

Rebuild: Ezra-Nehemiah
Part 10: “Reforming God’s People” | Nehemiah 11-13
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[SERMON MANUSCRIPT]

Introduction

Even though people love “fairy tale endings” with everyone living “happily ever after,” it’s usually not often true in real life, is it? I think that’s why these days, movies and TV series that *don’t* have happy endings are becoming more frequent. Just think about what we’ve watched recently- Squid Game or even Shang-Chi- the endings are unsettled or inconclusive or even the start of new problems. We’re now at the conclusion of our series on Ezra-Nehemiah and I’ll explain how this was *not* “happily ever after” either.

Let me share where we’ve gone so far in Ezra-Nehemiah. God worked in the heart of Cyrus, king of Persia, to send the captive people of Israel back to Jerusalem. The exiles returned and rebuilt the temple of God (Ezra 1-6). Fifty-seven years later, Ezra was sent by Artaxerxes, another Persian king, to teach the Book of the Law to the people. Ezra’s ministry of God’s Word started a reformation of the people’s identity as the people of God (Ezra 7-10).

Thirteen years after Ezra went to Jerusalem, God raised up Nehemiah to rebuild the walls of the city. They were able to finish that work in fifty-two days, despite all kinds of threats (Nehemiah 1-7). We saw last week how God breathed spiritual life back into his people as God’s Word was read, taught, and seen. God’s people recommitted to God’s gracious covenant relationship with them (Nehemiah 8-10). And now, we get to the final part of the narrative.

I’ll actually summarize chapters 11 and 12 and then we’ll do a deeper dive into chapter 13. In Nehemiah 11, the remaining tribes of Israel- Judah, Benjamin, and some Levites- sent their “tithes” of leaders to move into Jerusalem. These families that moved into the city are listed in detail and the remaining 90% of the people lived all around Judah.

In Nehemiah 12, the genealogies of the priests and Levites are presented, starting from those that came up with the original exiles all the way to the present time. Then all those priests, Levites, and leaders that were mentioned, they stationed themselves all over the top of the new wall and dedicated it. It was a *huge celebration* with choirs singing and people praising God. This was a *spiritual high* for the people of God! But were they done now? Was this it? Actually, no it wasn’t. Nehemiah’s work of reforming God’s people was a *continuous* job, as we’ll see in chapter 13!

Proposition

Here’s the “one thing” for this sermon, focused on Nehemiah 13:

***Keep reforming as God’s people until
God’s redemption story is done.***

We’ll see here how Nehemiah had to constantly put out “fires” among the God’s people- the many ways that they wandered into sin and broke the covenant that they made with God. And we’re the same too! In light of Christ, we also have to keep reforming as God’s people, but with the hope that not only are we forgiven and will change for the better, but that Jesus will come back and we’ll finally enjoy perfect communion with God.

Organizational Statement

I have three main points today- they are three ways that we **keep reforming as God's people until God's redemption story is done**: we keep reforming first, in our parts in the church (4-14); second, in our practice of dependence (15-22); and third, in our pursuit of holiness (23-31).

Transition: For the first way we keep reforming as God's people until God's redemption story is done...

Sermon Outline

I. See verses 4-14: Our Parts in the Church.

- A. In this first part, Nehemiah constantly had to address the issue of God's people not faithfully tithing and running the temple operations, even as they learned about worship from God's Word.
 1. [Here's the first principle I want to elaborate on here...] Principle #1: The church is like an ecosystem that thrives when all of God's people participate in its livelihood.
 - a) These various incidents that are recorded here happened at various times. Verses 4-9 happened while Nehemiah was away from Jerusalem in his twelfth year serving as governor of Judah. Remember that King Artaxerxes had given Nehemiah a temporary leave and at that time he was summoned back. While he was away, some cracks emerged within the covenant community. What happened was Eliashib, who was the high priest of the temple, decided to lease out a large chamber in the courts of the temple to Tobiah to use as his own personal office. This chamber was supposed to hold the grain offerings, the frankincense, the vessels, and the tithes of grain, wine, and oil. The Levites, singers and gatekeepers were supposed to be using them for the needs of the temple and for their own personal needs as they worked in the temple.
 - b) This was bad because Tobiah was constantly mentioned in the book of Nehemiah as someone who was trying to sabotage the rebuilding of God's city. He was not a part of the people of God and so his "setting up shop" there desecrated the house of God! The reason Eliashib the high priest did this was a bit of a surprise too: Tobiah (an Ammonite) and Eliashib (an Israelite) were related somehow- which was also a problem I'll explain in the third part. This was also bad because it was apparent that the space in the temple was not being utilized correctly- and the reason for this is seen in verses 10-14, which I'd like to read.
 - o Nehemiah 13:10-14 (ESV): *10 I also found out that the portions of the Levites had not been given to them, so that the Levites and the singers, who did the work, had fled each to his field. 11 So I confronted the officials and said, "Why is the house of God forsaken?" And I gathered them together and set them in their stations. 12 Then all Judah brought the tithe of the grain, wine, and oil into the storehouses. 13 And I appointed as treasurers over the storehouses Shelemiah the priest, Zadok the scribe, and Pedaiah of the Levites, and as their assistant Hanan the son of Zaccur, son of Mattaniah, for they were considered reliable, and their duty was to distribute to their brothers. 14 Remember me, O my God, concerning this, and do not wipe out my good deeds that I have done for the house of my God and for his service.*

