

Liabilities – Faithfulness doesn't happen by accident. Nehemiah 13:1-31

(Expanded Sermon Notes)



For some time now, the people have lived in and around Jerusalem and have made the worship of God in his city a priority. In fact, we just left chapter 12, where the wall was consecrated, and the statutes of the law had been read and re-read and restored to give shape to right worship. But, here, at the end of the book, we are reminded of a truth that we all live, faithfulness doesn't happen by accident. See, all of us have an innate desire to be seen and ultimately known for our faithfulness. Why? Because the people we look up to, honor, and celebrate were, above anything else, faithful and dependable. There is a deeper reason I think that we want to be known for our faithfulness. It has to do with the one who created us. See, we are wired to desire faithfulness because we are created in God's image, and he is always and loyally faithful. But we struggle to be faithful, don't we? That's where this chapter offers us a gift of grace.

The people of Israel have drifted back into patterns of habitual sin that plagued their ancestors. They allow the prevailing culture to set their priorities and treat each other with preference to gain favors, standing, or influence. Nehemiah comes back from serving the king (his day job), and his heart is broken at what he has found. In fact, it is likely that he wasn't planning to come back at all. But the news of the people's sin had reached him, and he couldn't stay away. He then restores right practices and pleads with God not to hold the actions of the people against him. He tried. They are repeating the sin of Solomon. Destruction is just around the corner. The truth is we are just like them, aren't we? Patterns of praise and rebellion persist in our lives. We think we'll be immune to the consequences of our sins. We tell ourselves that it will be different this time. But it won't. If we desire to be a faithful people, we must be reminded daily that faithfulness is an intentional pursuit. In other words, **faithfulness doesn't happen by accident.**

1. Good Starts

- a. Chapter 13 picks up where 12 left off. → The people are in the process of consecrating the wall work, the tithes have been brought into the storehouse, and in every way, the formation of a faithful people is underway.
- b. Review - **When we see how much God has given, we are moved to respond in right worship.**
 - i. This has been the larger story of chapters 8-10.
 - ii. This is also why we are coming back in the story to the dedication of the wall.
 - 1. The work was done in chapter 6.
 - 2. The people moved back in chapter 7.

3. Chapters 11 & 12 are a recapturing of that moment and of the worship that ensued.
 4. **They are ordering themselves as a community of worshipers. This is not just a celebration of a mile-marker in their personal lives. God has moved the community forward as a whole.¹**
- c. The larger story of where chapter 13 will end is the larger story of the challenge of faithfulness.
- i. They have a really good start.
 - ii. They grow complacent and comfortable.
 - iii. They start to make small compromises.
 - iv. They will fall back into habitual sin.
 - v. They will need to recommit to faithful principles.
 1. I love that the Bible pulls back the curtain for us over and over again and reveals the reality of the struggle of faith.
 2. We create heroes that are so unlike us in our fictional works. → That is, we create heroes that are only aspirational.
 - a. The Bible gives us heroes that are flawed, broken, and struggle just like us.
 3. We could very easily have ended our series in chapter 12. → That would have been a nice little bow on the story.
 - a. They fight and build arm-in-arm.
 - b. They confess and repent of their sin.
 - c. They rejoice in restored community and right worship.
 - d. They keep walking faithfully. → **Wouldn't it be great if this was the end of the story? → Graciously, and thankfully it isn't.**
 - vi. The reality is that the pattern we see in chapter 13 for them is the very same pattern that we experience in our lives.
 1. **Reflect: How have you seen this pattern in your life?**
 - a. Again, if we're all honest, we've all experienced this.
 - b. A word of wisdom: **Spiritual growth is generally better gauged by the quality of what passes as normal than by the fleeting moments of particular uplift.²**
- d. **What was the source of their good start? → God's Word. (v.3)**
- i. The Word of God has been the source of their reformation from the beginning.
 1. 8:1-3 → Ezra reads the law, and it convicts the people.
 - a. **And all the people gathered as one man into the square before the Water Gate. And they told Ezra the scribe to bring the Book of the Law of Moses that the LORD had commanded Israel. ² So Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could understand what they heard, on the first day of the seventh month. ³ And he read from it facing the square before the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand. And the ears of all the people were attentive to the Book of the Law.**
 2. 8:18 → They dedicate themselves to the reading of the Scriptures.
 - a. **¹⁸ And day by day, from the first day to the last day, he read from the Book of the Law of God.**

¹ Mason, Eric. *Nehemiah For You: Strength to Build for God (God's Word For You)* (p. 174). The Good Book Company. Kindle Edition.

