

Standing By Our Promises

Nehemiah 13

Rev. Brian Bill

December 1-2, 2018

For years, whenever I would go to the Dairy Queen in Pontiac, I would order a Snicker Bar Blizzard. All that changed the day I tasted my then six-year-old daughter's mint Oreo blizzard! From that point on, I left Snickers behind – I guess that makes me a “Snicker Bar Blizzard Backslider.”

When Becca had her tonsils out, we told her she could have whatever she wanted at DQ. She didn't feel like eating anything for a week, but when she was better, she remembered our promise. One day, we stopped and she ordered a blizzard. I used every trick I could think of to get her to share with me! She finally made me promise not to eat any more.

When we got home, she put what was left in the freezer. A few hours later, I grabbed a spoon and finished it (I didn't think she'd want it because she felt so sick). When she opened the freezer, she busted the Blizzard burglar and said, “*Dad, you promised!*”

A few days later, Beth bought her another blizzard. Once again Becca put what was left in the freezer but this time I didn't touch it. A couple minutes later, she said I could finish her tasty treat. I thanked her, opened the freezer and pulled out an...empty cup! She laughed so hard she fell on the floor.

That same week we went to DQ as a family [we didn't have Whitey's there] and Becca once again ordered her favorite blizzard. I got one as well but I could tell she didn't trust me because she sat as far away from me as she could. I tried to exchange cups with her when mine was empty but she was on to me. She gave me one of her great smiles and said, “*Dad, you promised!*”

I smiled sheepishly and mentioned my upcoming sermon was about keeping our promises. To which Lydia, who was then 9-years-old, said, “*Well then you better start keeping yours, Dad.*” Ouch.

How are you doing at keeping your promises? We all fail to follow through, don't we? Our good intentions often fall by the wayside. Sometimes we blatantly break our promises and other times, we just kind of drift away, a little at a time. Someone has said that spiritual failure is like a flat tire. Most flats don't occur as a

result of a blowout. Tires get flat because air leaks out over time, often imperceptibly.

I'm reminded of a song by Mercy Me called, "Slow Fade."

*It's a slow fade when you give yourself away
It's a slow fade when black and white are turned to gray
People never crumble in a day*

In Nehemiah 13, we come face-to-face with people whose faith had faded. Because their spirituality had sprung a leak, their commitments were compromised. You would think the last chapter of Nehemiah would contain compelling stories of how God's people took their spiritual commitment to the next level. Not so much.

Jason Crosby sure did a great job preaching Nehemiah 11-12 last weekend when he challenged us to give ourselves, to give our praise and to give our gifts to the Lord. I've been pondering something he said near the end of the message – "*You can't just change your affections, you have to exchange them by seeing Jesus as more reliable, more beautiful and more desirable than your idols.*"

Frankly, this script does not have a happy ending because God's people never pulverized their idols. Within a relatively short period of time, the children of Israel went spiritually flat and returned to their old ways of doing things.

Background

Before we head into chapter 13, here's some helpful background information.

1. Nehemiah returned to Persia at the end of chapter 12. He was the governor in Jerusalem for 12 years and then went back to Persia. After a period of time, he came back to Jerusalem. Chapter 13 records what Nehemiah discovered when he returned.

2. There is a literary link between chapter 10 and chapter 13. In chapter 10, the people made 4 vows – to *submit to God's Word*; to live *separate from the world*; to *keep the Sabbath*, and to *support God's work*. Sadly, by the time we get to chapter 13, each of these promises have been broken.

They were on a slow fade as they gradually accommodated to sinful selfishness, peer pressure and the wiles of the world.

Since chapter 13 is best understood in light of chapter 10, we'll follow this same outline.

The Submission Promise

The promises of chapter 10 began with an affirmation of loyalty to the Word of God in verse 29: “...*to observe and do all the commandments of the LORD our Lord...*” Notice Nehemiah 13:1: “*On that day they read from the Book of Moses...and in it was found written that no Ammonite or Moabite should ever enter the assembly of God...*”

As they listened, they remembered from Deuteronomy 23 what had happened to their ancestors when they were on the threshold of the Promised Land. The Ammonites' sin was one of *omission* when they refused to provide the Israelites with food and water. The Moabites' sin was one of *commission* when they hired Balaam to call a curse down on the Israelites. The bottom line is the Moabites and Ammonites were notorious for infiltrating Israel and leading them astray.

Here's the good news. When the Israelites heard what God's Word had to say, they submitted to the Scriptures. Check out verse 3: “*As soon as the people heard the law, they separated from Israel all those of foreign descent.*”

Are you in the Scriptures? Are you submitting to what God says? Or is there some spiritual slippage taking place? What is it you need to do that you've been putting off?

The Separation Promise

The next vow they violated was to live *separate from the world*. They did this in two ways.

1. They allowed an enemy to live in the temple. In verses 4-9, Nehemiah was horrified to find Eliashib, who was the high priest, had not only allowed Tobiah inside the city, he gave him the keys to a large suite of rooms where the tithes and offerings were stored.

This demanded drastic, public, and immediate action as seen in verse 8: ***“And I was very angry, and I threw all the household furniture of Tobiah out of the chamber.”*** Nehemiah showed him the door and then threw his furniture, TV, computer and Xbox into the street. Nehemiah could not live with *wrong* in a place that was built for *right*.

2. They allowed spiritually mismatched marriages. In 10:30 they made this promise: ***“We will not give our daughters to the peoples of the land or take their daughters for our sons.”*** When Nehemiah returned he saw that men of Judah had married women from Ashdod, Ammon and Moab.

