

worship that does not cost me anything, is not wor-ship at all.

This passage is a call for us to put first things first in our love life, our work life and also **our church life**. The people were putting first things first in their worship. The temple worship in Nehemiah’s day was being restored, but a system needed to support the ongoing worship ministry. In Nehemiah’s day God lived in the physical temple. When Christ died on the cross, the veil in the temple ripped in two from top to bottom. God now chooses to dwell within the hearts of believers. I Corinthians 6:19 tells us that believers are now the temple of the Holy Spirit. “Your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own. For you have been bought with a price therefore glorify God in your body. God inside us? Sobering. One time Augustine was tempted to dive back into his old sinful life and was stopped with his thought, “Thou fool, do you not know that you are carrying God around with thee? The house of God is no longer a building but where the people of God are. That is why it would be more accurate to say “This is where Northview Church meets.” This building is not the Northview church.

This section from verses 32-39 is summed up in verse 39 we commit to doing all these things so “we will not neglect the house of our God.” In verse 32 they agreed to a temple tax of 1/3 a shekel to provide for the needs of the temple service. It was a reminder that God has redeemed them and they are bought with a price to be set free. (V.34) talks about the way they chose families for wood gathering duties to people. It was a very practical thing that every family could be part of. The priests couldn’t sacrifice unless they had fire. They couldn’t build a fire unless they had wood. So somebody had to go and get the wood? It wasn’t a flashy job, but it needed to be done for ministry to flourish. All these families signed up knowing this was their day to bring in the wood in order to keep the fires burning. Kids would say, “Dad, It’s the third Friday of the month. It’s our day to serve the temple, let’s go gather wood!” They began to think more of their responsibilities than their rights. I think of the many behind the scenes service that happens every week to keep the ministry of our church fires burning. There are people who come and sharpen pencils and straighten up the seats and fill in communication cards, some fill communion trays, others stock all the coffee and drink and food items that lubricate conversation. Our greeters and guardians serve behind the scenes. Some change filters and light bulbs and clean toilets. Others love on our kids down the hall. What “wood gathering” task might you sign up to serve the people of God. Am I serving? Or have I been neglecting the house of

God?

In verses 35-37 it tells of their commitment to bring the first and best of what they have. The first of their fruit crops, flocks and sons and contributions. By doing this they recognize that God is the owner of everything, and symbolically represents He owns it all anyway. We are not our own but we are bought with a price. We bring the best affirming that God is the source of all good things and worthy of our best. While the New Testament no longer requires or limits our giving to a 10th of what we earn or a tithe (V.37) the principle still is valid. We are called to give “accordingly as God has prospered I Cor. 16:2. Our giving is a response of gratitude to God. As my heart is grateful for all that He has done for me, changed my life, stood by me in tough times, blessed me...I want to give to affirm my love and gratefulness in a way that isn’t under compulsion, but cheerfully, as God loves a cheerful giver. For where my treasure is, there is where my heart will be as well.

This morning’s passage is intensely practical and convicting. Am I putting first things in my love life? My work life? My worship life? Perhaps God is calling you to write down some of the goals, the priorities He wants you to pursue in these areas. As believers, we can only do these things because the Spirit of God lives in us. Is there something at home that needs a perspective sharpening? At work? At church? What is God calling you to focus on. It may mean getting rid of something so you can fully pour yourself into this. Don’t let your goals, priorities float away, nail them down. Before God write them down and then do them. As you align your life with Gods truth the adventure begins and you will begin to grow spiritually.

“First Things First”

Sermon Series: Nehemiah



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Early in the conflict with Vietnam, a fighter pilot named Howard Rutledge was shot down. Later, after his release, he wrote about the years of torture and misery while in the hands of his captors. Let me read an excerpt from his book entitled, *In the Presence of Mine Enemies*. Rutledge writes how life in a Vietnam prison became a perspective sharpening experience.

