

GC2 Press® Premium Commentary for Kingdom Assignment: The Relentless Pursuit of Obedience (A Study of Nehemiah) By Dr. Jeff Gravens, Pastor, First Baptist Church, Sulphur Springs, Texas

Lesson 11: LEADING BY EXAMPLE

Focal text: Nehemiah 10:28-30

Background: Nehemiah 9:38-10:39

MAIN IDEA: Nehemiah had consistently led the people and again he was the first to sign the pledge committing to be faithful to God's expectations for His covenant people.

QUESTION TO EXPLORE: Do our actions reflect our values as leaders in our family, church and community?

QUICK READ: The Levites, leaders and priests signed an agreement in writing promising obedience to God for His faithfulness in using them to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem.

INTRODUCTION

One of the most sacred but difficult pastoral tasks is offering counsel. I'm often on the receiving end of confession. I hear many people make vows to "do better." I've heard teenagers express a desire to obey parents, husbands mourn a pornography habit, and wives lament destructive social relationships. These confessions often end with something to the effect of, "I know its wrong. I want to do better." This sort of confession is a good place to start, but these vows are rarely successful until they are offered to God and in the presence of those who will keep the person accountable.

I often respond to sincere confession with, "Confession is appropriate, but confession to me will not bear much fruit. Confess these sins to God and experience the forgiveness offered to you through the Cross and the empty tomb. Confess these sins to those you've sinned against. You need to reconcile relationships. But also confess these sins to people who will support, encourage, and hold you accountable."

Nehemiah 10 is the fruit born from confession. A binding agreement was formed to keep people accountable. The agreement is sealed and signed by priests, Levites, and the leaders of the people. The book of Nehemiah repeatedly teaches the lesson of the necessity of leaders to follow the Lord in words and deeds.

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Binding Agreement (Nehemiah 9:38-10:27)

At the conclusion of the prayer, the people renewed their commitment to God. This section begins, “In view of all this, we are making a binding agreement, putting it in writing” (9:38). The leaders, Levites, and priests affixed their names to the agreement. The agreement was sealed. This signified a legal assent to a written document. The list contains 84 signatures which form a multiple of 12. After a list of priests and Levites in 10:1-13, a list of “leaders of the people” is found in 10:14-27. These names were family representatives. The first 21 names are nearly parallel to the list of Ezra 2:3-30 and Nehemiah 7. The remaining 23 includes some families who helped rebuild the wall (Nehemiah 3) along with some additional names. Perhaps some returned from Babylonia more recently, and others were branches from older families. It is possible that some could have been families who had remained in Judah during captivity and now joined the returned exiles.¹

Oath to Obey (Nehemiah 10:28-30)

Those who bear the name of God must bend to the will of God. They must do what pleases Him. The people renewed their covenant to God before families, friends, and neighbors. This was not whispered or done in secret. This was to be known by all and be seen by all.

Covenants play an important role in the biblical story. God made covenants with Noah and Abraham and later initiated a covenant with His people through Moses (Genesis 6:18; 9:8-17; 15:18; 17:1-22; Exodus 19:5; 24:1-8). God initiated the relationship, and His people were expected to obey the Law. God was always faithful to His people, but His people often failed to obey and quickly turned to false gods.

The prayer of Nehemiah 9 describes the relationship between God and His people and stresses God’s grace and generosity. The core of the covenant renewed in Nehemiah is the people’s promise to obey God’s Word. They publicly agreed “to follow the Law of God given through Moses the servant of God and to obey carefully all the commands, regulations and decrees of the Lord our Lord (Nehemiah 10:29).” This general agreement is followed by a series of specific ways in which this commitment to God’s Law is to be applied in various aspects of their lives:

¹ Mervin Breneman, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther (The New American Commentary)* (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman, 199), 245.

domestic (mixed marriages), commercial (Sabbath trading), agriculture (seventh-year laws), social (cancellation of debts), religious (tithes) and economics (commerce).

This was a specific covenant agreed upon by specific people. This was a stake in the ground. The people committed and opened themselves to be held accountable.

We can take away a few important principles:

The commitment was personal. The people took personal ownership over the covenant. It was not agreed upon by a vague reference to a group of people. Rather, names were attached.

The commitment was public. The covenant was renewed in the presence of many witnesses. This was not done in a backroom or private ceremony.

The commitment was specific. The specific people, in front of many witnesses, did not agree to a generalized statement. Rather, they agreed to specific actions regarding their daily conduct.

"Separated themselves from the neighboring peoples for the sake of the law of God" (10:28) is a reference to intentional separation from the ungodliness of pagan nations. It is an effort to conform to the will of God. The Old Testament warns of the danger of intermarriage with people of other nations due to the high likelihood that it would lead to spiritual adultery and eventually destruction and exile (Exodus 34:15-16; Deuteronomy 7:3-4; 29:26-28; Joshua 23:11-13; 1 Kings 11:1-6).

It was necessary for the spiritual leaders to agree to the plan. They needed to provide a model to follow and would be expected to enforce the agreement. They agree to the plan: "We promise not to give our daughters in marriage to the peoples around us or take their daughters for our sons" (10:30). The returned exiles of Ezra 9-10 had already struggled and failed regarding this issue. Passages like Exodus 34: 11-16 and Deuteronomy 7: 1-4 were warnings to avoid being drawn into idolatry. King Solomon is a case study in intermarriage paving the road towards idolatry (1 Kings 11:1-4).

The people of God discern how to conduct their own lives through adherence to God's Word. Submission to the authority of God's Word is the unmistakable command here. The postexilic community was experiencing many problems, both ethical and religious. The first step toward

solving these problems was a commitment by the whole community to submit to the authority of God's revelation as found in the Scriptures.²

CONCLUSION

As the modern people of God, we too must read the Word of God and obey it. We live in a cultural context which attempts to dismiss truth by making all truth relative. It attempts to bend, distort, pervert the sexual and marital ethic. It promotes the accumulation of wealth, possessions, and social status. Of course, the list could continue. As the people of God, we must read the Word and obey it.

As leaders, we must set the example for others to follow. The apostle Paul told the Corinthian church, "Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ" (1 Corinthians 11:1). If you are not the leader, make sure you are following the right people. The apostle Paul told the church in Philippi, "Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you" (Philippians 4:9).

² Ibid., 246-247.