

Eternal Vigilance

Nehemiah 13:1-14

In the rehearsal room of an orchestra I played in as a child, there was a poster hanging prominently on a wall, with the words “eternal vigilance.” As a boy, I could never quite figure out what that meant, but I understand now. To be a successful musician, you always have to be on guard, always vigilant. Always.

That phrase came from a speech given in 1790 upon the election of the Mayor of Dublin, where we find this quote, “The condition upon which God has given liberty to man is eternal vigilance; which condition if he break, servitude is at once the consequence of his crime and the punishment of his guilt.” More succinctly, as that quote is attributed to Thomas Jefferson, we often hear, “Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty.” So if you want to remain free, as a nation, you have to remain on guard. Vigilant. Always and forever on guard. Against tyranny. Eternal vigilance.

For our study this afternoon, I want to alter that expression just a bit, and apply it to the church. “Eternal vigilance is the price of faithfulness.” If you want to remain faithful, if we want to remain faithful, faithful to God’s word as a church, then we have to remain on guard. On guard against the exaltation of human tradition. On guard against self-righteousness, against the opposite errors of legalism and antinomianism. On guard so that we always speak the truth, and on guard so that always speak it in love. We have to be willing and able to examine ourselves and our church. Eternal vigilance.

We have to be willing to examine our traditions, our patterns, our schedule, our liturgy, our worship, and our doctrine. We have to continually search the Scriptures to see if what we are being

taught is true! And what grave dangers befall those churches that settle into comfortable patterns of tradition and never again budge. Typically, that happens most often in older churches, churches with a more lengthy and rich history in which they find their security.

But sometimes it happens in younger churches, too. And in newly transformed churches, such as the OT church of God that was reestablished under the leadership of Nehemiah. We’ve studied some glorious experiences of that body of God’s people, as the temple and the wall to the city of Jerusalem was rebuilt. The law was again read in the temple. The festivals were again observed. There was a great expression of corporate confession of sin. The covenant with God was reestablished and the wall was dedicated with a glorious celebration of gladness and thanksgiving to God. That’s what we’ve been studying these past several weeks.

But there seems to be a gap between chapter 12 and 13, for in Chapter 13, we read that Nehemiah had temporarily left Jerusalem and returned to his responsibilities to Artaxerxes King of Babylon. And by the time he came back, things were not as they ought to be! And once again, reformation was needed.

I believe such a reformation is needed in the church of today, the church at large. I often observe that we, the visible church, are all too eager to be conformed to the spirit of our age and all too quick to comply with demands of our culture. And as I long for genuine revival, and frequently pray for it, I realize that reformation in the church will likely precede any revival. The church has to change, and it has to change in many of the same ways that the corporate people of God had to change in Nehemiah 13. Today, we have to confront the same sins as they confronted then, for surely there is nothing new under the sun.

There are three sins to be addressed in Nehemiah 13, three things which had to be dealt with in order to remain faithful to God, and those three things still exist today. In this chapter, Nehemiah is first of all,

I. CONFRONTING THE SIN OF SPIRITUAL ASSIMILATION.

Spiritual assimilation. That's kind of a big word. It means joining things together. Specifically, joining together believers and unbelievers. Assimilating them together as one, forming them into one group. Integrating them, by denying or eliminating any differences between them. The American Heritage Dictionary defines the word this way, "the process whereby a group, as a minority or immigrant group, gradually adopts the characteristics of another culture."

It was pretty clear in Israel!
v.1-3

That's a quotation from Deuteronomy 23:3-5. It was a clear principle. Foreigners were to be excluded from Israel. In the OT, it was a national requirement, for the nation was itself the nation of God's people. And so, the application for us today is not that we should seek national or ethnic purity, but spiritual purity. The principle is repeated in,

2 Cor.6:14 "Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness? 15 And what accord has Christ with Belial? Or what part has a believer with an unbeliever? 16 And what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For you are the temple of the living God. As God has said: "I will dwell in them And walk among them. I will be their God, And they shall be My people." 17 Therefore "Come out from among them And be separate, says

the Lord. Do not touch what is unclean, And I will receive you." 18 "I will be a Father to you, And you shall be My sons and daughters, Says the LORD Almighty."

