



Series: Nehemiah, Healthy Walls	Reference: Nehemiah 13	Title: Reversion	Date: 8.6.17
<p style="text-align: center;">Website Writeup:</p> <p>It would've been nice to end Nehemiah on Chapter 12, since chapter 13 reveals a reversion to old ways once again with which Nehemiah must deal strongly. In this chapter we learn we need to be uncompromising in areas of purity & faith. Our personal walk affects others. Our corporate walk must be guarded. We need to exercise our spiritual muscles; stay in the Word, in community & listen the Holy Spirit. And finally we need to pursue humility & faithfulness in our work for the Lord both corporately & individually. Come explore with us this final chapter of a great book.</p>			

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UPG Prayer of the Day...

Levant Arabs of Syria typically live in villages near fertile regions; but can also be found near mountain foothills in less arid regions & hold strongly to their tribal affiliations. Tribes are ruled by sheiks (Arab chiefs considered to be experts in Islam & relating to outsiders). Their fortress-like villages can be easily defended & all goods & persons passing through are strictly controlled. They're about 92% Islamic with 6% Christian. Social life is extremely important to Arabs who can be often found sitting on the floor drinking coffee together.

Sermon...

Maybe this book should've ended with chapter 12, since chapter 13 reveals a reversion in their behavior. Which is foreshadowed early with mention of the Moabites, Ammonites & the prophet Balaam. Nehemiah had gone back to the king of Persia for a while leaving the Israelites to govern themselves - while the cats away, the mice will play. Let's see...

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. {Neh 13:1-3 NIV}

In chapter 10 they'd taken a vow they wouldn't intermarry with other peoples, at the time they tried to be obedient, although relying on their own strength. Making vows they couldn't keep, they bound themselves with a curse & oath to obedience. However, years later that covenant's already been broken when Nehemiah goes away. Upon his return many Ammonites & Moabites are found in the congregation of Israel through intermarriage; something which God had strictly forbidden in the Law of Moses.

The question is, why were the Ammonites & Moabites to be excluded? Why would God say that? If Israel's to be the 'light of the nations' shouldn't they be welcoming in all ways to them? Seems exclusionary with our limited information. Exclusion to us is a dirty word - it seems immoral. But God isn't immoral - there must be good reason.



The reason is alluded to in mentioning the story of Balaam. When the Israelites left Egypt long before this, they came to the edge of the Promised Land, into the country of the Ammonites & Moabites. But these people didn't offer them the normal desert hospitality of food & water. Instead, they hired the prophet Balaam to curse Israel. When he was trying to ride to the hilltop to curse the people, his donkey saw an angel of the Lord standing in the way. The donkey refused to move, and as a result, the prophet beat him three times. Finally, God caused the donkey to speak: "Why are you beating me?" Then the Lord caused Balaam to see the angel as well.

This was nine centuries before Nehemiah that Israel was mistreated by these peoples. Why keep a grudge for centuries? But, we often forget God reads hearts & inner motives. We view people from the outside & deem God unfair since everything looks friendly & nice. However, He's reacting to the deeper motives of someones heart.

I remember sitting with an old woman, sweet, wrinkly, grandmotherly & adorable, but in the course of conversation, some things came out of this woman's mouth which would embarrass a seasoned sailor! When the heart comes out of even the most pristine person, we're often dumbfounded at the sin found there. God knows these things are there before we do. He knew the hearts of the Moabites & Ammonites. The Israelites needed to follow His lead in this without question, but hadn't.

