

Being Holy

Nehemiah 13:15-31

Nehemiah 13:15-11 - *“In those days I saw people in Judah treading wine presses on the Sabbath, and bringing in sheaves, and loading donkeys with wine, grapes, figs, and all kinds of burdens, which they brought into Jerusalem on the Sabbath day. And I warned them about the day on which they were selling provisions. ¹⁶ Men of Tyre dwelt there also, who brought in fish and all kinds of goods, and sold them on the Sabbath to the children of Judah, and in Jerusalem. ¹⁷ Then I contended with the nobles of Judah, and said to them, “What evil thing is this that you do, by which you profane the Sabbath day? ¹⁸ Did not your fathers do thus, and did not our God bring all this disaster on us and on this city? Yet you bring added wrath on Israel by profaning the Sabbath.”*

¹⁹ So it was, at the gates of Jerusalem, as it began to be dark before the Sabbath, that I commanded the gates to be shut, and charged that they must not be opened till after the Sabbath. Then I posted some of my servants at the gates, so that no burdens would be brought in on the Sabbath day. ²⁰ Now the merchants and sellers of all kinds of wares lodged outside Jerusalem once or twice. ²¹ Then I warned them, and said to them, “Why do you spend the night around the wall? If you do so again, I will lay hands on you!” From that time on they came no more on the Sabbath. ²² And I commanded the Levites that they should cleanse themselves, and that they should go and guard the gates, to sanctify the Sabbath day. Remember me, O my God, concerning this also, and spare me according to the greatness of Your mercy!”

Background Notes for verses 15-22

During Nehemiah's first term as governor the city wall of Jerusalem was rebuilt. It was destroyed many years earlier, when the Babylonians conquered Jerusalem and took the Jews into captivity. Following the rebuilding of the wall, there was a great revival. In chapter 10 the people committed themselves, in a signed contract, to fully obey and follow the Lord. As many as 14 to 15 years had gone by between chapter 10 and chapter 13, and during this time the people had failed and backslidden. The focal points of commitment of chapter 10 had become focal points of failure by chapter 13.

Nehemiah had gone back to Persia, but he began to institute reforms when he returned to Jerusalem for a second term as governor. In verses 1-14 he corrected the lack of giving for support of the house of the Lord and the Lord's servants. Then, in verses 14-22, he dealt with problems connected to the Sabbath. The people were buying and selling on the Sabbath, and treating it like any other day. That was contrary to God's Law.

Doctrinal Point for verses 15-22

“The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.”

In Mark 2:27 Jesus said, *“The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.”* God did not come up with the Sabbath and make it a law so He could crack the whip over “Sabbath breakers.” No! God gave the Sabbath to us as a day to rest. God didn’t create us to go nonstop. We can’t keep going or burn the candle at both ends - even in ministry. We should be busy (that’s biblical), but we need time to rest. We need daily rest, and we need weekly rest. God gave us the Sabbath so we would rest!

In our studies of chapter 10 we learned that we’re not to “legalize” the Sabbath or turn the Sabbath into the “Christian Sunday.” The Sabbath was a ceremonial part of the Old Testament Law, and the Old Testament Law ended with Christ (Romans 10:4). But the **principle** of the Sabbath is rooted in **creation**. It is a **moral principle**. God’s moral principles never change, so a day of rest still holds today. We must take time out from our normal workload to rest, and to give time for worshiping God our Creator.

Practical Application for verses 15-22

Do whatever it takes to be holy.

In 1 Peter 1:15-16 we’re commanded to be holy: *“Be holy in all your conduct, because it is written, “Be holy, for I am holy.”* The word “holy” means “set apart.” We should be set apart for God’s use. We must do whatever it takes to be holy. Notice Nehemiah’s actions in this section. He knew that the Sabbath was to be holy, and he did what it took to keep the Sabbath holy. He contended with the leaders (v17), and he commanded that the gates be shut during the Sabbath (v19). The Jewish day begins at sundown, so he commanded that the gates be shut when it began to be dark on the evening before the Sabbath. And he posted guards! God’s Law didn’t command this, but Nehemiah did whatever it took to keep the Sabbath holy - set apart from the other days of the week.

There is a spiritual lesson here for us. Our lives need to be set apart. We need to do whatever it takes to be more holy. Maybe we need to change what we read, or what we watch on TV, or the movies we watch. Maybe we need to force ourselves to set aside specific time for God. We all need to do whatever it takes to be more holy.

