

Summer is officially upon us, and that means we are in the prime season for growth. That can be a good and bad thing. Good when the plants we want to grow, grow, and bad, when the plants we don't want to grow, grow. There's nothing like the satisfaction of a day in the yard, or even if you got a landscape company doing the work, there's something incredibly satisfying about a cultivated, manicured yard. But no matter how beautiful you get your yard, you better enjoy it, because it's not lasting right. You will have to be back out there next week to maintain it. It demands constant care and cultivation. It sure would be nice if the natural order led to cultivated gardens, but that's not the case. The natural order leads to disorder until man cultivates. And the need for cultivation never goes away.

In a similar way, so it is also with our spiritual walk with Christ. We never arrive, this side of heaven, where we don't have the weeds of sin springing up in our hearts. No matter how satisfied you get in Christ, no matter the sin that you conquer, no matter the heights of your worship experience, or the depth of your communion with Christ, no matter how confident you are in your on holiness, you are continually in need of Christ. Nothing propels you beyond your need. Just like there is nothing you can do to your yard to ensure it doesn't need anymore cultivation or weeding, there's nothing you can do that makes Christ irrelevant.

As this chapter opens up we are on the the spiritual mountaintop. It's like summer camp. On fire for Jesus. The Walls of Jerusalem have been built. The Temple has been constructed. The Word of God is at the center of everything. Sins have been repented of, and God's glory is put on full display. In chapter 10 they resign the covenant. They are all in. It's a new start. They are finally doing it now. In Chapter 12 the wall is dedicated to God and on the wall are leaders and choirs with great gladness, thanksgiving and singing, cymbals, harps, and lyres. It says v.43, and they offered great sacrifices that day and rejoiced, for God had made them rejoice with great joy; the women and children also rejoiced. And the joy of Jerusalem was heard far away.

It's a picture of revival and reform. The celebration led to more reform at the temple and it's services, to make sure the Word of God was obeyed. Flows right into our chapter 13, the Word of God being read..

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 enter the assembly of God, for they did not meet the people of Israel with bread and water, but hired Balaam against them to curse them—yet our God turned the curse into a blessing. As soon as the people heard the law, they separated from Israel all those of foreign descent.

Israel is on the spiritual mountain top. I mean this is like coming back from christian summer camp, or from a mission trip. They are just lit up with Jesus, and you'd think nothing could stop them.

12 years later their man Nehemiah is summoned back to the king. We aren't sure why, but off goes Nehemiah. We aren't sure how long he was gone. All we are given is "after some time", it's a general expression that could be a year or several years. Regardless, Nehemiah is gone and while he's gone, everything crumbles. The people of God go from spiritual high to spiritual low in a hurry.

The confident promises and zeal of chapter 10 has been replaced with overt wickedness and apathy. It's into this rebellion and compromise that Nehemiah now enters back into. He's a man on fire.

One scholar writes that if Nehemiah "came the first time in a whirlwind, his second coming he was on fire." - Kidner

Nehemiah goes on a rampage to 1. cleanse the temple; 2. restore the Sabbath; 3. purify the people. We are going to take each one of these in turn, and then make some overall observations.

1. Nehemiah cleanses the Temple (4-14)

Now before this, Eliashib the priest, who was appointed over the chambers of the house of our God, and who was related to Tobiah,

Stop right there. Tobiah! Does anyone remember Tobiah? He's an Ammonite and he's an overt enemy of God. We saw him in chapter 4, attacking Jerusalem and seeking to destroy the work of the wall. This foreigner and enemy is "related to" Eliashib the priest. Woah! We got to pause here. We just read how no Moabite shall enter the assembly of God, and how God's people were to remain separate from the other nations. This, as we have discussed, was about preserving worship, not ethnicity. Ruth was a Moabite, but she repented, came under the Lordship of Yahweh. Converts from other ethnicities were welcome. The line is drawn around who you worship, not what bloodline you are from.

Do you remember all the reform that the Israelites already had to do in Ezra 9, having to separate from all their wives, standing out in the rain, the judgement of God pouring down upon them. Have they really committed the same sin again. But it get's worse. It would be one thing, and still awful, if the alliance was made between let's say, an Israelite that was way on the outside, wasn't really familiar with the Word of God, and didn't have a place of prominence and influence in Israel. Though that would still be sin and certainly awful, Tobiah is allied into the family of Eliashib, the priest. Some think this may have even been the high priest. Either way the high priest was complicit. This is the most influential guy in Jerusalem. And the one who should be most familiar and most zealous for worship of Yahweh. And what does he do?

