



Ludwig von Beethoven had a life marked with both triumph and tragedy. By age 5 he was playing the violin. By age 13 he was a concert organist. He became a prolific composer, writing 9 symphonies, 5 concertos and countless pieces of chamber music. But his life was marked with trials. By age 20 he started to lose his hearing. By 40, his hearing was almost gone. By 50, he was stone deaf. One day in his study he was heard pounding the piano and saying over and over again, "I will take life by the throat and I'll never let go!" Those who knew him said he was the most persistent and passionate man they'd ever met and he accomplished far beyond normal human ability because he faced up to his challenges and was determined to do something about it.

This is a quality greatly needed today. Too often, when problems come our way, many of us try to ignore them and hope they'll go away. Only a few are willing to take problems by the throat and do something about them. Nehemiah had that quality. When something was wrong he'd do something about it.

That's exactly what we find in the thirteenth chapter of Nehemiah. During the past few weeks we've seen the completion of the wall around Jerusalem. We've seen Ezra and Nehemiah lead a revival among the people. We've also seen the people start moving back inside the walls to repopulate the city. In short, we've seen these people rebuild their broken world.

Today we come to the end of this book. And you'd think after all he'd accomplished Nehemiah might be able to relax a little bit, but here in chapter 13 he faces the most difficult challenge of all. This chapter covers Nehemiah's second administration. Verse 6 says in the 32nd year of King Artaxerxes, after 12 years in Jerusalem, Nehemiah returned to Babylon. He was probably there a number of years. And, you might say, when the cat was away the mice **did** play! But then Nehemiah returned. What he encountered upon his return wasn't a pretty sight. Practically everything he'd established fell by the wayside.

Yogi Berra said, "It's not over 'till it's over." This is true whether in the church or in our personal walk with Christ. Just like with Nehemiah, there are those seasons we feel we've made great progress. There are times in our walk with God we feel close to him and see him using us in a huge way. There are those times as a church we feel we're making great strides. But then we get hit in the face with a new challenge. Maybe that's how God prunes and matures us. J.I. Packer writes, "For the Christian life to be all thrills would work against maturity and inner toughness, and ripening and toughening us is central to God's plan....Thus in actual experience God-given times of great spiritual intensity and major achievement in ministry are often followed by times of decline."

This is what happened to Nehemiah and the people of Jerusalem. After the dedication of the walls they had to go home and deal with the everydayness of life with God. And they weren't prepared for it, they didn't fare well spiritually. When the going got tough, instead of ripening and maturing, they gave in and began to let their previous spiritual commitments slide. When Nehemiah returned he found quite a mess. It had to be so disappointing for him, after all that work and all that progress to see them slipping back to their old ways. How would Nehemiah deal with this mess? How do you deal with messy situations?

Four Areas of Spiritual Compromise

Before we answer that question, let's take a closer look at what Nehemiah faced when he returned to Jerusalem, when there were four areas where the people were compromising in their walk with God. It's these four areas we're tempted to compromise as well.

Compromising friendships

The first area has to do with friendship. Look at verses 1–5:

On that day the Book of Moses was read aloud in the hearing of the people and there it was found written that no Ammonite or Moabite should ever be admitted into the assembly of God, because they had not met the Israelites with food and water but had hired Balaam to call a curse down on them. (Our God, however, turned the curse into a blessing.) When the people heard this law, they excluded from Israel all who were of foreign descent.

Before this, Eliashib the priest had been put in charge of the storerooms of the house of our God. He was closely associated with Tobiah, and he had provided him with a large room formerly used to store the grain offerings and incense and temple articles, and also the tithes of grain, new wine and olive oil prescribed for the Levites, musicians and gatekeepers, as well as the contributions for the priests.

Eliashib is the priest who Nehemiah had left in charge of the Temple. The other character we see here is Tobiah, an Ammonite. As an Ammonite God's law didn't even allow him in the Temple. Furthermore, he was an old nemesis of Nehemiah's, having opposed the work on the walls from the start. But here Eliashib, being related to Tobiah, took a large room that was supposed to store supplies for the Levites, and allowed Tobiah to live there. It's like this Ammonite is in the penthouse suite of the Temple! He somehow weaseled his way not only into the city but into the very epicenter of worship, the Temple. Eliashib felt it was a time to relax God's standards about friendship with foreigners. I'll bet he was a nice guy. He even has a Jewish name.

