

# Nehemiah - Obedience

REVIEW: In the last two weeks we have seen two things that have a huge bearing on today's message. Two weeks ago, Nehemiah and company held a meeting in which they read the Word of God to the people. The people were so cut to the heart in hearing the Word of God that they began to weep. Nehemiah stopped them and reminded them that it was to be a day of celebration instead. So the people threw parties in their homes, and helped the less fortunate around them. The reading of the Word of God continued - basically they had Bible study. As a result, the people had several hours of confession of various and specific sins that they realized they had been committing.

TRAN: So on this road to revival, God's people have become people of the Book - dedicating themselves to God's Word. They have confessed their sins. Today is the cement that holds it all together.

INTRO: There was a young man in a church who always ended his prayers in the same way. After a nice prayer for his brothers and sisters in Christ, the events of life, the events in his life, this young man would say, "And Lord, clean the cobwebs out of my life! Clean the cobwebs out of my life!"

At first this was quite the refreshing prayer to his fellow church members. It displayed a sense of honesty, humility, and understanding that maybe he did not see all the sin or issues in his own life.

After several months had past, one member noticed that despite always ending his prayers the same way, he saw no change in the young man's life. So despite the pleas for understanding of sin in the corners of his heart, this man failed to deal with the sins in his heart. So one evening at the end of Bible study, the young man prayed once again - a lovely prayer - ending with, "Please Lord, clean the cobwebs out of my life! Clean the cobwebs out of my life!" To which the other member interrupted, "And while You're at it Lord, kill the spider!"

TRAN: The Jews needed to move beyond confession to obedience. Anyone can pray all the eloquent prayers in the world, confessing sin as they go, but if there is no obedience behind it, it is just words. These people were serious about what they prayed, and wanted to make a new beginning. Alexander Whyte said, "The victorious Christian life is a series of new beginnings." Sometimes we read at the end of the church service from Jude 24 that God is able to keep us from stumbling. If we do stumble, He lifts us back up and gets us going again.

Nehemiah 9:38; 10:28-39

I. To obey displays obedience to the Word of God - 9:38; 10:28-29

# Nehemiah - Obedience

- A. We will not deal with the list of names, other than to say this
  - 1. Nehemiah's name heads the list - so it appears that he is leading out
  - 2. Several groups of people are represented here with many that did not sign individually
    - a) They did not sign, but they did agree to this covenant
    - b) Basically, if they heard and understood the Word of God, they submitted themselves to this covenant
- B. All of these people are making an oath to the Lord
  - 1. Turn to Numbers 30:1-2 - It was a big deal when you are making an oath to the Lord
    - a) It is not to be entered lightly
    - b) It is something that we throw around flippantly nowadays
      - (1) We say things like, "I swear to God"
      - (2) If they uttered those words, they understood it was binding
  - 2. Notice, back in Nehemiah 10:29 that they are binding themselves with an oath and a curse
    - a) This is like a cause and effect situation
    - b) If a covenant is broken, the curse will come into effect
    - c) Covenants, oaths and curses are so closely related in the OT that they can function as synonyms in a few cases (cf. Deut. 29:20)
- C. The covenant is a direct result of what they understood the Word of God to be saying
  - 1. In other words, they were placing themselves under the authority of God's Word
  - 2. Today we like to debate God's Word - think that it is largely a matter of opinion
    - a) The more I study and the longer I go, the less I believe the Bible is up for the opinion's of others
    - b) It is quite clear about all of its central issues - it's a doctrine called perspicuity (clarity) - the Bible is clear
  - 3. God's Word was clear to them, and they responded to it
  - 4. What this boils down to for us in our lives is this:
    - a) If God is God, and God spoke through the Bible, which we confess he has
    - b) Than the Bible has authority over us
      - (1) When it speaks we listen
      - (2) We do not try to find ways around what we don't like
      - (3) We listen, and we obey
- D. This does bring up a question we should answer: Do Christians bind themselves with oaths in our walk in Christ

# Nehemiah - Obedience

1. I would agree with Warren Wiersbe on this one: probably not
  2. I can think of no NT examples of believers binding themselves with an oath for obedience to the Lord
    - a) God desires our relationship with Him to be based on love
    - b) The picture is consistently of a Father/child relationship
  3. Instead our obedience should be a joyful response to what Christ has done for us
    - a) That is the gospel in a nutshell folks
    - b) We are not bound to Christ with rules and regulations, oaths and curses
    - c) We are bound by seeing the amazing work of God in Christ, and follow Him out of love for Him
    - d) We don't have a successful Christian life because of what WE promise GOD, we have a successful Christian life because WE BELIEVE the PROMISES OF GOD and ACT on them
- II. The commitments the Jews make - 10:30-39
- A. The Jews are separating themselves from the parts of culture that pull them away from God
1. It was the culture around them that worked against the Jews
  2. The Gentiles did not observe the Sabbath, and the merchants wanted to do business - so the Jews over time let that command of God fall to the wayside in order not to miss out on potential profit
    - a) Sound familiar?
  3. Separation is total devotion to God
    - a) So, when you found that special man or woman that was just right for you, you devoted yourself to them, and you separated yourself from any other potential mates
    - b) It is a commitment motivated by love
    - c) The same is true for us today in our relationship to Christ
      - (1) We separate ourselves in order to devote ourselves
      - (2) And we do it because we love Jesus Christ
      - (3) We love Him, because He first loved us
  4. When we unite with Christ, we also unite with Christ's bride, the church
    - a) If we try to unite with Christ and forget to unite with our brothers and sisters, that leads to isolationism
    - b) Isolation only leads to sin
- B. The first area mentioned of separation of the culture is the family - v.30
1. The concern for separation here is religious, and not racial
    - a) Rahab is an example of someone outside Israel that became a follower of God