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, singers, and gatekeepers, and the contributions for the priests.

They form a marital alliance with this enemy's and then invite him to come stay inside the Temple courts. That's the heart of Jerusalem. And to do so, they have to make room for him, so they clear out all these items that were used for worship, and used to support those that were in charge of Temple worship. Unbelievable.

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, and 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 there the vessels of the house of God, with the grain offering and the frankincense.

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. So I confronted the officials and said, "Why is the house of God forsaken?"

Direct contrast to 10:39, "We will not neglect the house of God."

And I gathered them together and set them in their stations. Then all Judah brought the tithe of the grain, wine, and oil into the storehouses. 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. 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.

The people of God had compromised. *"Because Israel had refused to be ruled by Yahweh, an Ammonite thug was ruling them."* - Hamilton

Sin does not let you have your way. Sin is enslaving. Sin rules. You think you are operating in freedom as you indulge your desires, but you are enslaved. We are ruled by whatever we crave. When we give up our freedom under God's Lordship, we give ourselves to slavery.

We don't have a temple today, so this passage might seem hard to apply. But in the NT we see a spiritual reality that the physical temple pointed to. The spiritual temple takes on three forms in the NT, the personal heart, the church, and Christ Himself. So there are a lot of angles we could take here to apply this text to our lives.

Personally, do you allow the enemy a foothold in your life? Do you tolerate a pet sin? Have you compromised and made friends and allies with the enemy? If that is your stance, it is only a matter of time until the enemy rises up on you. He may look all cute and cuddly, but at some point a cub becomes a lion and will devour you.

For the local church, are you neglecting your covenantal responsibilities here at Harvest. In this particular passage, worship had to stop because the enemy was let in, and the Levites had no support for the work of God, so they had to leave. How are you supporting the life of the church? What is your attendance like, and what is your disposition while attending or serving? When someone needs a replacement on a serve team, are you looking for an excuse, or are you looking for a way to make it happen.

Is it one of burden or one of worship? How about your small group, what's your investment and attendance like in your small group?

Then let me ask you about your financial stewardship. How are you financially supporting this church? We don't believe in the tithe as a New Testament command, but we do believe in generosity, sacrifice, and worship through giving. Giving glorifies God, propels the mission forward, and makes war on sin in your heart. As Randy Alcorn says, "the tithe is training wheels for giving."

We are not about money here at Harvest, we are about the mission of God.

2. Nehemiah restores the Sabbath (15-22)

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. 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! Then I confronted the nobles of Judah and said to them, "What is this evil thing that you are doing, profaning the Sabbath day? 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."

As soon as it began to grow dark at the gates of Jerusalem before the Sabbath, I commanded that the doors should be shut and gave orders that they should not be opened until after the Sabbath. And I stationed some of my servants at the gates, that no load might be brought in on the Sabbath day. Then the merchants and sellers of all kinds of wares lodged outside Jerusalem once or twice. But I warned them and said to them, "Why do you lodge outside the wall? If you do so again, I will lay hands on you." From that time on they did not come on the Sabbath. Then I commanded the Levites that they should purify themselves and come and guard the gates, to keep the Sabbath day holy. Remember this also in my favor, O my God, and spare me according to the greatness of your steadfast love.

What is going on here, what's so bad about buying and selling fish on the Sabbath? The Sabbath was the seventh day of the week for the Israelites, corresponding to the seventh day in Creation when God rested from His work, and God commanded that the Sabbath day should be kept holy, this is the fourth commandment, in that it would be primarily a day about rest, worship, and mercy.

God was not being legalistic in the Sabbath, He was being gracious. We learn in the NT that the sabbath was made for man, not man for the sabbath. So the sabbath is a gift to man, it serves man (Mark 2:27). Why? Because in the Sabbath God was declaring to His people that He was sufficient for them, He would take care of them, He would sustain them. They could rest from their work not because the work was done, but because the fruit of their work ultimately depended on God and the fact that God was done working. The Sabbath was a time to stop. To breathe. To rest. During this time they would not only just rest, but rest in God, worshiping God for who He is and what He has done.

