

The Problem with Compromise

Nehemiah 13

Many of us can remember when we were in school how whenever the teacher had to leave the classroom for some reason, the teacher would usually tell us, “Be quiet and study!” However we also remember that as soon as the teacher left the room, many of us did anything but be quiet and study.

When I was in Junior High school I had a math teacher, a former marine, Mr. Anderson. While he was out of the room one day someone grabbed a chalkboard eraser and threw it. I don’t remember now who started it, but in just a split second we had an all out eraser war going on. When the lookout at the door spotted Mr. Anderson coming back, we all quickly replaced the erasers and sat quietly in our seats. Mr. Anderson walked into the room and called out in that drill sergeant voice of his, “Mr. Sipes, Mr. Shelton, Mr. Lopresti, Mr. Walls—pushups.” Now doing pushups for Mr. Anderson was a humbling experience because he had us do yo-yo pushups. You don’t know what yo-yo pushups are? That’s when everytime you go down and come back up you have to say, “I am a yo-yo.”

So how did Mr. Anderson know that while the cat was away, the mice had decided to play? Well, erasers that have been thrown tend to leave evidence behind. And dragging his finger across my desk that was white with chalk dust, and seeing the chalk marks in various places in the room, Mr. Anderson had no problem determining who had been involved in the eraser war.

In Nehemiah chapter 13 we find that Nehemiah returns to Jerusalem after having been gone for sometime, maybe eight or nine years. And he finds that while he was away, the people began to compromise. Nehemiah tells us in 13:6 that he had returned to Persia to the court of Artaxerxes just as he had promised to do in 2:6. Now Nehemiah comes back to Jerusalem and finds that things are not the same as how he had left them. Remember that when Nehemiah had left the people of God in Jerusalem in chapters 9 & 10 had separated themselves from the pagans in their midst, and humbly come before God in a solemn assembly to confess their sins and claim God’s forgiveness. More than this, they had pledged themselves to some very resolute and concrete promises, committing themselves to submit to the Word of God, to observe the Sabbath, to support God’s work, and to separate themselves from pagan influences.

The temptation might have been for Nehemiah to end his book on this high note, with everything rolling merrily along as the people praise God and serve Him. But the truth of the matter is that when we get to chapter 13, we find that the most spiritual of communities can find its standards subtly eroded as it accommodates to the pressures of contemporary worldliness. The people of Jerusalem did not exactly live happily ever after.

I’m reminded of a story Tony Campolo tells of his experience in a church of the more Pentecostal bent. He tells of a man who, in the throes of spiritual involvement, began to call out in a loud voice, “Fill me, Lord! Fill me, Lord! Fill me, Lord!” To which finally an older woman in the congregation who could control herself no longer replied, in loud voice, “Don’t do it, Lord; he leaks!”

How about you? Do you find that you have a leak in your spiritual life?

Sometimes we are ablaze with spiritual commitment, but as Gen. William Booth of the Salvation Army said, “I want you young men always to bear in mind that it

is in the nature of a fire to go out; you must keep it stirred and fed and the ashes removed.” Paul reminded Timothy to “**stir up** (rekindle or fan into flame) **the gift of God which is in you...**”

In Nehemiah’s time the people of Jerusalem had experienced real spiritual “highs”. God had done wonders through them as they completed rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem. Chapters 8-9 show how God spiritually revived the people. Chapter 10 tells how the people made bold promises God. In chapter 11 the people determine to make Jerusalem a holy city. In chapter 12, the people dedicate the newly rebuilt walls, and pledge support for their spiritual leaders.

But when we get to Chapter 13 we see that they became guilty of “inching away” into a comfortable compromise with a pagan world. I sense an excitement in our church about what God has done and what He is going to do with us. So message from Nehemiah for us today is that we must be on our guards lest we give in to the natural tendency to do what they did: to “inch away” into lives of compromise and complacency.

And usually that is how it happens. We usually do not decide one day just to give up our consecration to God and compromise with the world. It happens gradually, one downward step at a time until we find ourselves far away from God—and too close to the world. Raymond Brown put it this way, “All too easily, an ugly thing becomes tolerated, even viewed as the possibly useful thing, then the permissible thing, and finally the attractive thing. It does not happen in a moment. Standards are lowered gradually and imperceptibly. Sin becomes known by another name. We accommodate at one stage of life things which earlier would have been totally unacceptable.”

