

Notes on Nehemiah Chapter 13

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VI. Spiritual Renewal of the People – Chap. 13

Step 12 in useful service to God: Remind people of their commitment to God and rebuke disobedience

In Nehemiah 10 the people had renewed their commitment to keep God's law. They had even made a specific covenant to do so. In this chapter Nehemiah tells how the people failed in many ways to keep that covenant, so he had to remind them and insist that they keep the covenant and continue serving God.

Verses 1-3

1. What did the Jews learn from Moses' law? Why was this law given?
2. Tell the story of Balaam. Give **b/c/v** where it is found.

Separation of Moabites and Ammonites from the people

On a certain day (what day I cannot tell), the people read in the Book of Moses that no Ammonite or Moabite could come into the assembly of the people of God. This is recorded in Deut. 23:3-6. The reason given was that these nations had not welcomed the Israelites (with bread and water) when they came to Canaan after leaving Egyptian slavery. Instead, they had hired Balaam to curse Israel (as recorded in Numbers 22,23).

These nations were descendants of Abraham's nephew Lot, so they were related to the Israelites. They should have been hospitable and kind to Israel. Instead, they had sought to harm them, even seeking to turn God against them. It did not work, because God turned the curse into a blessing, and eventually Israel captured Canaan despite the opposition of these nations. But God pronounced a curse on them (instead of their curse on Israel), saying they could never enter the assembly of Israel. Apparently this forbade, allowing such people to come into any religious assembly of the nation. Vv 23ff make clear that the people were also forbidden to intermarry with such people.

By reading the law, the people were able to understand this restriction and use it to restore their proper conduct before God. Once again, as earlier discussed, restoration is possible when people will read and obey the law. Though the law had been written many centuries before and had been extensively disobeyed and ignored, yet the people could understand it, obey it, and thereby restore their relationship to God.

The Jews in Nehemiah's day had become lax regarding this law. On reading the law, however, they determined to obey it, so they separated themselves from these forbidden people. Similar language was used in 9:2 and 10:28, where they separated themselves from the people of the land (these were not necessarily Moabites and Ammonites). Note that the people not only committed sin, but they had problems staying right when they repented. In a few years they would again disobey the same laws.

Disobedience to God's law was bad, but the willingness to repent and obey was praiseworthy. Again, when people have hearts willing to obey God, study of His word reveals how we ought to live.

Verses 4,5

3. Who was Eliashib? Who was Tobiah? Give other **b/c/v** about them.
4. What had Eliashib done for Tobiah? Explain why this was a perversion.
5. Application: What lesson can we learn about the danger that enemies may influence God's people, even leaders?

Tobiah's alliance with Eliashib

V6 tells us that Nehemiah had been absent from Jerusalem for a time. During this time the people fell into various sins. When he returned, he had to lead the people to repent and keep their covenant regarding God's service.

One problem that reappeared during this time related to one of the old enemies of Nehemiah, namely Tobiah. This Tobiah was an Ammonite, one of the very kind of people that we just read should be put out from the assemblies of God's people. Instead, he was one of the people that the Jews had not separated from as they should have separated. And not only was he an Ammonite, but he had been an enemy who opposed Nehemiah's efforts to rebuild the wall, even threatening to do violence against the workers. See on 2:10,19 for other references.

Not only had the people failed to separate from him, but in fact he was an ally of the high priest Eliashib, grandson of Jeshua (cf. 3:1; 12:10). In 6:17-19 we were told that he had allies among God's people who worked to get Nehemiah to accept him. Now we learn how influential these allies were.

Note how strong the influence of evil people can be, and how hard it is to remove that influence when those people have close ties with God's people, especially people in influential places. This is exactly why God had forbidden intermarriage with people of the lands. Such relationships give people influence that continually caused trouble for God's people.

Christians also need to learn this lesson. Evil companions still corrupt good morals (1 Cor. 15:33). We must have the courage to rebuke and stand against such relationships.

Note also how old enemies have a way of coming back to haunt God's people. They may be defeated once or twice, but they have a way of resurfacing to create problems.

Perversion of the temple storerooms

As high priest, Eliashib was in charge of the storerooms of the temple, the rooms that should have been used to store the meal offerings, vessels, tithes, and other items for support of the priests, Levites, gatekeepers, and singers. These chambers had been built for a specific legitimate purpose relating to the service in the temple. The people had specifically determined, just in 12:44, to use these storerooms for these purposes.