During those longer periods of enforced reflection, it became so much easier to separate the important from the trivial, the worthwhile from the waste. For example, in the past, I usually worked or played hard on Sundays and had not time for church. For years Phyllis had encouraged me to join the family at church. She never nagged or scolded – she just kept hoping. But I was too busy, too preoccupied to spend one or two short hours a week thinking about the really important things. Now the sights and sounds and smells of death were all around me. My hunger for spiritual food soon outdid my hunger for a steak. Now I wanted to know about that part of me that will never die. Now I wanted to talk about God and Christ and the church. But in Heartbreak hotel solitary confinement, there was no pastor, no Sunday School teacher, no Bible, no community of believers to guide and sustain me. I had completely neglected the spiritual dimension of my life. It took me prison to show me how empty life is without God.

Is it going to take some sort of heartbreak hotel to cause a perspective sharpening stare at priorities? Have you recently felt that your focus could use some sharpening? Have you begun to notice your spiritual life is drier than usual? Maybe your good intentions have been pushed aside by the weekly demands and busyness is squeezing out the most important. Rarely, is our priority problem a matter of straining out the bad from the good. The challenge lies in discerning the best out of the good. What will motivate us to put the first things first? How can we sharpen our priorities without having the benefit of a North Vietnamese torture chamber? Fortunately, we have the Bible and it is given by God, designed to realign our focus. Those who play golf know how important alignment is. If I am just a little bit out of aim in golf the farther I hit that ball the farther astray it goes. I need a golf pro, a coach, who will observe my stance, my life’s goals, my life target, and let me know what I am aiming for is where I need to go. It’s God’s word that does that for us, and we who commit to obeying God’s word will discover it is far less painful in the long run than Hanoi Hilton prison.

Turn with me in your Bibles to Nehemiah chapter 10. Actually, this section starts in verse 38

of chapter 9. “Now, because of all this, we are making an agreement in writing...signed by the names of our leaders, Levites and priests”. What happened in chapters 8 and 9? During the festivals in the 7th month the people gathered to hear God’s Word read and explained to them. They read about a festival, the feast of booths that had been ignored for years and decided, we need to obey God and celebrate that feast. It sounds a bit ridiculous to build little temporary houses out of branches and sleep outside under them, but if God wants us to do that so we will remember Him and how He provided for our people in the desert escape from Egypt, there must be some benefits we can’t see right now for doing that. We will obey even when it’s not convenient for us. Spiritual growth came when they heard God’s Word explained, confessed they weren’t following God’s truth and they stepped forward to live out God’s truth. In obeying, the joy of the Lord increased along with the clarity of who God is and what He had done for them. It was like they had a week-long retreat to hear God’s Word and get more connected with God and each other. They didn’t want this to be just a week long emotional high and then go back to the way they had lived before. They knew how easy it would be to forget all they had learned once the retreat was finished and the janitors had swept up all the trash leftover at the Watergate plaza. The people wanted this time to be the start of a change. Not just empty words. They wanted their priorities, promises to follow God nailed down.

That is why in verse 38 they say, “We are making an agreement in writing.” We are going to sign our names to it. We want to be held accountable to each other and to God. With His help we desire to live in this way. Now back in the Old Testament, they actually made an oath that included curses against them should they fail to live up to their oath. Often they would invoke the name of a king, or god, or higher power as One who would be the enforcer of the oath. So to violate the Lord’s name would be to violate the Lord Himself. In the New Testament Jesus established a new standard based on one’s integrity. Let your yes be yes and your no be no. Obedience is to be based on love, a far stronger motivation than the fear that is underneath a written contract. And really our obedience doesn’t come because we make a written promise, but because we believe the promise of God and act on them. But that does not invalidate pledges, or written decisions made. We are fallen, weak humans that need things to help us remember. We need times where we write down our commitments to keep us focused and on track. So too these an-

cient believers saw the need to write down their priorities, exactly what they were going to do in response to understanding God's Word. They didn't want it to become fuzzy over time and float out of their minds. This might be similar to what we do when we get married. The climax of the ceremony is the exchange of vows committing publicly before all their friends to keep them accountable to their vows. These are the promises I pledge to keep. They seal it all with a kiss. People clap and they sign a legal agreement.

