



Today we are ending our study of the Book of Nehemiah. Ending a sermon series for me is like saying good-bye to an old friend. Since the beginning of summer we've studied the life of this amazing leader, Nehemiah. Let me share a few highlights. After a period of prayer and fasting, Nehemiah bravely talked with King Artaxerxes and got his permission to rebuild the walls of the desolated city of Jerusalem. Once in the city, Nehemiah carefully developed a plan to rebuild the walls. He would need to cast a vision and take people from **here** to **there**. In doing so, Nehemiah inspired a defeated and dejected people. For the first time in 160 years, the people of God were excited and unified. That didn't last very long. Opposition was knocking at almost every door. Nehemiah had to overcome a series of threats and opposition to the rebuilding efforts. Some enemies were outside the wall, others were within. Finally, Nehemiah completed the wall in an astounding 52 days. But, the work was far from over. Nehemiah encouraged and assisted in a national revival. God had set the peoples' hearts on fire for him. Because of that, Nehemiah was able to reorganize and repopulate the entire city. Last week we saw how the people of God celebrated and dedicated the wall to God with great joy and worship. At this point, I wish the book of Nehemiah ended in chapter 12, but it doesn't.

In chapter 13 we go from a spiritual high to a spiritual low. Isn't that how life is sometimes? We've all had those mountain top experiences, those amazing times of success and celebration, only to come back down the mountain and back to reality. For many years I was a Student Ministries pastor and every summer I'd take tons of students to Hume Lake Christian Camps outside Fresno. After spending a glorious week at camp, worshipping God, seeing students' lives changed, before we hopped back on the bus to go home, I would gather all my students and have the "going home" talk. And what I'd tell them was camp is awesome but camp is a Christian bubble. The real world and the real work is down the mountain. The camp spiritual high you are all on will only last so far. If you are going to live for Jesus Christ and walk with him, you'll have to learn how to persevere. How to endure. How to get back up after failure. You are going to struggle with sin and fail. The key is to get back up, with God's grace, and keep up the fight.

Failure is exactly what the older and wiser Nehemiah will have to confront. After leaving Jerusalem to go back to work under King Artaxerxes, Nehemiah returns to Jerusalem to find the people of God doing the very things they promised they would not do.

Personally, I would have turned around and went back to Susa. Nehemiah did not. Instead, he tackled the three major failures head on. The first major failure was: the people of God were neglecting the house of God. Let's read Nehemiah 13:4-9.

Failure #1: The People of God Were Neglecting the House of God

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.

But while all this was going on, I was not in Jerusalem, for in the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes king of Babylon I had returned to the king. Some time later I asked his permission and came back to Jerusalem. Here I learned about the evil thing Eliashib had done in providing Tobiah a room in the courts of the house of God. 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.

Originally, Nehemiah was in Jerusalem for about 12 years. After the dedication of the Wall, he left to go back to Susa and report to King Artaxerxes. After several years (we don't know exactly how long he was gone) Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem. During Nehemiah's absence God sent the prophet Malachi, to speak against the failures Nehemiah will address. So likely Nehemiah upon his return was facing hardened hearts that come from repeated failures. Nehemiah must have been discouraged by the spiritual climate he found in Jerusalem. He had worked so hard for over a decade to reinstate the people of God as a thriving and worshipping community of faith. Upon his return, he sees the House of God being completely neglected.

How was this happening? First, Tobiah the Ammonite had somehow acquired a suite in the Temple of God. This is like finding a worm in your apple. If you remember, Tobiah was one of Nehemiah's archenemies. All throughout the rebuilding efforts Tobiah was a hater! He did everything in his power to discourage and oppose the work. So Nehemiah used his power and

influence to keep Tobiah outside the wall. How in the world is the antagonist of the book now living in the Holy Temple of God? Eliashib, the High Priest, apparently had a “close relationship” with Tobiah. Tobiah was like the smooth talking Eddie Haskell from *Leave it to Beaver*. He weaseled his way not only into the city but into the very epicenter of worship, the Temple.

Nehemiah wasted no time dealing with Tobiah. It says that he threw out all of the foreigner’s stuff, cleansed the Temple and returned the Temple pieces to their proper places. Nehemiah basically had the rooms cleared and defumigated. He didn’t want even the smell of Tobiah in the Temple storerooms! I wish we could have seen Tobiah’s face when he returned home to find all this belongings littered in the streets and his rooms filled with grain! It would have been fantastic! But, that wasn’t the only problem in the house of God. Read with me verses 10–13,

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. 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.

The house of God was further being neglected because the Levites and the musicians were not being financially cared for. Specifically, the people of God were not bringing their tithe, their financial contributions, to the Temple. Levites and musicians were officially set apart for the job of keeping Temple worship running. They were the ones who offered sacrifices, burnt offerings and continually gave praise to God. The only way they could serve the Lord is through the generosity of the people of God who would tithe (give 10%) of their grain, new wine, and olive oil. The Levites and the musicians would survive and live off that tithe. But, since Tobiah was living in the rooms that once held the grain and the people of God stopped tithing, the Levites and musicians were forced to go back to their hometowns and farm again in order to survive. This was a spiritual disaster.

