

The Soul-Restoring Grace of Repentance Part 2

Books of Ezra and Nehemiah

By Ty Blackburn

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Pastor Ty Blackburn. We have a guest who taught our Sunday morning Bible study. The guest I'm speaking of is Steve Bowman. He is the Director of Development for Georgia Right to Life, a long-time friend of Ron Sheintal's and I've really been blessed to know him over these last few years and learn more about this important ministry of Georgia Right to Life. He's going to come and share with us. He shared this during Sunday school and I encourage you to, if you weren't here, to watch that online. You can go back and watch the video presentation of his message, but he's going to come now and share with you a few minutes about Georgia Right to Life and the things on his heart. Steve, come now.

Steve Bowman. Well, good morning everyone. It's a privilege to be here amongst God's people at Providence Duluth. I'm a member of Providence Presbyterian Church, Orthodox PC, Orthodox Presbyterian Church in Cumming, and it's just great to be here and get to know some of y'all.

I wanted to just give you a brief rundown of what Georgia Right to Life does. First of all, Georgia Right to Life is an explicitly Christian pro-life organization. We have bylaws that say that. We have a statement of faith. You are welcome to go to grtl.org and look at that, read that. And as such, we are driven by the reality that every human being is created in the image of God as it says in Genesis 1:27. So, "God made man in His image and in His likeness He created them."

So we are compelled since 1971, we're celebrating our 50th anniversary this year, to be the voice for the voiceless. And we do that in a number of different ways and it's not just us, by the way. People come up to me and they say, you know, "We're so glad that what you do is so important," and all of that, but the truth of the matter is, it is a lot of people in Georgia working together through prayer, through financial support, resources. We have had thousands of people through the years that have contributed both those prayers and their financial support and many have volunteered to get involved, and we have those opportunities as well. No matter what age you are, there's something that you can do to actively stand against the culture of death.

You know, 50 years ago we were formed because there was a coming threat, and actually the threat had already arrived, and that is in Georgia they had decided that abortion was going to be allowed in the case of rape, and even though the governor at the time did not sign the bill, it became law. That was in 1968 and several years later Roe v Wade, the infamous decision to nullify all state laws restricting abortions was decided, and since then it's pretty much been open season on the pre-born.

We don't only stand for the pre-born, though, we stand for anyone whose life is threatened and dignity is threatened by other persons or policies or law, no matter what age they are. So our mission is to restore respect and legal protection to all human life, and we do preface by saying innocent human life, from the earliest biological beginnings until natural death. Most of those transgressions are for the pre-born.

So what we do is we educate throughout the state. We run all sorts of media that I mentioned and showed pictures of. I do have some sheets if you want to take a look at some of the ads that we run. We're using things like Facebook and Google, and billboards and radio spots, and speaking engagements, and going to campuses like UNG and University of Georgia and other places like that to educate. We have some really great times out there.

We have 27 chapters across Georgia who stand for life and educate their communities, and we have been active in the legislature to get nine bills passed that were supportive of life. None of them, unfortunately, were able to stop the onslaught of the legalization of the destruction of unborn life, but here's the great news. You don't have to raise your hand but how many of you really believe that passing a law in Georgia is going to stop all of the destruction of human life? How many of you really believe that? Now how many of you believe that the law should protect human life? I think all of us believe that and it should, but every time a girl or a woman, or even a young man, sees our ads and gets connected to the websites and decides that, "I'm not going to do this. I'm going to give life to my child." That's as good as overturning Roe v Wade for that person. And so, you know, what your, I believe it was Ted, your man, Ted, what he said and what he read is just the truth. We live in a fallen world with a culture of death. We are to be the salt and light. And I invite you to join us in prayer. If you can make it to the dinner, you know, talk to your pastor, he can get you in touch with me and we can get you information on it. I've got these out in the foyer. Or if you can volunteer or if you can contribute financially, we need your help and we need your prayers. And I thank you so much for inviting me here today and just great to be able to worship with like-minded folks. Thank you. God bless.

Pastor Ty Blackburn. Thank you so much, Steve. The banquet he mentioned is September 23, Thursday evening, and I've been at the last two banquets myself, Patti and I, and we had a real blessed time of hearing about what God is doing and through Georgia Right to Life and so many different ways. And so, I encourage you if you would like to be a part of that, let us know. We would like to take as many people as we can to that banquet. It's in the Cobb Galleria area over there, so it's a little bit of a drive. You've got to kind of plan the traffic but we've done it twice and we survived. No, but seriously, it's a

wonderful cause and really feel like it's something that we need to be thinking about, what can we do through prayer and encouragement. And one of the things about Georgia Right to Life, they're there to protect life but they're also there to help people who have gone through abortions and will encourage, and that's part of what we are to do as Christians. I mean, the gospel is about taking broken people and restoring them through Christ. So we delight to have the opportunity to walk through. Some of you may have been touched by abortion in your life or in family members and you may be struggling with that, and that's something that we want to walk together through those circumstances and help one another, but we want to prevent as many as we can from going through that terrible tragic reality.

Steve, thank you so much.

Well, turn with me in your Bibles to Nehemiah 9, continuing our series of messages from the books of Ezra/Nehemiah. I do want to thank Dalton for sharing on Wednesday night. A blessing to have him able to do that and just a wonderful time in the word. So we thank, thanks, Dalton, for that. Patti and I did have a wonderful time on our anniversary, 35th. You may be wondering, she's not here today, there's no problem, nothing, you know. She's not feeling well today. She's got kind of a cold so she's home sick. She actually wanted to make sure of that, so, "Ty, make sure you let them know that." No, but seriously we had a wonderful time. It was a blessing. Thank you for your prayers and encouragement.