# Nehemiah - Obedience

- b) Ruth the Moabitess is another example - so it is not a racial thing
- 2. What is at stake here is the loss of faith for the Jewish mate
  - a) Turn to Exodus 34:15-16
  - b) This is why the prohibition against marrying unbelievers
    - (1) To this day I still fight this battle with students and their parents!
    - (2) The principle is very simple, it appears in both testaments of the Bible - do not marry unbelievers
      - (a) This is why I have told you before I will not perform the wedding for a spiritually mixed couple
  - c) The biggest argument that I get is that I am being ungracious, and that it gives the Christian the opportunity to share Jesus with the unbeliever
    - (1) Question: Is there something wrong with them sharing Jesus with the unbeliever and remaining friends?
    - (2) Granted the prohibition is against marrying an unbeliever, so they are not doing anything wrong dating, right?
      - (a) One problem - every day that passes they fall deeper in love
      - (b) So biblically the relationship ends in heartache - so why do that to yourself if you are committed to following God's Word
  - d) I promise you, I will get people objecting to me after this sermon - "You don't understand Pastor, that's how me and my spouse met."
    - (1) Praise God that it ended that way for you
    - (2) For every success story you hand me, I can hand you five train wrecks
      - (a) Some were painful break ups before marriage
      - (b) Others were lives that became disasters after marriage
      - (c) And many, many cases of Christians who made compromise after compromise until you could not tell their faith from any person walking down the street
- C. The second area mentioned is the Sabbath - v. 31
  - 1. The observance of the Sabbath was a Jewish practice, and the surrounding Gentile community treated the Sabbath just like any other day of the week
    - a) They would come to Jerusalem to trade and socialize
    - b) Jerusalem was on a heavily used trade route
  - 2. The Sabbath was not to be a drudgery for the Jews
    - a) It was designed as a day to rest and contemplate their relationship with God
    - b) It was a weekly reminder that they had a special calling by God

# Nehemiah - Obedience

3. Because the Jews did not observe the Sabbath, it got them into all kinds of trouble before the Exile into captivity
    - a) Their disobedience of the Sabbath was a symptom
    - b) It was a symptom of rebellion against God
  4. Here is the difference between them and us: we are not Jews living under the Old Covenant, bound by the law
  5. If you think that let's you off the hook, think again
    - a) Our day is called the Lord's Day, and it is in many ways much richer and fuller than theirs
    - b) We get to rest, and contemplate the full picture of the salvation of God
      - (1) What they only had a small glimpse of
      - (2) We have the whole picture - of how Christ, the lamb of God, not would take away, but DID take away our sins
  6. Let's think about the parts of the Sabbath and what carries over to us
    - a) The Sabbath was about rest
      - (1) God rested on the seventh day which makes the idea of rest bigger than just the Sabbath - so rest would carry over to us
        - (a) And this is an area that we need to commit ourselves to like the Jews here in Nehemiah 10
        - (b) We have forgotten how to rest, and it is killing us
    - b) Their's was a day of contemplation - more than likely contemplating sin, atonement, and the promise of God leading to the Messiah
      - (1) There is no reason we cannot contemplate, but our's is different
      - (2) We look back at the Messiah, more so than just thinking on the Messiah, it should lead us to joyful worship
      - (3) Sunday (or according to Paul, whatever day you set aside) should be the most joyful, the most looked forward to day of the week
    - c) The Sabbath was a day (or season) of trust
      - (1) Especially when you get into the Sabbatical year, (a year in which the Jews let the land rest and did not plant) it displayed trust in God
      - (2) For us, taking one day in seven to trust that the world will continue to turn without our involvement may shock us - but it is true - and it allows that space to rest
- D. The last area that is mentioned is the support of the "house of God" - 10:32-39
1. The phrase "house of our God" appears 7-8 times in the passage referring to the restored temple

