

“Seek the Lord, Cast the Vision, Work as One”
Part 11: Standing By Our Promises
 Nehemiah 13:1-31

We all fail to keep our pledges, don't we? Our good intentions and plans often fall by the wayside. Sometimes we blatantly break our promises; but other times, we just drift away, a little at a time. Someone has said that moral failure and spiritual decline are a great deal like a flat tire. Most flat tires don't occur as a result of a blowout. They get flat because air leaks out over time.

In our passage today, we come face-to-face with some backsliders. The dictionary defines the verb “backslide” this way: *“To relapse into bad habits or undesirable activities.”* You would think that the last chapter of this great book would contain encouraging and compelling stories of how God's people took their spiritual commitment to the next level. Frankly, this script does not have a happy ending. Within a short period of time, the children of Israel went spiritually flat and returned to their old ways – violating God's laws and allowing the world's system to press them into its mold.

But before we jump into chapter 13, let give you some *background* ...

1. As the chapter opens, we discover that Nehemiah is back to Persia ... After 12 years as governor of Judah, having completed all that he had set out to do, he returns as a senior advisor to the king. Then later, when he finally retired from his government job in Susa, he returns to Jerusalem. Chapter 13 records what Nehemiah discovered when he arrived. I can't imagine what he must have felt. Before he left, 12:43 says that the *“sound of rejoicing in Jerusalem could be heard far away.”* The scene has changed ... Because these same people had violated the covenant they had publicly signed, Nehemiah comes back hitting hard, trying to jar his people out of their comfortable compromise with the world.

2. There is a *literary link between chapter 10 & 13*. In chapter 10, the people made 4 vows. *1) They pledged to submit to God's Word; 2) They vowed to live separate from the world; 3) They promised to keep the Sabbath; and 4) They agreed to support God's work.* Sadly, by the time we get to chapter 13, each of these vows are broken. This reminds and warns us that the most spiritual person, or the best church, can find its standards subtly eroded as

we gradually accommodate to the pressures of contemporary worldliness. At the dedication in chapter 12, the builders celebrated their victory in a battle against idolatry and materialism, but they had certainly not won the war.

Since chapter 13 is best understood in light of chapter 10, I'm going to follow the same outline from a couple weeks ago, so that we can look carefully at each one of their four broken promises.

The Submission Promise (1-3) – The promises of chapter 10 began with an affirmation of loyalty to the Word of God in verse 29: “...to obey carefully all the commands, regulations and decrees of the LORD our Lord.” In Nehemiah 13:1, we read a description of Israel's carelessness in observing God's Word concerning the purity of their worship: “On that day the Book of Moses was read aloud in the hearing of the people and there it was found written that no Ammonite or Moabite should ever be admitted into the assembly of God...”

We see again that Scripture was read publicly. Those present realized how sloppy they had been about their exclusive loyalty to God. As they listened to the words of Moses, they remembered what had happened to their ancestors when they were on the threshold of the Promised Land. The Ammonites' sin was one of omission: they had not met the Israelites with food and water. The Moabites' sin was one of commission: they had hired Balaam to call a curse down on the Israelites. To get a fuller understanding of what happened here, I encourage you to read Deut. 23:3-6. The bottom line is that the Moabites and Ammonites were notorious for infiltrating Israel and causing their worship to become diluted.

Here's the good news: When the Israelites heard what God's Word had to say, they obeyed it. That's a great application for us. Let's admit that we fall short. We break our promises. We don't always follow what we know to be true. Like the Israelites, we are faced with two choices. We can continue in a pattern of disobedience or we can stop what we've been doing and determine to live out what God says.

Is there something you need to do that you've been putting off? Is there a decision you need to make? I suspect that some of us know exactly what God wants us to do, but perhaps we're holding back because it's difficult. Friend, if God is asking you to do

something, He will supply what you need to do it. Matthew 6:33 says, “But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness and all these things will be given to you as well.”

The Separation Promise (4-9, 23-30) – The next promise that they had broken was to live separate from the world. They ignored this vow in two ways.

