

ANNOUNCEMENTS / INTRO:

Amen!... Before we continue in the Scriptures together, I wanna ask you to be keeping your eyes peeled for a number of things coming up related to re-launching these Sunday Gatherings. Crazy to think that we only have 2 of them left this summer. So obviously, we wanna be prepared to move into the Fall well, not the least of which is securing an indoor space, as well as just doing some things that, in the spirit of *Ephesians 4*, really “equip” you and us as a church to, not only continue to trust and rest in the finished work of Christ, but practically, tangibly take steps towards helping others do the same. I think it’s important that we continually remind ourselves that we are here to be a blessing; not only to each other, but to those who aren’t yet enjoying the freedom & family that Jesus has died to secure for everyone. So just be keeping your eyes peeled, cuz in the coming days, there’ll be different things on social media. We’ll be sending out some different correspondences that we’d love your feedback on, and just planning for a number of different things for which we’d love your participation. Ok? Ok!

So I had a realization the other week: I realized that if we’re not careful, our Sunday Gatherings, rather than being a means of grace, could actually hinder you from laying hold of the grace that’s already yours!... If we’re not careful. And here’s why: We’ve been gathering like this every-other-week right? Which MEANS if we continued to do so over the course of, say, a year/ certainly if we gathered every week, that would be between 36 and 52 different Sunday messages. AND let’s say I have between 1, and 3 application points in each. THAT would translate to between 36 and 156 DIFFERENT things you might assume you need to do! Ever thought about that? Maybe that’s why 70% our our culture and about 95% of our city isn’t particularly interested in church. Cuz who wants to be told they need to do 156 different things?

And I say, “*if we’re careful,*” because, as I hope you’re seeing in our “True Myth” series - the Bible is NOT a story of what you and I need to do to get to God, but rather, what GOD has graciously DONE to get YOU back to Him FOR your good and His glory. The whole thing/cover to cover - is progressively unfolding not what we DO, but who Jesus is and what HE’s graciously DONE for you, in hopes that your life will then magnify HIM!

So here’s my question this morning: How do you know if you’re truly grabbing onto what Jesus’ done, versus say, just learning *more* facts about Jesus or worse doing a bunch of stuff FOR Jesus in hopes of pleasing Him? In other words, how do ya know if it’s Jesus or religion you’re trusting in. That’s the question!... So let’s hear the reading of God’s word and unpack the answer TO that question together... **John H. > Ezra 3.8-13...**

CONTEXT:

Thanks **John**... So obviously this passage is detailing an OT, Israelite worship service - the DETAILS of which show us **2 Characteristics** you could say of a person/or even a community that’s authentically grabbing onto who God is and what He’s done. And I say characteristics, because as we’ll see, you can’t treat these as things to cultivate in your life. No! They’re things that GET cultivated as YOU live in light of Christ. In other words, they’re not prescriptions;

they're diagnostics, which is WHY I've titled this message: "***Condition of the Heart.***" - they diagnose where your heart is and whether you're living in view of the reality of the Gospel.

But first, let's remember where we are in the Biblical story. When we last gathered, which I know feels like forever ago, we saw the kingdom of Israel under the leadership of King Solomon, with Solomon having constructed a magnificent temple where God could consistently meet with His people until the Messiah came. It was a real high-water mark in Israel's history... Unfortunately though, as successful/both physically and spiritually, as Israel was under Solomon, they were as equally UNSuccessful in the years following. History tells us that in 587 BC the Babylonians attacked and completely destroyed Jerusalem in a 30-month siege - brought the city and the temple to the ground, while taking God's people into exile hundreds of miles away - A true low point in Israel's history, such that for years later/and you can read about it in what's called the major and minor prophet books of the OT - ya know those books written by guys with funny names like ***Obadiah*** and ***Haggai*** - there's this questioning of if God had turned His back on His people or not! Cuz this was effectively Israel's Dark Age!

