

Sunday 12th June 2022
Nehemiah 13:1-14, 23-31
Rev.Sandra Mathers
Brightons Parish Church

Sermon keypoints:

- Spiritual permissiveness leads to social permissiveness leads to disobedience
- We need holiness in order that we remain obedient to God

Let us pause for a moment's prayer.

Loving Father, Gracious Lord, we praise You that, by Your Spirit, You are here.

Open us, each one indeed, by Your Spirit to Your Spirit and help us to behold wonderful things in the Word of our God. In Jesus' name. Amen.

I think we'd all agree that we're living in an ever-changing world. Some changes, of course, are for the better like the recent emphasis on ensuring that all are treated as equal value whether they're male or female, or black or white, whatever, and that's a good change, but I often think that for every good change that comes along society takes several steps back. But also, I think we'd all agree, living in a permissive society things that only a comparatively short time ago would have been regarded as unthinkable are taken for granted today, leading to rising numbers of broken and dysfunctional families and individuals. And I don't think it's any comfort, really, to know that that's how it's always been.

Take out the scriptures we read this morning. You have been following the life and work of Nehemiah for some weeks now and you've learned how this man, who never wore a crown, never led an army, a man who himself had been born in exile, although he rose eventually to hold a key post in the court of the Persian king, but he'd return to Israel and from out of the rubble and dereliction, both physical and spiritual, had re-established, not only their pride in themselves as a nation, as God's chosen people, but had led them forward to a fresh and vital relationship with God.

In chapter 10 we read that the people signed a spiritual covenant agreeing to obey God's law as applied to them personally and in their worship. What a transformation. And in chapter 12:43 we read of the dedication celebration. We're told that the sounds of rejoicing in Jerusalem could be heard far away. What a pity that wasn't the end of the story, that they all lived happily and joyously serving God faithfully after that. Sadly, real life isn't like that. After a while Nehemiah had to return to his post with the king in Persia and during his absence the blight of spiritual permissiveness set in once more and where there is spiritual permissiveness, very soon, social permissiveness eats into the fabric of life both individually and in the community.

We start off well in this chapter verses 1, 2, 3 tell us that the Book of Moses was read aloud and the people obeyed God's Word. That no Ammonite or Moabite should be admitted into the assembly of God because of how they treated Israel when the nation was journeying on the road to Canaan. Indeed, far from helping them, these peoples had tried, through Balaam, to have the nation cursed. But God had intervened and turned the curse into a blessing and in verse 3 we're told that Israel obeyed God's Word and excluded all who were a foreign descent.

Let's be clear, God didn't hate these nations, indeed, when we read the account of Jesus human ancestry, we find someone there who come hailed from Moab, Ruth. But Ruth had forsaken her old gods. She had wholeheartedly given herself to the worship of the God of Israel. But God knew that those whose hearts were given over to other gods would pollute Israel spiritually, hence the command, the nation heard God's Word and obeyed it.

And that underlines to us the importance of reading and hearing God's Word. But more than that, of obeying it. Jesus himself said in Matthew 6 and 24 'You cannot serve two masters. You either serve God or your love and service are given to another.' We can't have it both ways.

So, firstly we learn that God calls us to obedience to Him and His commands, not just in Nehemiah's day, but in our day too.

That, perhaps, all makes verse 4 more horrifying because we learn that the rot in Israel's spiritual health started at the very top of the religious establishment. 'Elaishib the high priest was in charge of the storerooms of God's house' but the very man who should have been a leader in spiritual propriety had become close friends with one of Israel's enemies, a man who from the very beginning of the work of building the walls had been a scourge to them, a thorn in their flesh, Tobiah.

It transpires he wasn't only very good friends with Tobiah but was actually related to him through marriage and it was for this man, an enemy of the nation, that Elaishib cleared out the grain offerings and artifacts of worship for use in the temple to make room for him to set up residence in God's house. What an insult to God.

Why would he do such a thing? we may ask ourselves. You know the old saying - blood is thicker than water - and that was probably part of the reason. Tobiah was an Ammonite a prescribed foreigner but Tobiah is actually a Jewish name meaning 'God is good' so he wasn't totally ammonite.

It's tough to side with a strict commandment of God such as excluding all Ammonites from the assembly of God when your relative is an Ammonite well, just a bit Ammonite, after all he's a bit Jewish too.

So, we allow ourselves to compromise and immediately we do that we've stepped outside the will of God.

It's sad but true that unwise friendships can seriously damage us spiritually. Spiritual permissiveness. But there was also financial permissiveness.

Verses 10 to 14. A problem that was the direct result of the first problem because Tobiah was using the rooms set aside for the tithes. The priests had required the people to bring their tithes and, as a result, the Levites who should have been in residence at

the temple to carry out their duties had to go to work in the fields in order to support their families thus neglecting their temple duties.