The point is, there is a distinct difference, a distinct separation, between a believer and an unbeliever. At a certain level, at the deepest level, there is nothing held in common, so great in importance is our communion with God. "For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness?" So pointedly, as Paul writes, "What part has a believer with an unbeliever?"

The visible church of our day has to come to terms with this, because the visible church is so enamored with numbers and growth. And there is often little or sometimes no effort made to distinguish between believers and unbelievers. There is no exercise of spiritual oversight at all, and no practice of church discipline whatsoever. And there needs to be. Specifically, note that it was the assembly of God to which the foreigners were excluded, from the temple, the holy places of worship.

v.1

They were kept from the assembly, which was held at the altar in the temple. I would summarize that this way,

A. Unbelievers should be excluded from the deepest expressions of communion with God.

We have open assemblies today, that is, we don't enter into a building that was itself the visible expression of God's presence. Instead, we worship in spirit and truth, and the presence of God is real, though it is in spirit. We don't have an altar, we don't have animal sacrifices, we don't have priestly intercession, for Christ has done all of that for us, once for all. And he tore down that curtain of the temple, so that we have access to God in him.

And so today, it's not that unbelievers ought to be excluded from our presence in worship, but that they ought to be identified as unbelievers. And when it comes to the deepest expressions of communion with God, which for us is the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, then they ought to be excluded. The Lord's Supper is an outward expression of that communion with God, given to us by God's own command. And it is only for believers.

Now, how do we identify believers? The most obvious way is to identify those who have made a public profession of faith in Jesus Christ, which is the basic requirement for membership in most every church. And though there are exceptions because of unusual circumstances, it is the normal expectation that those who are God's people be members in his church, his visible church in some form or another. And it is the normal expectation that those who are not members of the church will be identified as not belonging to the body of God's people. We need to have a high view of the church, because the church is the body of Christ. And at a minimum, we ought to exclude those outside the church from the fellowship and communion of the Lord's Supper.

I do, of course, mean the church at large, and don't wish to limit that at all to this local congregation or our denomination. But the church at large, the visible church which exists in every place!

We should go deeper, though, at least in our own examination of our own members. We should examine those entering the church, to see if they are of the faith. Certainly, we can be fooled, but it is the elders responsibility to make that determination, so that no one be allowed into the membership of the church unless they have a credible profession of faith in Jesus Christ.

It's not a doctrinal examination, per se, but rather an examination to see whether a person knows personally of the

salvation that is offered in Christ, and that he depends upon Christ for his salvation. And, that his life gives some evidence of the reality of that profession.

All of that is necessary, but I ask, "How often is that done?" In how many places, in how many churches, is the only requirement for membership simply the willingness to join. With no examination in the faith, with no determination made by the elders of the church. And how often, in how many places, is everyone invited to partake of the body and bread of Christ in the Lord's Supper? Even those who have never submitted themselves to the proper and lawful oversight of the church.

Unbelievers should be excluded from the deepest expressions of communion with God. And, related to that,

B. Unbelievers should be excluded from the membership of God's people.

They were in Nehemiah's day.

v.3

They put them out! In a word, the application of that for today is church discipline. As an example, consider the situation Paul addresses in 1 Corinthians 5. The situation was sexual immorality, a man living with his father's wife, presumably his step-mother. And the church was doing nothing about it, rather they seemed to be boasting.

1 Cor. 5:1 "It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and such sexual immorality as is not even named among the Gentiles—that a man has his father's wife! 2 And you are puffed up, and have not rather mourned, that he who has done this deed might be taken away from among you. 3 For I indeed, as absent in body but present in spirit, have already judged (as though I were present) him who has so done this

deed. 4 In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when you are gathered together, along with my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, 5 deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.”

And Paul’s conclusion,

1 Cor. 5:11 "But now I have written to you not to keep company with anyone named a brother, who is sexually immoral, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or an extortioner—not even to eat with such a person. 12 For what have I to do with judging those also who are outside? Do you not judge those who are inside? 13 But those who are outside God judges. Therefore “put away from yourselves the evil person.”

