

March 31, 2024

CONFRONTING SIN AND LOVING OUR NEIGHBOR

Nehemiah 13

(9 of 9 in a series through Ezra-Nehemiah)

So, let me start out by stating the obvious when you've scheduled to preach Nehemiah 13 on Easter Sunday. I don't factor in the annual church calendar too much when planning my sermon planning. In Romans 14:5 Paul says, "One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind." Well, I'm one of those guys that leans on the side of esteeming all days alike. When I look at the New Testament, the only calendar I see is a weekly one where the saints keep gathering together on Sunday, the Lord's Day, to praise the risen Lord. In other words, the New Testament seems to tell us that Easter should be celebrated not one time a year but fifty-two times a year as the saints assemble on the first day of the week to exalt the risen and reigning Lord Jesus Christ. That's always been our practice, and I've always allowed the Scripture to guide us in sermon planning, just moving on to the next biblical text as we work our way through the Bible. Plus, I've always said, if you can't see how your text connects to the resurrection of Jesus, then you're probably not understanding the text accurately. And then I opened my Bible early this week to study Nehemiah 13 in order to preach it on this Easter Sunday and thought, "Well, this will put that to the test."

Now, if you've read the chapter, you know why that was my reaction. It's a chapter where Nehemiah tells us he "was very angry" (v. 8), threw furniture out of the temple (v. 8), threatened to "lay hands on" some people (v. 21), beat others and pulled their hair out (v. 25), and chased still another (v. 28). If I were a visiting preacher somewhere else today, it's probably not the text I'd take up.

But I do think this chapter reminds us of some crucially important truths for the health of the church and is directly connected to Christ's resurrection in that sense, since the resurrected Christ is the head of the church. Before walking through these important truths, however, let me once more set up our chapter.

Nehemiah 13 begins, "On that day," but the day isn't the same day as what we saw in 12:44. The construction of the phrase is different, and context will show it's later.¹ It's a much later time, actually, probably twelve to fifteen years later, and I'll show you how we know it's a much later time in a second. But in 13:1-3 the people are hearing the Law of Moses read again, seeing that no Ammonite or Moabite should be among the assembly of God's people, and so they are separating themselves from these foreign peoples who worship false gods. And if you read that asking, "Why are they doing that?" well, that's what the rest of the chapter answers. Nehemiah

¹ Jim Hamilton, *Christ-Centered Exposition: Exalting Jesus in Ezra and Nehemiah* (Nashville: Holman Reference, 2014), 215-16.

13:4 begins with the phrase, “Now before this.” As I’ve mentioned before, this is the equivalent of one of those television shows that starts with a scene and then just as you’re thinking, “Wait, how did we get here?” the screen goes black, and white letters appear saying, “Three days earlier,” or like. That’s what Nehemiah is doing here with the words, “Now before this.” He’s saying, “Let me take you back in time a bit and show you what led to reading the law again and declaring that they would obey God’s Word.

Now, I know we’re all ready to dive right into the text, but let me remind you of one more thing that happened earlier before we do. If you remember back to Nehemiah 10, you’ll remember that Ezra had read from the Law of Moses to the people day after day when the people, having been convicted of their sin, made a covenant to walk in obedience to God’s commands. Specifically they promised to do three things: 1) they would not give their daughters in marriage to the surrounding peoples (v. 30), 2) they would not buy goods from these peoples on the Sabbath in order to keep it holy (v. 31), and 3) they would provide for the workers at the temple and make sure everything there is provided for (v. 32-39). Okay, so now in Nehemiah 13 we’re twelve to fifteen years later, and we’ll look at what’s taking place. And I’ll walk through our text under three headings, the first of which is: the growth and spread of sin.