This is the compromise of close partnership or friendship. It happens in our lives when we allow someone who's not a believer to have a position of influence and impact on us. Don't get me wrong, we can form friendships with those who don't know Christ, but we're talking here about being yoked together in such a way you can't help but be influenced by them. Paul said, *"Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? What harmony is there between Christ and Belial? Or what does a believer have in common with an unbeliever? What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? For we are the temple of the living God"* (2 Cor. 6:14-16a). This isn't just talking about casual friendships but who we turn to in crisis; who we go to for counsel, who we lean on. It's allowing an unbeliever access to the inner sanctum of your life and to influence you in a way that's inappropriate for a child of God.

Neglect of support for God's work

This was directly connected to the second problem area Nehemiah discovered when he returned. Look at v. 10.

I also learned that the portions assigned to the Levites had not been given to them, and that all the Levites and musicians responsible for the service had gone back to their own fields.

He discovers the tithes for the Temple service and the support of the Levites weren't being paid. By the way, that's why a room was available for Tobiah in the first place. Normally that room stored tithes and offerings of grain and wine for the Levites. But people weren't giving their tithes. As a result, the Levites had to go back to their land and make a living. God's Temple was left unattended and uncared for.

Here's another area where we can slide: the area of regular giving to support God's work. When things are going well, giving comes easily; we're motivated to give. But over the long haul giving a portion of our income to the Lord requires staying power. Are you neglecting the house of God? The reason why most of us neglect God's house, his church, is because we're too focused on our own houses, our own lives. If you're a follower of Christ, you're a member of the Body of Christ and where you choose to worship is your spiritual family. How often do you pray for your church and its leadership? Are you committed to worshipping here or is it a convenience? Are you using your spiritual gifts for the building up of Christ's church? Are you surrounded by a small group of people where you're studying the Bible, confessing sin and praying for one another? Do you regularly, generously and cheerfully give financially to the church? Maybe it's time to sit before the Lord and ask the Lord how you can better honor him and his house.

Failure to safeguard the Sabbath

The third problem area Nehemiah faced had to do with the Sabbath. Look at v. 15a.

In those days I saw people in Judah treading wine-presses on the Sabbath and bringing in grain and

loading it on donkeys, together with wine, grapes, figs and all other kinds of loads. And they were bringing all this into Jerusalem on the Sabbath.

For the Jews the Sabbath wasn't Sunday but Saturday. God said this was a day set apart from the other six for rest and worship; no work was to be done; no buying or selling or shopping. This commandment was meant to bring sanity and balance to their lives. It set the Jews apart because it showed their priorities were different. The Gentiles around them had no Sabbath; to them it was just another day for making money.

Today we're not bound to strict observance of the Sabbath, but we are called to be people of balance; people who make rest and worship a priority. If we do that we'll stand out. But this is another area where compromise can set in. We see others who neglect the Sabbath and they seem to get rewarded for it. They get the promotion; they get the raise. Or we see others who have all weekend to just leave town and do what they want, and we have to serve as a greeter at church. It's easy to think, "It works for them. Why can't I live that way?" Before long we're neglecting the priorities God has for us and our spiritual life suffers.

Improper family ties

Finally, the fourth area where Nehemiah faced compromise had to do with love and marriage. Look at verses 23-24.

Moreover, in those days I saw men of Judah who had married women from Ashdod, Ammon and Moab. Half of their children spoke the language of Ashdod or the language of one of the other peoples, and did not know how to speak the language of Judah.

We've seen this before in Nehemiah. God told them that intermarriage was inappropriate. One of the reasons for that we see right here. The children from these unions were speaking the language of the gentile partner instead of Hebrew. That meant these children grew up ignorant of God's law because God's law was written in Hebrew. God had always said the problem of intermarriage isn't a race issue but a faith issue; if his people married gentiles they'd eventually worship gentile gods. And that's what's happening here.

This is an area today where we're so prone to give in. There are so many "nice people" out there who on the surface would be such ideal marriage partners for us. And we begin to think, "What's the big deal if they aren't believers, I can change them; they'll come around and we'll live happily ever after." But more often than not we're the ones who end up changing and conforming.

All this teaches us compromise with the world is always a danger. When I say the "world" I'm talking about it in the biblical sense of the word, meaning the entire worldly system of thinking, values and behavior that's contrary and opposed to God and his word. The Scripture sees the world as constantly trying to squeeze us into its mold and this passage bears witness to that. And here are four areas we're most likely to cave in: friendships, finances, Sabbath and love. These things have hampered God's people for

ages, and we deal with them today. It's so easy to fall into any one of these traps.