HOWEVER, you see in **v.8** here, eventually the Israelites were allowed to come out of exile, return home and as it says, "*in the second year after doing so,*" begin working to reconstruct the temple. Cuz you gotta understand, Israel had two priorities upon returning home: ***One***, was to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. That's the book of ***Nehemiah***. And ***Two***, rebuild the temple, which is ***Ezra*** here. And the REASON rebuilding the temple was a priority was because it's presence, at least in-part, ensured that worship would, again, be at the center of the community. Because here's a truth about worship: We all do it... We all do it!... See, for years in exile, Israel had been confronted with every kind of idol.¹ Cuz of course the Babylonians and those they conquered worshipped all kinds of false gods. And so Israel had two choices: Worship idols OR worship God. What wasn't an option was worshipping nothing. And you might be thinking, "*that's so primitive.*" But as author Becky Pippert points out, "*Whatever controls (you) has power over (you)...but this is certain, she says: We don't control ourselves.*" What's she saying? She's saying, we all worship BECAUSE we all have some controlling influence in our lives. And that could be something very tangible like a job, career path, level of success, even romantic partner. OR it could be something less tangible like a certain level of influence or realizing a certain ideal: ideal political system, ideal body, family, kids, marriage... even I hate to say, ideal church... We ALL have controlling influences/things we treasure, value, fear losing. And those are the things, you understand, that you worship - literally ascribe "worth" to. And so as Tim Keller says, "*the response then is not to stop counting things as worthy - that's impossible - but rather to let yourself be controlled by God/ascribe ultimate worth to Him.*"

TEXT:

So to our original question: How do you know that your worship/our worship is actually grabbing onto God and what He's done? Or better said, How do you know that God is the controlling influence of your life? 2 Diagnostics you see in Israel's worship here! **First**, there's

¹ Insight about being surrounded by idolatry from <https://summitchurch.com/GetFile.ashx?Guid=d161fbb6-f823-49f7-8012-13350667362d>

a **Profound Hospitality** about you/about us! You see in **vv.8-10** the names of a bunch of people? And how it says they were all pitching in to build the temple? If you look closely, you see you've got young/old, professional clergy/non-professional. You've got people skilled in building, but also music. So engineers and artists. Left brained and right brained folks. You've got family or "kinsmen" as it says, as well as friends and neighbors. You've got everyone. Everyone pitching in and NO one excluded! That's **Hospitality**. All are welcome and invited to join-in.

Now, why do I say **Hospitality** is a mark of understanding God? Well, think about Israel: The only reason she could call herself God's people/certainly the only reason she was back in the land is cuz God had been gracious to her. Remember from our series thus far: This is a people who descended from Abraham, whom you recall, God had called out of an idol-worshipping family... They were descendants of the lying, thieving, lusting Jacob, whom God used to develop the 12 tribes of Israel... They were descendants of Moses and David, who you might recall had two things in common: **One**, God used em to lead Israel in big ways, but **Two**, they were both murderers. Not to mention, the Israelites were descendants of Solomon, who was perhaps the greatest womanizer to've EVER lived; at one point having 700 wives and 300 concubines... at one time.² And guys, I shouldn't have to say this, but in case you're thinking that's some goal to aspire to cuz ya know it's in the Bible, just don't. Solomon's story is exceedingly tragic BECAUSE of his womanizing ways... My point is: Israel knew she was God's people NOT cuz she'd earned it, but because God had been gracious. As the book of **Deuteronomy** says, "*It was not because you, Israel, were more in number than any other people that the LORD set his love on and chose you, for you were the fewest. It's because the LORD loves you and is keeping the oath he swore to your fathers.*"³ Grace!... And you see, when you understand God to be gracious, it produces in you a **Profound Hospitality** - literally "stranger lover"/a love and a desire for even strangers to be welcomed into that grace, cuz that's what God's done for you.

I'm trying to memorize the book of **Ephesians** right now, and I've just been so struck by how many times in just the first two chapters, the Apostle Paul reminds us that if we're enjoying ANY degree of life in Christ, it's ONLY because God's been gracious. Cuz as John Piper says, "*Grace is the hospitality of God to welcome sinners not because of (our) goodness but because of his glory.*"⁴ And as people who've been shown that kind of hospitality, we likewise are to live in hospitable ways. And I don't just mean hanging out with friends. I mean manifesting grace at the sacrifice of reputation and comfort... since that's exactly what Jesus did when He dined with and ultimately died for us as sinners! **Profound Hospitality. Does our life of worship/YOUR life evidence that? ... Like if you could imagine your life as one big dinner party, who would it be thrown for? Who would be the invited guests? Would it be people you like and are like you; ya know, people who can benefit you in some way? OR people who can't pay you back and for whom you pour out your life, as Jesus poured His?**⁵ **Profound Hospitality.**