The growth and spread of sin

Perhaps, surprisingly, we find out in this chapter that Nehemiah had left Jerusalem for a while. In verses 6-7 he writes, “While this was taking place, I was not in Jerusalem, for in the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes king of Babylon I went to the king. And after some time I asked leave of the king and came to Jerusalem.” So, Nehemiah and the others had finished building the wall in about 445 BC and had dedicated the wall with a huge celebration. That’s what we saw last week. But in the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes’ reign (which would be about 433 BC) Nehemiah went back to Persia to visit with the king. No doubt he was giving him updates on what all had transpired since he’d left and gone to Jerusalem to rebuild the wall. And Nehemiah tells us that he was with the king for “some time” and then came back to Jerusalem (v. 6). We don’t know how long that “some time” was, but even if it were only a year or two, we’re looking at 430 BC or so. Again, possibly fifteen years after the people made that covenant and the wall had been dedicated. Then when Nehemiah came back to Jerusalem, he found that things were in terrible shape, specifically that the people were disobeying in the very areas they’d promised to obey.

The first thing Nehemiah finds is almost hard to believe. He writes, “Now before this, Eliashib the priest, who was appointed over the chambers of the house of our God, and who was related to Tobiah, prepared for Tobiah a large chamber where they had previously put the grain offering, the frankincense, the vessels, and the tithes of grain, wine, and oil, which were given by commandment to the Levites, signers, and gatekeepers, and the contributions for the priests” (vv. 4-5). Now, if you’ll remember, Tobiah was an enemy of God’s people. He’d been the one back in 4:3 to mock the Israelites for rebuilding the wall, suggesting that a fox could cause the thing to collapse. Moreover, he was an Ammonite, which explains why Nehemiah mentions in

this future scene in 13:1-3 that they were reading the law about how no Ammonite should ever enter the assembly of God.

Well, this Ammonite and evil man, Tobiah, was actually living in a room in the temple. He was somehow related by marriage to the priest, Eliashib, and the priest had taken a room where the grain, wine, and oil was stored so the temple workers could have it, and had thrown it all out, moved Tobiah's furniture in, and let him live there. Yes, Tobiah was *living* in the temple.

Not only that, but because the Levites had nothing to live off of, since their supply had been thrown out to make room for Tobiah's furniture, we read in verse 10 that they'd left the temple and weren't ministering there anymore in order to work the fields and provide food for themselves.

So, the people had promised to provide for the temple and its workers, and now they'd done just the opposite, moving in an enemy who wasn't allowed to be in the temple and forsaking caring for the Levites so that they had to deny ministering at the temple and go work fields in order to survive. Also, though they'd also promised not to buy or sell goods on the Sabbath, we'll see they broke that promise as well.

In verse 15 we're told, "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." Then Nehemiah adds in verse 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!" Promise number two, broken.

Well, what about that third covenant promise that they'd not give their daughters in marriage to the surrounding peoples who worshiped false gods? Sadly, we read in verses 23-24, "In those days also I saw the Jews who had married women of Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab. And half of their children spoke the language of Ashdod, and they could not speak the language of Judah, but only the language of each people." That is, not only had they sinned in this way as well, once more forsaking the very promise they'd made to obey, but now an entire generation of children were at risk of not being able to read or understand the Scripture because they only spoke a foreign language. Even the priest's grandson had married the daughter of that now familiar enemy, Sanballat the Horonite. See how sin had grown and spread?

I doubt that Israel wept at their sin when the law was read, made a covenant to obey the Lord, and the very next week said, "Let's move Tobiah the Ammonite into the temple, start violating the Sabbath, and give our daughters in marriage to those who worship false gods." How did they get there? Well, remember when Tobiah and Sanballat the Horonite were opposing Nehemiah, and he would have nothing to do with them, telling them that he wouldn't be distracted from working on the wall back in Nehemiah 4-6? Well, just after the note about the wall being finished in fifty-two days, just when you thought, "That'll show Tobiah," chapter 6 ended with this little note about Tobiah keeping up correspondence with some of the Israelites, sending and

receiving letters from them, so that even some of the Israelites began to speak to Nehemiah about how good of a person Tobiah was (6:17-19).

