

Slide 1

When I was at school paper and pens were really important pieces of equipment, not so much for helping us to learn but for making paper aeroplanes and shooting spit balls whenever the teacher left the room. They'd be going all over the place.

Some guys also lit the gas jets in the science labs to send flames across the room.

We thought it was great fun and we did it despite knowing we'd be in big trouble if we got caught. And even though we did get caught, we'd do it again and again.

This might just sound like the rebellious pranks of school kids but as we get older we still try to rebel against the rules in various ways.

For instance, for those of us with drivers licences we are models of good behaviour and promise when the examiner is with us for our driving test or the police are around but when they're out of site we soon decide its ok to talk on the mobile, speed or park where we want – we reckon that we can work out if such things are ok, they're only little breaches, not really breaking an important law. But these things can soon become regular bad habits of our driving. And if we get caught we can be quite indignant.

Slide 2

In our lives we keep doing things we shouldn't even though we know there are consequences.

We take what appear to be small deviations from what we should do and before long they become regular parts of our lives

For instance I have to confess to be being what I call a chipaholic –

I just love eating potato chips and despite being overweight and knowing I shouldn't, whenever chips are around I find myself eating them – firstly I eat those rolled up, doubled over ones _ I think they are the best, then well a couple more wont hurt. All they way through the packet I think I can stop and take control when I need to, but before long the packets empty and I've got another 60 odd grams of fat to deal with

– I'm unhealthier, ashamed but I'll do it all again another day , and again and again ...

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Why does all this happen?

Quite simply it reflects our rebellious nature and our desire for self control of our lives. We really don't like having to be obedient.

We can see it from the very beginning of time when Adam and Eve thought they could do what they liked and get away with it unnoticed - but they were observed and there were serious consequences.

We know the rules for our lives are good for us, but we keep trying to prove that we can shift the boundaries as we see fit

The devil knows us too and he wants to take advantage our nature because he too desires to be in control

But, as we know, it is God who is truly in control and there's the source of major conflict in our relationship with God.

To complete our study of the book of Nehemiah, today we are looking at Chapter 13 to see what this passage and others of the Bible have to help us in dealing with our nature and our relationship with God.

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Before looking at Ch13 lets just take stock of what we have heard so far in the Book of Nehemiah.

From Ch 1 to 12 we see a complete change in the way God's people live.

In the very beginning they had turned away from obeying God.

But God brings Nehemiah to the people as a great leader to turn them around through teaching, rebuking and encouraging, strengthened by his trust in God.

We see their city and their lives rebuilt and their faith renewed culminating in what we heard in last weeks sermon where the people dedicated in writing there lives, time, money & effort to God.

“all..now join.. and bind themselves with a curse and an oath to follow the Law of God given through Moses .. and to obey carefully all the commands, regulations and decrees of the Lord”

Ne 10:30

They committed to making God the first priority in their lives and they were celebrating in the joy this gave them.

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By making this commitment, Nehemiah's people were now on the path that God had laid down in the time of Moses and which we can read here in Deut

- **“O Israel, what does the Lord your God ask of you, but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart & with all your soul, & to observe the Lords commands & decrees ..for your own good”**
Deut 10:12/13
- **“Be careful to do what the Lord your God has commanded you: do not turn aside to the right or the left. Walk in the way that your Lord God has commanded you.”**

Deut 5:32/33

These are the requirements to which the Nehemiah's people signed up.

They now on track and promising to stay there.

With the mission seemingly achieved Nehemiah returns to Persia

Sometime afterwards though he returns and what does he find?

Slide 6

Well as we heard in the Bible reading...The people are off track again

They are doing exactly what they promised God they would not do?

They were misusing the temple, Offertories were not given, the Sabbath was desecrated and they were marrying non-Israelites:

- | | |
|-------------------------------------|------------|
| ■ Misuse of the Lords house | Ne13:5/7 |
| ■ Offertory not given | Ne13:10 |
| ■ The Sabbath Desecrated | Ne13:15/18 |
| ■ Intermarriage with non Israelites | Ne13:23 |

Why did this happen?