² Fact cited in "A Place for His Name // 1 Kings 8 // The Whole Story #19" - J.D. Greear

³ Amos 3:1-2; Deuteronomy 7:7-8

⁴ <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/strategic-hospitality>

⁵ Questions adapted from "Luke 14:12-14//Who's at Your Party?//8 - Kingdom Come" - J.D. Greear

Second and Finally: Refreshing Transparency: One of the things that's so powerful, if not obvious, in this text is just the refreshing honesty of worship here. Cuz we see all kinds of emotion don't we? In **v.II**, it says the people "*sang responsively, praising and giving thanks to the Lord, (saying) "For he's good, his steadfast love endures forever... And (they) shouted with a great shout..."*" So on the one hand, there's this spirit of joy here and not just with like the Priests and Pastors, but with everyone. As one scholar says, "*The worship of Israel was no dull affair, nor any model for dry formality in Christian worship today.*"⁶...But on the other hand, you see there's also sadness too. As **v.12** says, some of the older folks "*who'd seen the first house, wept with a loud voice when they saw the foundation of this house.*" And that's why I say there's a **Refreshing Transparency** here. Cuz you've got rejoicing, but you also got mourning, specifically by some of the older folks. And scholars've long debated as to WHY they were mourning; most saying because they were comparing the dimensions of the present temple here with the magnificence of Solomon's 50 years earlier, and just sad that the present one didn't compare to the former...And to be sure, that's likely a part of it, but I think there's more. I think, as commentator Peter Williams says, "*they could be remembering what had made this day of celebration necessary in the first place. Israel's sin, idolatry, and disobedience, which had brought divine judgement in the form of their exile in Babylon.*"⁷ And so they're sad at how they and their fathers before them had grieved God...It's like the privilege I enjoy of getting to hear people's stories; in particular, mothers who've just had their first child. And for some of em, there's this combination of course of joy...but also sadness. And as I learned more-and-more of their stories, I learned to see that for many, the joy was of course because of the birth of their child...but the sadness?...was because that birth, joyful as it was, reminded them of a previous miscarriage...I think that's sorta the emotion here. They're overjoyed that God's delivered em and has begun to re-establish temple worship. But at the same time they're sad at the brokenness that required temple worship to need be re-established in the first place...Just this **refreshing transparency** that REALLY is rooted in an experience of God's grace here! - That God's certainly, as it says, "*enduring in His steadfast love,*" - willing to bring them to where they are, BUT having done so when they brought nothing but disobedience to the table. Again Grace!

And you understand, when you really take in God's grace/and not just that He's liberated you from a temporary exile and into a worship service like Israel here, but that, through Christ, actually liberated you from, as one person says, "*the hell of needing to make yourself good before Him*"⁸...you almost can't help but start throwing off the pretending and posturing and become a **transparent** person. Cuz Friend, if God sees you as you are, as **Proverbs 21:2** says/*He weighs out our hearts*, what's there to hide?...If He's done everything in Christ to make you acceptable, as **Ephesians 2:14** says/*He's become our peace*, what's there to prove?...If He's determined to love and accept you with a love and acceptance that's already there for you/ because of course His work on the cross is as He said, "*finished,*" why the need to construct your ideal self or protect your image?...It's like in every great marriage: The more you know you're

⁶ Mervin Breneman, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, electronic ed., vol. 10, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1993), 95.

⁷ Peter Williams, *Opening up Ezra*, Opening Up Commentary (Leominster: Day One Publications, 2006), 47.

⁸ <https://larksite.com/blog/formed/by/freedom>

loved and accepted by your spouse apart from your performance, the more you're willing to be honest and vulnerable. Even better, it's like with kids. Every kid I know goes through a phase where they're just totally cool being naked...everywhere. And when I say "everywhere" I mean I feel like Abby and I am always saying something to the effect of, "*Girls, move! You're standing in front of the window naked!*"...But ya know, the other day, it struck me: Even though they absolutely shouldn't be doing that, there is something beautiful about it/that they feel so free and safe in our house that they literally don't care what they're wearing. They can be totally **transparent!**...The same is even more true with God...which is no wonder Jesus says our relationship to Him is akin to both a marriage and a child with their Father...Just this **Refreshing Transparency** and **Profound Hospitality** that characterized their worship, and as such, you see in **v.13** "*was heard far away*" /literally the whole vicinity knew something was up.⁹

