

Always Reforming
Nehemiah 13:15-31

Introduction

- One of the challenges of biblical interpretation is getting from what it *meant* to what it *means* (from what it meant to Nehemiah's audience—both, original and reading—to what it means for us today)
- This, of course, affects our application of it
- In light of the unity of Bible and the unfolding plan of redemption, we will need to make certain adjustments in application as we take into account how Christ fulfills the OT (i.e. see Nehemiah through the person and work of Christ)
- Transition:
 - After the covenant renewal of chapters 8-10, and the dedication of the wall (chapters 11-12), we might expect, "...and they lived happily ever after"—however, that was not the case ('I used to be a people person...until people ruined it for me')
 - In our text for this lesson, we will see the final reforms of Nehemiah recorded in the book, dealing with particular sin issues in the community of faith, and we will explore how such reforms might apply to us today
 - As it was in Nehemiah's day, so today, the church is 'always reforming...'

Nehemiah's Further Reforms

1. Sabbath (v.15-22)

a. Reminder—these reforms came about through the reading of God’s word (v.1)—application: God’s word is the foundation of reform in the church (vs. political, sociological, or psychological notions)

b. The issue that needed reform: *sabbath-breaking*

i. This was nothing new¹—the people of Israel had struggled with profaning the sabbath for centuries (e.g., Exodus 16; Amos 8:5; Jer 17:19-27; etc.)

ii. They were treading the winepresses, bringing in heaps of grain, wine, grapes, and figs—all brought into Jerusalem on the sabbath, selling food (v.15)

iii. Note—^{ESV} **Nehemiah 13:16** 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!

1. Tyrians—Phoenician merchants (foreigners not bound by the sabbath law) living among them, found a viable market among the Jews

2. I.e. the Jews were welcoming and engaging in the pagan lifestyle (‘friendship with the world’)—of consumerism and commercialism (materialism)—something they explicitly vowed not to do: ^{ESV} **Nehemiah 10:31a** And if the peoples of the land bring in goods or any grain on the Sabbath day to sell, we will not buy from them on the Sabbath or on a holy day.

¹ Cf. Thomas, *Nehemiah*, 405.

3. Application—*how are we guilty of similar behavior and attitudes?*

- c. What was the sabbath law and why was it important?
- i. Imitative of God’s pattern of work and rest (motive rooted in creation—‘rest’ as the goal of *creation*) (Gen 2:1-3; Exod 20:8-11)
 - ii. Another main reason for keeping the sabbath is the celebration of God giving Israel rest from bondage in Egypt (motive rooted in *redemption*) (Deut 5:12-15)
 - iii. It was a day of refreshment, delight, and rest & a day of worship (‘to our God’—God-centered [Exod 20:10; Isa 58:13])—involves the whole human person (physical & spiritual)
 - iv. It was a *gift* of God to man, as a blessing and reminder of God’s creative and redemptive work on their behalf (i.e. *not* to deprive them of things!)
 - v. Imitating God’s creative pattern would have reminded them that their lives were not to be lived merely for their own worldly vocations (e.g., moneymaking), but rather to be lived for God and to enjoy Him
 - vi. Note—the Jews were not only breaking the sabbath command not to work, but they were acting in direct opposition to the very meaning of the sabbath (i.e. imitating the world)
- d. Nehemiah takes this sabbath-breaking very seriously (v.15b, 17-18)

- i. ^{ESV} **Nehemiah 13:17** Then I confronted the nobles of Judah and said to them, "What is this evil thing that you are doing, profaning the Sabbath day? ¹⁸ Did not your fathers act in this way, and did not our God bring all this disaster¹ on us and on this city? Now you are bringing more wrath on Israel by profaning the Sabbath."

- ii. Nehemiah takes action (v.19-22)
 1. When he sees merchants camping outside the walls Jerusalem, trying to be the first ones in on the sabbath to wheel and deal—he commanded that the doors not be opened until *after* the sabbath day

 2. ^{ESV} **Nehemiah 13:21** 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.