² H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, vol. 16, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1985), 389.

3. 9:3 → They read Scriptures as they fast, confess, and worship God.
 - a. ³ **And they stood up in their place and read from the Book of the Law of the LORD their God for a quarter of the day; for another quarter of it they made confession and worshiped the LORD their God.**
4. 10:29 → The Scriptures are the source for their covenant commitment.
 - a. ²⁹ **join with their brothers, their nobles, and enter into a curse and an oath to walk in God's Law that was given by Moses the servant of God, and to observe and do all the commandments of the LORD our Lord and his rules and his statutes.**
5. 13:1 → The Scriptures clarify how they are to live. I.e., Resets their worldview.
 - a. **On that day they read from the Book of Moses in the hearing of the people.**
- ii. **What is happening in verse 3? → Are they becoming a country club / exclusivist community where only those with the right credentials can belong? → No**
 1. **God is worried about spiritual influence. → I.e., The Solomon principle.**
 2. This is about committing to God's precepts and prescriptions. → Remember identity saturation?
 - a. If I belong to God, I am to honor and glorify God in all that I do.
 - b. When I pursue God's glory with my life, I will find my greatest good.
 - i. This is what's happening in v. 3.
 3. **A faith that is their own → It may therefore be that כל-ערב "all who were of mixed descent" refers narrowly to the children of a mixed marriage, hence "all who were of mixed descent," before they had become of age to decide which parent's religion they were going to follow for themselves.³**
 4. This removal of foreigners should not be viewed as racial exclusivism. **As always, foreigners could become part of Israel by conversion (Ezra 6:21; Ruth 1:16–17).**
 - a. **God is always most concerned about spiritual influence.** He wanted his people to have families and a legacy that passed on kingdom commitment and ethics.⁴
- e. They had a really good start. → I.e., They were on a spiritual high, but soon they would flame out, and eventually long-standing sins would make their way back in.
 - i. What caused them to flounder and eventually fall back into habitual sin?
 1. The same things that you and I experience.
 - a. A lack of urgency.
 - b. A lack of accountability.
 - c. Mixed motives.

2. Mixed Motives

- a. Verse 4 is a pivot point in the narrative of the passage. → Nehemiah has left, and things start to drift.
 - i. **Once again, after the editorial interlude of 12:44–13:3, Nehemiah speaks in the first person, in as hard-hitting and colorful a passage as any in the book.**
 1. **After twelve years as governor (445–433), he had returned to the emperor; then 'after some time' (verse 6) he obtained permission to go back to Jerusalem.**

³ H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, vol. 16, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1985), 385–386.

⁴ Mason, Eric. *Nehemiah For You: Strength to Build for God (God's Word For You)* (p. 181). The Good Book Company. Kindle Edition.