No More Mr. Nice Guy

How did Nehemiah deal with these issues? When Nehemiah returns to Jerusalem and sees what's been going on, he gets down to business. No more Mr. Nice Guy! He's like a tornado. You've seen the damage they can do to everything in their path. You know they rate those things: 2.5 is like the kind that lifts houses off their foundation. Nehemiah is at least a 2.5 here. What's amazing is most scholars say he was at least 60 years old by now. That's when most people start slowing down. But not Nehemiah. Winston Churchill wrote, "Success is not final, failure is not fatal: it is the courage to continue that counts." Nehemiah has the courage to continue and he does so with kind of a scary zeal. We see that in several ways.

He saw the wrong for what it was

First, he saw the wrongs for what they were. You might say he was observant, and when he saw it he didn't pretend it wasn't there and look the other way; he allowed himself to take in the unpleasantness of the situation. In v. 7 he says, *"I came back to Jerusalem. Here I learned about the evil thing Eliashib had done..."* In v. 10, he says, *"I also learned..."* In v. 15 he says, *"In those days I saw people in Judah some treading wine presses on the Sabbath..."* And then in v. 23 he says, *"In those days I also saw men of Judah who had married women from Ashdod..."* You get the drift? We have to be willing to look and observe and see reality. So often we develop a "don't ask don't tell" attitude. Like parents who say, "I prefer **not** to know what's going on in my kid's life." There are some pastors who keep their eyes shut to the reality of sin in a church because they're just tired of dealing with it.

He dealt with the wrong ruthlessly

The second thing Nehemiah did was deal with wrongs ruthlessly. Look how he dealt with Tobiah in verses 8–9.

I was greatly displeased and threw all Tobiah's household goods out of the room. I gave orders to purify the rooms, and then I put back into them the equipment of the house of God, with the grain offerings and the incense.

He's mad. He goes into Tobiah's suite and begins throwing all his goods out into the street. Isn't that great! This is like a spring housecleaning! I wish we could have seen Tobiah's face when he returned home to find all his belongings littered in the streets and the locks changed. Nehemiah also gave an order to "cleanse the rooms." That's like fumigation! Nehemiah's not a very nice guy here, is he? He didn't go to his friends and say, "Gee, maybe we should pray about this situation with Tobiah." He didn't go to Tobiah and say, "Gee, would you consider leaving by the end of the month?" He went in there and said, "Haul the stuff out! Get rid of the guy!"

But that's not all. Look how he dealt with the next two issues. When he discovered God's house wasn't being provided for look what he does in verses 11–13.

So I rebuked the officials and asked them, "Why is the house of God neglected?" Then I called them together and stationed them at their posts.

All Judah brought the tithes of grain, new wine and olive oil into the storerooms. I put Shelemiah the priest, Zadok the scribe, and a Levite named Pedaiah in charge of the storerooms and made Hanan son of Zakkur, the son of Mattaniah, their assistant, because they were considered trustworthy. They were made responsible for distributing the supplies to their fellow Levites.

Do you think he did that with a gentle voice? Does this sound like he's pulling punches? No way! He gets in their face and lays the responsibility right at their feet. He says, "This is wrong! You've let this thing go!" Again, he 's not winning any popularity contests here. He does the same thing with the Sabbath problem. He reprimands them in verses 17–19. Same tactless approach!

I rebuked the nobles of Judah and said to them, "What is this wicked thing you are doing—desecrating the Sabbath day? Didn't your ancestors do the same things, so that our God brought all this calamity on us and on this city? Now you are stirring up more wrath against Israel by desecrating the Sabbath." When evening shadows fell on the gates of Jerusalem before the Sabbath, I ordered the doors to be shut and not opened until the Sabbath was over. I stationed some of my own men at the gates so that no load could be brought in on the Sabbath day.

Then here's my favorite. You'll love this. Look how he deals with the mixed marriages in v. 25.

I rebuked them and called curses down on them. I beat some of the men and pulled out their hair. I made them take an oath in God's name and said: "You are not to give your daughters in marriage to their sons, nor are you to take their daughters in marriage for your sons or for yourselves."

How do you like that? Does this sound like a guy running for mayor? First, he curses some of them and then he knocks a few of them around. Finally, he pulls out some of their hair! It's likely this was some kind of judicial punishment which Nehemiah was allowed to administer as governor, but still, he's mad; he's a tornado!

Notice also in each situation he confronted he didn't just condemn the wrong, but he also put up safeguards for what was right to be practiced. He not only cleansed Tobiah's old room but he also put back the equipment of the house of God. He appointed reliable men to oversee the distribution of the tithes. To maintain the Sabbath, he had the gates to the city shut and stationed guards to keep the merchants out. In the cases of intermarriage, he made them take an oath not to do it. It's always wise to set up safeguards that will keep us on track.

