



To help you understand the Bible verses we're going to read today in Nehemiah 13, let me tell you about a recent experience I had at the Laurel St. Starbucks in San Carlos.

I was sitting inside looking out the huge windows onto the street when I saw a car perform a U-turn and pull into an open parking space right in front of Starbucks. It was early. There weren't many cars out and most of the parking spaces were open. So I thought, no big deal.

The cluster of police officers standing in front of Starbucks didn't seem to share my casual approach. One of the officers walked immediately over to the driver. A conversation occurred which I couldn't hear; the driver got back into her car, backed out of the parking space and drove off.

I was very intrigued.

My intrigue increased when a second car pulled a U-turn and parked. The same police officer walked over, had a conversation; this driver also backed out and drove off.

At this point I thought, "Someone in Starbucks should know that this police officer is running off all their business!"

As I was sitting there trying to figure out what was happening here, one of the drivers returned and parked in the same parking space without doing a U-turn this time. She got out of her car, smiled sheepishly at the police officer and got in line for her coffee.

Now I was totally hooked.

What was going on here? I had to know. I walked over to Officer Carson and asked him what did he say to those drivers?

He smiled and said. "I told them they had performed an illegal U-turn." It was obvious and unquestionable. They had a choice. They could keep their car in the parking space and he'd write them a ticket. Or he'd give them another chance to park legally. To do this they'd have to pull out of the space, drive around the block and repark in the legal fashion.

I loved that approach. He confronted the problem when a law was broken. Then he offered a fair choice for dealing with the consequence of this broken law.

This reminded me of how God interacts with people. As the all-powerful and holy God of the universe, He confronts people when they break laws. In fact, He can't ignore this. To do so would violate His holiness. And in the confrontation of the problem,

God offers a fair choice. "How do you want this to play out? A ticket or a second chance?"

Over the summer, we've been reading through and studying the book of Nehemiah. In this book we've seen an example of how God confronted with His people when they failed to follow His instructions. God had instructed His people to rebuild the wall around Jerusalem. They had disregarded this instruction. God sent Nehemiah to confront them about this and everyone said, "OK. We'll do this God's way" and they rebuilt the wall. God's people were then living inside the newly fortified city. They made a fresh commitment to follow God's laws and the city becomes a healthy, hustle and bustle place. Everything was looking really good.

But the good times didn't last. As we now come to the last chapter in Nehemiah everything is not going well. The people seem to have forgotten their commitment to follow God's laws and God sent Nehemiah again to confront them about breaking four of God's laws. We're going to look at each of the laws and I'll explain why God was bothered about this and in the end I'll wrap this sermon up with one main way this applies to all of us today.

First Problem

Turn in your Bibles to Nehemiah 13:7 and we'll learn of the first problem. Nehemiah has just returned to town after a 12-year trip to Babylon.

"Here I learned about the evil thing Eliashib had done in providing Tobiah a room in the courts of the house of God."

Someone said, "What evil thing did he do?" I'll tell you. In verses 4-5 the Bible says that Eliashib, the High Priest of God's temple, let Tobiah, an archenemy of God, move into a large room that was part of God's temple. This would be like Harry Potter inviting Lord Voldemort to stay in the boy's dormitory in Hogwarts. Or letting LeBron James move into one of the luxury boxes at the Warrior Stadium.

Early in the wall-rebuilding project, Tobiah was disturbed and angry about the wall. When his anger did nothing to deter Nehemiah's work, Tobiah taunted the Israelites and their god. **"What they are building – even a fox climbing up on it would break down their wall of stones!"** (Neh. 4:3).

After the wall had been built, Tobiah didn't give up. He and Sanballat tried to lure Nehemiah out of the city so they could kill

him. They sent him five requests full of insults, intimidation and lies. Tobiah hated Nehemiah, the Israelites, and their God. And when Nehemiah was gone from Jerusalem for 12 years, Eliashib the High Priest had invited Tobiah to move into one of the rooms adjoining God's temple inside the walls of Jerusalem. When Nehemiah learned of this situation verse 8 tells us,

"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."

Second Problem

The second problem Nehemiah had to face was financial misbehavior.

"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" (v. 10).

