

“The Pledge vs. Performance”
Nehemiah 11:1-13:31
Dan Lepo

Before we get to the final three chapters of the Book of Nehemiah, I believe it will be helpful to summarize this great man of faith’s journey up to this point.

- We first learn that he was a cupbearer to King Artaxerxes.
- He had a heart for Jerusalem, the Jewish people, and a calling to rebuild the wall around the temple.
- Through regular prayer and strong leadership skills, he put together a team to rebuild the wall faster than his naysayers’ thought were possible.
- The Jewish people returned from captivity, and Ezra read and explained the Law to them.
- Revival began with the people confessing their sins.
- Riding that high of cleansing themselves, they committed several oaths to God and ordinances within themselves to live as a holy, separated people from the land – the Gentiles. These oaths and ordinances included issues such as:
 - To neither give their daughters as wives to the people of the land (the Gentiles), nor take their daughters to marry the Jewish sons.
 - If the peoples of the land brought merchandise or any grain to sell on the Sabbath day, they would not buy it from them on the Sabbath, or on a holy day.
 - They would forego the seventh year’s produce and the exacting of every debt.
 - To exact yearly one-third of a shekel (a day’s wage in those times) for the service to the temple.
 - To bring the firstfruits of their ground, the firstfruits of all fruit of all trees, the firstborn of their sons and their cattle, the firstborn of their herds and flocks to the temple.

As we dive into chapters 11-13, Carol appropriately titled this lesson “*The Pledge vs. Performance*.” With Nehemiah leading the way, this positive trend of the exiles of returning to the Lord will continue in chapters 11 & 12. I don’t believe it is an accident that this revival commenced with the teaching of the Law – God’s Word. I continue to be amazed at the extraordinary secular methods seeker friendly churches use to lure people. They think that once the people come in the doors, they can sell them a light version of Jesus in hopes they may make a decision for Christ. Chuck Smith wisely once said if you’re going to use secular methods to bring people in the doors, then you’re going to have to continue to use those methods to keep them there.

I have found that there is nothing more compelling than the influence of the Holy Spirit. No matter how slick, sophisticated, and expensive a marketing or fundraising campaign is, the power and movement of the Holy Spirit is not only far greater, but also it deals with the real issue each person faces – their heart condition before God. When Ezra read the Scriptures, people were attentive and responded. The people were on fire for the Lord.

Nehemiah, with the walls and the gates of Jerusalem restored, began the process of recruiting people to protect it. This started with the leaders taking up occupancy within the city as opposed to living in the

rural areas. Per 11:2, “*The rest of the people cast lots to bring one out of every ten of them to live in Jerusalem, the holy city, while the remaining nine were to stay in their own towns.*” Effectively, the people tithed one-tenth of themselves to live in and work in the city. This 10% of the people were facing a difficult path. Per Chapter 7, verse 4, the houses within the city had not yet been rebuilt, so the living conditions were not ideal.

For verses 3-24, Nehemiah singled out not only the people who would be living in the city, but also broke out their respective responsibilities. He started with the tribes of Judah and Benjamin as they were the tribes occupying the Southern Kingdom where Jerusalem was. The responsibilities included:

- Overseer of the City (the Benjamites)
- Official in charge of the house of God (Priests)
- Outside work of the house of God (Levites)
- Lead in thanksgiving (Levites)
- Gatekeepers (Levites)
- Singers in charge of the house of God (Levites)

When you look at this list, I hope you can see the similarity of the duties to today’s churches. To run a church requires a lot of people with a wide variety of gifts and talents. Where churches get in trouble is they overuse willing volunteers. There are two concerns with this. First, the weight of shouldering more than they should can lead these people to something known as “Christian burnout.” While their desire to serve is admirable, there is only so much time in a day. Furthermore, if they are married or have children, there’s a likelihood that important time with those people is being sacrificed. Often, negative attitudes develop regarding serving the Lord for both those who aren’t getting their fair share of time and the actual people serving.

The second concern is that by just a few people doing most of the work, there are willing and able people who are ready to use their gifts to help but can’t because the overused people are doing too much. I’ve been at several churches, and I can tell you this issue of not properly distributing the workload across the congregants and lining the tasks up with their gifts is a challenge for everyone.