You see, instead of the Israelites saying, “Tobiah, we’ll have nothing to do with you and will not listen to you, for you oppose God’s Word and plans,” they cracked open the door to chat with him, then started talking about how good of a guy he was, and now he’s living in the temple. That’s how sin works. It starts with small compromises, and then it grows. It’s one of the reasons that the Scripture warns us to have nothing to do with divisive people or false teachers. They must not be given any area of influence. It’s why in the first nine chapters of Proverbs the father tells his son to make sure his feet are far from the adulteress’s house. We’re not made to make small compromises with sin and then just stop there. Sin grows and spreads. And if it’s not addressed, spiritual decline for an individual and a community can happen rather quickly. Paul wrote to the Galatians, “I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ. . . . You were running well” (Gal 1:6, 5:7).

So let’s make sure not to give in to any compromises with sin, no matter how small they are. Don’t let anger linger. Don’t give into that seemingly benign bit of gossip. Don’t allow yourself to watch that show that’s not too sexually explicit. Don’t stay in bed on that Sunday morning instead of gathering with the saints, even once. The author of Hebrews warns us against drifting away from God’s truth, and it sadly could well be said of any of us, “You were running so well. How have you so quickly deserted him who called you in the grace of Christ?” Well, as we get back to our story, we’ll continue to look at it under our next heading: the confrontation of sin.

The confrontation of sin

So, what did Nehemiah do when he came back from his visit with the king to find all of this happening in Jerusalem? He confronted the sin. First, with Tobiah living in the temple, Nehemiah tells us in verses 7-9, “I then discovered the evil that Eliashib had done for Tobiah, preparing for him a chamber in the courts of the house of God. And I was very angry, and I threw all the household furniture of Tobiah out of the chamber. Then I gave orders, and they cleansed the chambers, and I brought back the vessels of the house of the God, with the grain offering and the frankincense.” He confronted and dealt with the sin, even throwing out Tobiah’s furniture.

Then, we read that he confronted three other issues of sin, and notice how each time we read, “I *confronted*.” Concerning the Levites leaving the temple to work fields, Nehemiah tells us, “So I confronted the officials and said, ‘Why is the house of God forsaken?’ And I gathered them together and sat them in their stations,” (v. 11), bringing back all their goods into the temple.

Concerning buying goods on the Sabbath, we read, “Then I confronted the nobles of Judah and said to them, ‘What is this evil thing that you are doing, profaning the Sabbath day?’”(v. 17). Then, he ordered the gates of the wall closed on the Sabbath, and when traders gathered outside of the gates, eager for them to open so that they could jump at the opportunity to sell

their goods, Nehemiah confronted them, saying, “Why do you lodge outside the wall? If you do so again, I will lay hands on you” (v. 21).

And, finally, concerning their intermarrying with foreign peoples who worshiped false gods, we read, “And I confronted them and cursed them and beat some of them and pulled out their hair. And I made them take an oath in the name of God, saying, ‘You shall not give your daughters to their sons, or take their daughters for your sons or for yourselves’” (v. 25). Then, when Nehemiah discovered one of the high priest’s sons had intermarried with a woman who was the daughter of Sanballat the Horonite, he chased him off, protecting the priesthood.

Now, I know this can all feel over the top to us. You can picture Nehemiah tossing furniture out of the temple, or threatening to lay his hands on someone, pulling out hair, or chasing off someone and think, “Is this man a derange lunatic?” But if so, we’re thinking of this wrong. First, Nehemiah is a governing official. It’s mentioned multiple times in this letter that he’s a governor. Moreover, King Artaxerxes has charged Ezra and Nehemiah to make sure that the Law of Moses is obeyed. The king had said to Ezra, “Whoever will not obey the law of your God and the law of the king, let judgment be strictly executed on him, whether for death or for banishment or for confiscation of his goods or for imprisonment” (Ezra 7:26).