Well, we're in Nehemiah 9 and we're continuing a series of messages from this particular passage that we started looking at last week, and so the title of the message is the same as it was last Sunday and that is "The Soul-Restoring Grace of Repentance." The soul-restoring grace of repentance, that is, that repentance is a gift, it's a grace, it's something that God has to give us. He does command it but he must empower us to obey his command. When Jesus said, "Repent and believe the gospel. Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." The words that he spoke conveyed the power to produce what he was calling for and part of what we understand as we look at the Scriptures carefully and read it thoroughly, certainly a part of Reformed theology is being submitted to the word of God. What makes sense to us or what doesn't, it doesn't matter, it's what God says. That settles it. And one of the things that we see is God commands us to repent and God commands us to believe but he must grant us by his grace the power to obey his command.

Repentance is a gift. You see this in 2 Corinthians 2:24, 2 Timothy 2:24-26, where there Paul is exhorting Timothy and he says that the bondservant of the Lord "must not be quarrelsome, but be kind to all, able to teach, patient when wronged, with gentleness correcting those who are in opposition, if perhaps God may grant them repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, having been held captive by him to do his will." He's saying that, "Timothy, when you're dealing with opponents in the church, you are to do so with kindness. You are to do so with, you know, effort to teach well. You've got to be able to teach. You've got to be able to expound the truth but you do it with kindness, you do it

with gentleness because the only way they're going to change is if God grants them repentance. It's a gift." So even as we do it, we don't trust in our own abilities, we don't trust in our own persuasion, powers of persuasion, we trust in the power of Christ, that he speaks, that our spoken word is accompanied by him speaking through us in the moments he chooses to sovereignly bring people to saving conversion, faith and repentance.

So repentance is a grace, that's why we titled it that way. The soul-restoring grace of repentance. It's a grace that restores the soul. It brings us back to what we were created to be. I mentioned Psalm 19:7. It's interesting, we're looking at a passage where the law of God has been preached and the law of God produces this great revival, spiritual awakening, and restoration of the people of God to what they were made to be.

I mentioned Psalm 19:7, "The law of the LORD is perfect, restoring the soul." That word "restoring" could be translated "returning." Other translations say "reviving." The actual word there is the word for "repent" too. "The law of the LORD is perfect, returning, repenting the soul," in the sense that it brings repentance. The law of the Lord brings repentance and restores the soul all at the same time. To repent is to be restored. To be granted the grace of repentance is to be restored, and repentance biblically we said last week, is a whole person change of direction. It's a whole-personed changed of direction. When you put the biblical words together and you look at them in context, the idea is of turning, to be going in one direction and to turn and go the other.

It involves the whole person. It's not just merely a change of mind. Some people will teach that and they're dumbing down what the Bible says about repentance. It's not merely a change of mind. Yes, it starts in the mind but it continues on to the affections, the emotions and affections are engaged, and then the will is also activated so that the person is going in one direction, changes their thinking, their affections are changed, and their will is changed so that their life is changed, the direction of their life is changed. That is what it means to repent, to turn, to turn from sin to God is the idea.

And we've chosen that subject because it's described basically or illustrated wonderfully in this chapter. Nehemiah 8-10 are a beautiful picture of what repentance looks like when God grants it, and he has granted it in his sovereign grace in an amazing way to the people of Judah who've come back from captivity, have rebuilt the walls and God grants them repentance and we see this wonderful grace of repentance illustrated in these chapters. There is a whole-personed change of direction among the people of God.

We've noted this in previous weeks, they changed their thinking. It starts with the preaching of the law of God and the law being explained so that they can understand. You see, repentance starts in the understanding. It's not merely a change of thinking but it cannot happen without a change of thinking. It starts there. God works through the mind to change the life. It's not some kind of mystical, weird, just thing you work up in your emotions. No, it starts with objective truth. God speaks truth to the mind and that's where it begins but it doesn't remain merely there. When the Spirit of God is working granting repentance, what happens in the mind then moves to the affections, that is, the desires of the heart, the emotions, and they are captivated by the power of the word of God.

And we see this in this passage. They began with hearing the preaching, understanding, having it explained to them in chapter 8, and then we saw that what happened was, remember when we read chapter 8 and worked through that passage, they hear a four-hour preaching, four hours of sermons on the law, that is, the reading of the law of God. Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, from those five books. They're reading and preaching from those five books and God sends revival. God sends his Spirit powerfully upon his people and he sends revival and it happens, they hear the word of God, they understand the word of God, and then their hearts are gripped by it, and you see it in their affections.

They're grieved so that they are wailing and moaning over their sins. Those four hours of preaching are coming to an end and the men leading the service have to rush forward and say, "Do not mourn or weep." Basically verses 9 to 12 of chapter 8, this is what they're saying, "Don't mourn or weep. Be quiet." They're saying be quiet because it's not just that they have tears streaming down their faces, they are wailing in agony. They tell them, "Today is not a day for sorrow. Wait. That's not what God wants today because God wants you to know that when you return to the presence of God, the ultimate aim is your joy." His glory and your joy are not irreconcilable, in fact, they are always found together. When you truly glorify God, you will find your greatest joy because in his presence is fullness of joy, at his right hand there are pleasures forevermore.