In Chapter 9 of the book of Ezra, there's an account of a similar situation which arose thirty years before Nehemiah's day. Ezra had led a group back from Babylon to Jerusalem & he too discovered the people were intermarrying with these neighboring tribes contrary to the Law of Moses. Here's what the account says in Ezra 9:

After these things had been done, the leaders came to me [Ezra] & said, "The people of Israel, including the priests & the Levites, have not kept themselves separate from the neighboring peoples with their detestable practices, like those of the Canaanites, Hittites, Perizzites, Jebusites, Ammonites, Moabites, Egyptians & Amorites. They've taken some of their daughters as wives for themselves & their sons, and have mingled the holy race with the peoples around them. And the leaders & officials have led the way in this unfaithfulness." {Ezra 9:1-2 NIV}

Ezra was distressed deeply over this. In the midst of his prayer he adds these words, "But now, O our God, what can we say after this? For we've disregarded the commands you gave through your servants the prophets when you said: "The land you're entering to possess is a land polluted by the corruption of its peoples. By their detestable practices they have filled it with their impurity from one end to the other. Therefore, do not give your daughters in marriage to their sons or take their daughters for your sons. Do not further their welfare or prosperity at any time, that you may be strong & eat the good things of the land & leave it to your children as an everlasting inheritance." {Ezra 9:10-12 NIV} Israel's financial & sexual desires often overrode God's standards & commands...



There was good reason why the Ammonites & Moabites weren't to be mixed with in this way - it wasn't just about Balaam. Their lifestyle was terribly degrading involving deviant sexual practices & child sacrifice in their worship. If they were allowed to intermarry with Israelites they'd interject into the life of Israel these customs. Realize the issue is intermarriage - mixing of faiths. There's nothing that says the Israelites weren't to be a good witness to them - they were just not to be bound in certain ways which would compromise their faith. God's using a visual aid to teach his people, both in Israel & in the church today. These stories are indicating something going on within them & within us today. The Apostle Paul tells us that "*all these things happened to Israel as examples for us upon whom the ends of the ages have come,*" (1 Cor 10:11). And remember in ISAIAH 56:6-7 - God makes provision for foreigners who'd willingly convert & follow God to be accepted fully within the community of faith.

If you trace the Ammonites & Moabites back to their beginnings, you discover they're relatives of Israel. Ammon & Moab were the sons of Lot, the nephew of Abraham. During the destruction of Sodom & Gomorrah angels led Lot & his family up onto the mountainside. Lot's wife looked back & was turned into a pillar of salt, but Lot & his two daughters hid in a cave in the mountain while the cities burned before them. These girls, evidently feeling they were the last two women left on earth, contrived to trick their father into having sex with them. They both conceived & bore sons. One was named Ammon, the other Moab, and they went on to found tribes & countries of the same name. So Ammon & Moab are relatives, yet they're eternal enemies of Israel.

Do you have relatives whom you'd love to get rid of but can't? Troublesome, obnoxious, hard to live with & there's nothing you can do. That's Ammon & Moab with respect to Israel. Constantly harassing Israel, trying to undermine them. Forever trying to corrupt, pollute & destroy them.

We have an enemy like that; our sinful nature. The flesh, as Scripture terms it, which is not your body, but your internal sin nature. That inner commitment to self-centeredness which afflicts us all. When we look in the mirror we see our greatest problem - which is us! This is true of everyone. There's something about us that wants to be king, be lord, be served, be ministered to, regulate everything & run the world with ourselves at the center of it all.

We'd love to get rid of this nature because it tricks, traps, corrupts & injures us. We deplore it & know the misery it brings. It leads us into hurtful actions we repent of later. Sometimes you'd like to get inside, rip it out & get rid of it forever. But you can't - it's related to you. Yet we're called to live above & in victory over it while we struggle with it. We're called to overcome & to walk with God nevertheless. The Christian struggle which does something good in us - constantly leading us back to reliance on God. And we find purity's paramount in our walk with the Lord both individually & corporately.

In Verses 4-9 we get the detail of how this came about. 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 [this is Tobiah the Ammonite, one of the enemies who



consistently opposed the rebuilding of the wall & gave Nehemiah much opposition], and he had provided him with a large room formerly used to store the grain offerings & incense & temple articles, and also the tithes of grain, new wine & oil prescribed for the Levites, singers & 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 & 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 & 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 & the incense. {Neh 13:4-9 NIV}

The High Priest had allowed his grandson to marry into this Ammonite family. We learn later in this chapter he'd married the daughter of Sanballat, the governor of Samaria, who was an ally of Tobiah the Ammonite if you remember from earlier chapters. These were the guys making threats, spreading rumors & taunting the Israelites during the rebuilding. These were bitter enemies of Nehemiah & Israel - now they're being invited into the Temple. Tobiah actually moved into the temple itself. To make room for him the High Priest took over the storeroom set apart for the grain, oil & incense used by the Levites in their purification & rituals. So there were two wrongs involved. Firstly, an Ammonite & his family living in the temple of God, contrary to the Law of Moses. Secondly, in order to permit that they'd deliberately took away the Levite rights of storage. The Ammonites & Moabites weren't there with a searching heart to know God, They were slowly moving in undermining faith & progress.

