

Explore: Get an understanding

January 22, 2015

- *The Explore the Bible lesson for Feb. 8 focuses on Nehemiah 8:1-8.*

The I Am Second movement brought the gospel message to thousands of people who may not have heard it before. It has become a tool Christians easily can employ to begin a gospel conversation with a friend. However, the movement is bigger than the well-known videos with the white chair.

One of my favorite things about I Am Second is the discipleship groups that result. I love the six questions used to discuss any Scripture passage: What did you like about this reading? What did you not like or find confusing about this reading? What does this reading teach about people? What does this reading teach about God? What will you do now? Who will you tell?

Discipleship in the Scriptures

But one thing I found shocking about these discipleship groups was the stringent emphasis on obeying the Scripture taught. Each week the group is to do a check-up on how each person lived out the last two questions from the previous week.

If people did not do what they committed to do, the entire group is to review the lesson again (and again, and again) until the truths take root and produce obedience. Imagine the spiritual fruit this could bear in a disciple of Jesus. They take up the discipline of studying Scripture. With other believers, they apply themselves to understand what God is teaching them. And then, as James 1:22 says, they “do what it says.” It is this sort of passionate commitment to God’s word that we find in Nehemiah 8.

With the rebuilding complete, the people now turn to more spiritual matters. And with this shift of focus comes a shift in leadership as well.

With the beginning of chapter 8, governor Nehemiah takes a backseat and teacher of the law Ezra comes to the forefront. The people had a desire for God's word, and they "came together as one" and asked Ezra to read Scripture to them (v. 1).

The group was larger than just the men taught in the temple; this assembly was made up of men, women and even children who were old enough to understand. The Bible, especially in the book of Deuteronomy, consistently includes children in religious education, with an expectation they be taught the Scriptures and their family's faith (Deuteronomy 4:10; 11:19; 31:12-13; Psalm 34:11; 78:5).

Co-preaching at a Thanksgiving service

Amazingly, all the people listened attentively from daybreak until noon, a period of about six hours. At my previous church, I had an opportunity to co-preach at a community Thanksgiving service with a pastor friend from the Disciples of Christ denomination.

The first hurdle to cross in our sermon preparation together was our assumptions regarding sermon length. She was accustomed to preaching 10 or 12 minutes, or 15 at the very most, while a normal sermon in my experience usually averaged half an hour. We had to estimate the expectations and attention spans of our mixed congregation before we could even get started writing the sermon. Ezra's and Nehemiah's newly reformed community had a remarkable hunger for God's word that gave them stamina for a marathon community Bible study.

The community seemed prepared physically and spiritually to hear and respond to God's word as it was read. They had built a special platform for the reading of God's word to the community (v. 4). And as Ezra opened the Scriptures to read, the people all stood up in reverence (v. 5). The description of events that follow seem to be more of a summary than a play-

by-play. However, we see evidence that the reading of God's Word was a participatory and responsive activity. Ezra praised God, the people responded, "Amen! Amen!," and they prostrated themselves on the ground in worship (v. 6).

The Levites also helped the people hear and respond to God's word. While we don't know details of their format or method, the Levites gave spiritual instruction that corresponded with the reading of God's word. Perhaps like a small-group discussion following a large-group teaching, the Levites made sure the meaning was clear so the people could understand what was being read to them from the Law of Moses (vv. 7-8).

Moved to action

After hearing and understanding the Scriptures read to them, the people were moved to action. Their first impulse was to grieve and weep. Similarly, in 1 Kings 22 when Josiah rediscovered the Book of the Law, he tore his robes and wept with an awareness of the people's sin. But Nehemiah, Ezra and the Levites instructed the people not to grieve but instead to feast. It seems both responses are appropriate.

Psalm 19:8 says, "The precepts of the Lord are right, giving joy to the heart. The commands of the Lord are radiant, giving light to the eyes." The people moved from grief to celebration, because they had gained an understanding of what God's word said.

Next, the people moved quickly into obedience. After the marathon reading on the first day of the seventh month, we learn they returned on the second day "to give attention to the words of the Law" (v. 13). There they learned the Feast of Booths—also called the Festival of Tabernacles or Sukkot—was to be celebrated in the seventh month, so they quickly sprang into action, spreading the word throughout their towns and in Jerusalem and gathering branches to build shelters. And we see not only was this a compulsory

observance, but they celebrated with joy exceeding any such celebration since the days of Joshua, son of Nun (v. 17).

Hungering for the word of God

The chapter closes by telling us, “Day after day, from the first day to the last,” they read God’s word (v. 18). Like the community in Nehemiah 8, have we fostered the spiritual discipline of studying Scripture and applying it to our lives? Do we hunger for the Bible and prepare our hearts to hear and understand?

Do we allow God’s word to penetrate our hearts and our minds to the point where it leads to both repentance and celebration? Whether you ever engage in an I Am Second discipleship group or not, cultivate the discipline of studying God’s word. And as God’s truth takes root in your life, you might ask yourself: “What will I do now? Who will I tell?”