



**What goes around comes around?**

**Nehemiah 13**

We come to the latter days of Ezra's ministry. We are not going to focus so much on Ezra this evening but on his legacy. Ezra was a part of a process where the people of Israel – the remnant, the Jews – were returning to their land. There were many that desired that they re-occupy their land but re-establishing the land wasn't just about getting the temple and Jerusalem back, but it was about rebuilding their faith. What we discovered is that it took a couple of generations for the people to return, first to rebuild the temple, rebuild their towns and villages and finally to rebuild Jerusalem and get the economy of the province up and running. And we saw how God provided the opportunity and the men to do it. And it took time and things happened in their due time and we learned how God does things in His due time.

But the return wasn't just about the nation, but about their commitment to God. We saw how it wasn't just a matter of dealing with the physical things, but how they as a nation were to be built up spiritually. It took 14 years to rebuild the temple, but it took over 80 before they re-instated Tabernacles (Sukkot). So often we're good at the physical jobs, but spiritual building and rebuilding takes time, commitment and it costs. It's an important point. Sometimes we see God providing the physical needs, money, buildings, people, resources and we praise Him and think we've made it. But all these things are just resources, things. Things that God has given us as tools to help and encourage us to build or rebuild ourselves spiritually. It starts with individuals and eventually becomes owned by the whole church. If God is challenging you, then like Ezra, take up that challenge and work with others to see God's kingdom built here at Maidstone Road.

The message of Ezra is that God calls us to His word, to spend time with Him with His word. To allow His word to grow in our hearts. To remove the leaven from our lives, to make the hard decisions to follow His ways whatever the price and to make ourselves holy, and like Ezra, to encourage God's people to do the same. Building ourselves spiritually is much harder work than buildings, and ministries, and organisation. It involves time, heartache and most of all, time with God.

The final lesson of Ezra is that when we do take the teaching on board, when we commit ourselves to holy living, then there's no return or compromise and that's what Nehemiah 13 is about. Nehemiah was from the same stable as Ezra and as Governor of Judah, he, unlike Ezra, had the ability not just to persuade people to follow God's law; he had the authority to make it happen in the legal and social structures of the province. It was the end of the process of restoration, that started in the hearts of individuals, but now was something that was to be a part of the lives of people for generations. What was to define the people restored was the centrality of God's law which was to be a very part of their lives as a nation.

That was not without difficulty and Nehemiah records three incidents where he had to exercise his authority, and are not unlike that we have already heard about in these series.

#### 1. Separation from the nations

The people realised their separation from the surrounding nations should be more complete. This had been the command of old. Hadn't this been done before? Yes but not to this extent. Zerubbabel wouldn't have anything to do with the nations around when the temple was being rebuilt and got himself a whole load of trouble. Ezra encouraged separation and right from the start Nehemiah also separated himself from the surrounding people by refusing help from the local officials: Sanballat, a Samaritan, Tobiah an Ammonite and Geshem an Arab. Nehemiah used only Jews. Nehemiah was a strict Babylonian Jew. He was a strong advocate of separation.

That meant that Jewish communities were to be distinct, which their own laws and customs and not mixed with the local population. Yes, Jews would participate in trade and government and that would be a characteristic of their life down the following centuries – Jews would play an important part in the life and government of many societies. But there would be a line drawn beyond which Gentiles could never pass in regards to the life and religion of the Jewish people. Nehemiah now put this into effect in Judah under his powers.

This meant the exclusion of people like Tobiah the Ammonite, from the precincts of the temple. Officially he was excluded but there were clearly some people in the Jewish hierarchy who were in the pockets of Tobiah and didn't go along with the Governor's policies. When he went to the king in Persia to report, Tobiah got himself quarters in the temple! I wonder whether Eliashib thought Nehemiah might not return and took advantage?

But return he did with the continuing permission of the Persian Emperor and threw Tobiah and his stuff out and cleansed the temple. But there were worse implications to Eliashib's sin than letting a foreigner into the temple. The room was a storeroom for tithes and Levites had gone short as a result. The temple officials were in trouble and Nehemiah replaced Eliashib with a team of men in charge of the storerooms, presumably from preventing people like Eliashib from abusing that position again.

We can learn much from this. Firstly that we must guard against those that use their power and position to do things that are contrary to God's word. There is unfortunately a history in Christian leadership where Ministers can abuse their positions to the detriment of the people of God. This isn't just a matter of criticising law-breaking Catholic Priests. Even in in evangelical circles, Ministers and for that matter Christians generally, can easily abuse their position, to bully people into doing what they want, or taking advantage of others.

What sorts of things? People persuading people to give money when they can least afford it, abuse of volunteers and not paying Christian workers properly, pressurising people to make Christian commitments when they are not ready, accusing those whose prayers have not been answered of being sinners or even lost, bending scripture to support a personal prejudice. These things aren't even restricted to leaders. We've all come across it and maybe have even been guilty of it at some point in our lives.

It leads to the second point and that sin does not just have consequences for us, but that it's consequences ripple out into the lives of others. We may think the sin is our sin, but it may impact on our families, our friendships, or church and most importantly on our relationship with God.