Like us, they showed their rebellious nature and desire to be in control, through perhaps a series of deliberate or subconscious acts over time, no doubt encouraged by the devil, they were brought off track

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But thanks to God's grace, Nehemiah returns and goes about putting them back on track again.

As we heard read earlier, through a series determined acts he re-establishes God's rule to the community;

Some of his actions were particularly vigorous - some of these are summarised on the slide above, he wastes no time and does not hold back.

From slide:

- Determined reinstatement of God's rule
 - Vigorously clears and purifies the temple v 8-9
 - Rebukes the officials, the nobles, the traders & people v 11,17,25
 - Appoints trustworthy stewards and guards v 11,13,19,22
 - Stands up to the enemy v 21
 - Punishes the people v 25
 - Purifies the "church" leadership and drives out undesirables v 22,28-30
 - Reinstates giving v12,31

We see in Nehemiah a good role model for leadership. Our Rector Bruce is so taken with him that beatings and hair pulling are likely to become a regular feature of our services.

By the end of the Book, Nehemiah has returned God's people to faithful obedience

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Does all of this sound a bit familiar?

A few years ago a New Zealand Band called Split Enz had a hit song called “History Never Repeats”

- it tells of a boy going to bed at night trying to convince himself that history won't repeat, having just lost his girlfriend he hopes that he will fall in love again but this time keep the girl, but he doesn't sound like he believes it, perhaps with good reason.

As we look back through the Old Testament we see that this process of people being away from God, being called to God, turning back & committing to God and then turning away again happens over and over.

This circle of event is summarised in Ch9 of Nehemiah and is one of the features of the confessions that generation after generation tend to make as they turn back to God and promise to stay there.

As we move forward in time to the New Testament the Jesus comes as the true leader for the first time and what does he find?

Like Nehemiah, when he first came to his people, he finds them off track, not being obedient to God's laws and decrees.

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So what does Jesus do?

Like Nehemiah, a strong leader, he goes about reforming the people by teaching, rebuking, cleansing & encouraging.

But importantly, differently from Nehemiah, he comes to fulfil the final part of God's plan, removing the need for further sacrifices and he spells out what following God's path involves & where it will take us.

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He explains that in order to love and obey God as he commanded, we must love and obey him
– he tells us the path to his father’s house is through him

–In John 14 Jesus tells us he is The Way the truth and the life And that we must follow him

So when we ask “Will we follow”? – we are asking “will we follow Jesus”

Like Nehemiah, he tells us he will be going away, which he did, and he also tells us he will be coming back again.

And he tells us in John 12:29 that he does all this so that we will be prepared for the judgement day – so that we will complete the journey to which we have been called.

But he emphasises that to get there we must follow him.

From the slide:

Jesus:

- Tells of God’s requirement for us to Love God with all our heart & soul, Love others as ourselves **Matt 22:37-40**
- Removes need for further sacrifice offerings
- Explains that to love & obey God we must love and obey him – he is The Way **Jn 14:4-6**
- “Follow Me ..You must follow me” **Jn 21:19-22**
- Goes away to prepare a place for us **Jn14:2-4**
- Promises to return, so that we can fulfill our journey **Jn 14:3,28 & Jn 12;29**

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So when Jesus returns what will he find – while his is away will we be obedient or will we turn off track?

The earlier song title from Split Enz is an abbreviation of a saying attributed to Mark Twain who said:

"It is not worthwhile to try to keep history from repeating itself, for man's character will always make the preventing of the repetitions impossible." **Mark Twain**

Mark Twain was reflecting on the nature of man and what history displays about us – we do not learn from our mistakes and change.

By studying the history of man's repeated rebellion against God as recorded in the Bible, we are given both warnings and encouragement.

The warning is that despite the promises we make to God, our character and the devil work hard to take us off course from fulfilling our calling.

But the important encouragement comes from seeing that no matter how far off track we go, God is willing to forgive us and take us back on track if we want to come.

At confirmation, we confess our sins, promise to God that we will love & obey him, and to love others and we're full of joy, just like God's people in Nehemiah's

But have we kept those promises we made, or are we also going off track like Nehemiah's people?