- c) [Amen!] So now we see the root problem! There was a chain reaction: the people of Judah were not tithing faithfully (even though they had made a formal commitment to do so), which led to the Levites and singers and other temple workers not having enough to live on, which led to the Levites and singers and other temple workers having to go back to their fields to work and make a living, which led to neglect of the temple, which led to the priests leasing out prime real estate in the temple for pagans to use for who-knows-what! I'm going to highlight a repeated phenomenon here: The people of Judah had committed so passionately and sincerely not too long ago in chapter 10 verse 39: "We will not neglect the house of our God." But now we see that they had so badly forsaken the house of God (v. 11).
- d) *How did this happen?* I think it started small- maybe one or two families thinking to reduce their tithes of grain, produce, olive oil, wine, livestock, and wood or not giving their one-third shekel of silver that year. Then others noticed this and saw the advantage to build up their own savings. Then those leftovers were left wondering why they were the only suckers still giving, so they stopped too. That's why the Levites, singers, and other temple workers didn't have enough to live on. That's why the temple reduced the frequency of the sacrifices and the quality of their festivals and assemblies. It started small and gradually turned into "every man for himself"- at the expense of their corporate temple worship.
2. [Let me repeat the first principle again...] Principle #1: The church is like an ecosystem that thrives when all of God's people participate in its livelihood.
- a) Context: We don't have a temple anymore, but in the New Testament, the church is called the temple of God (1 Corinthians 3:16, Ephesians 2:21). So we can think about this in terms of the church. I think we can also be passionate and sincere when we commit to the church, but our sinful natures always creep in. We have thoughts that seem harmless: "Nobody will notice if I'm not Sunday Celebration- I can just listen to the sermon later online"; "I don't have engage in LIFE group- people keep it pretty superficial anyways"; "I cannot serve because I need to use non-work hours to relax." There *are* legitimate reasons to not be at SC or LG or to not serve. But if we're honest, there are also *rationalizations* for thinking about ourselves first, right?
- b) Context: The National Geographic Society defines an ecosystem as "a geographic area where plants, animals, and organisms, as well as weather and landscapes, work together to form a bubble of life." I think that the church is like an ecosystem, with people interacting, intertwining together, and if some parts stop functioning properly, it affects other parts, and gradually the whole bubble breaks down. This is why in so many churches you see 20% of the church does 80% of the work; then eventually that 20% gets tired, burnt out, and embittered from being the only ones giving themselves; then the church plateaus and dies a slow death. I don't know about you, but hat I've seen this and been a part of churches like this- it's pretty tragic.
- c) Context: But the opposite is true too! In fact, the apostle Paul wrote that Jesus wants his church to be united, mature, and loving- just look at Ephesians 4:16.
- o Ephesians 4:16 (NLT): *16 He makes the whole body fit together perfectly. As each part does its own special work, it helps the other parts grow, so that the whole body is healthy and growing and full of love.*

When each member is doing their part, their ministry in the church, then it helps all the *other parts* of the body grow too. Then the *whole body* is healthy and thriving! I think a great example of this is seeing so many people step up and serve to put together for our hybrid Sunday Celebrations. This was the coordinated effort of many brothers and sisters in Christ *participating* and thus making gatherings like this possible for people to join onsite and for people to join online. May this be the vision of what our church can be as we reform our church this new season!

Transition: First, we reform our parts in the church. For the second way we keep reforming as God's people until God's redemption story is done...

