

THIS WEEK'S MESSAGE

OCTOBER 9TH - 10TH, 2021 // BOOK OF NEHEMIAH

SEPARATION (NEHEMIAH 13:1-3)

Ch. 13 begins with a description of one final activity that occurred at the wall dedication ceremony of Ch. 12.

- "On that day they read from the Book of Moses..." (vs. 1) - and as they did, they became aware of God's standards for His people.
- One standard stated that the Ammonites & Moabites were not to be regarded as part of Israel, the people of God (Deut. 23:3-4).

We know that converts to Judaism were always allowed a place in the assembly of God (Ruth was a Moabite).

- This prohibition only applied to Ammonites and Moabites who refused to join with God's covenant people by leaving the gods of their people.
- If they wanted God's blessing, protection, and covering, they had to reject their gods and embrace Yahweh the God of Israel.

Why was this particular people group singled out?

- Long ago, the Ammonites and Moabites had schemed against Israel (vs. 2, Num. 22-24) and had hired the "prophet" Balaam to pronounce a curse on Israel.
- But God had turned each attempt at a curse into a blessing!
- However, Balaam seduced many among Israel to participate in immorality and idolatry, which resulted in Israel being disciplined by God (Num. 25).

In obedience to God, the people separated themselves from anyone who was a part of this anti-Yahweh culture but still wanted to hang around Israel, perhaps to get some blessings.

- There are many in our day and age who want the blessings, protection, good-feelings, reassurance and covering that identifying as a "Christian" may provide...but they still have an appetite for the things of this world.

To be a part of the family of God, you have to be born [again] into it! (John 3:3, Rom. 2:28-29)

- You also must be willing to leave behind the thinking and lifestyle of godless cultures and embrace a new family, culture, and lifestyle.
- As Christ Followers, we must be fanatical about our allegiance to King Jesus and His Kingdom above the kingdoms of this world- and we must be unashamed of the standards of God.
- We can't water it down or compromise!

COMPROMISE IN THE TEMPLE (NEHEMIAH 13:4-14)

Vs 6 tells us that Nehemiah had left Jerusalem for some time and returned to the Persian capital to see the king.

- His first term as governor had lasted 12 years (5:14), and after that he had apparently gone back to his duties in the Persian court.
- We don't know exactly, but scholars estimate that he could have been gone from Jerusalem for anywhere from 10-12 years.

Nehemiah had seen God do miraculous things during his term as the governor - God had given him protection, provision, and success in rebuilding Jerusalem.

- Now as he returns back to this city he has invested so much of himself into, what does he find?
- Eliashib the high priest had entered into an agreement with one of the enemies of Nehemiah's work, Tobiah (vs. 4-5).

Tobiah, an Ammonite, had been given a room in the house of God (the temple!)

- This was wrong on so many levels...
 1. This man hadn't joined the people of God in terms of his covenant to God (he was still very much a pagan, godless Ammonite).
 2. The room he was staying in was supposed to hold the contributions (vs. 5)... so where were all the contributions??

The tithes and contributions that were supposed to be in the storeroom were missing because the people had neglected to give (vs. 10).

- Because of this, the Levites and singers responsible for service within the temple had moved out of Jerusalem and gone home.
- Neglect and compromise in the spiritual life of God's people continue to be two great enemies we must war against.

Nehemiah was understandably grieved and very angry, and so he took action to make reforms.

- First, he threw all of Tobiah's household goods out of the rooms he occupied, then he ceremonially cleansed the rooms, and then he put the rooms back to their proper use as storerooms (vs. 8-9).
- Then Nehemiah confronted the officials, set up collection stations around Judah so contributions could be collected, and set up treasurers over the storehouses (vs. 11-13).

TOO BUSY FOR THE SABBATH (NEHEMIAH 13:15-22)

When they signed the covenant, the Jews promised to honor God in their working lives by not doing business on the Sabbath (10:31).

- But Nehemiah finds the people not only doing business with Gentiles but doing their daily work and carrying unnecessary burdens (vs. 15-16).
- The Sabbath was being completely ignored in disobedience to God's clear command - the people were just too busy to honor the Lord.

At the root of their disobedience was the question of priorities.

- It's not wrong to work hard in your business, to be diligent in your household chores, or to enjoy certain projects/hobbies.
- But when any of these things take priority over regularly worshipping God and spending time resting with your family - something is wrong, and disobedience is in play.

"Busy-ness" is a crummy excuse for spiritual negligence.

- Being "too busy" for church, family, or things that truly matter is an indication of a heart that is worshipping something else besides the Lord.

- When we're always in hurry, it's usually because we're running away from something or we're running to something.