Once again, Nehemiah took the problem by the throat. He confronted and rebuked the officials, those who were responsible for collecting the tithe. He then appointed men he trusted to distribute the tithes correctly. Nehemiah then challenged all Judah to fill those storerooms back to full with grain, wine and olive oil. And that’s exactly what happened.

For us today, the principle is crystal clear: How are you neglecting the house of God? I asked “how” because we all in some way or another neglect God’s house. The reason why most of us neglect God’s house, his church, is because we are too focused on our own houses, our own lives. The Body of Christ is an organism, not an organization. If you are a follower of Christ, then you are a member of the Body of Christ and where you choose to worship is your spiritual family. Every single one of you is important to the Body of Christ. Every single one of you has at least one spiritual gift you are called to use to build up the Body of Christ and to participate in the kingdom he is building here on this earth. But, it’s so incredibly easy to lose focus of that calling because we all are so busy and have lots going on in our own lives. Some of us believe that the work of the church is reserved for the pastors and paid staff. But, that’s not the New Testament model. You are the church and Jesus is the Senior Pastor.

I want to ask you a series of questions that hopefully will allow the Holy Spirit, not pastoral guilt, to help you consider how you are neglecting the house of God:

- How often do you pray for your church and its leadership?
- Do you consistently give your time, talents and treasure to the local church?
- How often do you come to church every month? When you do come, are you on time?
- Are you actively using your spiritual gifts for the building up of Christ’s church?
- Are you surrounded by a small group of people that you know and know you? A group where you are regularly studying the Bible, confessing sin, and praying for one another?
- Do you regularly, generously and cheerfully give financially to the local church?

Maybe just take one of those six questions and sit before the Lord this week and ask him how you can better honor him and his house.

The second major failure Nehemiah confronts is this: The people of God failed to keep the Sabbath day holy. Read verses 15–22.

Failure #2: The People of God Failed to Keep the Sabbath Day Holy

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. Therefore I warned them against selling food on that day. People from Tyre who lived in Jerusalem were bringing in fish and all kinds of merchandise and selling them in Jerusalem on the Sabbath to the people of Judah. 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. Once or twice the merchants and sellers of all kinds of goods spent the night outside Jerusalem. But I warned them and said, “Why do you spend the night by the wall? If you do this again, I will arrest you.” From that time on they no longer came on the Sabbath. Then I commanded the Levites to purify themselves and go and guard the gates in order to keep the Sabbath day holy.

I bet it all started with one person treading the winepress on the Sabbath, thinking, “Hey, no big deal.” Then someone else said, “He’s working on the Sabbath, so I’ll bring in some grain and sell it.” Before long, there is a farmer’s market set up on the Sabbath and people are working, selling and buying goods. Why was this a problem? First, the people of God were breaking one of the Ten Commandments. Exodus 20:8 says, “*Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy.*” I like to say that the Ten Commandments are not multiple choice. Not only that, but back in chapter 9, the people of God promised again to keep the Sabbath.

The purpose of the Sabbath was and is to remind people that the work they perform isn’t as important as they think it is. The Sabbath reminds us that we are not God. And if God rested after six days of creation, so should we. So we take one day out of seven to stop working, to rest, to worship and remind ourselves of our place in the Creation order. God is supremely reigning over everything, including you and all your work. The Sabbath teaches us to trust God with everything. To trust God with all we didn’t accomplish and with the work we left undone. The Sabbath teaches us that we are spiritual beings, not spiritual doings.

How does Nehemiah confront this failure? He first rebuked the nobles of Judah. He then shut and locked the gates of the city and posted his guards to keep out anyone wanting to trade and sell goods on the Sabbath. Nehemiah even threatened the fish traders from Tyre who were camping outside the doors and told them, “If you stay there, I’m going to arrest you homie! I’m not playing! Straight outta Compton!” He also rebuked the Levites and told them to purify themselves and do their jobs.

The application for us is clear—Are you keeping the Sabbath day holy? Are you taking one day a week to rest, renew and enjoy your God? The Sabbath is not just taking a day off, it’s a day of worship. It’s a day to gather with God’s people, to worship him and hear from his Word. It doesn’t necessarily have to be Sunday

either. My Sabbath is Monday because, guess what, I work on Sunday! The Sabbath is a day for worship and for rest. Whatever it is you do for work, whether you are an executive or housewife, don’t work. Is it hard? Yes. Does it take preparation and discipline? Yes. Will you have to shut off your phone? Probably. But it’s worth it and it’s a command of God for your good.

The final failure and probably the most important to Nehemiah is this: the people of God violated their marriage commitments. Let’s read verses 23–27.