# Nehemiah - Obedience

2. The famous preacher G. Campbell Morgan said, “Whereas the house of God is no longer material but spiritual, the material is still a very real symbol of the spiritual. When the Church of God in any place in any locality is careless about the material place of assembly, the place of its worship and its work, it is a sign and evidence that its life is at low ebb.”
  - a) We know God does not live in house made by human hands
  - b) God inhabits our hearts and our lives
  - c) But the way we care for the church building does say something about our hearts and what we think of God
    - (1) One of the reasons old churches were so ornate
    - (2) It was an issue of the glory of God
3. This area of the “house of God is broken down further starting with the temple tax
  - a) According to Exodus it was a half-shekel
    - (1) Here it is a third of a shekel
    - (2) Probably because of the difference in currency between Persia and the Jews
    - (3) Or perhaps because this is an annual tax in Nehemiah and a tax taken only during a census in Exodus
  - b) This tax may seem irrelevant to us as it talks about giving tithes in a few verses, but it really is not
    - (1) This tax was given to maintain the materials needed for the Temple worship
    - (2) But it also showed a desire for a central place of worship
      - (a) Sure the Jews could have worshipped in their homes
      - (b) But their heart was to be together to worship God
4. A second area under the house of God is wood offering - v.34
  - a) The fire on the brazen altar was to continue burning constantly (Lev 6)
    - (1) Obviously a steady supply of wood was needed
    - (2) And wood was a commodity back then
  - b) There was no specifics given in the law about a wood offering
    - (1) When God does not give us specifics, there is freedom in how to get the job done
    - (2) And I think that not everyone could contribute to the Temple in the same way, but just about anyone could contribute wood
  - c) Today, you may not be able to contribute large sums of money, or pay for the new wing of the church, or even pay for the furnishings in the new wing, but you can always contribute something
    - (1) Just as wood was a commodity back then

# Nehemiah - Obedience

- (2) So time is a commodity now - consider how you might be able to contribute time to the cause of Christ today
- 5. The next area is about the first fruits - v.35-36
  - a) The Jews were always taught to give their first and best
    - (1) "Honor the Lord with your wealth, with the first fruits of all your crops" - Proverbs 3:9
    - (2) Even in the days of Cain and Abel, Abel brought a better offering than Cain did - we assume that means Abel was observing this idea of giving your best to God
  - b) Nowhere in the Bible does it tell us how much of the first fruits to give - but it was to be brought before doing anything else with their harvest
  - c) Again, a principle for us would be simple - honor God with the first and best of what you have
    - (1) If you receive an unexpected blessing, give a portion, the best to the Lord
    - (2) This is even true of our paychecks, giving to the Lord the first, and best
- 6. The final area is the tithes
  - a) We have talked about this in the past, tithe means tenth
  - b) What you may not know is that in the law, the Jews were to tithe three times
    - (1) You do the math - 10% times 3 equals...
    - (2) There are differences between them and us
      - (a) They were supporting a theocracy (a governmental system in which God was the head)
      - (b) They were under the old covenant and the law, we are not
  - c) So there is no express command in the New Testament for tithing
    - (1) But we have talked about how the expectations go up in the NT
    - (2) God leaves open how to fulfill the expectation, but generously is the idea
  - d) Really the area of tithes should be looked at not as 10%, but as 100%
    - (1) All that I have is from God, and I will be generous with what God has given me
    - (2) All that I have is from God and for His glory, so I will give back generously for His glory
  - e) Motivation is a key in giving back to God
    - (1) You can be motivated by fear, duty or greed (God must prosper me if I give)

# Nehemiah - Obedience

(2) You might think that after you give, the rest of what you have can be spent any way you like - that is a failure to see that 100% is God's

- f) In these last couple of chapters we have talked about revival
  - (1) "Where there is true spiritual revival, it will reveal itself in the way we support God's work, beginning in our own local church."  
- Warren Wiersbe
  - (2) Winston Churchill put it this way, "We make a living by what we get, but we make a life by what we give."
  - (3) And let's not forget Jesus in this picture, "Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also."

## III. The people in Nehemiah made a covenant to do these things

- A. This is their way of committing themselves to do what they should do, and not do the things that were dragging them away from God
- B. Last week we talked a lot about confession
  - 1. Hopefully you did some business with God
  - 2. But confession must lead to obedience - which is where we started the sermon
- C. Some people debate about making formal commitments or covenants with God, feeling that we as the weaker party in the covenant should not be setting the terms for the commitment
  - 1. Seems like a foolish reason to me
  - 2. We are the weaker party regardless of who sets the terms
  - 3. And the reality is obedience is set by God - He sets the standards of what obedience is
- D. Some of you should make your commitments concrete
  - 1. One of the least used tools God has given us is our brothers and sisters in Christ
  - 2. It's called accountability, and it can be so helpful
  - 3. I encourage and urge you to make your commitments to obeying God's Word known to fellow believers
  - 4. So we are going to do one thing in here as we close
    - a) Raise your hand if you have areas in life that you have made or need to make commitments to obedience of God in.
      - (1) Look around for a minute
      - b) Understand that the hands you see up are people you can approach because they realize they need work too
      - c) You guys are so great before church about sharing
      - d) Now is the time to get good at sharing about stuff that really matters