Cuz of course they did right? I mean how beautiful/certainly counter-cultural must this've been? I mean just consider that almost any kind of hospitality these days is counter-cultural right? Years ago, a Harvard Sociology Professor wrote what's now become a pretty famous book entitled *Bowling Alone*, in which he chronicled the statistical decline in hospitality over the last few decades/the whole premise being that bowling leagues are now all but extinct, because when people go bowl now, they usually go alone...But not just bowling: The number of people who play cards together is down 25%...The number of bars, nightclubs, and taverns where people used to congregate is down 40%. (Maybe not in Southie)...Having a social evening with a neighbor is down 33%...Even having friends over is down 45%.¹⁰ And that was BEFORE COVID. Just dropping the mask and inviting folks into your life is completely counter-cultural. Much-more if you mix in that those you invite are outsiders who can't pay you back... BECAUSE everyone's welcome, since you've been welcomed with Jesus...I mean that's revolutionary! That'll reverberate!

And so you see why I say these 2 things/**Profound Hospitality** and **Refreshing Transparency** aren't prescriptions as much as they are diagnostics showing the **condition of your heart?**... They're not things you gain by, ya know, working harder to be the #realyou. No! They get cultivated IN you as you trust in the #realJesus. Because see ultimately, as great as Israel's worship was here; they couldn't sustain it. They frequently failed to welcome God and others into their life. And at the same time, failed to own and confess their sin. WHILE, mind-you, assuming they could simply go through the ritual motions and still please God...In other words, they frequently failed to live **Hospitable** and **Transparent** lives...Which is why, hundreds of years later you understand, Jesus' arrival on the scene was so shocking. Cuz not only, as the Messiah, did He NOT punish those who were **in-hospitable** and **un-transparent** as so many'd hoped He do...He was CONSTANTLY welcomeing-in and even befriending people like that. And THEN to add injury to insult He kept telling people He was gonna die in order to invite us into His Father's family. As **Galatians 4** famously says, "*When the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the*

⁹ Mervin Breneman, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, electronic ed., vol. 10, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1993), 96.

¹⁰ Book explanation adapted from citation in "Luke 14:12-14//Who's at Your Party?//8 - Kingdom Come" - J.D. Greear

law, *SO THAT* we might receive adoption as sons and daughters”...**Hospitality** and **Transparency!**...AND to think that Jesus did all that APART from any of your moral or religious efforts - apart from you and I ever getting our lives together and being more welcoming and honest, and whatever...Rather, did it when we were as **Ephesians 2:1** says, “*dead in the trespasses and sins*” - incapable of being **hospitable** or **transparent** with God OR others. **You see?** The way you know that you’re truly grabbing onto what Jesus’ done vs trusting in religion or some other means of making yourself good, is YOU/WE as a church, naturally start to become more **hospitable** and **transparent** - not only more welcoming to all people, but more willing to LET all people be nothing but themselves, as we all seek to trust-in NO ONE but Jesus...May that be true of you, me and this church family here as WE trust in Christ! Cuz if it is, it’ll reverberate for the Glory of God! **Let’s Pray...**

DISCUSSION:

So at this time, we’re gonna spend just a few minutes grouping up to discuss a specific question, which I’ll give to you in a second. But if you’d like, you’re welcome to move around and get with others in your Missional Family OR just jump in with some folks near you and ask them about THEIR Missional Family, since it really is in our Missional Family Meetings that we have the opportunity to practice things like **Hospitality** and **Transparency**. But let’s spend just a couple minutes discussing this question before we bless the meal and enjoy eating together: Here’s the question: ***What do you need to believe, today, about the person and work of Jesus in order to see Hospitality and Transparency grow in you? What do you need to believe, today, about the person and work of Jesus/the Gospel in order to see Hospitality and Transparency grow in you?*** Go ahead and start discussing...

CELEBRATION:

Alright folks, come on back...Before we ask a blessing over the meal, would anybody be willing to just BRIEFLY share, so we can celebrate with you, any Aha’s or even better things you sense God inviting you to believe about the Gospel today? Anyone?

SENDING:

For those of you that are gonna hang out and enjoy eating together, I encourage you to continue the discussion...But in the meantime, **Cyndie H.** would you be willing to offer up a prayer of thanks and blessing for the meal? Thanks...