Nehemiah 13:23-30 - *“In those days I also saw Jews who had married women of Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab. ²⁴ And half of their children spoke the language of Ashdod, and could not speak the language of Judah, but spoke according to the language of one or the other people. ²⁵ So I rebuked them and cursed them, struck some of them and pulled out their hair, and made them swear by God, saying, “You shall not give your daughters as wives to their sons, nor take their daughters for your sons or yourselves. ²⁶ Did not Solomon king of Israel sin by these things? Yet among many nations*

there was no king like him, who was beloved of his God; and God made him king over all Israel. Nevertheless pagan women caused even him to sin. ²⁷ Should we then hear of your doing all this great evil, transgressing against our God by marrying pagan women?" And one of the sons of Joiada, the son of Eliashib the high priest, was a son-in-law of Sanballat the Horonite; therefore I drove him from me. ²⁹ Remember them, O my God, because they have defiled the priesthood and the covenant of the priesthood and the Levites. ³⁰ Thus I cleansed them of everything pagan. I also assigned duties to the priests and the Levites, each to his service, ³¹ and to bringing the wood offering and the first fruits at appointed times. Remember me, O my God, for good!"

Background Notes for verses 23-31

Some of the Jewish men had intermarried with pagan women from Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab - Persian provinces surrounding the province of Judah (v23). Inter-marriage with surrounding pagan people was prohibited by the Law (Deuteronomy 7). God did not want false pagan religions of the pagans creeping into Israel. The people had committed themselves to be faithful in this area back in chapter 10 - but they had failed. Even the high priest's grandson had defiled the priesthood by marrying Sanballat's daughter. Remember Sanballat? He was an enemy who opposed the rebuilding of the wall!

What about Nehemiah's stern and harsh actions? *"I rebuked them and called curses down on them. I beat some of the men and pulled out their hair (v25). "Called curses down" means that he was calling on God to judge them for their sin. The people had called for a curse themselves when they took the oath to obey God's Law (10:29). Nehemiah knew that this was a serious situation that could lead to renewed disaster for the nation. "Nor shall you make marriages with them... For they will turn your sons away from following Me, to serve other gods; so the anger of the Lord will be aroused against you and destroy you suddenly" (Deuteronomy 7:3-4).*

Was it proper for Nehemiah to use actual physical force – to beat the offenders and pull out their hair? Remember - Nehemiah was the governor. He wasn't just a Jewish leader at tempting to enforce the Mosaic Law. Nehemiah wasn't just a godly "bouncer"! No. He was the governmental representative of Artaxerxes I, the Persian Emperor, and Artaxerxes had given Nehemiah sovereignty and power over the province of Judah. He had the legal right to use force with those who broke God's Law.

Doctrinal Point for verses 23-31

Children get mixed signals in a mixed marriage.

A "mixed" marriage doesn't mean an inter-racial marriage – it's a marriage where one parent is a Christian and one parent is not a Christian. One of the reasons why God has said that Christians should not be "yoked with unbelievers" (2 Corinthians 6:14) is that the children of a mixed marriage get mixed signals. Notice verse 24: *"And half of their children*

spoke the language of Ashdod, and could not speak the language of Judah, but spoke according to the language of one or the other people.”

There’s a spiritual lesson here for us. In a mixed marriage, it’s almost impossible to have a Christ-centered home. And when you don’t have a Christ-centered home, your children pick up both Christian principles and worldly principles. They get mixed signals. They “speak a mixed language.”

Every summer we’re on staff at a Christian camp for teens. Many of them come from mixed marriages - homes that are not Christ-centered. They come with a mixture of Christian and non-Christian values and attitudes, and often they’re very confused.

Listen! If you’re not yet married, determine to marry only in the Lord, because children get mixed signals in a mixed marriage.

Practical Application for verses 23-31

Never think you’re so strong or so blessed that you can’t fall into sin.

Verse 26: *“Did not Solomon king of Israel sin by these things? Yet among many nations there was no king like him, who was beloved of his God; and God made him king over all Israel. Nevertheless pagan women caused even him to sin.”*

Solomon! That great king of Israel, greatly blessed of God, and yet he fell into sin! What was his sin? He married pagan wives who turned his heart away from the Lord.

This principle can certainly be extended as a principle in other areas. 1 Corinthians 10:12 says, *“Let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall.”* It happened to Solomon. It happened in Nehemiah’s day. Are you thinking right now that you’re strong, and this would never happen to you? You’re vulnerable! It could happen to any of us. When you think that you’re strong and would never fall into sin, watch out! Never think you’re so strong or so blessed that you can’t sin.

Conclusion

This brings us to the end of the book of Nehemiah. Ending the book with a backslidden people doesn’t seem like a happy ending – but the book actually ends on a good note! Nehemiah had gotten things straightened out: *“I cleansed them of everything pagan.”*

Nehemiah. What a great spiritual leader! A dedicated and committed servant of the Lord, all the way through the book! Let’s follow the model that Nehemiah set for us, and the biblical principles we’ve learned from this wonderful book of God’s Holy Word.