However, Eliashib had taken one of the large storerooms and had allowed Tobiah to use it for his personal purposes. V8 shows that he had put his personal household possessions there. This perverted the purpose of the temple and hindered it from being used for the proper purpose. It also put the people in association with an Ammonite whom God said should have no part in Israel's assemblies.

Note how similar this is to many perversions today among God's people. Local churches today also purchase "chambers" (church buildings) for legitimate purposes of the church: assembling to worship God and study and teach His word. However, many churches today take those chambers and allow them to be used for activities that are no part of the church's work: parties, recreation, entertainment, and social meals. All such activities are perversions of the authorized work of local churches, just as the misuse of the temple storerooms described here.

Verses 6-9

6. Where was Nehemiah when this happened? What did he do when he returned?

7. What act of Jesus does this remind you of? Give **b/c/v**.

8. Application: What lessons can we learn about the church today from Nehemiah's act and Jesus' act?

Cleansing the temple storerooms

Here Nehemiah explained that he was not in Jerusalem when these errors occurred regarding Tobiah. In the 32nd year of Artaxerxes (12 years after he had gone to Jerusalem to build the wall – 2:1), he had returned to spend time with the king. This is apparently what the king had expected when Nehemiah went to Jerusalem – 2:6. Then after a time (how long we are not told) he left again for Jerusalem. On returning, he discovered the evil done by Eliashib and Tobiah in the house of God. Note that he clearly identifies this conduct as “evil.”

Note that evil people may be defeated in their cause. But when the leaders are gone, who had firmly opposed them, the enemies may attempt again to assert themselves and regain power without repenting. God's people must be on guard to continually oppose error.

Nehemiah grieved when he learned of the error. Again we are shown the great concern he had for the people. He was touched when their conduct or circumstances were harmful to them. This ought to be how we feel when we see others, especially God's people in sin or suffering.

He then took firm action and solved the problem by simply casting Tobiah's household stuff out of the temple chamber. This was easy enough to do of itself. However, Nehemiah had the advantage of having authority to do it without others harming him for so doing. He did not take the law into his own hands, but rather he administered the law as was his duty to do. Likewise today, those who pervert the purpose of the church must be disciplined if they will not repent.

He then commanded that the temple be cleansed and the rooms returned to their proper purpose for storing the grain offering and other supplies for those who served in the temple.

Note that, not only was Tobiah using a part of the temple grounds for that for which it should not have been used, but also in so doing he was hindering or preventing its use for its proper purpose. While his property remained in the storeroom, it could not be used to store the supplies for the temple workers as it should have been used. The error was both in using it for an unauthorized purpose and hindering its use for authorized work.

This is exactly the same for the unauthorized activities that people often today bring into the work of the church. Such activities as entertainment, recreation, parties, and social meals, when they are brought into the work of the church, inevitably they eventually push out the spiritual work that the church ought to be doing. The church and its members have limits on their time, money, and energy. When the church becomes involved in unauthorized activities with physical and carnal emphasis, like those mentioned, the result will be to limit or hinder the church's involvement in the authorized spiritual activities of worship, teaching, Bible study, and saving the lost. These physical or secular activities may not be wrong for individual to practice, but the church should not waste its resources and facilities on them. When they are introduced into the church activities, they will inevitably progress to more and more secular involvement, pushing out spirituality. The result is denominations today that are so wrapped up in material pursuits that they are nothing more than social clubs and general welfare societies. But it all begins with perversion of church work into some unauthorized secular activity, just as in this story in Nehemiah. We must oppose it from the beginning if we seek to prevent the proliferation of error.

Note the similarity to Jesus who likewise cast out the moneychangers and those who bought and sold from the temple. The problem and the solution were similar to Nehemiah's case. The people had perverted the temple from its authorized spiritual purpose. The solution was to remove the unauthorized activity.

Note the courage that Nehemiah showed in opposing the error. Surely other people had seen that this activity was a violation of the covenant and purpose of the people in chap. 10 and 12, yet so far no one had done anything. We too need the courage to cast out unauthorized activities from Jesus' church. God's faithful servants simply must not stand idly by and allow God's spiritual creations, built for the sake of spiritual purposes, to be perverted for secular and material purposes. We must speak out. And if people will not recognize the error and repent, then we must have the courage to exercise authorized discipline to remove them.

