

## The Dangers of Compromise Nehemiah 13:4-9, 23-31

Wait, what's going on here? As we have studied chapters 8 through 12, we have seen how the people read the Law of God and how they celebrated the feasts and festivals that it required. Their study of the Law also brought conviction of their sins, and they confessed those sins publicly to God in a prayer that constitutes almost all of chapter 9. And they made a solemn covenant, promising to be faithful to God, and making ongoing provisions to fund the work and worship of the Temple for years to come. And the first few verses of this chapter indicate that they were so serious about their pursuit of holiness that they were determined to stay away from Ammonites and Moabites so that they wouldn't even be tempted to worship their false gods. When you look at all this, it's hard to deny that the people had experienced a genuine revival.

So, what's going on at the end of chapter 13? Far from keeping their promise to exclude the Ammonites from the Assembly of God's people, they let Tobiah, the governor of the Ammonites, move into a room in the Temple itself! Worse yet, verse 23 says that many of them married Ammonites and Moabites, in clear contradiction of God's Word. Was this a case of mass amnesia? Why were they acting all of a sudden as if all the great revival had never happened?

Well, the first thing we need to understand is that this didn't happen all of a sudden. No, some time, and perhaps quite a lot of time, had passed between the events of verse 3 and verse 4. Verse 6 indicates that Nehemiah had served as governor of the area around Jerusalem for about 12 years, after which he had been recalled to Persia.

Now, we don't know how long Nehemiah remained in Persia – verse 6 simply says he was with the king for certain days, for some time. After that, he got permission to take another trip to Jerusalem, and verses 4-31 describe the changes that had taken place during the years of his absence, and how he had to respond to those changes.

But before we look at any of the specifics, we can learn a sobering lesson from this passage as a whole: until Christ returns, the work of reformation is never finished. Until Christ returns, the Church can never rest on our laurels. This has been true for the Church from the very beginning. Only a few years after the resurrection of Christ, congregations of earnest believers sprang up all over the Mediterranean world. But problems arose right along with their faith – think of all the misunderstandings and conflicts Paul had to try to straighten out in his two letters to the new believers in the Corinthian church. And when we turn to the Revelation given to the apostle John, we see that during his one lifetime many other congregations were already falling away from Christ. Some were leaving their first love, becoming lukewarm, or even spiritually dead. It only took one generation for the churches in Ephesus, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, and Laodicea to abandon their faith.

And the same problem continues to this day. Last year, we celebrated the Protestant Reformation, the great revival that took place all over northern and western Europe 500 years ago. Today, that same region is considered to be post-Christian, as the people have almost completely forgotten the Christ for whom their ancestors were willing to die. For example, in England today, less than 5% of the population are in worship on any given Sunday.

But lest we Americans become too smug, we should think about how times have changed here, even within living memory. The Christian consensus that extended across our society has completely broken down. We used to leave our doors unlocked, and make business agreements with a handshake, trusting in the honesty of our neighbors. We used to insist that courting couples have chaperones and that a man and a woman get married before having children. We used to let businessmen close their stores on Sunday so that everyone could attend both morning and evening worship. But even in very small, very traditional, Southern towns like ours, our doors are locked, too many of our church pews are vacant, and we're spending more time with our cellphones than our Bibles. And it wasn't in New York City but in Shaw, Mississippi, this week that a 20-month-old baby was stabbed and stuffed into a heated oven. By her grandmother. No, it doesn't take long for even the most Christian society to go completely off the rails.

But this isn't just a problem for societies, is it? What about each one of us? We claim to believe in Jesus, right? So, how high on our own list of priorities is God's worship? How interested are each of us in learning more about God's Word? How much time do we spend in prayer? Are we as close to God now as we were when we began to follow Jesus? How long does it take us to fall into bad spiritual habits, to trust other things and lose our focus on God, to make compromises with the things of this world?

For that's really all the people were doing in today's passage, slipping into worldly compromise. For why did they let Tobiah move into the Temple after Nehemiah went back to Persia? Well, it could have been that they had put too much trust in Nehemiah's leadership. After all, if we've learned anything about him as we've studied the first 12 chapters of this book, we've found that Nehemiah was a bold leader, a man of inexhaustible energy, someone who wouldn't take "no" for an answer. More importantly, he was a man of great faith and sound judgment, an incorruptible man who never wavered from the right path. Leaders like this are as rare as they are attractive.

So, is it hard to imagine the people wondering who would lead them after Nehemiah left? Instead of maintaining the steady course of faithfulness on which Nehemiah had set them, instead of trusting their priests and scribes to teach them the law and to lead them in the worship of God, it's easy to imagine them trying to find another dominant personality, another man of energy and determination to fill the void. And right across the Jordan River was Tobiah, the governor of the Ammonites. Just to the north was Sanballat, governor of Samaria. And regardless of their previous opposition to the people's efforts to rebuild the walls around Jerusalem both of them were ready to step in to Nehemiah's shoes, to provide the leadership the people craved.