The nature of oaths may have changed since Nehemiah's times, but the level of commitment that God invites us into has not changed. It is still costly. At times his call to follow looks ridiculous and without a very sharp and high view of God we would not dare to commit. But when we do, the adventure begins. When my priorities revealed by my action demonstrate that God's purposes are greater than my purposes; When I clearly understand a truth from God's Word and I begin to align my life to that truth...spiritual growth begins to happen. My priorities, my focus begins to change and align with God's purposes and priorities. The ridiculous becomes curiously beautiful. Lasting commitment will transform and shape every aspect of our life. So that if anyone around us wants to know what direction we are heading, we are heading toward the truth found in God's word. Psalm 119:105, "Your Word is a light unto my feet and a lamp to my path."

So how can we practically put God first in various aspects of our life? The first 27 verses of chapter 10 list 84 names of people; 22 priests, 17 Levites, and 44 other leaders and heads of household who want to clearly spell out in writing, declaring their desire to follow God's truth. And in verses 28-39, it describes some of the areas where they committed to following God. As I read, notice first few verses are more general in their obedience to God then it affirms putting God first in their love life, homes, family, work life, business and finance and in their church life and worship. Read with me from Nehemiah 10:28-39.

Put first things first in my love life. Look at verse 30. "We will not give our daughters or our sons to intermarry with the foreign pagan people of the land surrounding Jerusalem. This has nothing to do with race or color, but everything to do with faith. Ruth and Rahab were wives from a foreign race but they were God-followers and even made it into the Hebrews 11 faith chapter. There may be cultural challenges to face, but people are free to marry outside of their race, but not outside of their faith. Children should not marry those who were not followers of God, as they can so easily have their affections drawn away from following God. (Solomon certainly discovered this to be true.) Marriages in Nehemiah's day were arranged between the parents. It was a family decision that bound two

families together. It was a relationship of shared values, attitudes, priorities. Holidays celebrated together. There was a binding, a closeness between families and that is why God said, "don't give your daughters or sons to those who aren't heading the same direction spiritually." It far too often results in spiritual compromise.

So the people responded. "Ok, God we won't let our kids intermarry with pagan families." That is fine for the young woman who is dating a follower of God, but what if your daughter is dating a foreign young man who is not interested in following God? I can imagine the conversation in their home when Dad comes home from signing this promise to follow God. "What? You can't be serious! I love this boy. He is more kind and respectful than all the other boys in our village. You want me to give him up?" Following God can be costly and may impact your love life. Just so you don't think this truth is only valid for the Old Testament believers, this principle is also repeated in the New Testament. II Corinthians 6:14-16 says, "Do not be bound together with unbelievers, for what partnership ...has light with darkness?"...how can there be unity and agreement? Now if you are already married to a non-believer God's Word says, to stay that way, don't divorce. Your presence will cover them with God's grace and your example may win them over see God's grace toward them. But if you are a believer who desires to follow God, marry, pursue those in marriage, date only those who share your heart for God. If you are a 13-year-old girl when you go home today write in your Bible, in your journal. Nail this one down - "God, regardless of how strongly I am attracted to another, I promise to only marry a man who loves Jesus Christ and has placed his trust in Him for salvation." 15-year-old boys, you can do the same. "But have you seen some of those girls. They are so crazy beautiful. Yes. I have seen them. Write it down in your Bible, journal, a piece of paper. "I will not pursue romantically, lead on, or marry a girl who does not love Jesus." Before the hormones start flowing, decide your priorities. This does not mean we culturally isolate ourselves, refuse to speak with or be friendly with others. Our conversations may open up the opportunity for them to know Jesus. But we maintain a boundary at romance. It means we stay distinctly unique with a different set of priorities, focus.

Are there some other relational priorities, goals you need to nail down in writing before God? Have you and your spouse determined the goals of your family, your home this year? What will you do to best engrain God's truth in your children? How will you discipline? What areas will you be involved in church, in serving, in community? What creative things will you do to enhance relationships with your kids this summer? Are you starting a new school this fall? Going away to college? Put this one

down. Get connected with a church, a gathering of believers. If you don't, you have a far greater chance of getting picked off. Is there a new baby on the way? A new marriage? A new job. Be intentional and write down your priorities and goals as they align with God's truth. Priorities and goals that are not nailed down tend to get fuzzy over time. Were human. We forget. Share them with each other, your roommates, friends, family. Write them down.