 3. Then, he commanded the Levites to purify themselves, guard the gates, and keep the sabbath holy (they are to serve the Lord, not themselves)

- iii. He takes it seriously because God does (and remembers the past)

- iv. Application—reading about Nehemiah’s response in this chapter, we tend to think, ‘this guy is out of control and overreacting’—however, this reaction may reveal a negative, unbiblical view of the sabbath on our part² (e.g., a trivial piece of legalism, which is not close to being an essential of the faith, and really a burden)—*how do you view the sabbath? Do you take it seriously? How should we view the sabbath today?*

² Thomas, *Nehemiah*, 406.

- e. Taking into account Christ's fulfillment of the Sabbath in order to apply it rightly today
 - i. Jesus did not come to abolish the Law, but to fulfill it (Matt 5:17)—so, we should expect it to continue, but in light of his fulfillment (i.e. not a question of *whether* it applies today, but *how* it applies today)
 - ii. Jesus is Lord of the sabbath (Matt 12:1-14)
 - iii. Jesus emphasized doing good on the sabbath (Matt 12:10-12; e.g., Jesus healed on the sabbath); it was His custom to attend worship on the sabbath (involving reading and teaching of God's word) (cf. Mk 1:21; 6:2; Lk 4:16; 13:10)
 - iv. The sabbath was made for man, not man for the sabbath (Mark 2:27)—as a blessing not a burden
 - v. Note—right before He teaches about the sabbath, He calls people to find 'rest' in Him (Matt 11:28-30)—i.e. Jesus is Lord of both, 'rest' and 'sabbath' (finding 'rest' in Him links up with finding 'rest' in God's 'rest')
 - vi. In sum, Jesus' teaching restored the sabbath to its original intent in opposition to Jewish legalistic distortions
 - vii. Other NT teaching:
 - 1. We have already entered God's 'rest' in Christ now (Heb 4:3), but still look forward to the ultimate rest (not yet) (Heb 4:11)

2. In Paul, the sabbath law no longer continues as a distinguishing mark between Jews and Gentiles (as in the theocracy of Israel), but does continue in the way Jesus taught (see above)—we observe it not on a national or civil level, but rather on an ecclesiastical level (in the church)³

f. Application—*so, how do we apply the sabbath law today?*

- i. Our weekly sabbath observance anticipates our future home and final rest with God for all eternity (forward-looking)
- ii. We enjoy ‘rest’ in Christ’s work on our behalf, in communion with Him, but also look forward to the consummation of our ‘rest’
- iii. Avoid legalistic thinking (and thinking of communing with the Lord as a burden rather than a blessing)
- iv. *How will you improve upon your sabbath observance for your own spiritual and physical good (and for God’s glory)?*

2. Idolatry (v.23-28)

- a. The problem of *intermarriage* (cf. Ezra 9-10)—had already been confronted, but proved to be an ongoing stumbling block
- b. ^{ESV} **Nehemiah 13:23** In those days also I saw the Jews who had married women of Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab. ²⁴ And half of their children spoke the language of Ashdod, and they could not speak the language of Judah, but the language of each people.

³ Thomas, *Nehemiah*, 406.

- i. Their behavior violated previous vows—^{ESV} **Nehemiah 10:30** "We will not give our daughters to the peoples of the land or take their daughters for our sons. (cf. Neh 13:3)
 - ii. *How often are we subtly tempted to explicitly violate our vows to the Lord and His commands?*
- c. Nehemiah's response (v.25-29)
- i. He confronted, cursed, and beat some of them, evening pulling out their hair (v.25a)
 - 1. We do not have explicit evaluation from the book for Nehemiah's behavior—though the book as a whole does not place Nehemiah in the wrong, but rather the *people*
 - 2. In the OT economy, as a leader of the people, perhaps Nehemiah had the authority to carry out punishment as described here (cf. Deut 25:1-3)—don't let worldly notions of 'niceness' (i.e. being tolerant of sin) be the essence of 'goodness' rather than the character of God⁴
 - 3. Note—there is a legitimate form of 'cursing'—in light of the covenant; one that leaves ultimate vengeance to the Lord, according to the covenant curses he has revealed in His word (e.g., imprecatory psalms)
 - 4. What is clear from this is that their sin was serious and was taken as such!