One scholar writes... "The Sabbath was intended to be a protected space in which Israel could meditate on the Bible and rehearse the mercies of God. The Sabbath was intended for worship." -Hamilton

For us today, the Sabbath can be confusing. It's not very easy to understand and Christians can be across the map on exactly why it does or does not exist, and how much it should be a part of our lives today. It can generally be agreed that the unique law of the Sabbath for the Jews does not apply to us today, that Christ has fulfilled the law for us, and that the Sabbath has both a looking back and a looking forward aspect to it, as the believer sees God resting in Creation, Christ resting after His rising, and the church resting when we finally enter heaven.

Listen to how Kevin Deyoung summarizes the Sabbath principle for today, *"To put it simply, we should rest in Christ alone for our salvation. But along with that there is still an abiding principle that we ought to worship on the Lord's Day and trust God enough to have a weekly routine where we cease from our normal labors. . . . Whatever your take on the specific dos and don'ts of Sunday, I hope every Christian can agree that God has made us from the dust to need regular times of rest. He built it into the creation order and commanded it of His people...He made the Sabbath for man, not man for the Sabbath (Mark 2:27). God gives us Sabbath as a gift; it's an island of get-to in a sea of have-to. He also offers us Sabbath as a test; it's an opportunity to trust God's work more than our own. When I go weeks without taking adequate time off, I may or may not be disobeying the fourth commandment, but I'm certainly too convinced of my own importance and more than a little foolish. If my goal is God-glorifying productivity over a lifetime of hard work, there are few things I need more than a regular rhythm of rest."*

He's saying that the Sabbath is both a rest and a test. It's rest, because you are human, and you need it. But it's also a test, can you rest because you trust God to work for you.

Are you going to rest physically? spiritually? Are you going to trust God's work more than your own?

Do we need to worship God? Yes we do. And having a set apart time to worship is a very wise thing to do.

3. Nehemiah purifies the People (23-29)

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. 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. 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. Shall we then listen to you and do all this great evil and act treacherously against our God by marrying foreign women?"

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

We already saw how there was the relationship with Tobiah and Eliashib, and now we see that there is a relationship between Eliashib and Sanballat the Horonite. The high priest's grandson marries Sanballat's daughter. This guy was an even greater enemy than Tobiah. Unthinkable, crazy compromise here. As one scholar put it, "the only thing worse would have been if she married the high priest himself." But he was well aware of everything going on.

As the leader goes, so the people go, and we see the Israelite children spoke the language of Ashdod and these other foreign nations, and could not speak their own language. What this meant was they were one generation away from losing access to the Holy Scriptures." They were about to lose their ability to read the scriptures.

Nehemiah rises up, confronts them, by cursing them... this is not yelling cuss words at them, but reminding them of the covenant they signed that included curses for their disobedience. Then he beats them and pulls out their hair. Watch out for this guy! These weren't, however, just off the cuff, blow your temper and pull out hair, this would have likely been a ceremony intended to publicly shame them. And he calls them to repentance and makes them take an oath to never so this again. And I love what he does to Jehoida's son, "therefore I chased him from me." Just chased him off!

The concern here regarded their purity. They were to be set apart. Yahweh worshipers cannot allow non-Yahweh worshipers in their midst. God calls them to come out and be separate. Though we might draw a parallel to why we as baptists believe in a believer's only membership, at the core here is the battle between worship of Yahweh and idolatry. Purity is about worship. Purity is not about being able to tell someone you haven't cheated on finances, or haven't lost your temper, or kept yourself sexually, purity involves those things, but it's end is not the absence of those things, it's that your heart is given completely to Jesus, loves Jesus, makes much of Jesus.

I was just talking with our small group this week and reminded about a quote, "the person who is fixated on diving into sin and the one who is avoiding sin, both are still focused on sin, and in their sin, it's about Jesus." (find quote).

It's not just don't mingle with the other nations, but it's worship Yahweh. Israel by itself, without Yahweh worship, is just as bad. You recovered from your sin habit, without a heart that loves Jesus, is just as bad. All you've done is trade one idol for another, one might be more overt, and the other more subtle, an idol of drunkenness for the idol of self-reliance. We are thankful for programs that quote "cure" people of their addictions, but programs that don't offer the gospel as the remedy aren't ultimately doing the person any good.