2. If on his first visit he had been a whirlwind, on **his second, he was all fire and earthquake** to a city that had settled down in his absence to a comfortable compromise with the Gentile world.⁵
- ii. What is happening here?
 1. Nehemiah had gone back to serve the king. I.e., He had to go back to his day job.
 - a. How long was he gone? → We're not quite sure exactly.
 - i. We have already noted Eliashib's action as suggesting the latter, while Arsames' absence from Egypt for some three years (cf. A.D. and *AramP* 30) provides an apt parallel for the former. Again, for how long had Nehemiah been away? Despite various guesses, there is simply no evidence by which to determine the issue.⁶
 - b. What is clear is that everyone in Jerusalem didn't expect him to come back any time soon.**
 - i. **Here we would add that Nehemiah's need to "ask permission" to return suggests that such a second visit was not originally contemplated**, and this squares well with Eliashib's activity.⁷
 2. Eliashib seeks to gain favor with a local power broker and allows Tobiah to live in the Temple.
 3. The people return to working (selling and trading) on the Sabbath.
 4. They went back to the forbidden practices of intermarriage.
 - a. **Again, this is not a racial or ethnic rule. This is a rule about spiritual influence and the protection of children.**
- b. The real-life challenges that the people faced.**
 - i. v. 7 – Tobiah moves into the Temple.
 - ii. vv. 15 & 16 – The Sabbath is being disregarded.
 - iii. vv. 23-24 – They are offering their children in mixed religious marriages.
 - iv. vv. 28-29 – Sanballat tries one final coup to oust Nehemiah and his reforms forever.
 1. We could very easily pull the rug out from under them.
- c. If we are honest, this is more than just a blatant rebellion. It is more complicated than that. → This can be an easy way out of introspective reflection.
 - i. **These are situational utilitarian ethics. → Sure, they may not be the best choices, but they are doing the best with what they have. Right?**
 - 1. How many of us have justified sin the same way?**
 2. We know that the action(s) we are taking really don't honor God nor do they fit with the prescriptions of Scripture, but we're in between a rock and a hard place. What else are we to do?
 3. Nehemiah would tell us, honor God by following his commands as they are not as they best "fit" the moment.
 - ii. **In the larger passage, the people have mixed motives because their leaders have mixed motives.**
 1. They want to honor God.
 2. They also feel the very real pressures of this life and the needs of their family or community.

⁵ Derek Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 12, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, 141.

⁶ H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, vol. 16, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1985), 386–387.

⁷ H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, vol. 16, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1985), 387.

d. Gaining favor → Mixed motives at best.

- i. Again, Nehemiah is gone, and no one expected him back anytime soon. But, you know who is still around? → The opposition: Tobiah and Sanballat.

ii. Tobiah wanted control and influence. → Eliashib was happy to help.

1. For Tobiah, the room no doubt served as a base from which he could begin to develop again those contacts which he already had (cf. 6:17–19) and so to foster a more “liberal” and “open-minded” policy that would integrate Judah into the wider network of Levantine provinces.⁸
2. **Remember the contributions that were promised at the end of Nehemiah 10 and began to be made in 12:44? All that was stored in a chamber in the temple. This was a small warehouse where they stored all of the ministry resources for the Levites and the leaders, so that they had what they needed to do what God had called them to do.**
3. And Eliashib was in charge of this chamber. But Nehemiah went away, and as soon as he did, Eliashib went in there, took all of the resources out, and then gave the chamber to Tobiah as an apartment inside the temple of God.
4. Why does this matter? First of all, Tobiah was an Ammonite (2:10). Note the connection with the previous verses (13:1-3)! He was not even supposed to be in the temple at all. Second, we know that he was a nonbeliever. He did not like the people of God.⁹

e. How serious was God really?

- i. This is the big question we must answer when utilitarian and situational ethics creep up on us.
 1. Let’s make sure we define our terms:
 - a. **Utilitarianism** - A theory of moral reasoning within teleological ethics that looks to the principle of utility, that is, the degree to which an act is helpful or harmful in the world as a whole, to determine the rightness or wrongness of an act.¹⁰ I.e., “The ends justify the means.”
 - b. **Situationalism** - Situation ethics teaches that in any given situation, the moral agent must seek to discern what in that circumstance would be the most loving course of action and then act accordingly.¹¹
 2. Are we determining what is perceived to be “most loving” or the “best” outcome, or are we allowing God’s Word to establish those realities for us?
 - a. **As Christians, our foundational authority is the Word of God.**
- ii. **How do we take God’s commands seriously and walk through the complicated reality of this life?** → Again, we could dismiss their situation or we could step into it.
 1. Dr. Alan Branch suggests that Christians are not to confuse solutions with problems. He notes:
 - a. **Resist the temptation to rush to a solution. When problems are confused with solutions, it can lead to a premature advocacy of an inadequate solution and premature advocacy of a preferred course of action.** When this

⁸ H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, vol. 16, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1985), 386.

⁹ Mason, Eric. *Nehemiah For You: Strength to Build for God (God’s Word For You)* (pp. 181-182). The Good Book Company..

