

The Habit of Study

Ezra 7:8-14, 25-26, 2 Tim 3:14-16

Well friends, last week we began to talk about habits that we can cultivate in order to become more effective stewards of all the resources that God has blessed us with.

And the premise for this whole series is that if you look at people who exemplify what it means to use all the blessings which God gives us towards His Kingdom, you'll notice that they habitually do certain things. And it is these particular habits which contribute to their effectiveness and allows them to experience God using them to do amazing things for his Kingdom.

Perhaps you know someone who is very effective for God's Kingdom in their Christian service – and I bet that if you were to spend some time with them you would discover they have certain habits.

The habit of giving, the habit of service, the habit of worship and the habit of study.

You'll notice that things are just simply part of what they do, automatically, without a second thought – their schedules, their lives are formed around them sort of like that illustration Amoriza did a couple of weeks ago.

These habits are the big rocks which go in the jar first, and once they are in its easy to fit all the rest of the sand in and around these habits. These habits are priority #1 in the lives of effective stewards.

Now I'm assuming that we *want* to grow as stewards... That we *want* to become more effective...and if we need a little push to help motivate us as to why this is so important...

Well – remember what last week was...Thanksgiving! A time when we focus on how much we are given by God, a time to reflect on all the blessings he gives to us - and our gratitude ought to make us respond by saying “I want to do the best that I can with all that God has given me to take care of!”

And if positive reinforcement doesn't work so well for you, remember the fate of the last servant in Jesus' parable of the

talents. The master was angry with him for hiding his talent of money in the ground and refusing to put to work and in the end the servant lost what little money he had and was thrown out of the master's service. Let it not be so with us.

So, as I said – I'm assuming that *we want* to grow to be effective stewards!

And by looking at the story of Ezra this morning and seeing how his habit of study prepared him and equipped him to lead God's people in some particularly challenging times, I believe God will inspire us, challenge us and enable us through the Holy Spirit to take some steps towards implementing the habit of study in our own lives.

So Ezra's story starts in the city of Babylon, during the time of the Persian Empire, under the reign of King Artaxerxes – that would be approximately 450 BC for you history buffs

Now Ezra belongs to the people of God, a people who are now in exile – removed from their homeland and subjugated by a foreign empire, because they did not stay faithful to the

covenant relationship they had with God – and this was the consequence.

But God in his grace and mercy had not abandoned his covenant people to exile forever and during the time of the Persian Empire God caused their Kings to show favor towards his people and some were allowed to return back to the Promised Land and were encouraged to rebuild the temple and the city of Jerusalem.

So this is the context in which the story of Ezra takes place and we'll learn more about his life as we look at the answers to the question - What did Ezra's habit of study do for Him?

Well the first thing we can say is that it shaped his identity. Vs. 10 in the passage we read says "*Ezra had devoted himself to the study and observance of the Law of Yahweh and to teaching its decrees and laws in Israel*"

And in there are three other references identifying him as someone who habitually studied in the section we read.

Vs.11 *“a man learned in matters concerning the commands and decrees of Yahweh for Israel”*

Vs.12 *“teacher of the Law of the God of Heaven”*

Vs.25 *“Ezra, in accordance with the wisdom of your God which you possess”*

When people met Ezra, they could tell what his main habit was – studying. And he was specifically focused on studying the stipulations and guidelines which God had given the nation of Israel when He had joined Himself to them as their covenant God - The Law of Moses.

But Ezra wasn't a book-worm. He wasn't what we might call a nerd or an academic who likes to study because it's a means to escape or avoid society.

For Ezra to study the commands and decrees of Yahweh was to encounter Yahweh himself, it was to be in his presence and it was the means by which Ezra heard God speak and say I am your God, you are my people.

The habit of study lead Ezra to understand who, and whose he was.

Of course this leads right into the second thing his habit of study did for him – It shaped his perspective.

Secular historians tell us that the Persian Empire would often show favor to certain provinces in the Empire in an effort to shore up support and prevent rebellion.

Additionally the practice of showing deference and respect to the local deities by encouraging people to worship them was thought to be a prudent political move as well – might as well get into the good books of as many gods as possible and reap the benefits.

Vs. 23 in the letter the King sent with Ezra admits as much *“Whatever the God of heaven has prescribed, let it be done with diligence for the temple of the God of heaven. Why should his wrath fall on the realm of the king and of his sons?”*

But Ezra didn't see things this way. Ezra was able to see what was going on behind these events and motives and recognize, as it says in vs. 9 "the gracious hand of God" at work.

In fact chapter 1:1 of the book of Ezra begins with this statement *"In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, in order to fulfill the word of the LORD spoken by Jeremiah, the LORD moved the heart of Cyrus king of Persia to make a proclamation..."*

That gave Ezra the ability and confidence to see things differently and to take advantage of the opportunities which the King of Persia extended to him, and put them to use for God purposes.

And so we can say that the third thing which Habit of Study did for Ezra was to release God's blessing into his life.

Now, we all experience many blessings from God – sun, rain, food, family, health etc... but Ezra was extra blessed you could say.