You might wonder, What's the problem here? Put simply, the Levites weren't getting paid. God had set apart the Levites as a special group of people who weren't supposed to farm or herd so that they could serve as priests, musicians or guards in God's temple. The people of Israel who had land were instructed to give one-tenth of their product—animal or crop—to the Levites at the temple. The Levites would eat the food, trade it or sell it to provide for themselves. In Deuteronomy 12:19 the Israelites were told, **"Be careful not to neglect the Levites as long as you live in the land."**

During the time period we're reading about in Nehemiah, people had stopped following this law of God and the Levites had left their duties in the temple so they could eat and provide for themselves. In response to this, Nehemiah called the Levites back to the temple and instructed the people to start bringing them their payments.

"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" (verses 11–13).

Third Problem

The third problem Nehemiah encountered was a violation of the Fourth Commandment. Remember the Ten Commandments? The Israelites were breaking the Commandment that said they shouldn't work on the Sabbath.

"In those days I saw people in Judah treading winepresses 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" (v. 15).

God had been very clear with the Israelites about this matter. In the Ten Commandments he said, **"Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God"** (Ex. 20:8). This was a very serious law to God. Breaking this law could result in being cut out of the community or being put to death. That is serious, isn't it!

A person might wonder why God took this so seriously. Someone might say this is a good example of how archaic and out of date the laws in the Bible are, or how unnecessarily harsh God's punishments were. The purpose of the Sabbath was and is to remind people that the work they perform isn't as important as you think it is. One day out of seven we're supposed to do a "force-quit" so we're reminded of our place in the universe. God is supremely reigning over everything, including you and all your work. It's God's way of teaching us trust Him with everything.

In response to this Sabbath-breaking, Nehemiah confronts them and instructs them to follow the Fourth Commandment in verses 17–22.

"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.

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

Fourth Problem

The fourth and last problem Nehemiah deals with here concerns their families.

"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" (verses 23–24).

What's the problem that's being described here? These marriages had nothing to do with race, culture or language. It had everything to do with their different faiths. In Deuteronomy 7:4 God told them not to marry people who worshipped another god (in their day and age that meant a different culture) because doing so 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."*

This had happened to countless Israelites over the generations, including King Solomon whose heart was turned to other gods because of the influence of his wives. Ladies, I think this reveals just how powerful you are. At a very basic level we just want to make you happy!

Nehemiah's remedy to this situation was to have them take an oath to reaffirm their commitment to stop doing this.

"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" (v. 25).

So there they are. Four specific laws the Israelites were breaking in Jerusalem around 418 BC.

1. An enemy of God was living in the temple
2. They weren't giving their full offering to God's temple
3. They were working on the Sabbath
4. They were marrying people of different faiths

I've been praying and thinking, What are we to learn from these four laws that were broken and how God responded to them? Breaking God's laws reveal a heart problem.

Here's what I mean. Each of the four rebellious actions in Nehemiah 13 reveal something more than an inappropriate action, they reveal a rebellious heart. It's always about more than the actions because our actions are simply expressions of what's inside. Our motives and passions drive all of our activity.

Isn't that what we found so compelling about the movie *Inside Out*? The movie showed us the inner workings of Riley's emotions, her heart, and how these internal workings were driving all of her behaviors and words. When Jesus was teaching about obedience and the heart in Mark 7:20–21 he said, *"What comes out of a person is what defiles them. For it is from within, out of a person's heart, that evil thoughts come."*

That was highly controversial and offensive to the Pharisees. They prided themselves on being the most moral, rule following people. And Jesus was saying, "A good act isn't enough. Your heart has to be pure too." At another time Jesus confronted them and told them and said, *"You are like whitewashed tombs,*

which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean" (Matt. 23:27).

We don't want to be like that, looking good on the outside but dying on the inside. We want to live lives that have a heart that's pure expressed through good actions. We want them both.

Let's look at the four laws broken in Nehemiah 13 and I'll show you the connection to the heart for each.

1 – An enemy of God was living in the temple

Eliashib, the High Priest, allowed Tobiah to live in God's temple. Why? Possibly because he wanted to earn favor with a powerful man. Think of the perks and advantages that would come with striking an alliance with one of the most powerful men in your world. Perhaps Eliashib was profoundly uncomfortable with conflict. He wanted everyone to just get along. So he ignored Tobiah's past actions and just played nice.

We're not told what Eliashib's motive was for inviting Tobiah into God's temple. But we know enough about how people work to know that his actions weren't random. Something in his heart desired something that was in conflict with God's laws.