This really lit him up! Check out verse 25: ***“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...”*** By calling down curses on them, he was pronouncing God’s judgment on their actions. He was so mad that he yanked out their hair! This may seem like inappropriate behavior for a man of God, but this very sin was one of the reasons they were taken into Babylonian captivity.

Are you living a separated life? Or are you caving into culture and compromise?

The Support Promise

The third promise they neglected was to *support God’s work*. Their vow at the end of chapter 10 was they would ***“...not neglect the house of our God.”*** The ministry in the temple was hampered in verse 10 because the Levites and singers had to get jobs in the fields in order to survive. The temple storerooms were empty because people had stopped bringing their tithes and offerings.

Nehemiah does some tough talking again in verse 11: ***“So I confronted the officials and said, ‘Why is the house of God forsaken?’”*** Nehemiah not only rebuked them, he showed them what to do to make some changes. That’s exactly what God does for each of us. When the Holy Spirit convicts us, He also prods us to positive behavior. Verse 12 says, ***“Then all Judah brought the tithe of the grain, wine, and oil into the storehouses.”***

Is God your master or is it mammon? Jesus said we will either serve God *or* money – we can’t serve both. Are you putting God first with your finances by giving what God wants you to give?

The Sabbath Promise

When they signed the covenant, the Israelites promised in 10:31: “...***we will not buy from them on the Sabbath or on a holy day.***” In 13:15-22, Nehemiah discovered the people were not only doing business on the Sabbath, they were treating it as any other day of the week.

Nehemiah didn't sit back and let this promise be ignored either. He spoke sternly and acted firmly as seen in verse 22: “***Then I commanded the Levites that they should purify themselves and come and guard the gates, to keep the Sabbath day holy.***” In demanding the people keep their Sabbath promise, Nehemiah was emphasizing the centrality of worship, the importance of witness, the necessity of rest, and the priority of love. God never demands anything from us that is not for our own good.

Are you setting aside a weekly time to gather with God's people in order to give Him glory? Are you hitting the pause button to rejoice in what God has done for you in Christ?

Lessons from Nehemiah

As we wrap up our *Grow Time* series from Nehemiah, here are 12 lessons we can apply to our lives.

1. It's never too late to do what's right. I was reminded of this again last weekend when hearing the testimonies of four people who were baptized. BTW, our next baptism time is the last weekend in December. I have permission to share part of Tim and Sara Koehler's story.

[This past year was] a life-changing year in their marriage. A year ago November, their divorce proceedings [were] in full motion...For weeks, few words were exchanged and there was virtually no hope of saving this once “madly in love” couple. The marriage was all but officially over.

On a Tuesday evening in February, three days before their divorce would be finalized in the courts, Tim texted Sara that they needed to meet to exchange some final items for their divorce. Sara agreed to meet under one condition...she wanted him to also be open to talking. He agreed. The next day, Wednesday, February 14th, Valentine's Day, no less...Tim and Sara sat in the JC Penney parking lot for 2 hours...talking, crying and believing that

they did not want their marriage to be over. It was on this day they both knew what had been missing from their marriage.

*They were missing the third strand as stated in Ecclesiastes 4:12: “**Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not easily broken.**”*

God had been left out of their marriage and their marriage collapsed. Although Sara and Tim had found Christ years prior and professed Jesus as their Lord and Savior, they had lost their way. They had never accepted Christ into their joint relationship with him.

So to finish the story, the next morning Tim and Sara rushed to the courthouse to sign documents to stop their divorce proceedings. With less than 48 hours to spare, the Koehler’s were still Mr. & Mrs.

With God now at the center of their marriage they [completed] their commitment to Jesus Christ by being baptized and becoming members of Edgewood.

*Jeremiah 29:11: “**For I know the plans I have for you – declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.**”*

- 2. Don’t play around with sin.** Most of us underestimate our sinfulness and overestimate our goodness. Don’t flirt with sin or get cozy with compromise. Romans 12:9 says, “**Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good.**”
- 3. Remember who God is.** He is *great* and awesome. That means He is large and He is in charge! He is also *good*...all the time. And, He is *gracious*.
- 4. Cultivate a lifestyle of praise and prayer.** God desires to be worshipped with reverence and with rejoicing that leads to confession and contrition.
- 5. Move out of your comfort zone.** Most of us are way too comfortable with the way we’re living. When God asks us to do something that stretches us, let’s be ready to move!
- 6. Don’t let difficulties derail you.** God allows tough times in our lives for a purpose.

7. One of God's goals is get His Word in us. There's no way to grow if you're not in God's Word.

8. Allow change to change you. A couple weeks ago Pastor Tim shared some insight about change. Here are four points that impacted me:

- Change often reveals what we have placed our dependencies on.
- God uses change to help us see the need for the Fruit of the Spirit.
- Change can help us change.
- When faced with changes, hold your preferences loosely while holding on to God's purposes tightly.

9. Seek to resolve relational ruptures. There's a direct correlation between the effectiveness of our mission and how we treat each other.

10. Believe the promises of God and act upon them. If you'd like to learn more about God's promises, I highly recommend Ray Pritchard's brand-new devotional ebook called, "[Christmas Promises](#)." It's free if you download it by Sunday. We posted a link on Sermon Extras on our app and website.

11. No one can do everything but everyone can do something. There's a place for everyone as we determine to live out His purposes.

12. No one can give everything but everyone can give something.

I didn't do so well in my promise not to eat Becca's blizzards, but I'm thankful for fresh starts and new beginnings. We make a lot of promises to others and many promises are made to us. Sadly, too many promises are broken on both ends of the equation. God, however, never breaks a promise.

This is Commitment Weekend! It's time for us now to respond to what God is prompting each of us to do and then to stand by our promises...with His help.