Therefore, what Nehemiah is doing here is executing judicial punishments. He’s not going about randomly pulling out people’s hair. This is most likely a legal punishment where law-breakers had the hair of their beard pulled out as a shaming ritual. And if you think it’s extreme, remember that Artaxerxes said to execute them if it’s needed. So chasing someone away or pulling out their hair or threatening physical punishment is actually quite gracious. But the key for us is Nehemiah’s confrontation of sin. Three times he says, “I confronted” (v. 11, 17, 25). And we must recognize the need for this in our lives as well.

Perhaps we read this story and think that confrontation of sin is something that should belong to that era, but the reality is that the New Testament consistently affirms that confronting sin is good and loving. Paul tells the Corinthians that we judge those inside the church (1 Cor 5:12), holding one another to holiness. And Paul illustrated this throughout his letters with strong rebukes on occasion and in his public confrontation with Peter when he was acting hypocritically (Gal 2:14). We’re told that Scripture is profitable for reproof and correction (2 Tim 3:16).

Simply put, confronting sin in the body of Christ is necessary, good, and loving. It’s necessary because the church must be a holy people. It’s good because if sin is left unaddressed then, it can spread and corrupt others. And it’s loving because unless sin is dealt with and repented off, it can lead us and others to hell. I shared a story with my small group a few weeks ago of a man weeping to me one time, recounting how his church when he grew up was unwilling to confront his dad’s sin that eventually broke up that home.

Now, when confronting, we do it in love and with humility. We know that outside of the grace of God, we could easily be neck-deep in our own rebellion. And we confront not to get at someone or humiliate them but because we care deeply for their spiritual state. And so a healthy church

body is one that is willing to humbly and lovingly confront its members as we walk in unrepentant sin. So, as we've noted, it's crucial to keep a close eye on ourselves, but we must also fight for the holiness of one another. But there's one other element that we see in the text that I want to address: the concern to please God more than man.

The concern to please God more than man

We've really told the story of this chapter to address the growth and spread of sin and how Nehemiah confronted it and brought correction. But there is one other repeated element you may have noticed. In v. 14, 22, and 31 Nehemiah asks the Lord to remember him for the good that he's done.

Now, for us, that may seem odd. What do we do with that? Does it make us think that Nehemiah is a bit too focused on himself? Well, I don't think it should because Nehemiah is simply saying this to the Lord. In other words, what Nehemiah is showing us here is that he's more concerned about what God thinks of him than what man thinks of him. And if we're going to walk in holiness and be willing to lovingly confront sin, we'll need to have this same concern.

If we're caught up in getting the approval of man, we'll soon compromise what God says is good and right, and sin will grow and spread in our lives. The reason is because the world is opposed to our Lord and his teaching, and in our culture, you cannot hold to the teachings of Christ and be applauded. You won't even just be ignored; you'll be opposed.

Also, if we're more concerned about what man thinks than about what God thinks, then we'll never confront someone over sin. After all, people usually don't get excited about correction. But if our focus is on what God thinks and how each of us stands before God, then we'll obey the Lord whatever the cost. Paul will write to the Galatians, "For am I now seeking the approval of man, or of God? Or am I trying to please man? If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ (Gal 1:10). So let us make sure we're keeping our eyes on walking in a pleasing manner before God and not man.

So how does the resurrection of Jesus have anything to do with the corrupting nature of sin, our need to confront one another in love, and our seeking God's approval instead of man's? Much. You see, when we read of the Israelites promises in Nehemiah 10, we should have anticipated that they would fail. And it's not because the promises were bad or the laws they were trying to obey wicked. The law was good. But the law couldn't do what was most needed, namely, give someone a new heart. The law is insufficient to give life to one who is dead in his sins.

But when Jesus came and lived, died, and was raised, he provided the means for our holiness. Those of us who are united with him by faith have been raised with him in that we've been made alive, as we were once dead in our sins, and enabled by the Spirit to live in holiness. That's why, unlike the Israelites in our text, we can have confidence to walk in obedience to the Word we've seen this morning. So let's commit ourselves to obedience and give thanks for the Lord's empowerment as we come to the table. Amen.