For further information, see our article about church organization and work at our Bible Instruction web site at www.gospelway.com/instruct/.

Note that Artaxerxes is called king of Babylon in v6. See Ezra 5:13 where Cyrus was also called king of Babylon. Although these were kings of Persia, evidently they are for some reason also called kings of Babylon. Perhaps it is because they took over the empire from Babylon. Or perhaps they had for a time actually ruled the region of Babylon in their upward ascendancy to power over the whole empire. For whatever, the reason, the language is apparently not a falsehood.

Verses 10,11

9. What other work had been neglected (vv 10,11)? How did this relate to Tobiah's use of the storerooms?

10. Where had the people promised to do this work? What did Nehemiah do about it?

Neglect of support for the temple servants

The next problem Nehemiah observed was that the Levites and singers (and presumably other temple workers) had not been provided the support (portions) that the law required they be given. This duty to provide for the Levites was part of the covenant that the people had expressly agreed to accomplish in 10:32-39. Here we are just a few years later and they are failing to keep the law of God and to keep the covenant they had so energetically made. Note how easily God's people may become discouraged and begin to neglect the work they commit themselves to do.

Since the temple workers had no support, they had gone back to working in their fields. No doubt they were discouraged, but they also had to have some kind of support. So they had to leave the temple work to obtain income for themselves and their families.

So Nehemiah confronted the rulers of the Jews about this and asked why God's house was forsaken. He then gathered them together and set them again in their place. I can only conclude that this must refer to the workers in the temple who had gone to their fields. He brought them back to the temple to put them in their assigned duties.

All of this also was surely related to Tobiah's use of the storeroom. When the rooms were used for his personal property, they were not available to store the portions to support the temple workers. The two go hand-in-hand: changing the direction of God's work from spiritual activity to material pursuits leads God's people both to involve themselves in things they should not be doing and to neglect things they should be doing.

This is further evidence of the danger of the church today getting involved in unauthorized secular activities. As resources are diverted to these physical pursuits, less and less time, resources, facilities, and effort will be directed toward the authorized spiritual work.

Verses 12-14

11. What else did the people do (v12)? What did Nehemiah do to facilitate this work?

Support for the temple workers restored

When Nehemiah urged the leaders to return to providing for the temple workers and had cleansed the storerooms and arranged for the workers to return, the people again brought in the

provisions to the storehouse. Nehemiah then appointed men to serve as treasurers to be in charge of these provisions to see that they were distributed properly.

V13 names the men appointed and affirms that they were faithful men who would do their work properly. Men appointed to responsible positions among God's people must be trustworthy. In this case there was possibility for theft or misuse of these provisions, so reliable, honest men were needed.

Nehemiah then prayed to God to remember what he had done for the good of the service in the temple. He calls on God to not wipe out or forget what he had done. Of course, God never forgets our good deeds, but Nehemiah is simply calling on God to keep His promises in this matter.

Verses 15-18

12. What other sin did people commit in v15? Where else have we read about this day?
13. Who else joined in this sin (v16)? What did they do?
14. What did Nehemiah say and do regarding this sin (vv 16-18)?
15. Application: In what ways might emphasis on material prosperity hinder worship to God today?

Violations of the Sabbath

Another error committed by the people then came to Nehemiah's attention. People were violating the Sabbath by working for gain on the seventh day. Such work was expressly forbidden - see Exodus 20:8-11; 31:12-17; etc.

Yet people among the Jews were treading winepresses on the Sabbath, bringing in sheaves of grain, putting them on their donkeys, and carrying various produce and other burdens into Jerusalem and selling them on the Sabbath. Nehemiah warned them about this violation of the seventh day of the week.

Some of the men involved were foreign traders from Tyre, who brought fish and other goods to sell to the inhabitants of Jerusalem on the Sabbath. All this violated, not just the Sabbath law, but also the covenant the people had expressly made in 10:31.

So once again Nehemiah had to contend with the rulers of the people and call them into account for another sin, this time for violation of the Sabbath. He reminded them that sins like this were what had caused God to send the people into captivity. The people knew about this. They had just a few years earlier rebuilt the wall that had been destroyed when they went into captivity. Yet they were repeating the same kinds of errors (cf. Jer. 17:21-27).