1. An enemy intruder. In verses 4-9, we see that one of the Ammonites was actually living in the temple. Nehemiah was horrified to find that Eliashib, who was the high priest in Israel, had prepared a large guest room in the temple ... for Tobiah. Unbelievably, this archenemy of God’s people had set up residence in the nerve center of Jerusalem! From this position he could influence everyone. Throughout the book, Tobiah had been a thorn in Nehemiah’s side. But then while Nehemiah was away, the high priest not only allowed Tobiah inside the city walls, he gave him the keys to his own private suite where the tithes and offerings of the people were stored.

Eliashib had been entrusted with a privileged responsibility; but, by cultivating wrong relationships, he misused his office and frustrated God’s work. Nehemiah saw Eliashib’s act for what it was – an offense against a holy God ... a public denial of the priority of their spiritual life ... and an act of blatant disobedience to God’s Word.

The identification of the problem demanded immediate action. Take a look at verses 8-9: “I threw all Tobiah’s household goods out of the room ... then I put back the equipment of the house of God, with the grain offerings and the incense.” Nehemiah showed Tobiah the door, tossed his stuff to the curb, and filled the room again with the items and offerings set apart for the worship and work of God.

But this was not the only way that the people had broken the separation vow ...

2. Idolatrous intermarriages. You’ll recall this vow from 10:30: “We promise not to give our daughters in marriage to the peoples around us or take their daughters for our sons.”

Drop down to vs. 23-28 in chapter 13. When Nehemiah returned, he saw that men of Judah had married women from Ashdod, Ammon and Moab. Only a few years earlier, as God’s people were repairing the walls, 4:7-8 tells us that “The Ammonites and the men of Ashdod ... plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem.” Yesterday’s enemies had become today’s marriage partners.

This very sin was the primary reason they were taken into Babylonian captivity in the first place. Nehemiah knew that idolatrous intermarriages led even their wisest king into sin. We come back to vs. 26-27 – “Was it not because of marriages like these that Solomon king of Israel sinned? ... Must we hear now that you too are doing all this terrible wickedness and are being unfaithful to our God by marrying foreign women?” Nehemiah had personally experienced the results of Solomon’s sin. That’s why his grandparents had been carried off to Babylon. That’s why he was a servant to King Artaxerxes. There was no way that Nehemiah wanted God’s judgment to fall on Israel again. If God did not tolerate it in Solomon’s life, he certainly would not allow it now.

The Support Promise (10-13) – The third fractured vow was that they neglected to support God’s work. Their final proclamation in chapter 10 was: “We will not neglect the house of our God.” When we come to this final chapter, Nehemiah discovers that the ministry at the temple was hampered because the Levites had to get jobs in the fields in order to survive. The temple storerooms were empty because people had stopped bringing their offerings and tithes.

Nehemiah has to do some tough talking again in verse 11: “Why is the house of God neglected?” Nehemiah then sets up a system so that they could once again put God first with their finances. Nehemiah doesn’t simply rebuke them; he shows them what to do to set things right. That’s exactly what God does for us. He doesn’t merely rebuke our wickedness. He restores our righteousness! And He does so through the perfect life, atoning death, and victorious resurrection of His Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ! He worked *for* us then! And He works *in* us now! The Spirit of the Living God works in us—and for us—from start to finish! He is the One who convicts ... restores ... empowers ... directs.

In verse 12, we read that the people “brought the tithes of grain, new wine and oil into the storerooms.” They renewed their commitment by bringing their first fruits to their First Love. This lesson is just as relevant today. When God’s people start to go flat spiritually, one of the first places it shows up is in our giving. Jesus put it this way: “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matthew 6:21).

The Sabbath Promise (15-22) – When they signed the covenant in chap. 10, the Israelites promised not to do business with the Gentiles on the Sabbath Day: “We will not buy from

them on the Sabbath” (10:31). In chap. 13, Nehemiah discovers 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 this last promise by secularizing the Sabbath.

Nehemiah didn't sit back & let this promise be ignored either. He instituted 3 action steps.