II. See verses 15-22: Our Practice of Dependence.

- A. In this second part, Nehemiah constantly had to address the issue of God's people disobeying God's commands regarding the Sabbath, even as they learned about it from God's Word.
1. [Here's the second principle I want to elaborate on here...] Principle #2: We reinforce necessary dependence on God by obeying the principles of the Sabbath.
 - a) Let's go ahead and read Nehemiah 13:15-18 now.
 - o Nehemiah 13:15-18 (ESV): *15 In those days I saw in Judah people treading winepresses on the Sabbath, and bringing in heaps of grain and loading them on donkeys, and also wine, grapes, figs, and all kinds of loads, which they brought into Jerusalem on the Sabbath day. And I warned them on the day when they sold food. 16 Tyrians also, who lived in the city, brought in fish and all kinds of goods and sold them on the Sabbath to the people of Judah, in Jerusalem itself! 17 Then I confronted the nobles of Judah and said to them, "What is this evil thing that you are doing, profaning the Sabbath day? 18 Did not your fathers act in this way, and did not our God bring all this disaster on us and on this city? Now you are bringing more wrath on Israel by profaning the Sabbath."*
 - b) [Amen!] This was also some time in between those twelve years that Nehemiah served as governor of the Province of Judah. The city was bustling and lively again: people treading winepresses, bringing in heaps of grain in the villages, bringing their produce into the city, other people groups bringing in fish and other goods to sell at the markets. The only problem was, they were doing this not just on work days, but on the Sabbath too! Nehemiah called this an "evil thing" and "profaning the Sabbath day." This was disobeying the fourth of the Ten Commandments from Exodus 20:8-10 (ESV): *8 "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. 9 Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, 10 but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God."*
 - c) The intention of keeping the Sabbath day holy was to honor God who created the world in six days and then rested on that seventh- the *Sabbath*- day. The heart of this command was to pause from regular daily activities and set aside the needed time to remember who God is according to his Word: perfectly holy, absolutely just, patiently forgiving, faithfully providing, richly gracious, and steadfastly loving. The heart of this commandment was not to test a person's will power to resist working, but to rekindle trust in all of who God is by reconnecting with him and others meaningfully.
 - d) You know, doing regular business on the Sabbath was an ongoing temptation for the people of Israel dating way back before the exile. Nehemiah even said- later in verse 18- that breaking the Sabbath was one of the direct causes for the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile of Israel. So even though Nehemiah's generation had specifically committed to keep the Sabbath (in Nehemiah 10:31), they quickly gave into the temptation to get stuff done and to make money for themselves and their families.
 2. [Let me repeat the second principle again...] Principle #2: We reinforce necessary dependence on God by obeying the principles of the Sabbath.
 - a) Context: There are some Christians who believe that Sunday should be observed as the Christian "Sabbath" and some who believe that Sunday is not the same as the Christian "Sabbath." I actually won't go into that- it is an issue that I believe is not a top-tier issue to fight for sound, biblical faith. But what I will say is that obeying the principles of Sabbath- and actually any command from the Scriptures- is hard because often times obedience to them puts us at an apparent disadvantage in our world, doesn't it? The temptation to constantly work is real because in our fast-paced work culture where

productivity and results are valued above all, to *not work* when we *could work* causes us to get behind of others or to lose our advantage over others.

- b) Context: This is why we'll work into the nights and weekends- and neglect other important things (I specifically say "other important things" because I think work is a valuable activity in life, but it is not the *only* valuable activity in life): we neglect investing into our family relationships and other friendships, discipling brothers and sisters in Christ, building up our own Word and prayer ministries, and being healthy physically (with stuff like properly sleeping, eating, and exercising). The benefit in practicing Sabbath principles is that it reinforces necessary dependence on God- which wrestling through in our hearts and then deciding to obey actually builds up. You see, the development of our faith is a very high priority for God!
- c) Context: Can I warn us of one more thing here? I think we have to be careful of overestimating our own abilities and underestimating our own sinfulness. When we hear something like we need to obey the principles of the Sabbath, how many of us are prone to think, "But it won't happen to me, I can put more on my plate" or "But it won't happen to me, I can actually multitask." This is a trap of the devil: in our pride we think we can handle these "small sins" but as they get ignored, they can turn snowball into huge strongholds and do serious damage in our lives. What we need to say is, "I'm weak and prone to sin, so how I can take seriously these principles of the Sabbath and other commands of God?"
- d) I think this is what Nehemiah had to personally wrestle with too. Along with each of these confrontations with the people's sins, Nehemiah tried as best as humanly possible to fix the issues. With the issue of the upkeep of the temple, he kicked out Tobiah from the temple and appointed reliable people to manage the distribution of goods to the priests, Levites, and other temple workers. With the issue of keeping the Sabbath, Nehemiah ordered to shut the city gates from the start of Sabbath to the end (13:19). Three times, Nehemiah says a "remember me" prayer. Look at this one from Nehemiah 13:22.
 - o Nehemiah 13:22 (ESV): *22 ... Remember this also in my favor, O my God, and spare me according to the greatness of your steadfast love.*
- e) Nehemiah was a good leader who tried as much as possible to remove what tempted people to sin. But all of his corrections were *external*; the truth was that Nehemiah was not able to change the people on the inside. He knew that for himself, and asked for "favor" - in other words *grace*- to spare him from his own sinfulness. He appealed to the "great" steadfast love of God! Nehemiah's dependence on God was faith that looked ahead to God's promise of a time when he'd transform sin-ravaged, spiritually-dead hearts and make them new and alive- God's words would be written on their hearts and they would be his people and he would be their God (Jeremiah 31:33). We'll talk about this more in the final point!

