

Firstfruits

Nehemiah 10

Well, up to this point in the book of Nehemiah, the marks of a revival have been unmistakable. In chapter 8, the people demonstrated a renewed and steadfast interest in the Word of God, specifically asking Ezra to bring out the book of the Law of Moses, and then standing for hours, listening while he read. In the same chapter, we saw the people rejoicing in the good news they found in the Word and that they had experienced in their own lives – that God is the Savior of Sinners, our Protector, our Provider. At the same time, their encounter with the Word showed them just how sinful we all are. Most of chapter 9 constituted a long prayer, rehearsing all of these great truths, praising God for His power in creation, His mercy in salvation, and His patience with all of us sinners in need of a Savior.

So much is clear, but how can any of today's passage apply to us? We aren't called to separate ourselves from unbelievers – no, we are called to tell the good news of Jesus to everyone. And we don't have to offer all these sacrifices and maintain this kind of Temple worship anymore – no, they all point to Jesus, the perfect sacrifice for our sins. No, at first glance, this whole chapter smacks of legalism, as if the people have totally missed the point of the revival they've just experienced. They've been celebrating their salvation, reveling in God's grace. So, why all this stuff about observing the law? Were they suddenly trying to earn what God had already given them? Were they trying to save themselves?

Well, before we become too critical of our Old Testament brothers and sisters, we need to remember that they lived in a different relationship to all these rituals and ceremonies than we do. They hadn't yet seen Jesus, and they didn't know exactly how He would become the Savior of all His people. So, the way they could draw close to Christ was by observing these ceremonies, acting out a pattern of what He would eventually do. We don't need to do all that anymore because Christ has already accomplished His great work. Today, studying the Old Testament rituals and ceremonies helps us by giving us a deeper understanding of the Person and Work of Christ.

But at the same time, the desire of the people to obey God's law in today's passage illustrates a critical component of revival. Remember, we've already seen that during a revival, God's Word becomes more important to us, and we allow it to search our souls in greater depth, convicting us of our sins. Moreover, during a revival, our desire for God intensifies. We gain great joy from being with God and with God's people, reminding one another of the wonderful truth of our salvation. In short, revival changes our priorities, giving us a desire to put God first in every facet of our lives. So, in today's passage we see how God's Old Testament people sought to live out that desire, to put their new priorities into practice. So, maybe if we take a closer look at what they did, we might find some ways that our own lives might become more centered, more focused on God.

So, let's start with the part that is probably the hardest for us to understand. Verses 28 and 30 talk about the need for the people to separate themselves from the people of the land, and specifically to avoid marrying them. In our modern world that sounds hopelessly bigoted, but let's remember the context. After all, the prophets predicted that Jesus, the Messiah, would be the seed, the descendant of Abraham and the Son of David. And so, in order to prove the truth of this prophecy, it was important for God's people to keep their bloodline pure until the time Christ was born. If they had intermarried with all the nations around them, it would have become impossible to prove that God had kept His promises to Abraham and David through the birth of Christ. After His coming, that's just not important anymore.

But there was another reason that God's Old Testament people needed to separate themselves from the other nations living around them – in those days, one's religion was most often determined by one's ethnicity. In fact, we still use the word culture to describe all the social aspects of a people group – and of course the word culture comes from the word cult, or worship. In those days, if you were an Ammonite, you worshipped Molech. If you were a Moabite, you worshipped Chemosh. If you were a Canaanite, you worshipped Baal. So, the people of Israel needed to separate themselves from the people of the lands, from people of other cultures because in those days there was no meaningful distinction between culture and worship. Hanging out with foreigners or marrying would thus inevitably involve religious compromise.

And that does point to something we New Testament Christians need to do, doesn't it? After all, we've already seen that repentance is one of the necessary components of revival. Our desire to know God and to keep His Word necessarily means that we don't just confess our sins when we realize we've done something outside of God's will. No, repentance means changing the direction of our lives, turning our lives away from ourselves and our sins and turning toward God. In other words, repentance requires us to be separate, not from other kinds of people anymore, but from other gods. Like God's Old Testament people, we must be separate, but from something much more radical: from anything and everything that is out of accordance with God's will. And given what we know to be true about God's law, that means avoiding anything and everything that does not bring glory to God, anything and everything that does not bring good to our neighbors. That's not easy, is it?