I fear that today, too often, we think it will make the situation worse. We think it will just aggravate the situation. After all, the person might leave the church! So we ignore it, thinking that will get better all by itself! But it doesn’t get better. Not when those who demonstrate by their behavior that they are actually unbelievers. They should be excluded from the membership of God’s people, for the glory of God, for the purity of the church, and for their own opportunity for restoration, that they might be brought back to repentance.

There was a day not too long ago when theologians identified three marks of the church, three fundamental elements that a church had to have to be rightly called a church, the faithful preaching of the word, the faithful administration of the sacraments, and the faithful exercise of church discipline. But even among most well respected evangelical churches of our day, only two of those can be found. And ultimately, and I do intend this statement to be somewhat prophetic, ultimately churches that exercise no discipline will eventually become no churches at all.

They will fall away into apostasy.

Nehemiah confronted the issue, and settled it. God’s people would remain distinct and separate from unbelievers. Next we find Nehemiah,

II. CONFRONTING THE SIN OF ACCOMMODATION.

And here I’m referring to compromise, the reconciliation or settlement of opposing views, views that contradict each other. I’m not speaking of the sort of compromise necessary for different people to get along well in close quarters, such as a husband and wife, and as different members of most any church. Nor do I refer to wise and gentle willingness to get along with other believers who might disagree on secondary issues, but who share a love of God’s word with you. Rather, I’m referring to compromise in an entirely negative sense, that of accommodating, or making welcome, things that are necessarily and fundamentally opposed to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

With regard to our worship, the church is all too often merely imitating the world, in putting together what I often call, “a really big show.” Worship was the issue for Nehemiah.

v.4-5

Now, Tobiah was the official of the Ammonites, and the high priest of Israel had given him a large room, in the courts of the house of God. As one commentator puts it, “For Nehemiah, Tobiah’s presence as a heathen... meant contamination of everything which was holy. A person like Tobiah could not be allowed to enter the temple area...It was thus an act of desecration to bring into a sacred chamber a profane person such as Tobiah.”

It was a great offense in the eyes of Nehemiah, when he

returned from Persia.

v.6-7

A. The worship of God must be kept pure and sacred.

And in the shadows and external forms of the OT, in the temporary structure of the OT temple, that purity and sanctity of worship were outwardly demonstrated with obvious and external situations. Such as this one. Indeed, we see from Nehemiah's actions the general principle that,

B. Sin requires cleansing.

v.8-9

The offense, and offending person, had to be put away. And the room cleaned. Really cleaned. Scrubbed! As you might clean a house that has been vacant for a number of years, or where those who lived in it neglected to do any cleaning. Just imagine the effort that might be needed to clean the bathroom, or the refrigerator! That's the sense given in verse 8 and 9.

But here it was cleaned. And all the right things used for worship were put back into the room. And with obvious external emphasis, the significance is obvious. Sin requires cleansing.

And that cleansing, of course, is not merely external. As good a thing it is to keep a clean home, and to maintain the external cleanliness of the church building, that's not the main point here. That external cleansing, in the OT, is a shadow and type of what must take place in the hearts of God's people, and in the hearts of the body of God's people, the church.

Most assuredly, the church of today needs this cleansing! Not a work day, to wash the windows and scrub the bathrooms. But a cleansing, a putting away of all that is impure, particularly in

worship. And that is precisely what I mean when I speak about a needed reformation in the church. We simply cannot accommodate ourselves to the culture in which we live, and expect the church to be healthy and alive in spirit. And so, with all wisdom and grace, we need to throw out all the evidences of the presence of the world, that is, the presence of worldliness. We need to throw out the values of this world, the methods of this world, the evidences of this world. And return to simple, biblical Christianity.

Now, I don't want to boast unnecessarily about our church and our denomination, for surely, we are not exempt from the scope of these exhortations. But at least by comparison, I think we do that rather well. And that is why we are so different. That is what makes us different. A willingness to follow Scripture, to do business with God. My prayer is that that willingness will grow. That we'll be able identify where we might still be assimilating ourselves and accommodating ourselves with the world around us in which we live.