So their affections are engaged and then their will. They do what God says. They stop crying, then they listen to the people preaching to them, they go home and they celebrate that day and make a feast, and then the next day they come to hear the word, they are told by God's word that they're supposed to change the way they celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles. They realize by reading in Leviticus 23 that they've been remiss, that no one's been doing this for centuries the way they were supposed to. And so now they celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles the way God intended by making tents and living in tents for a week during that feast, lean-to's. They took branches and made makeshift tents and lived in them for a week and rejoiced and heard the word of God day after day all seven days, and then after that on the 24th day of this month, chapter 9, they gather to mourn and repent over their sins. And what's going to happen in chapter 10 is they're going to enter into a covenant renewal. They're separating from the nations, they're setting themselves apart, they're taking radical steps. So you see the mind, the affections and the will are all engaged and set on display for us. Look at this movement of God, and it shows us how God works in the lives of his people. But to be repentant, to be broken over your sin is to be moving into the place of great joy and blessing. It's a place of intense sorrow but it's a place of deeper joy because you're restored to what God made you to be.

So we started looking at this last week. We said that part of the restoration of the soul is that the soul that repents, that is granted the grace of repentance, begins to see what it could not see. The person who is granted the repentance unto life, that is salvation, when someone comes to know the Lord, they see what they never saw before and truthfully for them, they can say, "I was blind but now I see." They see God. They see their sin. They

see Christ. But there's a sense in which it continues for the Christian, that we continue to need to repent. Repentance is a grace that we need to be looking for every moment of every day of our lives. God intends it to be a daily part of our lives, turning from sin unto God.

And when God does grant us deeper levels of repentance, we see that which we could not see. Remember, I mentioned about Mount Etna last week. When we went to Sicily for the first time to visit our missionaries back in 2009, we'd heard about Mount Etna but we got there at night. You can't see a mountain at night. The next day it was overcast, it was cloudy, couldn't see it. I didn't know what to expect. You know, you hear about a mountain but you don't know. And then it was the third day that we were there, getting up in the morning, had not seen it once. We were in the town of Catania which is right at the base of it but you can't tell when it's overcast. We wake up the next morning, go outside, and bam, there it is in all its glory. It was there all along but we couldn't see it. That's the kind of force that repentance brings to the soul. You see that which you could not see before. It was always there but you couldn't see it.

So we said that it allows us to see things we couldn't see. Last week, we said it helps, repentance gives you a new, the ability to see your circumstances as they truly are. We saw that last week and we said, secondly, repentance gives you the grace to see God as he truly is. We looked at those two things last week. Today, we're going to look at the third point. I mentioned there are four and we're going to look at the third point this morning. Repentance gives you the grace to see the law of God for what it truly is. Next week, we'll look at our sin, Lord willing. But today, the theme of today's message is: the soul-restoring grace of repentance, it gives you, one of the ways it restores your soul is it gives you the ability to see the law of God for what it truly is, that which is good and beautiful and perfect.

We see this, we're going to read chapter 9 through verse 15, chapter 9:1-15, and then we'll pray.

1 Now on the twenty-fourth day of this month the sons of Israel assembled with fasting, in sackcloth and with dirt upon them. 2 The descendants of Israel separated themselves from all foreigners, and stood and confessed their sins and the iniquities of their fathers. 3 While they stood in their place, they read from the book of the law of the LORD their God for a fourth of the day [so another three-hour preaching, reading ceremony, service]; and for another fourth they confessed and worshiped the LORD their God. 4 Now on the Levites' platform stood Jeshua, Bani, Kadmiel, Shebaniah, Bunni, Sherebiah, Bani and Chenani, and they cried with a loud voice to the LORD their God. 5 Then the Levites, Jeshua, Kadmiel, Bani, Hashabneiah, Sherebiah, Hodiah, Shebaniah and Pethahiah, said, "Arise, bless the LORD your God forever and ever! O may Your glorious name be blessed And exalted above all blessing and praise! 6 You alone are the LORD. You have made the heavens, The heaven of heavens with all their host, The earth and all that is on it, The seas and all that is in

them. You give life to all of them And the heavenly host bows down before You. 7 You are the LORD God, Who chose Abram And brought him out from Ur of the Chaldees, And gave him the name Abraham. 8 You found his heart faithful before You, And made a covenant with him To give him the land of the Canaanite, Of the Hittite and the Amorite, Of the Perizzite, the Jebusite and the Girgashite To give it to his descendants. And You have fulfilled Your promise, For You are righteous. 9 You saw the affliction of our fathers in Egypt, And heard their cry by the Red Sea. 10 Then You performed signs and wonders against Pharaoh, Against all his servants and all the people of his land; For You knew that they acted arrogantly toward them, And made a name for Yourself as it is this day. 11 You divided the sea before them, So they passed through the midst of the sea on dry ground; And their pursuers You hurled into the depths, Like a stone into raging waters. 12 And with a pillar of cloud You led them by day, And with a pillar of fire by night To light for them the way In which they were to go. 13 Then You came down on Mount Sinai, And spoke with them from heaven; You gave them just ordinances and true laws, Good statutes and commandments. 14 So You made known to them Your holy sabbath, And laid down for them commandments, statutes and law, Through Your servant Moses. 15 You provided bread from heaven for them for their hunger, You brought forth water from a rock for them for their thirst, And You told them to enter in order to possess The land which You swore to give them."

Let's pray together.