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 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: “*Didn't your forefathers do the same things, so that our God brought all this calamity upon us and upon this city? Now you are stirring up more wrath against Israel by desecrating the Sabbath.*”

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

By imploring that they keep their Sabbath promise, Nehemiah was emphasizing the centrality of worship, the importance of witness, the necessity of rest, and the priority of love ... their love for God! Loving obedience is always better than a full wallet. Praise takes precedence over profit. This command was not intended to be a chore, or even a sacrifice. God gave the gift of the Sabbath for our good. When we neglect the Sabbath, we end up damaging the very fabric of our physical, spiritual, and social lives. [P]

As we conclude this series – and as we *continue* to Seek the Lord, Cast the Vision, and Work as One – I want to wrap up our time with what I'm calling **Nehemiah's Top Ten:**

1. It's never too late to do what's right. Even though God's people had broken their past promises, it didn't disqualify them from renewed service or nullify their relationship with God. Don't let your past keep you from doing what is right. Begin right now by renewing your walk with God.

2. Don't play around with sin. Nehemiah dealt with sin decisively and abruptly. Most of us underestimate our sinfulness and overestimate our goodness. Children of God, don't flirt with sin. Don't get cozy with compromise. Be vigilant. As Romans 12:9 says, "*Hate what is evil. Cling to what is good.*"

3. Remember who God is. He is a great and awesome God ... He is a good God ... He is a gracious God. He doesn't treat us as we deserve; He offers us his merciful, steadfast love.

4. Cultivate a lifestyle of praise and prayer. God desires for each of us to worship Him with reverence and with joy, both individually and corporately. As we do, we'll also cry out to Him in confession and supplication. And as we learn from Nehemiah's life on multiple occasions, often those "single-breath prayers" will more than suffice.

5. Move out of your comfort zone. Many of us are probably too comfortable with the way we're living. We tend to default to what is predictable. God wants us to be available to Him. When He asks us to do something that stretches us, let's be ready to move!

6. Don't let difficulties derail you. When hard times come, and they will, don't bail on God. Use them to get closer to Him and ask Him to develop your character through it all.

7. Seek to resolve relational ruptures. As we spend time with people, we are bound to have conflict and disagreements. Each of us sin against others, and others sin against us. Don't allow this conflict to go underground. Meet face-to-face and seek resolution.

8. Say "yes" to God's priorities and "no" to the devil's distractions. God wants us to live purposeful lives, focused on those things that matter to Him. The Enemy seeks to get us off track through busyness and selfishness. Commit yourself to God's priorities – specifically as it relates to your time, your talents, your treasures, and your influence.

9. Believe the promises of God and act upon them. While it can be helpful to make promises to God, it's more important to believe the promises of God. Trust in what God has promised to do for you and ask Him to give you the tenacity to take Him at His Word.

10. Allow God to use you. God takes great pleasure in using people who are available to Him. You don't have to be a spiritual giant. God delights in using ordinary people like us so that His extraordinary power can be unleashed in our lives. [Pause]

In this final chapter, Nehemiah prays 3 prayers for himself: “Remember me for this, O my God, and do not blot out what I have so faithfully done for the house of my God.” (13:14) “Remember me for this also, O my God, and show mercy to me according to your great love.” (13:22) “Remember me with favor, O my God.” (13:31)

Nehemiah prayed that what he had done would not be blotted out. He wasn't pleading for blessings on the basis of personal merit, because He knew that God's favor only comes by His grace. He is simply asking God to remember Him. He wanted God's favor, not the accolades of man.¹

These prayers reveal an attitude toward life. Nehemiah could have built a monument to himself. He could have written an inscription on the wall: “Built by Nehemiah the Great.” He could have looked back at his life and been proud of his accomplishments ... He could have been frustrated in the moment because the believers had broken their promises.

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 embraced by the Lord. His prayers reveal that he was living for that day, when the Lord would say to him, “Well done, good and faithful servant” (Matthew 25:21). Are you living for that day?

¹ Credit given to Brian Bill, “A Time to Build: Lessons from Nehemiah”