How different are people today? We do not have a specific Sabbath command not to work on a certain day of the week, but we do have commands to assemble to worship God. Yet how many people simply choose to pursue material interests when they could arrange to be worshiping God? Many will accept voluntary overtime, keep their businesses open, or schedule themselves to work during church meetings, when they could rearrange their work schedules to attend church meetings. Do they make an effort to trade shifts, avoid voluntary overtime if it conflicts, or even change jobs if necessary to avoid frequently missing? Others choose to attend sports, entertainment, recreation, or musical functions instead of worshiping God and studying his word? How does this differ in principle from those here in Nehemiah who, for their own personal profit, neglected the spiritual service of God? We should be willing to suffer financial loss, if necessary, in order to obey God's commands and worship Him. See Matthew 6:19-33; 16:24-27; Romans 8:5-8; 12:1,2; 2 Corinthians 8:5; 10:3,4; John 6:27,63; Luke 12:15-21; 1 Timothy 6:6-10; Colossians 3:1,2.

Verses 19-22

16. What other measures did Nehemiah take to insure that the traders did not lead the people to violate the Sabbath (vv 19-22)?

Nehemiah's action to promote Sabbath observance

Nehemiah took steps to prevent people from doing business on the Sabbath. He had already talked to the leaders. Further, he had the gates of the city closed as the Sabbath began when the day grew dark (days were measured from sundown to sundown). The gates could not be opened again till the Sabbath was over. This would keep people from coming into the city to sell on the Sabbath. He also sent some servants to guard the gates to make sure no burdens were carried in or out on the Sabbath. Cf. Jeremiah 17:21,22.

This kept people from carrying burdens in on the Sabbath; but then the traders simply made camp outside the city gates, waiting to come in as soon as the gates were opened. Nehemiah would not have this either, but rebuked them and warned them that, if they stayed, he would lay hands on them (arrest them). The result was that they altogether ceased to come on the Sabbath.

He then commanded the Levites to accept the responsibility to guard the gates to make sure that the Sabbath was kept holy and not violated. He then called on God once again to remember the good that he had done and to show mercy and goodness to Nehemiah to spare him (cf. v14).

Verses 23,24

17. What other sins had some people committed (v23)? Where else have we read of this problem?

18. Describe the consequence this sin had (v24). What danger of intermarriage does this demonstrate?

Intermarriage with people of the land

Vv 1-3 had discussed failure of the Jews to separate themselves from the Ammonites and Moabites. Now Nehemiah begins to discuss a related problem in which the people were intermarrying with people of the land, Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab. Not only were they allowing them into the assembly, they were actually marrying them.

The people had a similar problem just 25 or so years earlier. As soon as Ezra had brought his group back from captivity, he discovered much intermarriage between Jews and people of the surrounding nations. He had led them to give up their wives on that occasion. See notes on Ezra 9 and 10 regarding this problem and the Scriptures it violated. (However, remember that Ruth was a Moabitess, whom God allowed to marry Boaz and even included her in Jesus' ancestry. There must have been some exception, such as genuine conversion as a proselyte.)

As a result of this intermarriage, half the children could not speak the Jew's language (presumably did not speak it clearly or well), but spoke the language of the foreign parent. This illustrates one of the more tragic problem areas caused by such intermarriages: the effects on the children. Not only did intermarriage endanger the servant of God to become unfaithful, but it subjected the children to ungodly influences that may cause them to be lost.

Children will be influenced by both parents, as illustrated here by the speech of these children. But godly parents should raise their children to serve the true God (Proverbs 22:6; Ephesians 6:4). The harmful spiritual influence of the ungodly parent is reason enough to avoid such marriage. Even if the servant of God remains faithful and does not fall away, chances are very slim that all the children will grow up to be faithful. Almost invariably one or more is lost. It is bad enough that parents choose to endanger their own souls, but their children have no choice who their parents will be. Intermarriage causes the children to be born into an influence that puts their souls at eternal risk without their choice or knowledge in the matter.

