

## Sermon – Nehemiah 13:1-9, 15-31

### “Will we follow?”

**III** – Someone once said: “Behind every successful man there is a surprised woman.” As I was reading Nehemiah 13, I thought about success and failure. I wanted to apply the passage to my own life, so I went on the internet to see if I was a “success”.

I did two “success questionnaires”: And some of the results were a little unexpected!  
Test 1: “Outlook is pretty good, your chances of success are above average! Estimated future income: \$60168 (US!), most likely to have 2 children. Most likely to live to the age of 69.”  
Test 2: “You are living at 45% of your potential. Time for a life makeover. Consider hiring a coach. You will be more successful than 2% of other people.”

Now, I know what you’re thinking. Why does Bruce spend so much time on the internet?” But you might also be thinking: “Why on earth would you think of success when you read Nehemiah 13?!?”

Here we are not only at the end of Nehemiah, but at the end of the Old Testament, time-wise. And we’re finishing with a story of the complete failure of God’s people!

It’s about 400B.C. Israel has returned from slavery to Jerusalem to rebuild their city. They build the temple. They build the city wall. They build houses. They find the Word of God and they rebuild their community around God’s law. They confess their sin as a nation. They repent of their sin. And then in chapters 10-12, they sign a covenant to say that they will continue to follow God’s laws. This was a new community – a community set apart for God. And, in 12:43,  
*“The sound of rejoicing in Jerusalem could be heard far away.”*

**III** – Heather and I went to a rock concert on Friday night to see U2. They’re an Irish band if you’ve never heard of them before! On the way in, along with 70,000 other people, I was frisked! They padded me down! (Not Heather! Just me!) And they were a little rough actually! Then we went inside, and there were sniffer dogs sniffing me for drugs! They didn’t find any. These people, and their dogs, were there to make sure people weren’t breaking the law. They were vigilant. Uncompromising.

While Nehemiah was in town as the governor, he did this. He was vigilant. He called Israel back to God’s word and laws. But then he went away to Babylon for a little while, and things started to change. Israel goes from being a model nation to being a **complete mess**. Listen to what happened:

1. Verse 5 – They gave Tobiah, an enemy of God’s people, the guy who tried to stop them building the wall, an office inside God’s temple! They have God’s enemy sitting in God’s house!
2. Verse 10 – All the priests have returned to the fields to work, because the people have **stopped giving their tithes and offerings** to support the temple and the priests.
3. Verse 15 – Everyone’s ignoring the Sabbath! They’re working and trading on the day they were supposed to set aside for God each week. Basically, they’ve all stopped going to church and giving!
4. Verse 23 – The big one. Men from Judah were marrying women from Ashdod, Ammon and Moab. They were marrying people from enemy nations, AND they were marrying people who worshipped other gods! Nehemiah reminds them about King Solomon. A great King, until he married 700 wives and had 300 porcupines / concubines from these nations. Women who

worshipped other gods. And guess what Solomon ended up doing? He ended up worshipping their gods as well! This is the problem. They're marrying people who worship other gods and *they're* worshipping those gods too! And in verse 28, even one of the high priests grandsons marries an outsider who worships other gods!

You see, Israel are doing an offensive thing. They are set apart to serve God, they made a covenant, and they've broken every part of it! With the temple, with the priests, with the Sabbath, and even with their marriages.

And the marriage thing makes Nehemiah snap! Verse 25: *"I rebuked them and called down curses on them. I beat some of the men and pulled out their hair."* This is governor Schwarzenegger! Nehemiah is a construction site manager. Probably not a small guy by the sound of these verses. And he was furious. He beat them and pulled their hair out! Now hair pulling certainly wasn't one of the pastoral discipline methods I was taught at college! But the intensity of this reminds me of another scene in the New Testament, where God's temple was being used by money changers – a market place, instead of a place of prayer. And Jesus walks into the temple and turns over the tables. He responded dramatically to a drastic situation. It was offensive to see this among God's people.

Here is a community who were SET APART FOR GOD, and they were falling apart because they were COMPROMISING their faith. It was an offensive thing to Nehemiah. And it was an offensive thing to God.