I’m going to pause in the story for a moment. These chapters are not the first time Nehemiah spends a lot of ink detailing the names of the people who were involved in this revival. Frankly, when the Bible periodically provides these kinds of lists, short of seeking to see if they fall in the genealogical line of Jesus, it’s admittedly hard to glean much value from these lists. What we shouldn’t lose sight of, though, is God wanted them memorialized in His Holy Word. What does that mean to each of us? He’s paying attention. He deeply cares about each of you, what you think, what you do, what you say, and, most importantly, how much time you spend with Him. Not one of you is insignificant in God’s eyes. You are

His creation, and He created you for a purpose to do great things that will both fulfill you and glorify Him. Do you believe that?

No, your name may not be in this book – the Bible, but that doesn’t mean you’re not valuable or important to God. Remember this: if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. (Romans 10:9) If you have done this, your name is in a different, but glorious book – the Book of Life. This book, and please excuse the crudeness of my description, is God’s personal log of every name that has confessed Jesus is the only begotten Son of God, and faith in His sacrificial death and resurrection. I’m in the camp of once saved, always saved, so God does not use disappearing ink or an eraser when He logs in another name. Personally, I imagine each name is written with Jesus’ blood. This is an eternal book – cementing the eternal redemption of each believer. Please keep this image in mind the next time you’re asked to read through a bunch of names in the Scriptures. Those names may not mean much to you, but they meant enough to God to include them in His Word. You mean enough to Him to include them in the Book of Life.

Ok – back to our story. Nehemiah has recruited all the workers, and now it’s time to dedicate the wall nobody thought could be built. He got all the Levites who were scattered outside of the city to come to Jerusalem to “celebrate the dedication with gladness, both with thanksgiving and singing.” If the focus of events like these are truly on God and not the people, celebrating the Lord’s work is a good thing. I’m not a fan of attempting to decipher what a Biblical character was thinking at a critical point in his or her life. However, I can’t help but to wonder if there wasn’t at least a smidgen of Nehemiah thinking of two of his oppressors back in chapter 6, Tobiah and Sanballat, who didn’t believe he could restore the wall, and wanting to say, “Nanny, Nanny Goat!” Wow, I’m really dating myself with that line! What I do believe is that Nehemiah wanted this celebration to let both the Jewish and Gentile world know what God can do.

The celebration consisted of two large thanksgiving choirs first meeting on the restored wall at what many Bible scholars believe was the Valley gate. One choir would move along on one side of the wall while the other choir went the other towards the east. One of the gates this choir would cross was the Water Gate. As I have shared with you in the past, I’ve had some success in unearthing ancient pictures of Biblical characters. I’m happy to share with you a picture of one of the members of the choir as he was at the Water Gate. Are you ready?



The two choirs eventually connected and stood as one in the house of God. There were instruments, and the singers sang loudly. Additionally, they offered great sacrifices, and they rejoiced. The celebration was so loud, verse 43 of Chapter 12 tells us the joy of Jerusalem was heard afar off. This lines up with David's exhortation in the 69th Psalm, "*I will praise the name of God with a song, And will magnify Him with thanksgiving.*"

Chapter 12 wraps up with appointments of people to oversee the rooms of the storehouse of the offerings, the first fruits, and the tithes. Nehemiah notes that one of the reasons the people were giving, was their pleasure in seeing the priests and the Levites ministering as God intended. Maybe this isn't the right attitude, but if I'm seeing Biblical based behavior and stewardship, it is easy for me to be more generous in my giving.

It is too bad Nehemiah's story doesn't conclude with chapter 12, but life is not a Hallmark movie. Biff and Buffy don't always end up happily ever after. Our old bad habits – our sin nature can too easily rise up soon after a mountain-top experience with God such as the one the people just experienced. The celebration was over, the day-to-day grind of life set in, and Nehemiah had returned to King Artaxerxes – likely to share stories of God's work. Bible scholars believe he could have been away from Jerusalem as long as a year. As Carol's title to this lesson aptly points out, here in chapter 13 the pledges the people made in Chapter 10 were not lining up with their performance – their sworn adherence.