Howard Hendricks wife, Jeanne encouraged us through a mutual friend, Linda Reed, to start an anniversary tradition. Erin and I are looking forward to celebrating our 31st anniversary, just two weeks away. We try to get a night away and usually go out to a nice restaurant. During the leisurely dining time we take out a sheet of paper that gives space for writing down the highlights of the past year. Erin's then mine. We write down how God has miraculously provided His faithfulness. Then we also write down our goals for next year. We spend time praying about it. I can help Erin with her goals and she can encourage me with mine. It's fun to look back over the 30 years, and read what we've written on our anniversary sheets to see how God has worked in us. Sometimes we accomplish our goals and other times not so well. We always are surprised at how much we have forgotten and would be lost to us unless we had written it down. Great application for you starting a new life together, and it's never too late to begin this year. I guarantee if you do this faithfully it will become one of your most treasured notebooks on your shelf. Written plans keep us from just shooting at the hip. Written plans confirm right priorities. If we fail to set goals, focus, priorities from God's truth, be assured they will be set by others. Put first things first in your love life, your relationships and your home.

Also **put first things first in your work life**, your business dealings, finances, your money. Read verse 31. "We commit to not buying or selling on the Sabbath and will not work our crops or exact debts on the 7th year. That is a radical commitment, costly and inconvenient to allow God to have a say in the way they conduct their business. They do this regardless of their profit margin needed to compete in the marketplace and maintain a viable business. When sundown comes on the Sabbath, they put out the "closed" sign, shut their doors and went home to rest with their family. When the 7th year came, the farmers agreed to take the year off and rest their fields in fallow. In the 7th year they released their brothers from debt payments.

We are no longer under these stipulations of Old Testament Law, but there is still a principle for us to learn. Putting first things first means we take our direction from God and not culture. We don't cave in to the world's ethics. We don't allow the world's values to control us. That means we are honest in our business dealings. Other may play by

a different set of rules, but not us. We are honest even to our hurt. We provide the service promised, the goods promised or else we make it right. We work for the hours that we are paid for. We can be trusted to not pad expense accounts. We don't take those things that don't belong to us. Keith Millar writes, "It never ceases to amaze me that we Christians have developed a kind of selective vision which allows us to be deeply and sincerely involved in worship and church activities and yet almost totally pagan in the day in, day out guts of our business and work lives, never realizing it." How are we doing at putting God's way first in our work life?

How about rest? God gave the Sabbath day as a gift to people who keep their lives so jam-packed living on the edge of frayed and burned out. Anybody there? We complain about our busyness, but it makes us feel important. I wonder if it's a way of covering up our emptiness and sense of purposelessness? Rest doesn't look productive. Rest doesn't get us what we want. Even in our vacations we pack our schedules to exhaustion. We push 5 miles an hour past the speed limit so we can get to our "vacation" stop. We don't even want to brake for a rest stop fearing we will get behind the 10 semi's we spent the last hour on the road trying to pass. God is saying today, "Hey, I love you guys. I have provided for you something to recharge and refresh and refocus your life and bring encouragement for your soul. Take one day a week out of your crazy crammed week and use it to intentionally rest, refocus and worship me. If you do this I will make it worth your while. God says, trust me. God even modeled it for us, patterning it after Creation. Exodus 20:11. If God rested after His work, we need to do the same. Deuteronomy 5:15 ties Sabbath rest to redemption. Remember you are no longer a slave like back in Egypt. You have freedom, so live like it! Shout it out by your actions, "I rest because I am no longer a slave."

The New Testament does not repeat the command to keep the Sabbath, in fact observance of the Sabbath had become so legalistic and distorted that Jesus even said things like He is Lord over the Sabbath. The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. The Sabbath in the Old Testament was on Saturday. We now celebrate and worship together on Sunday as what the Bible calls the "Lord's day", but the principle of rest is still there for us. Worship is still about God and not us. We still need that day of rejoicing, rest, refocus, worship when we declare that He takes priority in our life. When we take a day of rest it affirms life is more about pursuing Him than our own goals. We think of His purposes rather than our preferences. It all may be quite costly to take one day off in seven. It may be Saturday or Sunday for you. Mine is Monday. But do you have a day where you can stop doing the things you normally do and rest? It will cost me to be a worshipper in my work life, but