Failure #3: The People of God Violated Marriage Commitments

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. 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. Was it not because of marriages like these that Solomon king of Israel sinned? Among the many nations there was no king like him. He was loved by his God, and God made him king over all Israel, but even he was led into sin by foreign women. Must we hear now that you too are doing all this terrible wickedness and are being unfaithful to our God by marrying foreign women?”

Intermarriage with foreigners had nothing to do with race or culture. It had everything to do with religion. In Deuteronomy 7:4 God told them not to marry people with different faith (in their culture that meant a different culture) because it will “*turn your children away from following me to serve other gods, and the Lord’s anger will burn against you and will quickly destroy you.*” Like all of God’s laws, this was put in place to protect his people and set them apart from pagan nations. To protect them from the heartbreak of being married to someone yet your hearts are moving in different directions. To protect them from doing something that will lead their heart away from God. To protect them from raising children who can’t even speak the language of the Scriptures (Hebrew) as was the problem back then.

In this law of God, something of God’s nature is revealed. Time and time again history has shown us that a person’s loyalty to God gets divided when they marry someone who places their faith in a different god. Nehemiah even gives them a stark example of this—King Solomon. The whole reason they are living in exile in Babylon in the first place is because Solomon had too many wives who divided his heart and then divided his kingdom.

This failure really got Nehemiah going! He was righteously angry. He confronts the sin and even called down curses on them. He

went a little AWOL and beat some of them and pulled out their hair. He then had them take an oath that their children wouldn't intermarry in the future. Notice that unlike Moses, he doesn't tell them to divorce though.

The New Testament is equally clear about marrying someone with a different faith or no faith at all. Apostle Paul in his letters to the churches in Corinth repeatedly addressed this issue. In 1 Corinthians 7 Paul clearly lays out what to do if you are in a marriage and one person is not a Christian. His answer is essentially, don't get divorced, but represent Christ in that marriage covenant. Later he writes, ***“Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? 15 What harmony is there between Christ and Belial? Or what does a believer have in common with an unbeliever?”*** (2 Cor. 6:14–15). Paul is not telling us to completely separate ourselves from non-believers. Not only is that impossible but it's against the mission of Jesus to seek and save the lost. Instead he wants us to be very careful with who we “yoke” and bind ourselves with.

By way of application, there are three areas we should consider in our own lives—friendships, marriage and business relationships. First, friendships. Proverbs says, “Bad company corrupts good morals.” Isn't it true that whoever you spend a lot of time around you'll start to emulate. Teenagers, hear me well—you need to be careful and not develop friendships that will influence you negatively and cause you to participate in their sin. When it comes to marriage, like those in Corinth, if we marry someone outside of our salvation experience, we're walking into serious trouble. Sure, it sometimes works out and the spouse becomes a Christian, but more often than not the marriage of a non-Christian and a Christian will lead to heartache, disappointment, separation and divorce. If you are in a marriage like that, I am not saying it's time to get out. Stay there. Trust God. Pray. And hopefully one day, your spouse will come to know and love Jesus like you do. Finally, in business, you have to be careful and not compromise your Christian convictions in order to work at a company or survive in a contractual relationship. Jesus said, “Be as shrewd as snakes and innocent as doves.” That is good counsel.

In the end, what we see in Nehemiah is a failed experiment. The revival didn't last very long. Worldliness encroached into the spiritual fabric of the faith community. And the book ends on a sour note of failure. Winston Churchill once wrote, “Success is not final, failure is not fatal: it is the courage to continue that counts.” I love that line, failure is not fatal. In the end, what Nehemiah tells us, what all these failures tell us is this—Failure is not final because we have a Savior. Nehemiah is a sign pointing us to our need for a Savior. The people of God didn't have the power to obey and therefore failed because they were under the Law. In many ways Nehemiah is a picture of the Law. He was a constant reminder of their failures. What they needed and what we need is a reviver and a reformer who can work from the inside out. One who can overcome our failures. We need Jesus Christ, the one who never failed.

Nehemiah left a palace to come to a broken place. Jesus left the palace of heaven and entered our broken world. Nehemiah cleansed the Temple as Christ cleansed the Temple. Nehemiah called out sinful religious leaders and rebuked them. Likewise, Jesus spoke truth, got angry at sin, and took action. Both Nehemiah and Jesus showed courage and devotion and did things that were unpopular in order to honor God. They both were devoted to their Heavenly Father throughout their ministries. Yet, Nehemiah didn't always succeed at honoring God. Jesus was beaten and had his beard pulled out. Jesus took our sin and fully dealt with God's wrath. Jesus took the curse and became a curse. Jesus fulfilled every oath and every requirement of the Law. Truth is, we are a much bigger mess than the city of Jerusalem. All those prayer cards testify to that truth. But, love and grace are available through a relationship with Jesus Christ.

Only Jesus can rebuild your broken world. Only Jesus can change you deep within. Our failures are not final because we have a Savior, Jesus Christ. Come to him this morning. Bring all your failures to him and lay them down at his feet.

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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