Let me talk about two ways I see that we may compromise when it comes to our *own* faith.

### **1. The first is backsliding.**

**III** – Do you know the story of the frog in the pot? If you put a frog into boiling water, he'll try and jump straight out. But if you put him into nice cool water, and slowly bring it to the boil, the frog won't realise until it's too late. I don't know why you would want to boil a frog. But the point is this – it's often the slow changes in temperature, not the sudden ones, which slip by without us noticing.

Your time set aside for God gets a little shorter each week. More commitments. More things to juggle. Family, work. Prayer time gets shorter and less frequent. Bible reading is fitted in whenever you can. Coming to church becomes optional if you're feeling too tired or there's too much on next week. Your financial giving each week changes to cope with the interest rate rises on your mortgage, or with extra financial commitments.

Christianity is not about the things we **DO**. But when we start to backslide on these outward commitments, that's a sign that there's something not quite right with our faith commitment. When we hold back money or time from ministry, when our prayer life or Bible reading suffers, the *real* concern is that we're not trusting God with ALL that we have. Compromise begins with the small things and ends with the big things, like our faith.

What we see happen in Nehemiah 13 didn't happen overnight – but it did happen! Step by step. The temple, the priests, the Sabbath, their marriages. What are the first steps for you? Have you taken a step down? Have you compromised your commitment?

The second way of compromise is a little tougher to talk about.

### **2. Don't commit in the first place.**

If we never fully commit to God, we'll never really backslide!

I think this is the bigger danger for us, whether we follow Jesus or not. It's frightening to commit to things. It's easier to stay at a distance. But what *should* we be doing? How *should*

we be committing. **SCENE 1** –Imagine the scene – you’re walking down the street and pass a man begging for money. You ask yourself “Will he use it to buy drugs or alcohol?” You think “I’ve only got a \$10 bill in my wallet!” You look the other way as you pass by. It’s easier to stay at a distance than commit to being involved with a human being in need.

**SCENE 2** – You notice a person at church or work going through a difficult time. They’ve been away for a while, on and off. They seem pretty unhappy. Probably personal issues. Probably not something they want to talk to *you* about. Just say “Hi” and move on. It’s easier to stay at a distance than commit to being involved with a human being in need.

**SCENE 3** – Hanging on a cross. A crown of thorns on your head. Nails in your hands and feet. People laughing at you, spitting on you, cursing you. I wonder if Jesus, as he was being crucified, was thinking “I should have stayed at a distance.” “I shouldn’t have become so involved, so committed” to human beings in need.

If you are a follower of Jesus, he’s called you to commit to taking up *your* cross. The cross of life-giving self-sacrifice. Nothing less. If you’re *not* committed to Jesus, the cross was Jesus’ way of saying: “I love you, and I’m prepared to die for your sin, so you won’t have to.”

You may be backsliding at the moment. Or you may be finding it hard to commit some part of your life. Or you may not be prepared to commit to God at all. Wherever you stand with God today, remember that **we** are waiting for someone to return. Nehemiah returned to a fallen community, and he ripped their hair out. We’re waiting for someone a lot bigger than Nehemiah. What will JESUS see when he returns? Will he see commitment? Or will he see compromise? When he returns, there won’t be that chance for repentance like Nehemiah gave to Israel. There will just be judgement. The good news is that there is time *NOW* to repent. Whether you’re a backsliding Christian – and we all are at times, lots of times – or whether you’re failing to commit every part of your life to God, or if you simply haven’t committed to him at all, there is time *NOW*. There is time *NOW* to take away whatever distance stands between you and God.

**III** – I remember when Jonah took his first steps. One step. Fell over. Up again. Three steps. Fell over. Up again. 5 steps. Fell over. But he kept getting up. With a little help. Now, he’s running. Lots!

The book of Nehemiah is not about failure. It teaches us about success. Real success. Eternal success. Failure is when we say to God “I don’t *want* to get up. Success is turning to God when we fall, and saying “Help me get up.” I wonder sometimes if we forget how to ask God for help to get up again?

Isaiah 40:31 says: *“those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.”*

Let’s not forget how to ask for help. That will lead us to compromise. We’re called to commitment.  
Let’s pray.