Now, before we condemn these ancient Israelites for their fickleness or their faithlessness, we'd better take a good look in the mirror. As November 6 approaches, and as political ads fill our TV screens, are we American Christians really trusting in the sovereign power of King Jesus? Or are we fretting about who will win the upcoming election? Are we really looking to King Jesus to protect us and to provide for us and to tell us what's right and wrong? Or are we putting too much faith in the promises of our politicians? Worst of all, do we ever catch ourselves being willing to compromise our principles, to make peace with the enemies of God in order to get what we want?

We see that problem even more clearly in the last part of chapter 13. Here the people weren't looking to a strongman to protect them and provide for them – no, they were responding to much more basic human desires. They knew that the Law of Moses prohibited them from marrying people who

worshipped false gods. And as Nehemiah reminded them in verse 26, they knew that such marriages had gotten their ancestors into trouble in the past – even Solomon, the greatest king Israel had ever known, the wisest man who had ever lived on the earth had been led into the sin of idolatry by his many foreign wives. They knew all this – but chose instead to do what Samson did when he saw a cute Philistine girl. He said, “She is right in my eyes.” In short, they chose to elevate their passions, their feelings over their devotion to God.

And what was the result of these affairs of the heart? Verse 24 makes it plain: many of the children of these mixed marriages naturally embraced their foreign mothers’ culture and language. And since they hadn’t learned to speak Hebrew, they were cut off from reading, or even hearing the Word of God proclaimed in the synagogues. That meant that if the adults of Nehemiah’s time were sliding into idolatry, the children wouldn’t even know how to turn back to God even if they had wanted to. No wonder Nehemiah lost his temper in verse 25 – everything he had worked for, the very spiritual foundations of the people of Israel were at risk.

Now, I hope we understand that such mixed marriages aren’t a problem for us New Testament Christians. Now that Jesus has come, fulfilling God’s promise to Abraham and David that one of their descendants would be the ruler and savior of the world, we just don’t need to worry about bloodlines when we get married. Today, the gospel of Jesus is for every tribe and tongue and nation, and the only human distinction God cares about is those who are in Christ and those who are not.

But that doesn’t mean we Christians aren’t just as tempted to compromise with the idols of the world, especially where it comes to seeking happiness in relationships. We’ve already seen that, like these ancient Israelites, we have a tendency to pin too many of our hopes on human leaders, to place too much of our faith in politics to solve our problems and keep us safe. Well, can we doubt that our feelings, our urges, our desires, can lead us into all sorts of other compromises?

Yes, we all know what the Bible says about marriage. Jesus Himself said that God made us male and female so that one man and one woman could become one flesh in marriage, and that no one should separate what God has thus joined into a physical and spiritual union. And we Americans should have learned from our 50-year experiment in sexual anarchy and disposable marriage that abandoning this God-made pattern only leads to poverty, crime, drug abuse, ignorance – really all the social ills that plague us today. The facts are clear: strong, stable families really are the only building blocks of strong, stable societies.

But in spite of the teaching of Scripture and in spite of all the evidence to the contrary, are we any more willing than the people of Nehemiah’s day were to put our feelings aside in order to keep God’s law? Are we any more ready to believe that God knows best when all our desires point in a different direction? Do we judge God’s faithfulness by how we are feeling at the moment, how many good things we have in this world, or do we walk by faith – trusting God and obeying His Word no matter what our desires may be?

For that’s really what it means to follow Jesus, to be like Jesus, isn’t it? I mean, Jesus could have started a political movement – that’s what the Jerusalem crowd wanted, right? With His supernatural power, He could easily have formed His people into an army and kicked the Romans out of the Promised Land. He could have fed them with manna from Heaven, just as Moses did. He could have given His bride, the Church, exactly what we wanted, avoiding the painful and shameful death of the cross. In

short, He could have enjoyed all the good things this earth has to offer – that’s what Satan wanted him to do, and that’s what all His disciples wanted as well.

But He knew that His Father’s plan was different. He knew that in order for us to be saved from our sins, He would have to abandon political solutions and give Himself over to the religious and the Roman authorities. And instead of elevating His feelings over His responsibility, He allowed His bride to crucify Him so that she might have, not what she wanted, but what she needed – forgiveness and cleansing from her sins. In short, Jesus submitted Himself completely to the Father and completely to His bride, because that’s what real love really looks like.

So, I suppose we can go on drifting down the river of compromise, trusting in our human leaders, trusting in our feelings. Or we can do the hard work, the higher work of following Christ – seeking His face in prayer, seeking His will in His Word, and then following His example of self-sacrificial, unconditional love. Which will we choose?