Father, we ask that You now would cause the entrance and the opening of Your law that in Your light we might see light, that You might send forth Your light and Your truth and let them lead us to Your holy hill, to the place of Your habitation. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

So the soul-restoring grace of repentance. It allows us to see the law of God for what it truly is. In the verses we read, there's a wonderful description in verses 13 and 14 of the beauty of God's law and it continues throughout the rest of the chapter. Over and over again the author, I mean the people as they're praying to God, describe the law in glowing terms. You hear the words "ordinances, law, commandments, statutes" again and again and again and always with terms of endearment and value. The people of God love the law of God. They are like the Psalmist in Psalm 119 who says, "O how I love Your law. It is more delightful to me than the honey from the honeycomb."

The law of God in Scripture is that which is treasured and valued. This is a very important thing for us to know as Christians in the 21st century because this is an area that in every century really it's been this way, but the law of God is attacked from within the church. One of Satan's great strategies is to raise up false teaching from inside the church. It's what's always happened. It was happening even in the early days of the church. That's why you see so many of the epistles addressing false teaching and one of the false

teachings that is very common and has been common since then is this idea that the law is somehow something that we don't need in our lives. And the Reformed view, the biblical view of the law is that the law doesn't save us. No, we're saved by grace apart from works of law, but once we are saved, we are saved by grace. No works are evaluated at all in our salvation, only what Christ has done, but once we're saved, we're now saved unto good works. The passage Ted read earlier from Ephesians 2, "For by grace are you saved through faith, that not of yourselves it's the gift of God not as a result of works that no man should boast." What does it say next? "For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works." We're not saved by works, we're saved unto works, and the law is that which guides us in how to live.

You will hear this sometimes people will say things like this, and they'll say it in circles that they claim to believe the Bible, even claim to be Reformed, they'll say things like this, that we don't need the law anymore, we just need the law of love. Jesus' commandments to love, that's all we need. Well, that's not an accurate statement. Yeah, we do need to follow Jesus' commandments to love. Jesus gave two commands, right? He said, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, with all your strength, and love your neighbor as yourself." But what did he say after that? "On these two all the law and the prophets hang on those two commandments." What he's saying is, yeah, love God with everything you have, love your neighbor as yourself, what does that look like, how do you really do that? The 10 Commandments tells you.

Love God with all your heart. Love your neighbor as yourself. There are two tablets of the 10 Commandments. The first tablet of the 10 Commandments, the first table concerns that love of God. Remember, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your mind, all your strength." The first commandment, "You shall have no other gods before Me." The second commandment, "You shall not make for yourself an idol. You shall not worship Me through something that you make in your own mind or with your own hands. You worship Me as I am." That's the second commandment. The third commandment, "You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain. You shall not speak about Me in casual ways. You shall not demean My name and My value and My honor in the way that you speak or live." The fourth commandment, "Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy."

So how do you love God with all your heart? You obey those four commandments. How do you love your neighbor as yourself? Well, you honor your father and your mother. You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not bear false witness. You shall not covet. You see, it puts teeth on what God is saying and what he's saying, then, is to love God and to love your neighbor is to keep the 10 Commandments.

Now we don't keep it in a legalistic wooden way in our own strength. No, we keep it through union with Christ. You come to Jesus not being able to do anything, just like we sang about earlier and Ted mentioned. It's we know that we are nothing. We believe what the Bible says about us. No, there's nothing good in me. There's nothing worthy of God.

There's nothing in me that really seeks him apart from him doing something in me. I'm helpless. But now coming to Christ by his power, under his word, his Spirit giving me new life, now I have repentance, now I have faith, now I have life, and it's completely settled forever the moment you believe on Jesus. Your standing is forever just like that song we sang, your robes of righteousness that you are wearing are yours forever because Jesus wore your robe on the cross. You don't have to wear yours. He's given you his. I love that when it talked about, in the song it said he was abandoned and alone and you were welcomed home. Because he was abandoned and alone, you can be welcomed home.

That's the great exchange that happens in the gospel. But now that that has happened, now that you've received it, if you have a new heart, you want to live for his glory and this is what true believers will resonate with. It's an up and down process but there's something in you. If you now have a new heart, you want to be holy. Yeah, you still struggle with sin every day but you want to be holy and the law is your friend now to help you in pursuing holiness. It's a guide. It's a lamp to your feet and a light to your path. That did not expire. There was no expiration date on those words.

The law is still good and beautiful but it's not to be used in the way God hasn't intended. You're not to trust in works of law to get to heaven. If you do, you will go to hell. It's that clear. It's that plain. If you believe in Jesus plus your works in any way, Paul makes clear in Galatians, Christ is of no benefit to you. If you try to go to heaven through your works of law, you will fail. You cannot clean yourself up so stop trying at all and trust completely in Jesus, and now having trusted in Jesus, having been washed, now you want to just honor him by learning how to walk with him in union with Christ and become more holy and the law is going to help you do that.

And one of the ways that we see this is that the law is continually loved throughout the Bible. The godly love the law, and so when people come along saying you don't need the law, whenever you think about your sin, don't think about that, don't think about what God says about your sin and the law, they're leading you, they'll talk about grace but they're describing something that is not true grace. And so I want this passage to help correct our understanding, so it helps us to see the law of God for what it is. When repentance comes, we see the law of God for what it truly is.

The two points this morning, the character of the law is the first thing. We see the law for what it truly is. They see the character of God's law. Because God has granted them repentance, they now see in a new way how wonderful and beautiful the law of God is. They see it throughout this whole passage but particularly verses 13 and 14 when they recount the giving of the law on Mount Sinai. Look what they say about the law. Verse 13 of chapter 9. Well, let's read verse 12 too. "And with a pillar of cloud You led them by day, And with a pillar of fire by night To light for them the way In which they were to go. Then You came down on Mount Sinai, And spoke with them from heaven." That's an amazing statement. We believe God came down from heaven and spoke. "You gave them just ordinances and true laws, Good statutes and commandments. So You made known to

them Your holy sabbath, And laid down for them commandments, statutes and law,
Through Your servant Moses."