- We are the ones to blame for being in a hurry.

Nehemiah took three steps towards fixing the situation.

- First, he rebuked the Jews who were working and selling on the Sabbath and made them stop (vs. 15).
- Then, he rebuked the nobles for allowing business to happen on the Sabbath (vs. 16-18).
- Lastly, he ordered the city gates shut on the Sabbath (vs. 19).

His last method for making sure people didn't work on the Sabbath is probably not one we should emulate ("...if you do so again, I will lay hands on you!!", vs. 21), but it worked, nonetheless.

- This is a picture of us dealing with sin in an assertive, direct, and drastic manner.
- When we make excuses, wink at, or justify open sin, we invite the correcting judgment of God.

FOREIGN INFLUENCE (NEHEMIAH 13:23-31)

"IN THOSE DAYS I ALSO SAW THE JEWS WHO HAD MARRIED WOMEN OF ASHDOD, AMMON, AND MOAB..."

The most drastic disobedience to God's command was this practice of intermarrying with the pagan nations that surrounded Jerusalem.

- The children from these marriages didn't, "speak the language of Judah" - how could they read God's Word or participate in holy services?
- What was the future of the Jewish nation?

Pursuing ungodly romance and getting involved in relationships God has said "no" to has a trickle-down effect in the long run.

- Raising children to fear and serve the Lord is very difficult when only one of the parents is a follower of God.
- If the generation to come, "doesn't know how to speak the language of Judah" - what's the future for the people of God in our nation?

Nehemiah is an old dude at this point, and he's been through a lot, so we can cut him a bit of a break with how he responds...just don't follow his example.

- He gets so mad he "curses them, beats them, and pulls out their hair" (vs. 25), and makes them take an oath to promise to never do it again.
- Then he gives them a sermon about what happened to Solomon (vs. 26-27).

While he's still on his "berzerker rampage", he finds out that one of the grandsons of Eliashib the high priest was son-in-law to Sanballat the Horonite (vs. 28).

- This was a desecration of the bloodline of the priesthood! Nehemiah gets so mad about this he chases the dude, presumably out of Jerusalem to signify exiling him from Israel.

His final reform is cleansing the priesthood and Levites from "everything foreign", reestablishing their duties, and providing for the wood offering and first fruits (vs. 30-31).

- "Remember me, O my God, for good!" - at the end of it all, Nehemiah knew he had done his very best to make the people of God strong, safe, secure, and holy. But it still seems he carried with him a sense of failure and futility.

THE BROKEN PROMISES OF MEN

- God delivered his people, and they had promised Him that they'd follow His rules, commands, and direction.
- But it only took them 10 years as a nation to allow compromise, negligence, and busy-ness to lead them to break their promises.
- This is the history of Israel in the Old Testament in a nutshell... and this is us too!

All of us have at least a basic understanding of God's commands, rules, and directions for our lives - but still for many of us compromise, negligence, and busy-ness keep us from following them.

- The point is this- rules, laws, vows, promises, covenants, recommitments on their own are ultimately powerless to stop sin.

The book of Nehemiah points out that true renewal is only accomplished through God giving His people a new heart (Jer. 31, Ezek. 36).

- Only the presence and grace of God, alive and flowing in our lives, can give us the power to overcome sin and live as the people of God.
- Social, moral, and political reform always come up short - because they can't address the root problem of sin in the human heart.

ASKING THE RIGHT KIND OF QUESTION...

- What is it that's truly broken in our world and in us? Is it capable of being fixed through religion or moralism? Legislation? Human effort? Money? Fame? Adoration or Acceptance?
- What is it we're truly after in this life? When we're always in a hurry, rushed, and discontent - what are we after or what are we running from?

Have the gods of our culture - entertainment, busy-ness, money, power, sex, materialism, fame, intoxication, "being right" - saved us?

- Has self-righteous anger over the sins of the world changed anything? Has it brought peace, joy, love, and contentment to our hearts?
- What's truly broken in our world and in us? And can it be fixed by rage or consumption?

JESUS OFFERS US A NEW HEART

- The only hope for the brokenness both in us and in our world is Jesus.
- We need Him to save us from sin and put His Spirit in us to transform our hearts.
- What the Gospel is inviting us into is NOT outward conformity to a set of rules, laws, and moral - we've been offered a new heart (Ezekiel 36:26).

If your heart has been changed, you understand that Jesus is the only answer to the brokenness of humanity and the only thing that can quench your thirst.

- If your heart has been changed, you're losing your thirst for the things and answers of this world.
- Don't ever let compromise, busy-ness, or negligence lie to you and lead you away from who you truly are and what can quench your thirst.