⁴ Packer, *A Passion for Faithfulness*, 182; cf. Thomas, *Nehemiah*, 409.

- ii. Furthermore, he made them take an oath to not give their daughters to foreign sons or take foreign daughters for their sons or for themselves (v.25b)
- iii. He uses the notorious example of Solomon as case in point (cf. 1 Kings 11)—including Ammonite and Moabite women (11:1 // intermarriage in Nehemiah 13; Note—‘Ashodite’ = Philistine women)

1. It is clear in the context of 1 Kings 11 that the underlying issue was idolatry, not racial
2. ^{ESV} **1 Kings 11:2** from the nations concerning which the LORD had said to the people of Israel, "You shall not enter into marriage with them, neither shall they with you, for surely they will turn away your heart after their gods." Solomon clung to these in love. ³ He had 700 wives, princesses, and 300 concubines. And his wives turned away his heart. ⁴ For when Solomon was old his wives turned away his heart after other gods, and his heart was not wholly true to the LORD his God, as was the heart of David his father. ⁵ For Solomon went after Ashtoreth the goddess of the Sidonians, and after Milcom the abomination of the Ammonites. ⁶ So Solomon did what was evil in the sight of the LORD and did not wholly follow the LORD, as David his father had done. ⁷ Then Solomon built a high place for Chemosh the abomination of Moab, and for Molech the abomination of the Ammonites, on the mountain east of Jerusalem. ⁸ And so he did for all his foreign wives, who made offerings and sacrificed to their gods.

d. Common question: is it a sin to marry a person from another race or nation?

- i. No—the issue is not race, ethnicity, or nationality, but *idolatry* (Note—elect from all races are included in the people of God)
- ii. Note—the relationship between the Lord and His people is often depicted as a ‘marriage’ (in Scripture,

their sin is often described as ‘spiritual adultery’—clinging to idols in love, instead of the Lord, which they were repeatedly exhorted to do [Deut 10:20; 11:22; 13:5; 30:20—same Hebrew word for ‘cling’ as in 1 Kgs 11:2])

- e. The issue was compounded by the fact that the *priests* were engaging in this idolatry, not merely the ‘laity’ (v.28-29)
 - i. Previous reform and covenant renewal had already begun to deteriorate within one generation
 - ii. Further, one of these marriages involved the high priest’s grandson to *Sanballat’s* daughter! Not too long ago, Sanballat, along with Tobiah and Geshem tried to thwart Israel’s rebuilding efforts!

3. Nehemiah’s Appeal to God (v.29-31)

- a. Again, Nehemiah prays (as he has done throughout the book)
- b. Content of his prayer:
 - i. *Remember the wrongdoers (cf. 6:14)*—God is not aloof to what is going on in the world (Scripture emphasizes this fact in many places—pray such passages back to the Lord about your concerns today)
 - ii. *Remember me*—another good prayer; often, we are discouraged in thinking that God does not ‘remember’ us or has ‘forgotten’ us (prayer is a remedy for this—we see examples in the psalms and other places)

- c. *Is Nehemiah being prideful in mentioning what he had done (v.14, 22, 31; cf. 5:19)?*⁵
- i. No—the rest of the book bears this out; he was not puffing himself up, but expressing his desire to live out covenant faithfulness to the Lord and to call God’s people to do the same
 - ii. Certainly, Nehemiah wasn’t sinless (only Christ is), but we should let the book as a whole (along with the rest of Scripture) shape how we view his example

4. Practical Reflections

- a. Homework—read WSC⁶ on the Ten Commandments, especially the Second Commandment (vs. Idolatry) and the Fourth Commandment (vs. Sabbath-breaking)—Questions 49-52 and 57-62, respectively & take *heart inventory*
- b. Talk to God about these things as you take inventory—we deal with our sin in the context of the gospel, otherwise we make one of two opposite errors—presumption OR despair (*neither* is God-honoring!)
- c. Imitate Nehemiah’s example in prayer, especially during these days (when we are tempted to give up hope for change and growth, when the world seems upside down, when the world seems greater than the church)—*remember who our God is*

⁵ Thomas, *Nehemiah*, 409-410.

⁶ Cf. WLC 107-110 and 115-121.