What do we do with all this? Would you have enjoyed spending an evening with this guy? Does he just come on a bit too strong for you? Is this just an old crotchety man with a short fuse? I don't believe so. I believe what we see here is zeal. It's not the self-absorbed resentment or personal hostility of a wounded man. This is the action of a zealous servant of God in the face of scandalous irreverence. Yes, Nehemiah was acting within his own cultural context. I don't recommend you pull out people's hair, but there's a place for this kind of zeal and drastic action today. While Jesus was incredibly gentle with those who were broken, he also cleansed the temple with a whip. John explained that by quoting from the Old Testament, "**Zeal for your house will consume me**" (John 2:17b). Chuck Swindoll says, "I have never known anyone who uprooted a deep-seated wrong without first becoming sufficiently angry."

But we're uncomfortable with zeal, especially in the church. Today we'd send Nehemiah to get help to find out what the real root of his anger is. We've elevated two things far too much in our society and that's seeped into the church: being tolerant and being nice. We look at Nehemiah and he was neither tolerant nor nice. He wasn't tolerant because he believed in the absolutes of God's word. And he wasn't nice because you can't always root out sin by being nice. Again, I like what J.I. Packer says, "The assumption, so common today, that niceness is the essence of goodness needs to be exploded." Jesus was good but he wasn't always nice. He called certain people poisonous snakes. He said things like, "If your eye makes you stumble pluck it out." Sounds like zeal to me, but listen to what Paul says in Romans, "**Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord**" (Rom. 12:11).

He looked to God in prayer

There's one more thing to notice in this chapter about how Nehemiah dealt with compromise. In his zeal, he wasn't self-reliant but God-reliant. We see this in four brief prayers in verses 14, 22, 29, and 31.

Remember me for this, my God, and do not blot out what I have so faithfully done for the house of my God and its services.

Then I commanded the Levites to purify themselves and go and guard the gates in order to keep the Sabbath day holy.

Remember me for this also, my God, and show mercy to me according to your great love.

Remember them, my God, because they defiled the priestly office and the covenant of the priesthood and of the Levites.

I also made provision for contributions of wood at designated times, and for the first fruits.

Remember me with favor, my God.

Notice in each one he addresses the Lord, "My God," showing the kind of intimacy he enjoyed with the Lord. Three of these are a request for God to **remember** him for what he's done.

What do we do with this? These prayers almost seem selfish; too focused on his own works; it's like he's boasting before the Lord. But I wonder if perhaps these prayers disappoint us because we're just not as honest and zealous as him. I wonder if there's not a real spirituality here that somehow we've missed out on.

I think of when my kids were young. They loved to do things and say, "Watch, Dad! Look at what I'm doing!" Is that wrong? As a father, I wanted to watch. I'm glad they wanted my approval. That's what Nehemiah does here. He says to the Lord, "Watch me, Lord. No one else seems to care, but I know you do." That's the heart of a child who wants to please his heavenly Father and hear his, "Well done!"

The amazing thing to me is the book of Nehemiah ends on this note of prayer. It ends with Nehemiah looking to God for his reward. "Remember me with favor, my God." It reminds me of something Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 15:58. "**Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.**" I'd say Nehemiah was a man who gave himself fully to the work of the Lord, wouldn't you? And here he just prays, "Lord, don't let my labor be in vain. Remember what I've done here." I think he had a sense he might be fighting a losing battle, that the next time he left Jerusalem the same thing would happen, but he commits his cause and his work to God.

To be honest, the book kind of ends on that note with a thud. Wouldn't it have been far better if Nehemiah ended the book with the dedication of the Temple and all the rejoicing that went with it in chapter 12? Instead we get this feeling all that was accomplished in the book might not last. And, by the way, it didn't last. It wouldn't be long before the walls and Temple would again be torn down by Israel's enemies. This reminds us the old covenant based on the law didn't work. We need more than a great leader like Nehemiah; we need more than rules and regulations. We need a Savior. We need a new covenant. What sinful people like us needed was a whole new arrangement where someone else would fulfill the demands of the law, and where he'd write his law on our hearts and place his Spirit within us so we could walk in loving obedience to him.

That's what we have in Jesus. We have one who kept the law we couldn't keep and we have one who died to be our Savior. And all of that should make our zeal even greater. Like the old hymn says, "Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all."

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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