

BUILD-A-BELIEVER WORKSHOPS

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People say to me, "How do you build a church?" You don't build a church, you build a believer. As a result, the church will build itself. (John MacArthur).

Text
Nehemiah 13

Topic
Nehemiah returns to Jerusalem only to find the Jews have gotten lax in their obedience

Title
House of Lax

Nehemiah 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,

Nehemiah 13:2 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.

Nehemiah 13:3 So it was, when they had heard the Law, that they separated all the mixed multitude from Israel.

Nehemiah 13:4 Now before this, Eliashib the priest, having authority over the storerooms of the house of our God, was allied with Tobiah.

Nehemiah 13:5 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.

Nehemiah 13:6 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,

Nehemiah 13:7 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.

Nehemiah 13:8 And it grieved me bitterly; therefore I threw all the household goods of Tobiah out of the room.

Nehemiah 13:9 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.

Nehemiah 13:10 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.

Nehemiah 13:11 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.

Nehemiah 13:12 Then all Judah brought the tithe of the grain and the new wine and the oil to the storehouse.

Nehemiah 13:13 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.

Nehemiah 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!

Nehemiah 13:15 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.

Nehemiah 13:16 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.

Nehemiah 13:17 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?

Nehemiah 13:18 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."

Nehemiah 13:19 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.

Nehemiah 13:20 Now the merchants and sellers of all kinds of wares lodged outside Jerusalem once or twice.

Nehemiah 13:21 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.

Nehemiah 13:22 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!

Nehemiah 13:23 In those days I also saw Jews *who* had married women of Ashdod, Ammon, *and* Moab.

Nehemiah 13:24 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.

Nehemiah 13:25 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.

Nehemiah 13:26 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.

Nehemiah 13:27 Should we then hear of your doing all this great evil, transgressing against our God by marrying pagan women?"

Nehemiah 13:28 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.

Nehemiah 13:29 Remember them, O my God, because they have defiled the priesthood and the covenant of the priesthood and the Levites.

Nehemiah 13:30 Thus I cleansed them of everything pagan. I also assigned duties to the priests and the Levites, each to his service,

Nehemiah 13:31 and *to bringing* the wood offering and the firstfruits at appointed times. Remember me, O my God, for good!

Introduction

The reading that day was from the **Book of Moses**. The Bible prohibited intermingling and intermarrying with Ammonites and Moabites, and then gave an example of the disastrous consequences of disobedience.

The Jews heard these words, and they immediately **separated all the mixed multitude from Israel**.

Or was it immediately? In verse four you read, **now before this...** It would seem that at least some, if not all, of the reforms that Nehemiah imposed preceded the obedience of the first three verses. In other words, some things needed to occur first, before the people were ready to respond immediately.

The people of Jerusalem had gotten lax in their obedience. In both the house of God and in their own houses, they were slacking-off.

Nehemiah first put God's house – the Temple - in order. Then he instituted reforms that got the people's 'houses' in order. Once things were back in order, they were able to hear the Word of God with hearts that were ready to immediately respond.

I want to talk about putting and getting houses in order. We'll organize our thoughts around two points: #1 Put God's House In Order, and #2 Get Your 'Houses' In Order.

#1 Put God's House In Order (v4-14)

The Temple at Jerusalem is called [the house of God](#) about five-times in this chapter. It was where you went to meet with God, and to enjoy fellowship with Him.

I want to start with it, in verses four through fourteen, for two reasons:

1. First: The words in verse four indicate Nehemiah first step was to put God's house in order.
2. Second: It might be that if we thought more about putting God's house in order, we would have less problems in our own houses!

Nehemiah finished overseeing the rebuilding of the wall around Jerusalem. He spent about twelve years in Jerusalem as governor. Then he'd been called back to serve the Persian king. About a year after he'd left, he returned to find these lax conditions.

His greatest shock was a deplorable situation in God's Temple.