The words he uses to describe, there are four different words there just to talk about the law. Just ordinances, ordinances, true laws, good statutes and commandments, those four words.

Ordinances speaks of God as the judge, as the ruler giving his will. So the judge gives his will and what they're saying is when the judge gives his will, his will is just. In fact, that adjective translated "just," I'm reading the New American Standard, "just ordinances" pictures that which is straight; that which is delightful. It's just like it's supposed to be. So what they're saying is, "The things that You have commanded, Lord, when we understand it, we have eyes to see, it's just like it should be. This is exactly right."

When I was listening to Proverbs 7 read earlier when James was reading, you hear the seductive power of sexual sin dealt with in a very frank, almost uncomfortable way because God knows the reality of what it is to live, he understands how hard it is for sinners to live in this world. He understands how sin has corrupted sexual desire so that women and men struggle in ways they should not struggle. As I was listening to that, though, as a man who knows what it was to fight sexual sin and still have to guard myself, let him who thinks he stand take heed lest he fall, God helping me be faithful to my wife until I die, when you hear that, you can sense the pull of that on young people and my heart was saying, "No! No! It's not the way to go!" Just like the Proverb that Solomon is saying you think it's leading to life, you think she's enticing you. She says things like, "I've been waiting for you." Lie, she's been waiting for somebody. You just happen to be the guy that looks like the sucker. And she has deceived herself and she's killing herself, and when you say yes to her, you are like an ox going to slaughter. Think about that. You're being led by the nose. You think you're being led to greener pastures. That's what normally happens when you get led around. Maybe you've been led to eat the corn. Last time, probably you were, you were getting ready to be slaughtered. You didn't know it, they were feeding you corn now to fatten you up. You think you're going to have pleasure, something good is coming, but death is right around the corner.

The law of God is good from first to last. It is the best way to live and that's what these people are seeing. "Your ordinances are just. They're exactly what they should be. When you say this is out of bounds, it's because it should be. We are made to live that way. We are made to live straight in accordance with what You say." You say, "I have desires, I don't know why I feel the way I feel." I understand that but, listen, the reason you feel the way you feel, there's probably a lot of different factors but essentially there's one that matters, you're a sinner just like me. Don't trust your heart, trust the law of God. Forget what you think or what you feel, submit to the law of God through the power of Christ.

You've got to have Jesus to do it but part of it is just acknowledging you aren't the authority. Your feelings are not your master. If you make your feelings your master, you are an ox being led to slaughter and so the law, the just ordinances, he says, "You gave them just ordinances, true laws." The word "torah" here, instruction is the idea behind the

word "torah." True. The adjective here means "that which is firm and solid." "The judgments You gave were right just as they should be. The instruction You give is something you can build your life upon. It's a foundation that will hold you up in the midst of storms and the challenges of life. Build your life upon it."

Then he says the statutes. The statutes is the idea of setting boundaries. Each of these words is another way of saying law but it emphasizes slightly different elements. God sets the boundaries and he did it well. His boundaries are good. He knows what is good for us. He knows what's not good for us.

And there are good commandments. It's interesting, there is a chiasm going there if you notice. It's good to look for these things. Sometimes people can make too much out of them but the Scripture, the Hebrew mind, the way God revealed himself through the apostles and the prophets, they thought in very much poetic forms of thought, lots of images, word pictures. So when you read the word picture, look at the word picture and let it impact you but also there's a chiasm here. That's a literary tool to focus attention.

Look at this. Just ordinances is kind of like a rubric over the whole thing. "You gave them just ordinances. You're the judge. You gave Your law and it was just what it should be." But look next. Remember, a chiasm is A, B, B, A, or cheasm if you prefer, that's actually more how we pronounce it with Greek. But you know, I just don't like pronouncing it that way so I say chiasm. There's a lot of things that if you said...anyway, I'm not going to go on about that. Okay.

So there's an A, B, C, D, C, B, A. Look at this. True laws, A, "You gave them just ordinances and true laws," A. Good statutes, B. And commandments, C. "You made known to them Your holy sabbath," D. "You laid down for them commandments, statutes and laws," C, B, A. You see he reverses the order. The order is laws, statutes, commandments in verse 13. In verse 14, it's commandments, statutes and law. It forces your eyes to the center. There's something about the sabbath that he wants us to think about and to stand out. "Your holy sabbath." The commandment to rest on the seventh day.

But the picture also of this chiasm puts together is just the beauty and perfection of the law and how it speaks to every aspect. It is not just a judge giving ordinances, it is God giving law, instruction, it is God setting forth boundaries and issuing commandments, directives, specific. All of these things are there in the law. The law is all you need is the idea, and if you want to read, do some extra credit on this, read Psalm 119 this week, just spend time in Psalm 119 and see how much the Psalmist loves the law.

Many people think that's Ezra that wrote Psalm 119. It's very likely. Could be. Ezra is the author, we believe, of Ezra/Nehemiah, most people believe that. I mean, Nehemiah is giving us his journal. Ezra incorporated that into his final document. But he loved the law. He was a man of the law.