Transition: First, we reform our parts in the church and second, we reform our practice of dependence. For the third way we keep reforming as God's people until God's redemption story is done...

III. See verses 23-31: Our Pursuit of Holiness.

- A. In this third part, Nehemiah constantly had to address the issue of God's people being "unequally yoked" with pagan people groups, even as they learned about holiness from God's Word.
 - 1. [Here's the third principle I want to elaborate on here...] Principle #3: We can pursue holiness in our lives because trusting in Jesus makes us holy and accepted before God.

- a) This is the last issue that Nehemiah dealt with on behalf of the people of Judah- it was the issue of intermarriage. This was the same issue that Ezra tackled some ten or twenty years earlier. They didn't "separate themselves" from the people groups that also lived in the Province of Judah. Instead, many took the daughters of these pagan people groups to be their wives. Now Nehemiah observed that half of the children of these mixed marriages did not speak Hebrew at all. It was not only just a loss of their language and culture, but the loss of their ability to learn their Scriptures (which were in Hebrew)- which was their lifeline to God!
 - b) Now I don't want us to think that God was against interracial marriages- that Jews were simply not allowed to marry people from other races. Look at the famous story of Boaz marrying Ruth, a Moabite woman. Ruth had vowed to her mother-in-law, "Your God will be my God" and had thus *joined* the covenant community. *Then* her marriage with Boaz was blessed. The heart of the issue with intermarriage was *spiritual*: you see, becoming "unequally yoked" together with people who were not worshipers of God *always* included getting involved with their idolatry and immorality as well- and it was a downward spiral.
 - c) So let's read what Nehemiah *said* when he directly responded to the issue when it arose, and then what he did in response to this issue and also what he *did* regarding one specific case in Nehemiah 13:26-29.
 - o Nehemiah 13:26-29 (ESV): 26 *"Did not Solomon king of Israel sin on account of such women? Among the many nations there was no king like him, and he was beloved by his God, and God made him king over all Israel. Nevertheless, foreign women made even him to sin. 27 Shall we then listen to you and do all this great evil and act treacherously against our God by marrying foreign women?" 28 And one of the sons of Jehoiada, the son of Eliashib the high priest, was the son-in-law of Sanballat the Horonite. Therefore I chased him from me. 29 Remember them, O my God, because they have desecrated the priesthood and the covenant of the priesthood and the Levites.*
 - d) [Amen!] Nehemiah reminded them that Solomon, the wisest man to ever walk on the earth, was brought down by his relationships with foreign women, who led him down the slippery slope of idolatry and other great sins against God. Once again, this is a reminder for us to not *overestimate* our abilities to be devoted to God and to not *underestimate* our ability to sin and the danger of sin! Jehoiada, the son of Eliashib the high priest, married Sanballat's daughter! Sanballat, along with Tobiah, was a longtime enemy of God's people. Do you see the hypocrisy in this? Jehoiada would fulfill his duties as a priest, doing the sacrifices on behalf of the people to God; then he would go home and live like a pagan- worshipping idols and living loosely without regard to the Law of God. This was a desecration of the priesthood! Nehemiah's response was very severe: he chased Jehoiada away and removed him from his priestly job in the temple.
 - e) Think about these issues: tithing and maintaining the temple, observing the Sabbath, and marrying from other people groups- none of these seem so terrible in and of themselves. But each of these three things- worship at the temple, honoring the Sabbath, and staying set apart for God- were *core* to who they were. Additionally, their failure to obey points to the truth that were fundamentally *unable* to do what God expected and commanded them to do. Just think about what happened in chapter 12: the dedication of the wall- after it was finally done, after the revival they'd experienced, after the heartfelt commitment to obey and serve God, after the passionate celebration with the choirs singing. But inevitably the people of God crashed and burned...again...and again.
2. [Let me repeat the third principle again...] Principle #3: We can pursue holiness in our lives because trusting in Jesus makes us holy and accepted before God.