[Nehemiah 13:4](#) Now before this, Eliashib the priest, having authority over the storerooms of the house of our God, was allied with Tobiah.

[Nehemiah 13:5](#) 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.

You remember Tobiah from previous chapters as leading the opposition to rebuilding the wall surrounding Jerusalem. Yet here he was, receiving special treatment from Eliashib.

You'd have to be a Jew to completely understand the horror of allowing someone, and especially a Gentile, to live in a room in the Temple. It illustrates how lax the Jews had become in spiritual matters.

[Nehemiah 13:6](#) 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,

Nehemiah 13:7 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.

The impact of this is made greater when you realize that only about a year had transpired. *God's people had backslidden at warp speed!*

It can, but it doesn't always, take a long time to backslide. It is therefore critical that you pay close attention to your spiritual life at all times. Here is a quote: *It is the nature of a fire to go out; therefore keep it stirred and fed and the ashes removed* (General William Booth).

Nehemiah 13:8 And it grieved me bitterly; therefore I threw all the household goods of Tobiah out of the room.

Nehemiah 13:9 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.

Nehemiah wasn't messing around. He literally **threw out** all Tobiah's furniture. Then he restored the room to its proper function.

We are not into buildings the way the believers of the Old Testament were into the Temple. Today, the Church itself – the believers – we are God's building on earth, wherever we gather. It's not at all unusual, or wrong, for a building to have a dual use. For example: We met in the YMCA for over eighteen years.

What we glean from this episode is to remain true to the function of the Church. The Temple storehouse had a proper function, but it was being used improperly. We want to therefore always consider if our priorities and programs as a Church are in proper alignment with the purpose of the Church on earth – which is to exalt Jesus by edifying believers and evangelizing unbelievers.

Nehemiah 13:10 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.

Nehemiah 13:11 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.

Nehemiah 13:12 Then all Judah brought the tithe of the grain and the new wine and the oil to the storehouse.

Nehemiah 13:13 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.

Nehemiah 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!

The reason that the storeroom was available was because the people were not bringing in their tithes and offerings. Those gifts were what supported the ministry of the **Levites and the singers**. With no support, these guys had gone back to farming. Nehemiah took steps to see that the people brought in their required tithes and offerings, and that they be handled with integrity to support the ministry.

No tithes and offerings meant no ministry. They were robbing themselves of ministry.

I want to make an application of this; but, since we're talking about money, I want to be careful. God has wonderfully provided for the ministry of Calvary Hanford these more than two decades. But, on an individual level, I wonder if sometimes a person isn't robbing him- or herself? If you withhold gifts and giving, the ministry goes on because others are faithful. **But you may not be receiving all the ministry God has for you!**

- being changed to bring change -
1. Either there is a lack of potential ministry in some area that might benefit you or your family;
 2. Or you might become somewhat dull to hearing the Word of God because your heart has not been set free by giving to God's work.

Your giving is up to you. *But you might want to consider whether or not you are ripping yourself off by not giving!*

Nehemiah put God's house back in order, and then these other things took place. The Church is a far more important component of solid spiritual life than you might think. If people are having spiritual problems... **Get them back to Church!**

#2 Get Your Own 'Houses' In Order (v1-3; 15-31)

The remaining verses describe getting your three 'houses' in order:

1. Verses one, two, and three describe getting your spiritual house in order.
2. Verses fifteen through twenty-two describe getting your material house in order.
3. The last verses, twenty-three through thirty-one, focus on getting your personal house in order.

Church... Work... Family. Those are your three 'houses'; they are where you 'live' everyday.

We already read verses one, two, and three. It was probably the weekly Sabbath day reading in the Temple. Upon hearing Deuteronomy 23:3-5, which is the passage quoted, prohibiting intermingling and intermarriage with Moabites and Ammonites, the people immediately responded. They **separated** themselves.

You get your spiritual house in order by reading, or hearing, God's Word, and then acting upon it without delay. You want to be reading it for yourself; and you need to be hearing it read and taught in gatherings of God's people.