Let’s look at where the people of Jerusalem compromised, and let it be a lesson to us about how we will be tempted to compromise, and what to do about it.

I. DEFILING THE HOLY (1-9)

13:1 On that day they read from the Book of Moses in the hearing of the people, and in it was found written that no Ammonite or Moabite should ever come into the assembly of God,

2 because they had not met the children of Israel with bread and water, but hired Balaam against them to curse them. However, our God turned the curse into a blessing.

3 So it was, when they had heard the Law, that they separated all the mixed multitude from Israel.

4 Now before this, Eliashib the priest, having authority over the storerooms of the house of our God, was allied with Tobiah.

5 And he had prepared for him a large room, where previously they had stored the grain offerings, the frankincense, the articles, the tithes of grain, the new wine and oil, which were commanded to be given to the Levites and singers and gatekeepers, and the offerings for the priests.

6 But during all this I was not in Jerusalem, for in the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes king of Babylon I had returned to the king. Then after certain days I obtained leave from the king,

7 and I came to Jerusalem and discovered the evil that Eliashib had done for Tobiah, in preparing a room for him in the courts of the house of God.

8 And it grieved me bitterly; therefore I threw all the household goods of Tobiah out of the room.

9 Then I commanded them to cleanse the rooms; and I brought back into them the articles of the house of God, with the grain offering and the frankincense.

I hope that as I read that passage, it struck you that there was “a fox in the hen house.” Tobiah, the very nemesis of Nehemiah was now living in the temple. This was a man that had opposed the rebuilding of the wall, and thus, the work of the kingdom of God. Nehemiah had worked hard to keep him out of Jerusalem and out of power. But sometime after he had left, Eliashib the priest developed an unholy alliance with Tobiah.

Vance Havner had this to say: “Today the world has so infiltrated the church that we are more beset by traitors within than foes without. Satan is not fighting churches—he is joining them!”

We need to be hard on Eliashib here, for he has misused his office. He has frustrated God’s work. The temple was no place for Tobiah. Just being in the temple was a holy privilege, and it was not to be used for an unholy purpose.

So Nehemiah shows us that ... When sin gets in to the house, its time for a spring-cleaning. Simply, Nehemiah gives Tobiah an eviction notice. It happened quite simply. The furniture is on the front lawn. And he cleans up the place.

Nehemiah has good company in this spring-cleaning. A few hundred years later, Jesus is going to do the same thing at the temple. He will see the courts of the temple filled with dishonest merchants and money changers. Jesus will get angry, take a whip, and drive them all out of the temple saying, **"It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer,' but you have made it a 'den of thieves.'"** (Matt. 21:13).

Notice how both Nehemiah and Jesus reacted to this compromise. They got angry. It is a reminder to us of how infrequently we express outrage over compromise with evil. Too often, we allow sin to have room in our lives and in our homes, and it begins to fester and grow. But, we must see it as it is...a compromise. And we must take drastic action to throw it out.

II. DESERTING THE HELP (10-14)

10 I also realized that the portions for the Levites had not been given them; for each of the Levites and the singers who did the work had gone back to his field.

11 So I contended with the rulers, and said, "Why is the house of God forsaken?" And I gathered them together and set them in their place.

12 Then all Judah brought the tithe of the grain and the new wine and the oil to the storehouse.

13 And I appointed as treasurers over the storehouse Shelemiah the priest and Zadok the scribe, and of the Levites, Pedaiah; and next to them was Hanan the son of Zaccur, the son of Mattaniah; for they were considered faithful, and their task was to distribute to their brethren.

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 its services!

At the end of Nehemiah 10, we find this statement made by the people, **“we will not neglect the house of our God.”**(10:39). Now look at 13:11, **“Why is the**

house of God forsaken?" The words neglect and forsaken are both the same word in the Hebrew. Clearly the people failed to keep the very thing they had promised.

The problem with compromise is that it is never an isolated incident; it always has consequences that reach beyond your self.

The sin of Eliashib had many implications. The Levites were dependent on the faithful support of the people, but when Tobiah moved in, the support dwindled. The grain, oil, and incense the Levites needed were thrown out, and thus they had no supplies to work with, nor were there salaries paid. Since they were not adequately supported, they had to go to work in the fields to earn a living for themselves. The Levites were despondent and singers were silenced. The spiritual life of the nation was in a shambles.