As well-intentioned an oath or promise to perform to God may be, we need to think twice before blurting out these kinds of things. Jesus said on the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5:33, "*Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform your oaths to the Lord.'*" He would conclude this thought in verse 37, "*But let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No.'* *For whatever is more than these is from the evil one.*" How many of us, when we are in a tough situation, lob out to the Lord something like, '*God, if you get me out of this jam, I promise to never eat another donut again!*' Then, after God delivers you out of your jam, you go to church on Sunday, and you can hear the donuts calling your name, right?

Doing business with God is serious business. God doesn't lie. He can't deny Himself. He doesn't change His mind. With the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, He is looking for that same level of commitment in each believer. It's much better to keep your mouth shut and ask God for more of His mercy and grace – both undeserved – rather than dangle an “incentive” of repentant behavior as a motivation for Him to take action. Here's a little nugget for you the next time you think about doing this: God doesn't work that way. As we read through chapter 13, it is easy for us to slam down our gavels of judgment on these oath-breaking people. Yet, what does the Apostle Paul remind us in Romans 3:23, “*We've all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.*” Put your gavels down folks, own your failures, and now that Nehemiah has returned, let's see what we can learn from his responses to these broken promises.

The first thing Nehemiah did was read from the Book of Moses and remind the people they are not to allow Ammonites and Moabites into the assembly of God. You may recall that Ammon and Moab were products of the incestuous relationships between Lot and his two daughters. Their descendants were avowed enemies of the Nation of Israel. When the people heard the Law, they separated all the “mixed multitude” – namely, the Ammonites and Moabites – for the third time. They had done this previously in chapters 9 and 10.

Next, one of the priests who had authority over the storerooms of tithes in the temple was allied with one of Nehemiah's old oppressors, Tobiah. Upon Nehemiah's return, he learned this priest had allowed Tobiah to room within the house of God. Nehemiah, being a man of conviction and action, threw out Tobiah's household goods and commanded that the rooms be cleansed.

How do we reconcile Nehemiah's exclusionary acts with Jesus' commands to love others? Does everyone have an open invitation to come to Jesus? Absolutely. However, Jesus never leaves the new believer in the condition he/she was in at the time of his/her confession. Through the Holy Spirit, He begins the cleansing process – throwing out those things that violate the holy-based tenor of what a relationship with God demands. He does this in love and grace, but make no mistake, the sanctification process is tantamount to a throwing out the things that are not pleasing to God and harmful to you. It may seem harsh, and adherence to the rules these days is looked upon as unmerciful and exclusionary. Which is harsher? Being honest with someone regarding their spiritual state in hopes they will repent, or soft-pedaling the truth for the sake of a “connection” but allowing someone in a fallen state remain in their sin and jeopardizing their eternal destination?

Starting with verse 23 in chapter 13, Nehemiah dealt with the issue of mixed marriages. If you recall back in chapter 10, the people vowed to God they would neither give their daughters as wives to the people of the land (the Gentiles), nor take their daughters to marry the Jewish sons. In his survey of Jerusalem, Nehemiah saw women from Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab married to Jewish men. He heard their children speaking foreign languages. If you think about it, at this point in history, God's Word was

all in Hebrew. It is only through God's Word that the people can know the true God; so, if the children aren't speaking Hebrew, how can they come to know God? 1 John 4:5-6 speaks to this issue of speaking the right language, "*They (non-believers) are of the world. Therefore, they speak as of the world, and the world hears them. We are of God. He who knows God hears us; he who is not of God does not hear us. By this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error.*"

Nehemiah, again, takes immediate action as noted in verse 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.*" In a similar situation, Ezra plucked his own hair and beard – from chapter 9, verse 3 of his book. Ezra dissolved the mixed marriages, while Nehemiah only rebuked the offenders and ordered the people to promise not to do it again. Different methods of dealing with the same issue? Yes, but at least they were dealing with them. Nehemiah went on to remind these backsliders what happened to King Solomon when he married non-Jews. His familial reign would dissolve into a disaster and, ultimately, lead to a division of the Nation of Israel.