Okay, so how can we separate ourselves from sin? How can we set ourselves apart for the God Who has saved us? How can we really put God first in our lives? Well, this chapter goes on to give us some hints, explaining first how the people worshipped God with their time. We've already seen that they were determined to keep all the Old Testament festivals like the Feast of the Tabernacles they celebrated in chapter 8. Well, in verse 31, they also made a promise to observe the Sabbath, the weekly day of worship and rest that God prescribed in the fourth of the Ten Commandments. And that's something all of us need to do too.

Now, at this point we oh-so-active Americans might cry foul. Surely the Sabbath is just one of those Old Testament ceremonies fulfilled in the coming of Christ. Well, not exactly. For remember, the Sabbath was established well before the giving of the Law of Moses, well before the coming of sin into the world. In fact, God prescribed a day of rest and worship for all people, all the way back at the time He created the Heavens and the Earth. God wove a cycle of work and rest into the very fabric of creation, and we ignore this part of how we were made at the very real, and very modern risk of burnout.

But instead of observing the Sabbath out of guilt or fear, let's think again about the context of the promise these people made. For the promise to keep Sabbath was part of their desire to be set apart for God, part of their desire to draw near to God by living according to His Word. Well, what better way can there be for us to draw close to God than to spend time with Him? And what better time could there be for us to spend with God than the day that the rest of His people are also setting aside for worship? And if an hour of worship in the morning is a great way to start the day in fellowship with God, then why not spend the rest of the day with Him as well, reading His Word, praying with and for others, meditating on His power, His mercy, His patience, His righteousness and His grace? In short, if we want to put God first on our list of time commitments, keeping the Sabbath is a great place to start.

But why end there? The people of Nehemiah's time were determined to give God the firstfruits of all their produce, so why shouldn't we give God the first, the best of our time every day? No, everyone's not a morning person, and everyone's day looks slightly different. But if we can schedule around other important appointments, shouldn't we put a priority on prayer and reading Scripture each day? For how can we be set apart for God if we aren't spending regular quality time with Him?

And that leads to another way we can put God first in our lives – not just with our time but with our possessions. Verses 35-37 make it clear that the people of Nehemiah's time were determined to support the work of the Temple with the first fruits of everything they produced in their fields and their orchards, the firstborn of their herds and their flocks, and even bringing God a ransom payment for the firstborn of their children. In modern terms, they were willing to put God first in their checkbooks as well as on their calendars.

Okay, what about us? No, we don't have the same financial commitments that they did. We don't have to bring all that food and fuel to support the work of one central Temple. We know that God can be worshipped everywhere, and that the new Temple of the Lord is actually the Church, as the spirit of Christ indwells all His people.

But if all that's true, if our Temple is the Church all over the world, well, then our financial obligation to God is actually much greater than the one Nehemiah's generation had, isn't it? If we need to promote the true worship of God and the royal claims of Christ all over the world, then that Old Testament requirement of a tithe starts to look a lot more like a floor than a ceiling. Giving a tenth of our income to the work of the Lord isn't the most, but the least we can do, doesn't it?

For we not only need to keep up our own place of worship so it will be comfortable and inviting. We're going to have to help all those congregations in the Carolinas that were flooded out by Hurricane Florence, just as we helped the churches in Texas after Hurricane Harvey. We need to be involved in planting other churches, as our Presbytery is doing in New Orleans and New Braunfels and Austin. We need to be involved in mission work overseas like our Engage 2025 project.

But it isn't just EPC ministries that need our help. We need to support institutions like Reformed Theological Seminary that train so many of our future church leaders. We need to support Belhaven University, which is teaching the next generation about a Christian world-and-life view. We need to support Hands of Hope and Christian Volunteer Service that do so much good for so many.

But the Lord's work isn't just done through institutions. Think of all the ways we as individuals have every day to help needy, hurting folks around us experience the love of Christ. Think of the lonely that need encouragement, the fatherless children who need a good example set for them, the lost who are seeking fulfillment everywhere except in Christ.

Now, don't get me wrong. I'm not saying that this little congregation can possibly do all that work by ourselves. There's a reason we have partnerships like Presbyteries to allow all of us to do together what each of us can't do by ourselves. But if none of us are called to do it all, all of us are called to do all we can. For isn't that what it means to be truly repentant, to be truly set apart for God?

So, when we compare ourselves to Nehemiah's generation, how are we doing? Are we as joyfully willing to give the best of our time and treasure to God? Are we committed to the Work of

God's Kingdom as our top priority? Or are we holding out on God, keeping our firstfruits, our best for ourselves?