You see ... When we become indifferent to God's Word, we become secularized. It was the responsibility of the Levites to make sure that worship happened. They were the ones that studied God's Word, read it, and taught it. But compromise had brought an end to it.

It is a warning to us. For when we allow the study of the Bible and prayer to disappear, we begin to live like the world around us. Materialism becomes our new god and everybody works to please themselves.

Again, Nehemiah takes deliberate action to change the picture. Worship is too important to ignore. The spiritual leaders must get back to Jerusalem and the temple. So Nehemiah gathers four different men to properly collect, count and disburse the offerings. Giving is an accurate indicator of our faith. When God gets a hold of our hearts, it makes a difference in our wallet.

III. DISREGARDING THE SABBATH (15-22)

15 In those days I saw people in Judah treading wine presses on the Sabbath, and bringing in sheaves, and loading donkeys with wine, grapes, figs, and all kinds of burdens, which they brought into Jerusalem on the Sabbath day. And I warned them about the day on which they were selling provisions.

16 Men of Tyre dwelt there also, who brought in fish and all kinds of goods, and sold them on the Sabbath to the children of Judah, and in Jerusalem.

17 Then I contended with the nobles of Judah, and said to them, "What evil thing is this that you do, by which you profane the Sabbath day?"

18 "Did not your fathers do thus, and did not our God bring all this disaster on us and on this city? Yet you bring added wrath on Israel by profaning the Sabbath."

19 So it was, at the gates of Jerusalem, as it began to be dark before the Sabbath, that I commanded the gates to be shut, and charged that they must not be opened till after the Sabbath. Then I posted some of my servants at the gates, so that no burdens would be brought in on the Sabbath day.

20 Now the merchants and sellers of all kinds of wares lodged outside Jerusalem once or twice.

21 Then I warned them, and said to them, "Why do you spend the

night around the wall? If you do so again, I will lay hands on you!"

From that time on they came no more on the Sabbath.

22 And I commanded the Levites that they should cleanse themselves, and that they should go and guard the gates, to sanctify the Sabbath day. Remember me, O my God, concerning this also, and spare me according to the greatness of Your mercy!

When they signed the covenant, the Israelites promised not to do business with the Gentiles on the Sabbath Day in 10:31: "...We will not buy from them on the Sabbath." In 13:15-22, Nehemiah discovered that the people were not only doing business on the Sabbath, they were treating it as any other day of the week. They had broken their fourth promise by secularizing the Sabbath. Verse 16 tells us that there were men of Tyre who actually moved into Jerusalem and set up their own businesses. The leaders allowed them to operate their shops seven days a week.

Nehemiah didn't sit back and let this compromise be ignored. He spoke sternly and acted firmly. First, in verse 15 he rebuked the Jews who were working and selling on the Sabbath and made them stop.

Second, he rebuked the nobles for allowing business on the Sabbath day by reminding them that the violation of the Sabbath was one of the reasons for their captivity in the first place. We see this in verse 18: **"Did not your fathers do thus, and did not our God bring all this disaster on us and on this city? Yet you bring added wrath on Israel by profaning the Sabbath."**

His third step was very practical: He ordered the city gates shut on the Sabbath and he put some of his own guards on duty in verse 19. He threatened those who wanted to sell their goods on this holy day and also ordered the Levites to set a good example and minister to the people in verse 22.

Why was it so important for the people to keep the Sabbath? It was a weekly reminder to them that they were God's holy people, when they kept this day holy. Holiness is worth safeguarding. When Nehemiah's people ignored the Sabbath, they were damaging the very fabric of their spiritual lives.

IV. DOMESTIC DISOBEDIENCE (23-31)

23 In those days I also saw Jews who had married women of Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab.

24 And half of their children spoke the language of Ashdod, and could not speak the language of Judah, but spoke according to the language of one or the other people.

25 So I contended with them and cursed them, struck some of them and pulled out their hair, and made them swear by God, saying, "You shall not give your daughters as wives to their sons, nor take their daughters for your sons or yourselves.

26 "Did not Solomon king of Israel sin by these things? Yet among many nations there was no king like him, who was beloved of his God; and God made him king over all Israel. Nevertheless pagan women caused even him to sin.