- a) **Context:** In the same way, being a part of the church (as God's people who believe in Jesus), practicing our dependence (growth in trusting God for everything in life), and pursuing holiness in our lives (to please and serve God alone) are core aspects of who we are as Christians. There are no hours in a week that don't count as "holy to the Lord"; there is no dichotomy between the two hours a week at Sunday Celebration and the other 166 hours a week at home, work, and anywhere else. And if we're honest, we could think of a ton of ways that we fail to be consistent with this. We are fundamentally *unable* to do what God expects and commands us to do! The emotions and desires to obey and serve God wear off eventually and we crash and burn. Even how we feel *now*- the joy of starting onsite Sunday Celebration and the energy we have to serve- will eventually (if not already) wear off!
- b) **Context:** Look at Nehemiah's "remember me" prayer here in verse 29: *Remember them, O my God, because they have desecrated the priesthood and the covenant of the priesthood and the Levites. We need this prayer too: "Remember us, O God, because we desecrate everything we touch and break our commitments over and over again."* And the great news is that God *does* remember us! God sent us the *perfect high priest* who did not desecrate himself with sin but *consecrated* himself to obey God the Father all the way to the cross. Jesus was sacrificed on the cross and his blood pays the penalty for our sins and makes us clean and holy before God. And in doing so, Jesus secured our redemption forever- this is the first part of the good news from this Scripture!
- c) **Context:** Nehemiah ends in a weird sort of way, doesn't it? There's no neat-and-tidy happy ending; it's a cliffhanger- the original audience of this book of Scripture are left wanting something more. Here's the thing: Nehemiah is the last book in the Old Testament in terms of historical timeline- there are no other events that are recorded between the end of Nehemiah and the beginning of Matthew. They were waiting for the promised Savior and King to come, the one that the Scriptures all pointed towards. We now know that is Jesus, and we know that he came the first time to incarnate and go to the cross for the sins of the world. So even though the war with sin and death is won, our battles are still going on until Jesus comes the second time to usher in his final kingdom. This is when God's redemption story will be done and we will be taken up to eternal glory with Jesus!
- d) **Context:** So here's how to live in between Jesus' two comings. In light of Jesus' cross (the first coming), we understand that we cannot *make ourselves holy* to be accepted by God- only Jesus' cross can do this for us. But now, look at what it says in Romans 12:1.
- o Romans 12:1 (ESV): *I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.*

By the mercy and grace of God, we are *already* holy and acceptable to God. Now, we present ourselves- every part of our lives- to be living sacrifices to God. Everything we do is now can be worship to God!

Transition: So there are three ways that we keep reforming as God's people until God's redemption story is done: first, we reform our parts in the church; second, we reform our practice of dependence; and third, we reform our pursuit of holiness. To conclude, let's go to the...

Conclusion

IV. Life Application

A. Our next steps in light of Nehemiah 13 are to answer these two questions:

1. In light of Jesus making us holy and accepted before God, will I *receive* God's gift salvation for the first time or *renew* my faith in God's gift of salvation again?
 - a) Friends, I hope that this is starting to make sense to you. There is no way to save ourselves from our own sin and we break our own commitments again and again. But thanks be to God that Jesus is the perfect high priest who stands in our place now and forever! You are made holy and accepted by God *only* and *always* because of Jesus!
2. In light of Jesus making us holy and accepted before God, how will I keep reforming in my pursuit of holiness, practice of dependence, or part in the church?
 - a) Brothers and sisters in Christ, Jesus demands our whole lives to be living sacrifices- and we can confidently and joyfully put ourselves in the process of allowing Jesus to *reform* our everyday lives- 168 hours a week- to be consistent with God's heart. Be open to how God will want to do this in your life! Also, by allowing Jesus to reform how we depend on him through obeying the principles of the Sabbath and playing our part in the local church, we will also grow in our pursuit of holiness.

Transition: I'll give us a few moments to meditate and pray through this, as well as to prepare our hearts for observing communion.

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