What have you given yourself to that is not Jesus? Are you in danger of losing the Scriptures because you keep flirting with sin. You mess with sin long enough and your brain starts to fry and you will lose your ability to read and enjoy the Scriptures. That is the warning of Hebrews. You don't want to be given over to your desires, but there is time now to repent.

Husbands, are we pursuing our wives, loving them and serving them, or are we all about ourselves, or caught up in lusting after women that don't belong to us? Wives, are you respecting and honoring your husband, or do you disrespect him and seek to dominate him, talk poorly about him to others, fantasize about other men? As parents, are we seeking to love and faithfully protect, provide for, and nourish our children in life and matters of faith, or do we check out. Maybe if we are home with them we start to resent them and try to escape. Or if we are working all day, we come home and decide it's me time, not family time.

Singles, what idolatrous pursuits are you giving yourself to?

What we see in this chapter is Nehemiah on a mission to reform the people who have fallen back into sin.

Conclusion (30-31)

1. We need to be confronted in our sin (receive the rebuke of Nehemiah)

Our sin is constant, and we ourselves are blind to it. Therefore, we need the community of faith to confront us in our sin. How open are you to receiving rebuke or confrontation from another brother or sister in Christ. We generally are not very good at it, am I right? And that just shows how much farther the cross of Christ needs to travel in our hearts. When we get bent out of shape and defensive, we are putting more stock in what a brother/sister says than in Christ.

You will never receive a stronger rebuke than you got at the cross. You will never be criticized more than how you were criticized in the fact that Jesus had to die for you to save you. In other words, nothing makes your sin look more awful than the cross of Christ.

Welcome others to ask you the hard questions, and welcome others when they share with you what they see.

2. We need to confront others in their sin (act like Nehemiah)

We have mostly seen ourselves as the Israelites in this passage. But we need to realize that God has called us to be like Nehemiah as well. God could have confronted the people in their sin supernaturally, apart from human means, but He chose not to. He confronted them through a man. God still, generally, operates the same way today. The community of faith is to be involved in each others lives. And willing to help someone if they see them caught in sin.

You don't have to pull out someone else's hair, but you do need to confront their sin. That is what we have covenanted together to do. Avoiding talking to someone about their sin hurts the whole community. We believe that church discipline should be going on in a low level at all times. These are the conversations where we are guiding people back to the gospel and to behavior that corresponds with the gospel. We refrain from confrontation because we don't want to cause trouble, but we cause more trouble by avoiding it than we do by actually confronting. Confront with love, grace, and truth, but confront.

3. We need to cling to Christ

Thus I cleansed them from everything foreign, and I established the duties of the priests and Levites, each in his work; and I provided for the wood offering at appointed times, and for the firstfruits.

Remember me, O my God, for good.

It's interesting, as this book closes, Nehemiah's last words are remember him for __ __ __, not a single mention about the wall. When we think about the man Nehemiah, we think about the great construction of the wall, Nehemiah chooses not to be remembered according to the wall, instead, this is how he wants to be remembered, by carting wood for the temple. Why? Because Nehemiah was about God.

Nehemiah in all his powerful, godly efforts, throws himself upon the mercy of God. "remember me in your steadfast love." Remember me is his refrain. It's not remember me because I'm so great, but remember me in your great love. His only hope is God's steadfast love.

And so it is with us. We have nothing to look to except for the gracious work of Christ on our behalf. Nehemiah was looking forward to a day still to come when God would make everything right. He knew they hadn't arrived. But Nehemiah gives us a picture of when the greater Nehemiah, Jesus would come to earth to do for us what we could never do ourselves.

But as the story closes, they are all right back in their sin. A dark note to end a book on, which historically leads straight into the 400 years of silence and darkness leading up to the coming of Christ.

Nehemiah cleanses the Temple, Jesus would one day also cleanse the Temple, and declare destroy this temple and I will raise it up in three days. Jesus is the Temple. He's where we meet with God and He is the center of worship as He is the central sacrifice.

Nehemiah restores the Sabbath, Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath, and is our eternal rest.

Nehemiah purifies the people (the people would sin, again) Jesus purifies us from sin by His blood once and for all. Jesus shows us a picture of His love for us in that He is the faithful groom to us, the church.

Ezra-Nehemiah teaches us that we are more weak and sinful than we ever thought possible, and God is more powerful and gracious than we've ever dreamed. May we, in light of God's mercy, make war on the weeds of our hearts until the day when we will dwell with Christ in the New Garden.