If you've been confirmed, perhaps you can remember others who were with you at the time – you might wonder how many of those people are still walking a straight path with God?

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I suggest that if we are honest with ourselves most of us tend to go off track & risk staying there.

So the issue for us is will we change, will we be different and stay obedient or will we keep trying to take control.

When I was being trained to coach and counsel staff at work I learned that you can only successfully change someone's behaviour if they recognise the need to change and embrace carrying out the things they need to do to change

- its no good just telling them to change and what needs to be done.
- Without them committing to the change they tend to keep going around in circles, getting nowhere.
- To get someone to change they have to have a mindset that says there's a problem, there's a solution and I am going to do it!

So if all I did was stop to talking now and suggest you go home and change (not your clothes but yourself), many would do nothing - I guess that's what happens after lots of sermons - We might think that there was a good message, well presented etc but we do not walk out the door and do anything different. We don't take it to heart & embrace it.And so history repeats.

So the first challenge for us all is to consider whether we are on track, following Jesus, or if we need to change..

In doing this we need to seriously and honestly consider whether our love and obedience of Jesus and love of one another is as he commanded or whether other things are getting priority in our lives or distracting us like:

Work

Money

Relationships

Desire for possessions

Slide13

So if we accept that we need to change then we need to work out what sort of things will keep us on track?

While some specifics are given in the Bible it also gives us general guidance about needing to do things that make God's role in our lives **prominent**.

Here is some guidance from the Old Testament:

- “Love the Lord our God with all your heart & with all your soul & with all your strength. These commandments I give you today are to be upon your hearts.

Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you walk along the road, when you lie down & when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hand & bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses & on your gates”.

Deut 6:4

I'm not sure if you think those things would work for you but you need to find the things that will.

Perhaps a fridge magnet that warns you to be alert but not alarmed with our Rector Bruce's phone number on it would be helpful.

SLIDE 14

Our Archbishop, Peter Jensen has warned us that our apathy to our faith is one of the biggest threats to us staying on track, so it's important that we do things that keep our faith life active.

“One of the greatest spiritual problems of our community is unwillingness to commit. Making Church a leisure time instead of a committed priority (personal and financial)”
Peter Jensen

With that in mind here are a few more ideas that might help us to stay on the path.

Probably the most important things we can do are to pray and read the Bible regularly.

Bruce has suggested we join him in the Bible in A Year program to help us all achieve this aim – if you think this would help you perhaps you could speak to him at the end of our service.

You might find tools like prayer journals or having have Christian friends study or pray with you helps them and you to stay on track,

Hang out with your Christian family – be involved in Church activities , come to the worship services, social events or working bees – there are plenty of opportunities.

Perhaps your first committed action after leaving here today should be to sit down, possibly with your family or a church friend, and work out what your more detailed actions will be – perhaps like Nehemiah's people you could commit your plan to writing and monitor your own or a friend's achievements.

I suggest this would be a far better use of pen and paper than what we were doing at school!

Slide 15

And finally call for help

While Jesus left us and has promised he will return he has not left us alone. He knew we would need help because this is not an easy journey, so he left the Counsellor, the Holy Spirit, with us to teach and encourage us – and because we are not alone don't think your disobedience goes unnoticed.

- “I will ask the father & he will give to you another counselor to be with you forever”

Jn 14:16

- “The Counselor, the Holy Spirit ,... will teach you all the things & will remind you of everything I have said to you”

Jn 14:26

- Don't think God won't know

- “For he lives with you & will be in you”

Jn 14:17

And you are part of a strong body, the Church – friends we are all called to be here for one another in love – seek encouragement and be encouraged by one another

Consider what tools and activities will help you stay on track and embrace them – remember our nature and that the little deviations we want to make to please ourselves and satisfy our desire to be in control can lead us quickly way off path - don't let history keep repeating.

Let's learn from the history in the Bible and our own mistakes and change!

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Remember that when Jesus returns, unlike when Nehemiah returned to his people, there will be no further chance to change path again.

Stay on track to fulfil the journey to which you have been called.

Follow Jesus!

Don't take the path to a dead end!

Amen