Spiritual permissiveness invariably has a negative effect on our giving. The prophet Malachi confronted the people for robbing God by failing to bring their tithes into the storehouse. Spiritual permissiveness impacts on every part of our lives and just as it impacted every part of the lives of the people of Nehemiah's day, the same is true today and our giving to God is often one of the first areas of our spiritual lives to suffer.

In chapter 10 and 31 we read that the people had agreed in their covenant with God to keep the Sabbath day holy. They wouldn't work. They wouldn't buy and sell. That day of the week would be set apart for God and His worship. What did Nehemiah find? He found that the merchants from Tyre, who had no scruples about the Sabbath, were doing a roaring trade selling merchandise to the Jews on the Sabbath and the people themselves were busily engaged in treading grapes and doing all sorts of work and having commercial dealings on the Sabbath.

No doubt the Israelites could have found at least a dozen reasons as they would see it, excuses might be better, for working and trading on the Sabbath, just as we do today. I remember someone rather ruthlessly saying 'In my grandfather's day it was the Holy Sabbath. In my father's day it was Sunday. And today it's just the weekend!'

Nehemiah took strong measures to bring an end to the desecration of the Sabbath by ensuring the city gates were locked and posted trustworthy guards to ensure they remained locked and chased the merchants who set up camp outside the gates. In verses 23 to 29 we're told that there was also permissiveness in their homes, a problem that Nehemiah had previously corrected but, once again, some of the Jews had married foreign women and their children couldn't even speak the Jewish language so it was impossible for them to understand God's Word when it was read.

I think we are all aware that marriage is probably one of the most important and one of the most vulnerable areas in our lives especially for those of us who claim to love and follow Christ. It's so easy to fall in love with someone who has no interest in the things of God

They may say they're happy for us to be 'religious', as they might call it, but it's not for them. No, but one won't have any effect on our love for each other or in family life.

Sadly, while that sounds great in theory, in practice it invariably on the one hand puts a strain on the relationship and on the other puts an even greater strain on the Christian relationship with our Savior. For instance, it's Sunday, one person wants to decorate a room or to go away for the day and the other wants to go to church. The result? Just as in Nehemiah's day there's compromise. We'll do what I want today and next week you can go to church. We'll do it week about. That's fair.

Does it work? To begin with, perhaps, but, in the long term, it doesn't and, invariably, the Christian partner, and it's always the Christian partner, gets more and more caught up with worldly things, and worship and the place Jesus has in our lives becomes less and less, until we find ourselves no longer having time for Him and, indeed, no appetite for the things of God. Compromise, compromising the things of God just doesn't work because He calls us to obedience. Obedience in every part of our lives. No exceptions and that includes our loving, our living, and our giving.

From the very beginning, Israel was called to be a people apart. God's people. Leviticus 26:26-11 tells us 'God said 'I will put my dwelling place among you. I will walk among you and be your God and you will be my people.'" He gave them His law, a tool enabling them to live in obedience to Him and, thus, be a holy people. He called them to be His witnesses to the nations around them but, just like us, how often they compromised, so often with disastrous results. And God would send one of His servants like Nehemiah to bring them back to that place of obedience to Him. Nehemiah had had a very successful ministry among them but sadly how quickly the desires of the flesh took over once more.

Verse 30 tells us that Nehemiah purified the priests and the Levites of everything foreign. Purification, holiness. Holiness and the conduct of the affairs of God's house but also personal holiness. 1 Peter 1:16 the apostle reminds us 'It is written, you shall be holy as I am holy' and we cannot be holy if we are living in disobedience to the commands of a Holy God. The two are incompatible.

We might think Nehemiah's reaction to the people's sin will was a bit OTT. He's often criticized for not being more polite or tactful. Nehemiah wasn't in the least concerned about what people thought of him, his concerns centered purely on God, on God's command, God's holiness and the nation's utter Godlessness.

Nehemiah was accountable to God alone and he was aware of God's presence in every situation. He wasn't taking action against permissiveness for his sake, he was doing it for God's sake and his prayers for God to remember him spring not from any sense of self-importance, not a parading of his goodness and holiness, but from love, from love for God and for the people of Israel. They are also a plea for God's help in what he is doing.

Nehemiah was well aware of his frailty. One man pitted against a nation. If anyone needed God's help, he did, and he got it.

As we considered Nehemiah's call to obedience to God and holiness of life before God and before our fellow men and women, we've got the responsibility to ask ourselves where do we stand? Are we, as individuals, living in that place of surrender and holiness before our Savior or not? And, if not, what is our response going to be?

Only we can answer that question.

Amen.