After all he had risen through the ranks of the Babylonian bureaucracy, merited the favor of the Persian King, was given the task of leading a delegation back to Judah, he had access to the royal treasury for supplies to rebuild the temple, he had authority given to him by Artaxerxes to administer justice and punishment on the Kings behalf- you might say that goes a little beyond the common blessings which God gives to all people.

But the Habit of study trains a person to be fit for service, to be an effective steward – it turns you into someone who knows what should be done with resources and blessings, God can trust you to put them to use instead of becoming distracted by them.

Ezra didn't let the attention, the power and authority and resources he had been given by the King of Persia go to his head.

And the writer of the text acknowledges this. Ezra has been given these things - yes, but they are mentioned once and then

it seems forgotten. They aren't what really defines Ezra, they're sort of incidental.

On the other hand the author can't seem to say enough about Ezra's creditability and suitability for the task at hand based on his being a descendent of Aaron the High Priest, and his habit of studying God's Law.

Which brings us to the fourth things Ezra's Habit of Study did for him, it equipped him and qualified him to do the work God had set out for him.

When Ezra arrived in Judah, the local leaders came to him with a problem – Many of the men who had returned to Judah had taken wives from the people who were living around them, which was a direct violation of the command which God had laid down when Israel first entered the Promised Land.

Here Israel had a second chance to re-enter the Promised Land and some of them were already violating God's law, and we find out from other passages of scripture that the main reason was for financial gain - what should be done?

Ezra with his knowledge of the Law and his ability to interpret it and apply it was able to speak with authority into the situation, and approve a course of action that would remedy the unfaithfulness of the Jews.

The people admitted their guilt, and suggested that they would prove their faithfulness to God by divorcing their foreign wives and sending them away. Ezra's knowledge of the law enabled Him to say this would be an acceptable solution to the problem.

So, the remnant of God's people were guided back into a faithful relationship with Him through Ezra's habit of study.

A simple Habit, huge impact

And friends it can be this way in your life as well – if you begin to take time and read the scriptures regularly, ask questions and search out answers you will be well on your way to developing the habit of study.

And what can you expect that this habit will do the same things for you as it did for Ezra.

It will shape your identity, as you come to know and understand the story of the scripture you begin to know who and whose you are and by whom you were saved.

Because friends, when we study the scripture – it's where we encounter Jesus Christ!

As 2 Tim 3:15 says “the Holy Scriptures are able to make us wise for salvation in Jesus Christ” – and when Paul wrote this the NT wasn't around yet, He's talking about the OT, the Law of God – the same books that Ezra habitually studied.

The New Testament just makes it clearer for us to see how the Old Testament pointed to Jesus Christ all along...

And the habit of study will change your perspective - you will see more and more of what happens in this world, in your life through the eyes of faith and will learn to recognize God's Holy Spirit at work.

For example, it's not just a coincidence that you bumped into so-and-so in the coffee shop yesterday. Weren't you praying for God to give you opportunities to speak to others about Jesus – well there's God at work giving one to you...

The Apostle Paul writes in Romans 8:28 – “*we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, and have been called according to his purpose.*”

And the more you develop the Habit of Studying Scripture the more qualified you become to receive resources from God to be used for His Kingdom. It opens the door for you to receive blessings – first and foremost the wisdom to find salvation in Jesus Christ; and secondly to be able to encounter Him as you study, but it also means material blessings.

Did you receive a promotion at work, has your business grown, are you finding people coming to you for advice?

Friends, if your blessings are increasing – ramp up your study habits, spend more time studying, go deeper into the scripture because you'll need the knowledge and wisdom and the

encounter with Christ to guide you as you work at figuring out how to steward your blessings for Christ's Kingdom.

We have a regular bible study that happens each week – come out and make the investment, or get into a Christ Care group and practice the biblical equipping and discover the blessings of having God's word in your life.

And finally friends, the habit of studying the scripture will, as the Apostle Paul says in Romans 12:2, prevent you from *“conforming to the pattern of this world – but will enable you to be transformed by the renewing of your mind”*

Friends the scriptures will point out to each one of us where we, like the Jews of Ezra's time did in marrying foreign women, have intimately aligned ourselves to things, people, actions, causes, organizations that are not of Jesus Christ – and there will be times that Christ through the scriptures will encourage us to walk away from these things so that He can be first in our lives.

Friends we may live in our society, but we are not to be of our society - and the habit of studying the scripture will help us to discern how to live in this way.

So that we can be like Ezra who lived in Babylon, who was in the service of the Persian Empire – but He was not *of* Babylon, or *of* the Persian Empire – He was *of* the people of God and that is where his loyalty fell first – always!

Friends, we live in Canada – one of the richest nations in the world, blessed with one of the most stable economies right now, full of natural resources, fresh water, good farm land, there is peace and good government...so many blessings that we've been given.

I don't know about you, but when I think about it like that – it makes me think, I've got to do whatever I can to be the best Steward of all of this that I can be –

So friends, lets promise each other that we're going to get into the habit of studying the scripture.

Amen.