So you see the character of the law is seen in the beauty of the law itself but it's also seen in the beauty of the law-giver. The reason the law is beautiful is because the law-giver himself is beautiful. The reason the law is good is because the law-giver himself is good. This is so important because the goodness of God is the one thing that the world cannot believe because the world believes the lie, and the lie at the beginning was this: God is not good and cannot be trusted. You don't find those words explicitly said in Genesis 3 when Satan tempts Eve but they are there in the fine print, as it were, when you read between the lines. What does he say? "Has God said that you should not eat from any tree of the garden?" He's attacking God's goodness. He doesn't say, "Has God said don't eat from that one tree?" He says, "Has God said that you can't eat from any tree at all? Hasn't God said that you can't eat from any of these trees?" He's raising the issue, "Hey, God's the kind of God that I believe would tell you, create all these trees and say you can't eat from any of it," raising doubt about the goodness of God. Then she says, "No, no, no, God didn't say that. He just said we can't eat from the one tree in the middle of the garden. We're not even to touch it because in the day we touch it, we die." And Satan says this or the serpent says this, "You shall surely not die. God knows in the day you eat from that tree you will become like God. You see, God's holding out on you. God is not good. God cannot be trusted."

That's what the serpent, that's what the lie was: God is not good and cannot be trusted and the whole world is born believing that, and that's what you hear every moment of every day, but the reality is God is good. He is a God of exceeding goodness, completely trustworthy and perfect, and the reason the law is good is because God is good. You see them expressing this a number of different times. Verse 25 speaking about God giving the people the land, he says, "So they ate," this is verse 25 of chapter 9, "They captured fortified cities and a fertile land. They took possession of houses full of every good thing." You see, "God, You gave them the land. It already had the cities built. The land was already cultivated. The land was already planted. You gave them this. They took possession of houses full of every good thing." They didn't have to go shopping to get their furniture, it was already there when they got their houses. "Hewn cisterns," they had places to catch the rainwater so they would have plenty of water. They had "vineyards, olive groves, fruit trees in abundance. So they ate, were filled and grew fat," and look at this, "And reveled in Your great goodness. This is who You are. You are a God who is so generous and good and kind and benevolent that You bless those who belong to You."

They speak of the great goodness again in verse 35, "But they, in their own kingdom, With Your great goodness which You gave them, With the broad and rich land which You set before them, Did not serve You or turn from their evil deeds. Your great goodness is all around them. You are so good, Lord." This is what the people have come to see. Now this is what's so cool is, they were struggling before God sends revival. Remind you, they thought their circumstances were terrible. They were doubting God's goodness. They were wondering, "Hey, why has God brought us back to the land and why aren't we experiencing what was promised in Isaiah and Jeremiah, that we're going to be just everything's going to be great, that the nation is going to be streaming to Jerusalem, that we are going to be on top of the world again? Where is it?" Because, remember, the land they're inhabiting now is a postage stamp of what it was before.

Jerusalem, though the wall was built miraculously in 52 days, it's basically uninhabited. Nobody wants to live there. It's still dilapidated all over the inside. The economy has crashed. They are hurting. Their lives are miserable and they're like, "Where is the blessing?" And they're wondering, "Why has God not been good to us?" They're looking at their circumstances and they are really concluding and inferring from their circumstances, "Something's not right. God's not being fair with me."

Sometimes we'll do that for other people. Do you struggle with that? You hear about something that happened to a brother or sister in Christ and you're like, "Lord, really? Don't they have enough to worry about?" I mean, you don't say that actually out loud but somewhere in the back of your mind you're thinking it. "Seriously, Lord?" What are we doing? We're accusing God of wrongdoing. We think we know better and we think we're a better judge of what is good than he is. They were looking at their circumstances and they were thinking that, "Look at our circumstances, Lord, this surely can't be what You called us back to. If I had known this, I wouldn't have come back with Nehemiah, or I wish my grandfather hadn't come back with Zerubbabel 90 years before." Whatever they're thinking, they're thinking things like that.

Then God opens their eyes through the preaching of the law of God. They hear the word of God and the word of God takes the blinders off their eyes and suddenly they see what is reality. What they were seeing before was not reality. It was what the world said reality is. It was what everybody around them believed reality is but it was not reality. What God says is reality. That is reality. It doesn't matter if the whole world testifies and swears on it that something is real and true, if God says something different, forget what the world says, submit to God. And when you are granted repentance, you know that in the depth of your soul, and that's what's happened to them. They see the reality is not that you were doing anything wrong, in the circumstances you've brought into our lives, you've let us live in ways we didn't want to experience, you put us in circumstances we would never have chosen and yet in this moment they are saying in their hearts, "You have done all things well. There's nothing, there's no flaw in what You have done." Because the law of God has given them eyes to see, given them ears to hear.

They see that God, look, when they see who God is and the law has revealed that to them, they see a God, we could look all throughout the prayer, they go and forth to seeing who God is. We talked about this some last week. But verse 17 just for a moment, after he says, "They refused to listen, And did not remember, they became stubborn," next sentence, "But You are a God of forgiveness, Gracious and compassionate, Slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness; And You did not forsake them." Gracious, compassionate, slow to anger, abounding in lovingkindness. God is a God of mercy, that's grace sovereignly administered, yes. Slow to anger. He doesn't get angry quickly. If he did, we would all be consumed. He abounds in lovingkindness. He overflows in chesed, is the Hebrew word. It's the disposition of a person who has means, who looks upon someone in misery, to move toward them in lovingkindness. "I want to bless you." That's who God is. He overflows with an attitude of lovingkindness.