In many ways, we are counter-cultural, and we need to be--when culture contradicts the truth of God's word. In many ways, we are radical, and we need to be radical when the world in which we live denies the very existence of anything called "absolute truth." And we need to be continually confronting these sins as they affect us, most especially keeping pure and sacred the worship of God.

Finally, we see in Nehemiah's return to Jerusalem that he is,

III. CONFRONTING THE SIN OF SPIRITUAL SELFISHNESS.

We saw in chapter 12 the willing generosity to provide for the Levites with tithes, but in a short period of time, that had changed.

v.10

Nehemiah's language is appropriately strong,
v.11

A. To withhold the tithe is to forsake the house of God.
Period.

Remember the timely rebuke from the prophet Haggai, a rebuke so needed for the church of today.

Hag.1:2 "Thus speaks the LORD of hosts, saying: 'This people says, "The time has not come, the time that the LORD's house should be built." ' " 3 Then the word of the LORD came by Haggai the prophet, saying, 4 "Is it time for you yourselves to dwell in your paneled houses, and this temple to lie in ruins?" 5 Now therefore, thus says the LORD of hosts: "Consider your ways! 6 "You have sown much, and bring in little; You eat, but do not have enough; You drink, but you are not filled with drink; You clothe yourselves, but no one is warm; And he who earns wages, Earns wages to put into a bag with holes." 7 Thus says the LORD of hosts: "Consider your ways! 8 Go up to the mountains and bring wood and build the temple, that I may take pleasure in it and be glorified," says the LORD."

And, of course, the words of Malachi.

Mal. 3:8 "Will a man rob God? Yet you have robbed Me! But you say, 'In what way have we robbed You?' In tithes and offerings. 9 You are cursed with a curse, For you have robbed Me, Even this whole nation. 10 Bring all the tithes into the storehouse, That there may be food in My house, And try Me now in this," Says the LORD of hosts, "If I will not open for you the windows of heaven And pour out for you such blessing That there will not be room enough to receive it. 11 "And I will rebuke the devourer for your sakes, So that he will not destroy the fruit of

your ground, Nor shall the vine fail to bear fruit for you in the field," Says the LORD of hosts; 12 "And all nations will call you blessed, For you will be a delightful land," Says the LORD of hosts."

Surely, to speak in broad and general terms, the house of God is forsaken today, isn't it? Forsaken by those who claim to be God's people, who so faithlessly fail to bring the whole tithe into the storehouse. In so many places today, the people are living in paneled houses, in great comfort and luxury, while the house of God lies in ruins.

May it never be so among us! May it never be that we have to beg for money to do the work of God in the house of God! May it never be. May this house, this church never be forsaken. May this visible manifestation of the kingdom of God on earth be blessed by God as God's people eagerly and generously bring forth their tithes! In that regard, Nehemiah clearly identifies the broader principle, that,

B. The house of God requires faithful stewardship.
v.12-13

"They were considered faithful." Reliable. Treasurers, whose "task was to distribute to their brethren." Faithful stewards. Faithfully administering the resources of the house of God for the glory of God. Reliable in handling those things to which they had been entrusted.

The goal for us is faithfulness. The measure of our success is faithfulness. Faithfulness in obedience to God's words. Faithfulness in utilizing the gifts and opportunities that have been entrusted to us.

I believe there are great opportunities for ministry for us, great opportunities for the ministry of the word of God. And whatever size we might be, however many people might come to this place and however much money we might have in our receipts, the measure of our success before God is faithfulness.

So pray that we would be found faithful. Pray that the work that do will not be in vain, but that the kingdom of God would grow and prosper among us. Pray as Nehemiah prayed,
v.14

Please let all of this be an encouragement to you, and pray in that way for this particular house of God. That prayer, of course, assumes that you will be working hard in your own way, with your own gifts and opportunities, as God enables you and calls you to do. So work hard for the church. Continue to work hard for the church. And pray that God might remember, and bless, that work which is done for the house of our God and for her services. With the encouragement of,

1 Cor.15:58 “Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord.”