When Nehemiah returned he went into action. He threw the baggage out, fumigated the room & returned the oil, grain & incense to their proper place. Did he overreact? Today we don't get upset by the presence of evil & think it strange a man should have such strong convictions. At some level we've lost our ability to express indignation over things which are wrong - outside of the popular societal ills. And how these things undermine people, community & intimacy with God.

How often we see the standards of Grace flaunted & say nothing for fear of being deemed judgmental. But, it's not judgmental to call each other to a higher standard set by God. I'm not your judge, but am called to confront if you're claiming Jesus while living in sin. That doesn't make me your judge, it should be done in love & with full knowledge my heart's in as much need of grace as yours, but we're still called to live in a faith community which pursues holiness & purity as God's outlined it.

Churches cease to be relevant & have spiritual power when they allow sin to root. When we allow people to have the upper hand in the community who are not dealing with their own demons. When we're more concerned about institution rather than integrity & purity of the Gospel. When we start to bow to the common logic of our time instead of seeking purity. When leadership becomes more concerned with building its kingdom



rather than Gods. Or, when we allow our convictions to be conformed to the patterns of pop-culture.

It starts with the individual. Each one of us affects the Church in our willingness or unwillingness to walk in purity. A few years back, I had a guy under my pastorate having marital problems. I counseled him & thought it was going well. However, I found out later he was threatening his wife not to tell me certain things. Such as when he came on to a young girl they'd taken into their home as a help. While his wife was in the shower he came onto her - she left without any explanation before the wife got out of the shower. The wife only found out years later when she ran into the girl & asked why she'd left. His wife called me & told me all this, and then said he was going out to meet another woman 15 years his younger at a local bar that night. I was mad! I was lied to, he was destructive. I don't mind counseling people when they show willingness to grow, but when they just want to live in sin & hide it I get angered - I should've been mad! I drove to the bar, waited in the parking lot until I saw them pull up, then turned on my head lights & pulled up in front of them as they walked into the bar. I told the woman to leave & gave my brother a piece of my mind pleading with him to go back to his wife. There are times we pull off the gloves in ministry. His sin affected himself, his wife, that girl & the body in very negative ways & needed to be confronted.

This is similar to when Jesus came into the temple & found it filled with moneychangers making extravagant income off the sale of the sacrifices & offerings - commercializing the worship of Israel. Jesus reacted in a way similar to Nehemiah. He made a whip & cleared the Temple, upsetting tables & driving the moneychangers out. There's a time for drastic action. A time for strong stands against evil which others have indifferently accepted. That's because our individual choices affect the ministry of Christ.

Evil invades quietly; before we're aware of it we've compromised ourselves & gone along with standards widely accepted by others around us. God's people have always struggled in such ways - 'the good ol' days' are a farce. It's always been the constant struggle of our flesh & we must take a strong stand against evil in ourselves & community. Prepared to take drastic & painful action to clear up the things which are wrong in our lives.

We live in this world, we have to deal with it & can't be sheltered from it. I went to Harry Potter with my kids, I have no problems with the story. But am not unaware it has effects. I'm not easily flustered & certainly not a prude, but when Harry & Hermine are pictured nude making out as children in the movie, I have to remember my children have to be talked through that, and we did. The scene was unnecessary, but it comes out of a world-view which is contrary to God & it's the world we live in.

Remember what Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount speaking in dramatic language for proper effect: *"If your right hand offends you, cut it off. If your right eye offends you, pluck it out," (Matt 5:29-30 KJV)*. Take action. Don't allow these evil things to remain. Even if it takes painful effort, end it! If you've allowed your heart to be involved with something evil & it is painful to give it up - you must give it up. That's what Jesus is saying. Bear the pain & stand firm; there's unlimited grace for these things.