27 "Should we then hear of your doing all this great evil, transgressing against our God by marrying pagan women?"

28 And one of the sons of Joiada, the son of Eliashib the high priest,

was a son-in-law of Sanballat the Horonite; therefore I drove him from me.

29 Remember them, O my God, because they have defiled the priesthood and the covenant of the priesthood and the Levites.

30 Thus I cleansed them of everything pagan. I also assigned duties to the priests and the Levites, each to his service,

31 and to bringing the wood offering and the firstfruits at appointed times. Remember me, O my God, for good!

It is interesting (and sad) that the purity issue continues to keep coming up. Again, the fathers were giving their children, and in this case, their sons, to be married to foreign daughters. And Nehemiah makes it plain. It is an act of treachery. It is offensive to God.

Their history had been plain enough. Solomon was a great and wise king, but when he disobeyed in this area, his faith suffered. But, now the people of Jerusalem were repeating this sin.

Just a few years ago when Nehemiah led the people to work on rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem, it was the Ammonites and the Ashdodites that were lined outside the walls opposing its rebuilding (Neh. 4:7). Now they were married to the people of Judah.

Nehemiah is none too kind to these that have done this. He pulls out their hair! I am sure that it hurt. But Nehemiah does not want them to miss how important this is. Though they may have made these decisions based on security and economics, these were secondary issues compared to faith. Nehemiah says, "What in the world are you thinking?" You do not provide security for our children by inviting the presence of idols into our homes. It is the undermining of faith, and it never fails to be that.

Nehemiah is stunned that the children are not even being taught Hebrew (it was at least being taught to the children back in Persia). So when the kids are at service, they are counting the lights in the chandeliers, because they don't understand what is being said. And how are they going to grow in their faith if this is the best that they can do.

I hope you did notice in this study, that the very promises that the people of Judah made, those concrete promises, every one of them was compromised years later.

They committed themselves to submit to God's word, to observe the Sabbath, to support God's work and to sanctify their marriages. And when Nehemiah returned, they had broken each one.

A hunter raised his rifle and took careful aim at a large bear. When about to pull the trigger, the bear spoke in a soft soothing voice, "Isn't it better to talk than to shoot? What do you want? Let's negotiate the matter."

Lowering his rifle, the hunter replied, "I want a fur coat."

"Good," said the bear, "that is a negotiable item. I only want a full stomach, so let us sit down and negotiate a compromise."

They sat down to negotiate and after a time the bear walked away, alone. The

negotiations had been successful. The bear had a full stomach, and the hunter had his fur coat!

Compromise with the world will eat you alive.

Now let's go back & summarize. How did Nehemiah solve these problems?

1st of all - He recognized the problems. He didn't bury them or hide himself from them. He was honest with the people & said, "These are problems."

2ndly - He sought permanent solutions to them. He didn't accept excuses, & he didn't just let them slide. He did something about them!

3rdly - He dealt with them decisively. There was nothing wishy washy about how they were handled. They were serious problems, & he dealt decisively with them.

Then - He prayed & thanked God for helping him through it all.

Remember Me

God uses people that will give Him all. Nehemiah prays three prayers for himself in chapter 13.

13:14: "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 its services!"

13:22: "Remember me, O my God, concerning this also, and spare me according to the greatness of Your mercy!"

13:31: "Remember me, O my God, for good!"

He reminded God of His faithfulness and prayed that what he had done would not be blotted out. Nehemiah wasn't pleading for blessings on the basis of personal merit, because He knew that God's favor only comes by His grace and mercy. He is simply asking God to remember Him and what He had done. He wanted God's favor and reward, not the accolades of man.

These prayers reveal an attitude toward life. Nehemiah could have built a monument to himself. He could have written this inscription on the wall: "Built by Nehemiah the Great." He could have looked back at his life and been proud of his accomplishments. Or, he could have been frustrated because the believers had broken their promises. In other words, he could have been impressed with his past accomplishments or discouraged about the present situation.

But he chose neither of those things. He simply said, "Lord, a day is coming when all of this will be over. I want the meaning of my life to be anchored in the future." He knew that there was a time coming when He'd be rewarded by the Lord and embraced by Him. His prayers reveal that He's living for that day, when the Lord will say to him, "Well done, good and faithful servant" (Matthew 25:21).

Are you living for that day?