

Forsaking the House of God

Nehemiah 13:10-22

Do you remember when you first met that special someone? All you wanted to do was to buy gifts for her or to hang out together. You just couldn't get enough of each other. Now of course, it's only natural for relationships to mellow as they mature – you can't stay newlyweds forever. But sometimes, instead of developing into deeper connection and true intimacy, passion can cool into mere complacency. Expressions of tenderness can degenerate into mere habits or even duties. As life goes on, it's easy to start taking any relationship for granted.

The relationship between the people of Israel and God had certainly cooled off, hadn't it? Oh, years before the events of today's passage, back when the people had just completed the wall around Jerusalem, they had been full of enthusiasm. In chapter 12, we read that two great choirs had climbed up on top of the newly finished wall, stretching to the north and the south of the Temple, singing praise to the God Who had allowed the project to be finished so quickly. At the same time, the people had offered great sacrifices, expressing their thanks to God not just with their time but with their treasure. And they had followed up this celebration with a firm determination to insure that the work of the Temple would go on into the future. The end of chapter 12 explains how the people not only gave sufficient offerings to make the work of the Levites and the singers possible – they had also appointed stewards to make sure that these offerings went to the people for whom they were designated.

And why had the people done all these things? In order to fulfill a solemn vow they and their leaders had made. Chapter 10 records how the people had made a covenant with God, devoting themselves completely to Him. They promised not to intermarry with the pagan people who lived nearby. They promised not to trade with unbelievers on the Sabbath day. And they promised to give their tithes and offerings to support the priests, the Levites, the singers, and the gatekeepers. The very last verse of chapter 10 sums up their attitude: "We will not neglect the house of our God." In other words, the joyful and solemn promises the people made to God were a lot like those that brides and grooms make to each other on their wedding day.

So, what happened? Last week, we saw that their promise to stay away from the pagan people didn't last very long. No, when Nehemiah had to go back to the Imperial Court in Persia, the people lost their focus, and began to marry foreigners to the extent that their children didn't even know how to speak Hebrew. Simply put, all their pious promises to God had melted away in the heat of their worldly desires. It turns out they didn't love God enough to obey His Word if it barred them from having a human relationship they wanted. Well, today we find they were no more faithful to God with their money and time than they were in their romantic life. In the absence of a strong leader, they had simply started drifting, allowing themselves to be carried by the self-centered cultural currents of the world. Compromise had led them to neglect not only the House of God, but to neglect God Himself.

So, before we get into any of the details of today's passage, let's take an honest look at our relationship with God. Do we love Him as much as we should? Are we really putting Him first in the most important parts of our lives? Sure, we know what we're supposed to believe, what we're supposed to feel. But how can we know where our loyalties really lie?

Well, let's look at the two ways Nehemiah wanted his people to express their love for God in today's passage – with their time and money. Those two things continue to be good indicators of our passions, right? Of course we tend to spend more time with people we care about and less time with people we are trying to avoid. In a similar way, we love to buy gifts for our friends and family, and we hate to pay taxes. If it were up to us, all our time and money would flow towards the people, things, and activities that we love.

So, how much time are we making for God on our calendars? How much time are we listening to Him in His Word? How much time are we talking with Him in prayer? And if our devotional life has grown cold, why is that? Could it be that we don't want to know more about God's Word because it might tell us we need to make some changes in our priorities? Could it be that our prayer life has faltered because we've grown tired of asking for the same things over and over again and not seeing any change? Or could it be that we've started doubting God's power or love because of the way our lives have turned out? It seems that the same sorts of things that can cause human relationships to drift apart – doubt, disappointment, frustration – can get between us and God as well.

Oh, and while we're at it, what would we find if we were to take a close look at our checkbooks or credit card statements? How much are we spending on ourselves, on our pleasure, our comfort, our entertainment? In contrast, how much are we devoting to the things we know good and well that God wants us to support? How much do we give to the work of our congregation, to our missionaries and church planters? How much do we give directly to the needy, or to organizations that seek to help them? The people of Nehemiah's time were expected to give a tithe, a tenth of their income to support the work and worship of the Temple. Are we even getting close to that level of giving?

Now, we could look at this passage from Nehemiah and come to the admittedly correct conclusion that it is all too easy for our relationship with God to grow cold. And it would be very easy at this point to close this sermon and send everyone home on a guilt trip. But we could also look to this passage for some very practical advice on what it takes to build a healthy relationship with God. We could allow this passage to teach us about repentance, about how to turn away from ourselves and how to turn toward God in our daily lives.

For let's think again about our human relationships, especially the ones that have grown cold. How do you breathe new life into them again? How do you go about getting closer to people that you like, to people whom you love?

Well, what does a young man do when he wants to get closer to a girl who has caught his eye? He invents excuses to spend time with her, right? He spends money on her, buying candy or flowers or whatever else she likes. We don't think twice about spending time and money if we want to strengthen human relationships.