## 2. Respect for the Sabbath

Clearly the Jews knew about the Sabbath but there were some that thought it was OK to do some work anyway. Nehemiah decided to enforce the Sabbath. This again was a new addition to the life of the people – the Torah became ore and more part of the civil law of Judah, because Nehemiah could do that. Then he realised that foreign traders still did business in Jerusalem on the Sabbath (encouraged by the local population doubtless). So he closed the main gates to Jerusalem during the Sabbath. So the traders trade outside the walls on a Friday evening until he stopped that.

The Jews were experts at law. If there was a law, they would find ways of getting around it. They still do that today. They still get Gentiles to do tasks on a Saturday that they can't do themselves. That's what happened with the sellers of fish from Tyre. As we discovered a few weeks ago, the purpose of the Sabbath was for R & R because we need it. To not have R & R damages ourselves.

How often do we try to rationalise God's law by finding what we think are loopholes. We came across them in Just 10. We say an "innocent" word instead of taking the Lord's name in vain. We rationalise theft, speaking and thinking ill of others by justifying the action. "He deserves it anyway". "The boss knows that people use the photocopier for personal stuff". "I'm just aspirational". "I've every right to be annoyed". "What's wrong with a bit of something you fancy".

Understanding the law of God is about understanding the spirit of it and seeking to obey the law rather than trying to keep to the letter. Legalists can always be easily spotted by trying to argue for the keeping of one of the commandments whilst breaking most of the others! How many times have I read justification of why we should shun certain Christians or certain non-Christians with the most hateful of arguments. Their self-righteousness projects strongly and negates what they are trying to say even if there is anything in it. It's a pity that Christians are so often quick to condemn but very slow to try to bring people to repentance, usually because they need to

repent just as much. When you point the finger at someone, remember that more fingers are pointing back at you!

### 3. Marriage to foreign wives

Marriage to foreign wives. Just a minute, this had been an issue two decades before? It was but here they were again, leaders and people marrying foreign wives. It was heart-wrenching stuff the first time around. Does Nehemiah agonise about their sin by pulling out his hair and weeping all day. Different time, different leader, different solution. Nehemiah is not as kind as Ezra was. *I reprimanded the men, called down curses on them, beat them, and pulled out their hair. Then I made them take an oath in God's name that never again would they or their children intermarry with foreigners. 26 I told them, "It was foreign women that made King Solomon sin. Here was a man who was greater than any of the kings of other nations. God loved him and made him king over all of Israel, and yet he fell into this sin. 27 Are we then to follow your example and disobey our God by marrying foreign women?"*

Was Nehemiah abusing his position? The policy for not marrying foreign wives had been around for 20 years and was well-accepted. The men had no excuse and were harshly treated. Similar stiff treatment was dished out on Joiada *28 Joiada was the son of Eliashib the High Priest, but one of Joiada's sons married the daughter of Sanballat, from the town of Beth Horon, so I made Joiada leave Jerusalem. 29 Remember, God, how those people defiled both the office of priest and the covenant you made with the priests and the Levites.*

Rough justice. Interestingly I wonder whether Eliashib was the same Eliashib that Nehemiah sacked from being storeroom keeper for giving quarters to Tobiah? Joiada and consorted with Sanballat, it was a serious sin. The consequences were much worse than in Ezra 10 because they had been warned, they knew that sin was sin but thought they could or should get away with it.

And that's the lesson for us here. If we continue to sin or not take sin seriously, the consequences get worse the next time around. That's how it works in law, that's how it works in family discipline. If the offence continues the punishment gets worse.

It's the same with sin. God is patient, but if we keep on doing the same thing, then one day His patience runs out. That's the story of the Restoration. The Jews ended in exile because they kept on doing the same sins. The returning exiles knew that – or at least the people God raised up understood it. They lived in fear of failing in relation to the law.

The problem was, people just did many of the same things again. I can compare sin to an addiction. We know it's wrong but our sinful nature is such that sometimes we can't seem to stop ourselves. For whatever we say about the badness of sin, the truth is we do sin because we like it, it gratifies us, it makes us feel better for the moment (but probably not afterwards). It's about act now and face the consequences later.

And we rationalise sin to ourselves and others so we can justify it to ourselves, rather in the same way an alcoholic justifies drinking too much. So we find what goes around comes around and all of us have some sins we just keep on doing and make excuses. Here were tonight's excuses – in fact they are all forms of denial that the sin is there.

- by arguing how much it may benefit God's work – and myself (Eliashib). In the short term Tobiah may have done some favours for Eliashib and the temple financially, but sin is sin. The benefits didn't justify the means and others were hurt as a result.
- by looking for "loopholes" in God's law. The whole tenor of our society is if there is not someone in authority watching, we think we can get away with it. We usually do. The main difference with God is that we ultimately never will.
- by thinking it doesn't matter – somehow we think the "the Lord understands" when we fall short and don't see we need to come to repentance. The Lord does understand – only too well!

Nehemiah understood that the consequences of ignoring God's will and ways were serious and dealt with them. Mindful that God is our judge. We won't get away with it in the end. The whole life and ministry of Ezra was about following God and seeking to live a holy life as he discovered more and more of God's word. That's the example for us from Ezra. Here's my short summary:

Be hearers of God's word – know it, love it, meditate on it.

Be doers of God's word- make it the practical foundation of our life – and don't keep going around the same thing

Be a holy people – as we understand God's word we repent of that which He illuminates and covenant with Him to follow His will and ways.

Nehemiah's prayer: Remember me O Lord.

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