¹⁰ Stanley J. Grenz and Jay T. Smith, *Pocket Dictionary of Ethics*, The IVP Pocket Reference Series (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 124.

¹¹ Stanley J. Grenz and Jay T. Smith, *Pocket Dictionary of Ethics*, The IVP Pocket Reference Series (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 109.

happens, we develop ownership in the solution we have advocated. When the solution does not work out, we may engage in face-saving measures to protect our own reputation instead of working on the right solution to a vexing problem.¹²

- b. I.e., Ethic dilemmas are complex and we should not treat them like they have simple solutions.

2. **Apply a form of deontological hierarchicalism¹³ -**

- a. Deontological ethics – These are ethics that are not primarily concerned with the consequences or outcomes of an action (like utilitarianism and situationism). Instead, it is primarily concerned that the ethical action is governed by a rule.

- i. **For a Christian, those rules are always the prescriptions of God.**

- b. Hierarchical ethics - declares that actions are to be governed by a multiplicity of rules that form a hierarchy or a scale of priority, with the result that a “lower” rule can be suspended in a situation in which it comes into conflict with a “higher” rule.¹⁴

- i. I.e., There are prima facie (first order) rules.

- c. Example: Rahab and the spies. (Jos. 2) → This is a common ethical question.
 - i. Rahab lies and hides the spies to preserve their lives.
 - ii. Is lying wrong? Yes. (Exod. 20:16)
 - iii. What’s the prima facie duty? To preserve life.
 - iv. Rahab decides that it is better to lie and preserve the life of the spies because of the mission they were on from God.

iii. **Can Bible-believing Christians disagree on this? Yes.**

1. **We need to treat difficult problems with an honest amount of humility.**

- a. **Humility allows us to disagree better so that we can honor each other and God.**

2. Some questions to help us to get at why we disagree:¹⁵

- a. Are there cultural differences leading to these different opinions?
- b. Are sincere people overlooking important Bible principles?
- c. Can I make this choice with a clear conscience?
- d. Are there specific patterns of behavior in my own life that should be considered in this opinion?
- e. How will my decision affect my family, my church, and my witness to non-Christian friends?
- f. Am I lying to myself about any aspect of this dilemma?

- f. The reality for the people in chapter 13 is that they faced real external pressures, and if we are willing to step into their reality with humility, we will see the very same pattern emerge in our lives.
 - i. We are a people of good intentions that live in patterns of rebellion and praise.

3. Patterns of Rebellion & Praise

¹² Dr. J. Alan Branch, *Christian Ethical Decision Making* (2015), p.8.

¹³ See *Ethics for a Brave New World*, Paul and John Feinberd (2nd Edition) for a detailed examination of this concept.

¹⁴ Stanley J. Grenz and Jay T. Smith, *Pocket Dictionary of Ethics*, The IVP Pocket Reference Series (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 51.

¹⁵ Dr. J. Alan Branch, *Christian Ethical Decision Making* (2015), p.10.