So, isn't that really what Nehemiah is trying to teach the people in this passage? For he not only notices that their love for God has grown cold. He not only sees that they aren't supporting the Levites and the singers as they should. He not only brings in the rulers of the people and gives them a good dressing down. No, he shows them how to correct this problem, by paying the tithes they are supposed to pay. And he appoints people to make sure that those tithes go where they are supposed to go. In other words, Dr. Nehemiah doesn't just prescribe a dose of sorrow for us when we realize we are

getting too self-absorbed. He tells us to reverse course, to change our priorities, to put God first in our checkbooks.

But if we start tithing, giving a tenth of our income to the work of the Kingdom, even if we don't feel like it at first, isn't that just giving in to legalism? Far from it. Giving God His tenth off the top, regardless of how we feel about it, is actually one of the purest expressions of faith. For to give to God in this way, most of us will have to make some budgetary adjustments, spending a little less on our priorities so we can spend more on God's priorities – and isn't that sort of turning away from ourselves and turning to God a real-world, tangible manifestation of repentance? Isn't that a concrete expression of putting God first in our lives? Better still, giving in this way might just require us to trust that God will help us make ends meet, that God will give us not only our salvation but our daily bread. And what is the Christian faith all about if it's not about trusting God?

And what about our time? We might be skimping on our daily quiet time with God because we think our schedules are too tight. Really? Let's do an experiment this week – every time you start to browse the internet or check your Facebook feed, pray instead. Every time you sit down to watch TV, pick up your Bible instead. You know you can read through the whole Bible in a year if you just read three or four chapters a day, and for most folks that just takes 15 or 20 minutes. And with a church our size, how long would it take for you to pray for all your brothers and sisters in Christ? Throw in the rest of your family, and the missionaries in the bulletin and are we really talking about more than an hour in total? Don't we all waste a lot more time every day than that?

So, how would our relationship with God change if we devoted ourselves to even a short time of daily prayer and study? How would our walk with God be strengthened if we didn't let any other priority take precedence over Sunday worship? We don't have to wonder about what even a little investment of time does for human relationships, right? Every phone call you make or text or card you send to a loved one brings y'all closer, right? So, can we seriously doubt that as we spend even a little more time in prayer and study and worship we will grow closer to God?

But what about the big deal Nehemiah made about Sabbath? Didn't Jesus condemn the Pharisees for the way they behaved on that day? They criticized Jesus' disciples for having a snack and thought Jesus was wrong to heal people on the Sabbath because they considered such action to be work. Surely we don't want to descend into that sort of legalism, right?

But remember, Jesus didn't say the Sabbath was a bad idea – He just said that the Pharisees were observing it in the wrong way. In fact, Jesus said, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath." In other words, spending a whole day every week with God and with God's people is supposed to be good for us. It's a gift God gives us, not something that we should find onerous or burdensome.

And again, this just makes sense when we put it in terms of human relationships, right? What if your boss told you, "Take a day off from work. I don't even want you to check your e-mail – I'll take care of all the urgent stuff and everything else can wait until Monday. Oh, and I want you to spend the whole day with your sweetheart." You wouldn't think twice about taking him up on that offer, would you?

Well, that's why God made the Sabbath, just so He could spend the whole day with us. Oh, and come to think of it, as we put aside all our regular chores so we can spend more time with Him, aren't

we doing the same sort of thing with our time that tithing does with our money? Aren't we basically saying, "God, I don't know how I'm going to get everything done, but I'm going to trust You to be in charge of my schedule so I can spend more time with You and Your people?" And if we have to plan the rest of our week more carefully, wasting less time Monday through Saturday so we don't have to work on Sunday, well, that's all for the better, isn't it? In fact, budgeting our time in this way might not only help us to worship more – it might help us to work more too.

But please don't confuse any of this with legalism. No, spending time and money on God should be the clearest reflection of our love for Him. That's really what lies behind Nehemiah's prayer in verse 14 – he wants God to remember his good deeds, and this translates the Hebrew word "hesed" which means deeds of faithful, covenant love. In other words, Nehemiah wanted God to see his efforts at encouraging the people to greater faithfulness as nothing less than expressions of his love for God.

And the very last verse of the passage asks for God's love in return. For when Nehemiah asks God to spare him according to the greatness of God's mercy, he's using the same word, "hesed." In other words, just as Nehemiah wants God to see his actions as evidence of his love for God, He desperately wants God to return that same kind of faithful, covenant love to him.

So, let's take a closer look at our checkbooks and calendars this week. What are they saying about our love for God? And how can we use our time and money to draw us and others closer to God? And as we give more of ourselves to God, let's pray that He would fill us with His Spirit so that our love for Him might grow as well. For isn't the One Who gave His only Son for us, isn't the One Who willingly died for us worthy of our love?