But also the word "compassionate." Six times in this passage they speak of God's great compassion or his compassion. Compassion, that is, God sees misery and his heart is absolutely activated to alleviate and to help. He feels the misery of those who feel. That's what compassion means. Passion, feeling. Com, with. To feel with. God feels with us and he moves toward us, and they're seeing this. The law of God has helped them see this. This is the nature of the God who gave the law. The nature of the God who gave the law is a God who is gracious, slow to anger, abounding in lovingkindness, and compassionate. How could it be anything but good?

Isaiah 49:15, "Can a mother forsake the infant nursing at her breast? Can she fail to have compassion? Though she may forget, I will not forget you," says the Lord. That's the word "compassion." Isaiah 49:15. Psalm 103:13, "as a father has compassion on his children, So the LORD has compassion on those who fear Him." I love that. He's mindful of our frame. He knows that we are dust. He's like a mother caring for her infant. He's like a father having compassion on his children. This is the heart of the God who gave his law. How could it be anything but good and delightful?

The character of the law, the function of the law, second point, the function of the law. There are two things the law does that I want to focus on today and I think they're in the passage. One is clearly in the passage but more not explicitly but implicitly but powerfully implicit because the function of the law, the first function of the law, this is 2A, second point, the function of the law, A, to expose sin. The function of the law is to expose sin. Now I would add a previous one and say expose the character of God. Okay, there are more than two functions but I want to just talk about two. We can only talk about two.

So it's to expose sin. By revealing God's glory and his will and the beauty of it, it exposes sin. Though it is a perfect guide, perfect in and of itself, when it comes to sinners it has the function of exposing our sin. It doesn't create the sin, it reveals the sin. They are broken over their sin because of the preaching of the law and they begin, we're going to look at this more carefully next week how they saw their sin but just look at verse 16 and 17 just for an example. They see how their circumstances, the fact that they are where they are is really connected to sin and they see their sin, they see the sin of the covenant people of God, "But they, our fathers," Nehemiah 9:16, "they, our fathers, acted arrogantly; They became stubborn and would not listen to Your commandments. They refused to listen, And did not remember Your wondrous deeds which You had performed among them; So they became stubborn and appointed a leader to return to their slavery in Egypt." Stubbornness. Unwillingness to listen. Acted arrogantly. The law of God has exposed this. The real problem was not anything God did, the problem was the people. And they don't just say "the people," they say "us." The problem is us.

Verse 26, "they became disobedient and rebelled against You, And cast Your law behind their backs." That was right after, "They reveled in Your great goodness, but what did they do in response to Your goodness? They became disobedient and rebelled against you and cast Your precious law behind their backs. And they killed Your prophets who had

admonished them." Why did they admonish them? They admonished them, "So that they might return to You, And they committed great blasphemies." The law exposes sin.

It shows the exceeding sinfulness of sin. It's a phrase Paul uses in Romans 7. In fact, that would be a good place to turn right now. Romans 7. Paul is teaching a way of salvation by grace apart from works of law. This is where people get confused and they think the law is not good and the law is not for Christians. Well, they're right in the sense that the law is not the way to be saved, but the law is for Christians who have been saved. And the law is not the problem. The law was actually given to foster and make salvation a reality. That's what Paul's going to say in Romans 7:7. He's been talking about we're no longer under the law as the way of living. We don't even live today by the law, by just knowing what we're supposed to do and now go do it. No, the way you live today, you look at the law, you see what you're supposed to do, you see that you're not doing it, you see that you're failing miserably. God's standard is perfection. I'm so far from that. And you run to Christ, and in union with Christ by the power of his Spirit, you can then begin to keep the law but it's union with Christ. It's his power. It's his Spirit. It's his righteousness given to you in sanctification. In the same way he gives you righteousness and justification, he gives you righteousness in sanctification. He is your righteousness. He is your sanctification.

But Paul is saying, "Listen, don't be confused. The law is not a problem." And what he's going to say here, look what he says, Romans 7:7, "What shall we say then? Is the Law sin? May it never be! On the contrary, I would not have come to know sin except through the Law; for I would not have known about coveting if the Law had not said, 'You shall not covet.' But sin, taking opportunity through the commandment, produced in me coveting of every kind; for apart from the Law sin is dead. I was once alive apart from the Law; but when the commandment came, sin became alive and I died; and this commandment, which was to result in life, proved to result in death for me; for sin, taking an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me. So then, the Law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good. Therefore did that which is good become a cause of death for me? May it never be! Rather it was sin, in order that it might be shown to be sin by effecting my death through that which is good, so that through the commandment sin would become utterly sinful."

So the law is given, it awakens sin in us and shows us the true condition of our hearts, creates all kinds of wickedness, and shows us how much we need Jesus. That's what he's saying. That was the function of the law in the old covenant. Nehemiah and the people of Israel in his day are receiving the law and that's part of the function of the law. It's to show them the character of God, the beauty of God, this is the way to live, but it's basically when it comes to us, it's going to have the impact of stirring up sin in us because of the wickedness of our hearts. When God says, "You shall not," our heart says, "I will." When God says, "You shall," my heart says, "I will not." That's the wickedness of the sinful heart of man. But the function of the law, then, the reason God gave the law was like an x-ray to show you what's going on inside. It draws it out and makes you know how utterly sinful you are, and then what happens is you run to Christ.