When Nehemiah returned from seeing King Artaxerxes, he found the temple and its grounds in disrepair. He learned this was happening because the people were not honoring their chapter 10 vow to financially support the priests and Levites. Deuteronomy 12:19 told them, "*Take heed to yourself that you do not forsake the Levite as long as you live in your land.*" One more time, Nehemiah took action and rebuked the people, the nobles, and the temple officers who had forsaken their posts because nothing was coming in. He made sure that the people resumed their tithing and offerings to help get the grounds back into shape. Finally, Nehemiah purified the priests and the Levites of everything foreign, and assigned them duties, each to his own task. This book concludes with one of his now well known "quickie" prayers, "*Remember me with favor, my God.*"

Nehemiah, the man, was a great study in Biblical leadership. He was a man who knew He was called by God, and He knew that a critical component of such a call requires a lot of prayer. He was organized, was able to discern the tactics of the enemy, he walked out his faith, and he sought only to glorify God. For me, one of the most critical leadership character traits was his willingness to take action. He was determined to take the necessary steps to reveal the truth of God's desire of how the people were to live. That is what Jesus did at the cross. He saw our lives not being led by or submitted to God because we were still an unforgiven and unreconciled state. Jesus took that action, notably - at the loving directive of the Father, at the cross. Through our faith in the what Jesus accomplished at the cross and His resurrection, He gave us the Holy Spirit to give us the supernatural strength to live in the manner God desires that we cannot live on our own strength.

This leads me to my conclusion. This lecture marks my 100th teaching at People of the Word. I don't say this out of a desire to earn your congratulations or thanks, but to make a point. I'm a pretty self-aware person. I know who I am, and I know who I am not – at least from my perspective. Given what I know of myself, it makes no sense whatsoever that I am teaching the Bible. I'm largely an introvert – I'm not comfortable at all being around a lot of people. I'm almost completely untrained in the Scriptures, and I don't always practice what I teach. If you don't believe that, just spend a few minutes with my wife, Vickie, of over 34 years, and she'll set you straight on any inflated view of me you may have. If someone had come up and told me some 16 years ago that I would be teaching a Bible study in front of more than 100 wonderful Christians for the next 16 years, I would have said you need to enter a 12-step program. Yet, here I am and, God willing, I'll keep doing this until He tells me not to do it any longer...or Carol and Maggie give me the heave-ho!

My point in sharing this with you is most of you serve the church in some form or another. On behalf of the Lord, I thank you! My exhortation to each of you is that during your time off this summer, spend some quiet time with the Lord and ask Him the following questions:

- Should I continue to serving in the manner I'm serving? That may seem like an odd request, but a lot of people serve the Lord without ever asking Him if they should or not. If you've reached a point where you're not getting any joy or peace in your service with the Lord and grumbling about it, it's quite possible He doesn't want you performing that service. This could be a scary request as you may have part of your identity wrapped up in how you serve. Also, don't think your service is irreplaceable. Please forgive me if I've offended you with that statement, but your ministry is really His ministry. If He wants it to continue, He'll find someone else to get it done.
- Secondly, ask Him if there is another manner, or in replace of what you're currently doing, in which He wants you to serve. Now this is the important part – keep your heart and mind open to what He says. I'm living proof of someone who serves in a manner that doesn't line up with how I see myself.
- Next, ask Him to give you what you need to perform your service – be it as it is now, or in your future service, to do it with joy, peace, and excellence. He never asks you to do something He isn't willing to provide you with what you need to do it. He is 100 for 100 in providing me the content He wants me to share with you. Believe me, there are sections of Scripture when after reading them, I looked up to Him and asked Him, '*What am I supposed to teach from this?*' Candidly, this lesson was one of those times. Yet, He has never failed to provide what I needed, and He will never fail you, either.

Finally, follow Nehemiah's "take action" mindset and ask the Lord what aspect, or aspects, in your life isn't pleasing to Him or needs work. This is an admittedly scary thing to do. Basically, I'm asking you to do what David asked of the Lord in Psalm 139:23-24, "*Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me, and know my anxieties; and see if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.*" I get it, this can be an uncomfortable prayer, but you need to remember two things. First, God already knows what areas of each of your lives needs some work. He's just waiting for you to confess and own it. Secondly, you can be certain that whatever fear or pain taking such a step may come with it, He will never leave your side as He walks you through it and gets you to a higher level of relationship with Him and a holier living than you can imagine. And, this is the final point, whatever He tells you to do, do it! It's ok to ask for His help, but once you've heard from Him, you don't need to keep praying about it.

God bless you for your faithfulness in this year's study. Let's stand and praise the Lord via the Doxology for His faithfulness.