This example also shows the influence of people on others and the danger of compromising with sin in general. Just as these foreign parents influenced their children, so we are often influ-

enced by people even if they are not our parents or family members. We want to have our cake and eat it too. We want to try to serve God yet maintain close ties to sinners or tempting people, places, and activities. Such associations frequently lead Christians into sin. See Proverbs 4:23; 6:27; 13:20; 22:3; Matthew 5:8; 6:13; 18:8,9; Romans 13:14; 1 Corinthians 15:33; Genesis 39:7-12. If this can be true just of friendships, how much more so can ungodly spouse or parents influence people for harm? This is why God expressly forbade such marriages in the Old Testament and why they are foolish and dangerous still today.

Verses 25-28

19. What great king had committed this same sin? What was the consequence? Give **b/c/v**.
20. Who is named in v28 as being guilty of this sin? What sin did we earlier learn that Eliashib had committed?
21. What did Nehemiah do regarding this grandson of Eliashib?
22. Application: What should be done today when a member of the church is involved in an unscriptural marriage and will not repent?

Nehemiah's opposition to intermarriage

Again Nehemiah contended with the people for their sins. They were violating God's law (see on Ezra 9,10). But they were also violating the covenant vow they had made to God just a few years earlier in 10:29. They had then expressly vowed to God that they would not do this kind of thing.

So Nehemiah pronounced curses upon them, beat some of them, and plucked out their hair (all of these were valid punishments under the Old Testament law). Then he made them once again take a vow (as in their former covenant) not to allow intermarriage with people of the land.

He also reminded the people of past examples of those who committed this error. Specifically, Solomon, though he had been highly blessed of God as king of Israel and the son of godly David, yet he was led into sin by his foreign wives (cf. 1 Kings 11:1ff). They had influenced him to commit all kinds of idolatry. Surely people in Nehemiah's day and likewise today are foolish to think they can avoid the temptation that even the wise man Solomon succumbed to. If we marry people who do not serve God, what makes us think we will not go astray like he did? Nehemiah then asked the people why they were transgressing God's law by marrying such people.

Next a specific instance is given. We are told that a son of Joiada, who was in turn a son of Eliashib the high priest, had married the daughter of Sanballat, who was a Horonite! Sanballat, of course, was another of the enemies who had attempted to stop Nehemiah and the people from rebuilding the wall, even threatening violence against them (see notes regarding Tobiah on vv 4-8 above). Not only was the high priest Eliashib himself allied with the enemy Tobiah, but Eliashib's grandson was married to a daughter of the enemy Sanballat. This was an express violation of God's law against intermarrying foreign wives and an express violation of the covenant of the people in chap. 10.

This example shows the powerful influence that can be caused by fraternizing with the enemy. When God's people form close associations with people in sin, the result harms other people of God. And the problem is magnified when those who are guilty are leaders. In this case, both the alliance with Tobiah and the alliance with Sanballat led the high priest and his family into sin.

Nehemiah dealt with this by chasing Sanballat's son-in-law from his presence. This clearly implies that he was removed from among the people of God, which was the proper discipline for people who committed such sin but would not repent. This passage does not mention that those who intermarried had to give up those wives, but this example shows that those who did not do so were driven from among the people. This also shows that people today who live in unscriptural remarriages, which today are an express violation of God's law, should likewise be disci-

plined by withdrawal if they will not repent. Such discipline is needed both to motivate the sinner to repent and to remove the sinful influence from among God's people.

Verses 29-31

23. What other good deeds did Nehemiah do to restore the people to God's service?

Nehemiah's concluding prayer

Just as Nehemiah had called on God to remember his righteous deeds, so he here called on God to remember those who had sinned and defiled the priesthood and the covenant of priests and Levites. Such intermarriage was a sin for any Israelite, but especially for a priest. God, of course, will remember both good and bad of all that we do.

He then summarizes that he had cleansed them of everything pagan or heathen. This appears to especially refer to the priests and Levites. Note that all pagan religious practices and influences must be removed from the worship God's people offer to God. He then appointed the purified priests and Levites to their duties and services. He also appointed the responsibilities to provide for their support by offerings and firstfruits.

All these works Nehemiah had done according to God's will. He then concludes by once again calling on God to remember him and bless him for good (cf. vv 14,22). Surely Nehemiah was a good and godly leader. We can learn many lessons from him about useful service to God and helping God's people serve Him. Let us study diligently such godly men, learn the lessons, and apply them in our own lives that God can also remember us for good.

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