Nehemiah went still further: *I also learned that the portions assigned to the Levites had not been given to them, and that all the Levites & singers responsible for the service had gone back to their own fields. So I rebuked the officials & asked them, “Why is the house of God neglected?” Then I called them together & stationed them at their posts. All Judah brought the tithes of grain, new wine & oil into the storerooms. {Neh 13:10-12 NIV}*

This neglect of the Temple is a result of the practice of intermarrying with Ammonites & Moabites. A few peoples choices affected the whole community. When Tobiah moved into the temple & they had to throw out the grain, oil & incense the Levites needed, it meant the Levites had no supplies with which to work. They couldn't perform their ministry, since they were inadequately supported, they were forced to work in the fields. As a result, Temple worship was neglected - ministry was hamstrung. The center of their life as a nation wasn't being maintained. Just like my friend chasing women, his sin took the pastor away from necessary duties of the leading the church & he could no longer serve in the worship ministry of which he was so gifted, and his wife was devastated & her life put on hold.

When we neglect our spiritual disciplines things seep in quietly. It's not an argument of grace vs works, it's an argument of spiritual warfare under the umbrella of grace. We need to commit ourselves to the Word, community life & worship, to maintaining a healthy prayer life - listening the Holy Spirit together. Committing ourselves to growth knowing our individual lives affect others. Nehemiah took action. He rebuked the officials & calls them to account & obedience to God's will. He calls on the people to bring in the tithes, oil & incense again - to refill the temple storage areas, allowing the Levites to return. Due to his leadership, God's order was restored in the nation.

There's still a third step: I put Shelemiah the priest, Zadok the scribe, and a Levite named Pedaiah in charge of the storerooms & made Hanan son of Zaccur, the son of Mattaniah, their assistant, because these men were considered trustworthy. They were made responsible for distributing the supplies to their brothers. {Neh 13:13 NIV}

And, in a characteristic prayer, Nehemiah adds: *Remember me for this, O my God, and do not blot out what I have so faithfully done for the house of my God & its services. {Neh 13:14 NIV}*

This group represents all Israelites; Priest, Scribe, Levite & Layman. All four represent various aspects of the life of Israel & 'these men were considered trustworthy'. Faithful men. We talked about faithfulness last week, remember FATSO?

God desires faithfulness. Paul says in First Corinthians those who minister in the church are *“servants of Christ & stewards of the mysteries of God, and it's required of a steward that he be found faithful,” (1 Cor 4:1)*. The ability to hang in with an assignment until you're through; the willingness to fulfill responsibility with no need to be praised, thanked, or publicly encouraged in order to do so. To work unto the Lord; to



show up on time & not leave until the work's done. The ability to strive towards purity & holiness even in the midst of a chaotic life. Is faithfulness a value today? Or do we pick & choose what we want to do, not necessarily what's needed. When we get bored, we drop it, even though that unfinished task will be taken up by someone else who's probably already busy. Do we compromise in small ways which are leading us ever farther from intimacy with Christ?

Societal values don't necessarily reflect Gods. Manhood in a way has been defined as dull & selfish - watch beer commercials & you'll know what I mean. Boorish, dirty things who care only about four B's; Boobs, Butts, Bud light, & Ball games. Machismo & personality don't matter to Nehemiah; he's concerned about character; faithfulness, humility, love, concern, ministry, teachability, openness, sacrifice, growth, etc.. Those who'll be satisfied with Christ's words, "*Well done, good & faithful servant,*" (Matt 25:21). Nehemiah would've been satisfied with our FATS0 acronym. It's what he looked for in others & modeled himself.

So, in conclusion, we need to be uncompromising in areas of purity & faith. Our personal walk affects others. Our corporate walk must be guarded. We need to exercise our spiritual muscles; stay in the Word, in community & listen the Holy Spirit. We need to pursue humility & faithfulness in our work for the Lord both corporately & individually.