Galatians 3, look these verses up later. Galatians 3:23-26. I'll just summarize it for you. Paul says the law was a tutor to lead you to Christ. Beautiful image. It was one that was really effective in that day because people could relate to it in Greco-Roman culture. The tutor was not like today, you have a tutor that helps you with a subject. No, the tutor they're talking about here was a man who would instruct and educate wealthy young men. A father would hire a tutor who would take charge of his son and basically would just take over his life. He might live in the house with you but he would be what time you go to bed, what time you get up, what you're going to do from morning to night. The tutor is in charge and he's going to take you from being a boy all the way to manhood, and then when you're a man now, you're free. Aristotle was the tutor for Alexander the Great.

So the tutor. The law is a tutor. It takes you from a place where you don't understand anything about who you are, who God is, and it leads you. And the tutors, listen, they were known to be brutal. It wasn't like today. No spankings and all that kind of stuff. No, the tutor would just beat the child as needed. You know, I mean, just it's whipping, it was up to him. And so the deal was the dad says, "I'm not going to interfere. You do what you've got to do." And they understood, you know, that they could get results by doing that. I'm not advocating for that kind of thing but I'm saying when he uses the image, he's saying it was hard tough instruction. That's what the law is to us. Even though it's good, there's nothing wrong with what it does. It never does a single thing wrong. It's not like a bad tutor, but because we're so utterly sinful, for us it feels like that. But what does it do? It comes and it hammers us with God's requirements. It says, "You must be perfect to enter heaven. You must never lust to enter heaven. You must never have an angry thought to enter heaven. If you've had one angry thought, you're disqualified for heaven. You may live a whole life, never sin, all the different," it's impossible but theoretically if you did, "and you had one angry thought, you're too filthy to enter heaven with a holy God."

Now that standard seems unfair in your minds and my mind because we are wicked sinners. If we thought correctly, we would say, "Amen! Yes! You're right!" Because we're so conformed to this world and sin has messed us up, we think it's not fair. God should grade on the curve. The news is God doesn't grade on the curve. The requirement is 100% righteousness. Never sin. Any sin of commission, don't do anything you're not supposed to do, and always do everything you are supposed to do, that's the requirement. "Who can stand in My holy place? Who can ascend the hill of the Lord? He who has clean hands and a pure heart who has not lifted up his soul to evil, who has never spoken falsehood. He can come."

That's the standard. The law sets that forth before you with clarity and urgency every single day but, listen, the beauty of the law, when God gave the law in Exodus 20, he told them how to build the tabernacle, "So that you can dwell with Me. I want to dwell in your presence in the tabernacle." What's the next thing he did? The first five chapters of Leviticus he gives the sacrificial system. "Do this and live." It's a required perfection. "But when you don't do this, offer blood. There must be a sacrifice." Leviticus 16, the Day of Atonement. The sacrificial system is a part of the law and it is there day after day pointing sinners to a sacrifice, a substitute. God must provide a substitute for us. In all of

that, the standard is perfection. The standard is not almost perfect. That's what so many people believe today. If you're sincere and you trust in Jesus a little bit, you can go to heaven. No! No! No! You trust in Jesus for everything or you don't go to heaven and the standard of whether you're at 95% righteousness or you're Adolph Hitler, there's no difference. Both are going to hell. You're no better than Hitler. I'm no better than Hitler. It's but for the grace of God we would just be as evil and wicked.

So forget comparing yourself to other people, compare yourself to the standard that God says, 100% perfection. "That's what I require. That's what is right." And then in despair say, "Lord, have mercy on me, the sinner." And now you're ready to look to Christ. Jesus, he came and he lived a perfect life. The reason he had to live 33 years was so that he could be tempted in every single way, yet without sin. Every sin of commission, every sin of omission he was tempted to and he never once failed to obey the law of God. He did everything he was required to do and he did nothing he was prevented from doing according to the law. He fulfilled the law in perfection. His record is 100% righteousness. He's the only one worthy to go to heaven but he also died on a cross, and on that cross he was a sin-bearer and the sins of everyone who would ever believe, all sins past, present, future, were credited to Jesus and he, then, was treated as if he lived our wicked lives. He was the wrath-bearer. God poured out his anger, his fury upon his Son. And then when he said those words, "It is finished!" It was finished. The requirements of the law completely satisfied. The requirements to say the soul that sins must die, Jesus took that out of the way on the cross, and then he gives you his righteousness who believe, and you now have a perfect record of righteousness, 100% perfection.

That's why you can go boldly into the throne room. It doesn't matter what your performance is today, that is not going to make a hill of beans' difference in how God's going to receive you. It's not going to make a difference on how you do tomorrow. When you go into the throne room of God, you go only along the blood-sprinkled path of Jesus Christ and in his righteousness. And that's the same yesterday, today and forever. So go boldly, draw near with boldness to the throne. That's the gospel and the law of God is beautiful because it sets the context. It explains who God is and it shows the way of salvation.

So have you come to know Christ? Have you been trusting in kind of a halfway faith with your own efforts added in? A lot of Christians, a lot of professing Christians are doing that. Don't trust in anything in yourself. Despair of everything that is a part of who you are and look only to Jesus and in that you will find life. He gives a new heart and he gives grace daily to become more like him.

Let's go the Lord in prayer.

Our Father, we thank You, Lord, for the glory of the gospel. We thank You that You have done that which was impossible. We could never have saved ourselves. Can the leopard change his spots? Neither can you who are sinners be made righteous. But Lord, You have done it and it's marvelous in our eyes. We pray for those today that have not yet really placed their faith in Jesus, that today You would grant them grace, the grace of

repentance and the grace of faith. Keep them just looking to Jesus, resting in Him. Lord, help us all to be bold in faith, not audacious or proud in ourselves but bold in trusting in Christ and clinging to Him. Christ alone. We pray this in His name and for His glory. Amen.