2 – The people weren't giving their full offering to God's temple

Why would people do this? I don't think this one's difficult to discern their motive. There's a lot of research on people and their money. A new study of multi-millionaires offers some answers. The study, by SEI Private Wealth Management, found that respondents, worth \$10 million or more, listed two top reasons for not giving more: first, nearly half said they needed more confidence "that the level of their wealth would continue to support their lifestyle and their family," and second, they said they would give more if the markets improved.

If we apply these attitudes to the people in Israel who were withholding their offerings, we can safely speculate that they wanted to control their financial future. They didn't want to give up a percentage of their hard-earned money. Doing so would leave them feeling threatened and vulnerable. Although God promised to throw the gates of heaven open and pour blessings on them, they struggled to trust God in the area of financial giving. In their heart, they were probably trusting in the security they felt from a large bank account.

3 – The people were working on the Sabbath

What would motivate them to do this? A couple of options come to mind. They wanted their success or failure to be determined by the power of their hard work and ingenuity. They didn't want their financial prosperity to be determined by an invisible God who said to rest for an entire day every week. They could use that time to get ahead and increase their power and influence.

Another motive could have been acceptance from the surrounding cities. All of the surrounding cities worked on the

Sabbath and they would have missed out on all the trading. For the Israelites to refuse to trade with them on the Sabbath would have made them look weird. It would have created a barrier between them. In these ways, their hearts were either looking for power or acceptance.

4 – The people were marrying people of different faiths

Doing this was such a clear violation of God's law. Why would they do this? Maybe because they wanted the freedom to give their affection to whomever they chose. They didn't want to limit the choices of whom they would love. Doing so would force them to trust that God would provide for them and bless them.

So you see how all of these law violations connect to the heart. In every example there's a desire in the heart that is driving people to act. This is so important because God is not primarily interested in your good behavior. He is interested in changing your heart. That's why the Apostle Paul said, "*Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners – of whom I am the worst*" (1 Tim. 1:15).

Jesus Christ wants to save us by giving us a new heart.

We've looked at four problems in Nehemiah 13 and the root issues behind the behaviors. However, the greatest problem of all in this story and in our lives hasn't even been mentioned. The greatest problem is that none of us can follow God's laws. We always fall short.

I don't think you need much convincing of this truth but just look back to Nehemiah 8 and 9. The Israelites were having a powerful experience with God's love, holiness and forgiveness. They admitted their wrongs, they were praising God, and then they made an oath to be obedient to God.

In Nehemiah 9:38 they pledged, "*In view of all this, we are making a binding agreement, putting it in writing, and our leaders, our Levites and our priests are affixing their seals to it.*" They made a huge oath to be obedient to God. The verses we've read today from chapter 13 are about 12 years later. They've strayed a long way since then. They're no different than anyone else.

Romans 3:23 tells us that "*all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.*" As much as we'd like to ignore this, we all know it's

true. Kids, you can't be perfectly obedient all the time. Your behavior clip in school isn't always at the highest level. Sometimes you get really angry with your parents and you yell or think bad thoughts about them. Sometimes you tell a lie.

As adults we're too familiar with how we've failed to love our spouses as well as we desire, to love our children as we desire, or to honor our parents as we desire. We know we fall short of God's glory and break His laws.

Theologians say we have three ways of dealing with the cycle of success and failure; see which one relates the most to you:

1. We change the rules to match our behavior (meaning we lower the expectations)
2. We deny the rules exist
3. We rely on someone outside of ourselves to follow the rules on our behalf

Christianity rests solidly on #3. We rely upon Jesus Christ's perfect life, death and resurrection from the dead to meet God's standard on our behalf. I believe it's the most miraculous event of history. It's because of this belief that a godly man such as Billy Graham said, "God's mercy and grace give me hope, for myself, and for our world."

We need God's mercy and grace. God wants the deepest affections of everyone's heart. And He wants to satisfy the deepest desires of everyone's heart with His unconditional love.

Have you been giving your heart to anything or anyone other than God? When you give your heart to anything or anyone else, like Officer Carson, God walks out to the car, confronts us with the inappropriate action and gives us a choice: you can pay the price of the ticket or you can get another chance to do it correctly. This is the personal truth God wants us to learn from these verses: breaking God's laws reveals a heart problem.

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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