intentionally seek God's Word?
- 2) Is there an area you can intentionally sign up to serve in to do God's Word?
- 3) Is there an area in your life you need to intentionally seek the Holy Spirit's help and each other's support to live out God's Word?
- 4) Is there someone or a harvest field that you can intentionally reach out to, to share about God and teach His Word?

Optional items:

Suggested worship songs:

1. Great Things – Phil Wickham <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y4CY3nf1Mvw>
2. Potter's Hands – Hillsong <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DqIfy0A3gg>
3. Making A Difference – City Harvest <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FrPMxtUeONE>

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