Whatever God's Word says, you should immediately do. Why don't we? Let me suggest two reasons:

1. First, we don't always immediately do what God's Word says because it is not what we want to do. We don't want to forgive others; or humble ourselves. I see this a lot in marriages. The husband or wife does not want to look past their current unhappiness and treat their spouse the way the Lord commands.
2. Second, we don't always immediately do what God's Word says because we think we can't. You need to remember, then believe, that God's Word **is** God's enabling. You can do what God tells you to do.

The next 'house' in the text is what I'm calling your material house. It encompasses your career, or job, and all of the business you transact in the world. We derive the application from verses fifteen through twenty-two.

The Jews were conducting business on the Sabbath, in direct defiance to the Law of Moses. They were breaking the Sabbath in other ways, too – by doing work and by carrying heavy burdens.

Nehemiah rebuked them. He reminded them that refusing to keep the Sabbath was in large part what had led to the Babylonian captivity. Then he took practical steps to insure that they would observe the Sabbath – like posting his own men at the gates, and changing the hours when the gates were opened and closed, and chasing-off the Gentile merchants.

New Testament believers in the Church are not under obligation to the Law of Moses to keep the Saturday Sabbath. **Every day is a day of spiritual rest for you.**

Does that mean you can conduct and transact business anytime you please? Yes and no. While you're free to do as you please, since every day is now a Sabbath of spiritual rest, you should alter your priorities to put God first.

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Let's over-simplify by saying you have days you need to work, and days you don't need to work. If you can, you should try to work on days that won't hinder you from coming to Church. When you can't, you should remember that your work is really your mission field.

Days you don't need to work should still have God as their priority. It's too easy to get involved in habits and hobbies that take you and your family away from Church. In fact, I think the devil designs many recreations to do just that. *Be careful!*

The remaining verses in our chapter describe a problem in the Jewish families.

[Nehemiah 13:23](#) In those days I also saw Jews *who had married women of Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab.*

Nehemiah 13:24 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.

God's Word prohibited mixed-marriages for religious reasons. The kids were no longer being raised Jewish. They were in danger of losing an entire generation to the pagan ideas and ideals of the world around them.

By the way: God's Word still prohibits mixed-marriages in this sense: Believers must marry believers and not unbelievers!

Nehemiah reminded them how Solomon, even with all his wisdom and blessing from God, had been led astray into backsliding by marrying foreign women.

Bringing-up godly kids was, and is, an extremely important focus of the Christian life. Marrying right; then staying married; ought to be very high on your list of priorities.

The world has everyone believing that if the parents aren't getting along, it is "better for the kids" for them to divorce. Unless there is real abuse going on in the home, *that just isn't true!* It would be "better for the kids" if the parents would quit being so selfish and learn how to get along!!

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It's somewhat unfair to say that to unbelievers. They do not have God's Word; they do not have God's indwelling Holy Spirit. Believers **do** have both. If you are a believer; if you are married to a believer; **Stay married!**

I think that one reason Christians aren't having more of an effect on the world is because we have little to show the world in our personal lives. If Christianity is not working for us at home, why would anyone else want to embrace it?

Some of my words have been strong words. I took my cue from Nehemiah. *He wasn't messing around!*

1. He threw Tobiah's furnishing out of the storeroom into the street.
2. He took over the gates of Jerusalem, and he warned the Gentile merchants who were camped outside on the Sabbath to get lost! He said to them, *I'll lay hands on you – and it wasn't the good kind of laying on of hands.*
3. When dealing with the mixed-marriages, he pronounced curses, struck the men, and literally plucked-out some of their beards!

I'm not going to do any of that as you leave services today. You – and I – need to do these things to ourselves (spiritually speaking), when it is appropriate.

Nehemiah's boldness came from his focus. Four times in this chapter he asked God to remember him. The only opinion he cared about was God's. The only Person he wanted to please and serve was God.

May that be true of each one of us.



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