- a. **The larger point of the passage → joy is possible through faithful pursuit of God, even when our faithfulness isn't perfect.**
 - i. **Rather than leave the reader in a fairytale ending of unsullied celebration in the temple courts, they press on to speak of how that joy could be maintained in the longer term.**¹⁶
 - ii. Again, we are left with an ending that reminds us of a reality we all know is true, wish it wasn't, and yet have to confront. That is, faithfulness doesn't happen by accident.
 - iii. **Reminder** – The Bible doesn't give us heroes made in our own aspirational image. It pulls back the curtain on deeply flawed people, who live with mixed motives, struggle through habitual sin, and are ultimately met by a gracious and loving God.
 - 1. This is why the Cross is such good news.
 - 2. God knew that we would struggle and we could never pay the price our rescue demanded.
 - 3. So, he made a way to pay it for us through his Son, Jesus.
 - iv. **Examine – What patterns of rebellion and praise are present in my life?**
 - 1. What habitual sins / generational sins or patterns do I struggle against?
 - 2. How do I justify my sin through situational or utilitarian ethical reasoning?
 - 3. What mixed motives do I bring in my relationship with God?
- b. **God's grace through sending Nehemiah. (v. 25)**
 - i. At the beginning of this series, we asked the question – “Do I have a Nehemiah in my life?”
 - 1. This is an important question because we need the voices of mature, Godly people in our lives.
 - 2. It is a myth that we will never not need those voices. → Again, consider the warning about Solomon (v.26).
 - a. One commenter put it like this - **To me, one of the most haunting verses in the Bible is 1 Kings 11:4. “When Solomon was old his wives turned away his heart after other gods, and his heart was not wholly true to the Lord his God, as was the heart of David his father.”** This is my greatest fear, and it's Nehemiah's too.¹⁷
 - b. Solomon never outgrew the need for wise counsel. Instead, his downfall was the action of not heeding wise counsel.
 - ii. This is an uncomfortable verse – Why does Nehemiah resort to such tactics?
 - 1. It was a relevant way to get through to the people.
 - a. It reflected the seriousness of the violations.
 - 2. **The measures of verse 25 were not simply an angry man's blind reactions. / *contended* uses the same verb as 'I remonstrated' in verses 11 and 17, i.e. the word for arguing one's case against an opponent (arguments from history and from a stronger instance are used in verse 26).**
 - 3. **The rest of Nehemiah's onslaught used the leverage of divine sanctions (the curse; the promise under oath), physical pain, shame (cf. 2 Sam. 10:5; Isa. 50:6 with the plucking of the hair) and an appeal to loyalty (27).**

¹⁶ H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, vol. 16, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1985), 389.

¹⁷ Mason, Eric. *Nehemiah For You: Strength to Build for God* (God's Word For You) (pp. 190-191). The Good Book Company. Kindle Edition.

- a. It was a fearsome attack, but a crucial issue.¹⁸
 - b. If they were going to live faithfully, they would have to do so without Nehemiah. And, that meant they would have to take seriously the commands of God without his accountability.
- c. **Nehemiah's pleading prayer: "Remember me..."**
 - i. Three times in this passage Nehemiah pleads with God to remember him. (v. 14, 22, & 31)
 - 1. The very act and utterance of this prayer is a sign that Nehemiah sees God as gracious, fair, and just.
 - 2. v.22 – Nehemiah appeals to God's steadfast love. → The long-loyal love of God (*hesed*). This is the same love that Nehemiah appealed to God in the beginning of the book.
 - 3. Nehemiah knows (with conviction) that God is faithful and loyal and will always be faithful and loyal.
 - ii. God will do more through Nehemiah's faithfulness than Nehemiah would ever imagine possible.
 - 1. ***I cleansed ... I established ... I provided ... makes a far less brilliant epitaph than Caesar's boast, 'I came, I saw, I conquered.'* But Nehemiah's work was the making of his people. His reforming zeal, partnered by the educative thoroughness of Ezra, gave to post-exilic Israel a virility and clarity of faith which it never wholly lost.** This would have been the memorial most to his liking. This, indeed, now crowned by the lasting benefits of his book to the Christian church, surely constitutes a major part of heaven's answer to his repeated prayer (on which, see again on verse 14): *Remember me, O my God, for good.*¹⁹
 - 2. Nehemiah is a leader facing discouragement and doubt, trusting that God will do something significant through his limited efforts and seemingly mixed results.
 - 3. They (Israel) will never rule themselves again.
 - a. After the Persians will be the Greeks
 - b. After the Greeks will be the Romans
 - c. But, over those 400 years, there will be a faithful remnant that will persist because of the reforms of Nehemiah.
 - 4. **Out of that faithful remnant, a poor Jewish couple will become the earthly parents to the Son of God, Emmanuel, the long-promised Messiah.**
 - a. Nehemiah's efforts are not in vain.
 - b. God would use Nehemiah's faithfulness in ways that he could only have dreamed about.
 - c. What if the same was true for you and me? → What if the small, quiet, and seemingly insignificant moments of faithfulness God used on a larger eternal scale for his glory and the good of people we may never meet?
 - i. How does that change my perspective on living faithfully?
 - ii. Let us continue to pray, "Lord, find me faithful."

¹⁸ Derek Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 12, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 144–145.

¹⁹ Derek Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 12, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 146.