

BIBLE TEACHER'S GUIDE: NEHEMIAH--BECOMING A GODLY LEADER.

14. Signs of Spiritual Decay

But while all this was going on, I was not in Jerusalem, for in the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes king of Babylon I had returned to the king. Some time later I asked his permission and came back to Jerusalem. Here I learned about the evil thing Eliashib had done in providing Tobiah a room in the courts of the house of God. I was greatly displeased and threw all Tobiah's household goods out of the room. I gave orders to purify the rooms, and then I put back into them the equipment of the house of God, with the grain offerings and the incense...

Nehemiah 13:4-31

What are signs of spiritual decay in our lives or others and how should we confront it?

After seeing the revival that happened in Israel, we also see how prone they were to fall back into sin and compromise. Some have compared the spiritual life to walking upstream; if you are not fighting to move forward, then you are, by default, going backwards.

At this point in the final chapter of Nehemiah, Nehemiah returned to Persia for some unspecified amount of time.¹ Some commentators think his second term as governor began approximately nine years after he left.² While Nehemiah was gone, it is possible that Ezra had died "(in 13:13, Zadok is called 'the' scribe, perhaps indicating that Ezra no longer held that post)."³ When Nehemiah returned, Israel had reneged on the majority of its commitments to God, which they made in chapter 10.

This may seem like a surprise after all God had done for them and their seemingly genuine repentance; however, this not only happened with Israel, it commonly happens to us individually and corporately. If we are not fighting to move forward, then we are sliding backwards. It is for this reason that we must be tenacious in seeking to practice a holy life and also fighting for holiness in our churches. There is a continual inertia drawing us and others towards spiritual decay.

Certainly, we see this in our churches and Christian communities. Why are so many of our churches in disarray? Statistics say that around 75% of youth fall away from the faith in college and never return.⁴ Seventeen hundred pastors leave the ministry every month in America.⁵ We have churches making all kinds of moral compromises as they disregard Scripture. We are seeing a very rapid spiritual decay happening in the church.

As we consider Nehemiah 13, it can seem a little depressing after such a great revival. And, it also can be depressing as we consider the decline of Christianity happening in so many parts of the world; however, there is hope. We see hope in a man who was zealous for the Lord named Nehemiah.

Four times he prays for God to remember his works in this chapter. He is a man who wants to please God. Yes, there is hope for us individually and as a church as well. God still uses people like Nehemiah, people like John the Baptist, godly leaders who are zealous to turn communities and individuals back to God.

In this text, Nehemiah is a type of Christ. As Christ went into the temple, he pulled out a whip, turned over tables, and harshly rebuked the leaders of Israel. Scripture says of Christ that zeal for the house of God consumed him (John 2:17). Nehemiah was the same. He threw a man out of the temple who was defiling it, rebuked the leaders for their lack of faithfulness in giving, locked people out of the city who were abusing the Sabbath, and pulled out the hairs of those who married foreign women in order to turn them back to God. Nehemiah was a man consumed with seeing God's glory in Israel.

In the same way, God is calling for people in this generation to be zealous for personal holiness and also holiness in the church. He is looking to raise people who are consumed with zeal for the house of God (cf. 2 Chronicles 16:9).

In this text, we will consider common signs of spiritual decay not only in the church but in our spiritual lives. Godly leaders must be able to spiritually diagnose their people, their society, and even their own lives. They must be able to diagnose so they can participate in the restoration process. In this text, we will not only see common signs of spiritual decay but also steps to restoration—to restore our churches and our lives.

Big Question: What signs of spiritual decay do we see happening to Israel in Nehemiah 13; how does Nehemiah confront them, and how should we apply these truths as leaders to our spiritual lives and our ministries?

Compromised Leadership Is a Sign of Spiritual Decay

Before this, Eliashib the priest had been put in charge of the storerooms of the house of our God. He was closely associated with Tobiah, and he had provided him with a large room formerly used to store the grain offerings and incense and temple articles, and also the tithes of grain, new wine and oil prescribed for the Levites, singers and gatekeepers, as well as the contributions for the priests.

Nehemiah 13:4-5

In this text, Nehemiah introduces us to the compromise that was happening within Israel. They broke all the commitments they made in chapter 10. It is no surprise that when he started to list their sins, he started with the leadership of Israel. The High Priest was disrespecting God by allowing an Ammonite official into the temple (cf. Neh 2:10, 13:1). He had given Tobiah, who had previously persecuted the Jews, a room in God's house.

This is how moral compromise often begins in the people of God—it begins with the leadership. The leadership starts to compromise by disobedience and disregard for the teachings of the Word of God, which eventually affects all the people. Have we not seen the effects of bad leadership throughout Scripture?

Interpretation Question: In what ways have we seen the negative effects of bad leadership throughout Scripture?

Solomon compromised by marrying pagan women in disobedience to the law, and consequently, all of Israel was led astray into worshipping idols. The book of Kings shows us a pattern of Israel's stumbles. They would have a good king and, therefore, start following God. And then they would have a bad king and, consequently, stumble away from him. For every Josiah, Asa and Jehoshaphat, there was a Jereboam, Jehu, and Ahab, the wicked kings of Israel who led the nation astray.

During this time period, not only were the kings corrupt but so were the priests. In fact, right before God judged Israel by Assyria, God rebuked the priests through the prophet Hosea.⁶ Listen to what he said:

The more the priests increased, the more they sinned against me; they exchanged their Glory for something disgraceful. They feed on the sins of my people and relish their wickedness. And it will be: Like people, like priests. I will punish both of them for their ways and repay them for their deeds.

Hosea 4:7-9

The priests were sinning just like the people. In fact, they enjoyed the sins of the people and made a profit off of them. God promised he would punish the priests and the people together for their compromise.

Theological and moral compromises amongst the leadership of churches or ministries typically precede people going astray. In fact, when Christ appeared in the Gospels, Israel was being run by the Pharisees and Sadducees who were corrupting the teachings of Scripture and leading people astray as well. In the Gospels, Christ spent a significant amount of time correcting and rebuking the leadership of the people.

Application Question: Why is the leadership of the church so important?

Consider what Christ said: "A student is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master. It is enough for the student to be like his teacher, and the servant like his master" (Matthew 10:24-25). The people can go no farther than their leaders. The leaders create the ceiling for the church.

When we look at the state of our churches, it is often a reflection of its leaders. When we have leadership that does not preach the Word, leadership that is not on fire for God, leadership that does not run their household well, it is no surprise that the light in the church is so dim.

Paul described the church in the last days in a similar manner. He said that the church would not be able to stand sound doctrine and, therefore, would heap up many teachers to itch their ears and to say what they wanted to hear (2 Tim 4:3-4).

Interpretation Question: Why was the High Priest compromising? What could be some of the reasons?

We are not sure why the High Priest compromised; it could be many reasons:

1. Maybe, he had liberal doctrine.

Even though they had just read that Moabites and Ammonites could not enter the temple (cf. Neh 13:1), maybe he thought the Scripture was antiquated, full of errors, and not relevant. Maybe he thought God was not the author of "every" portion of Scripture, and therefore he could pick and choose what was of God. We see that happening in many churches today, and consequently, instead of submitting to the Word of God, they stand in judgment over it. They take liberty to decide what God said and did not say. They say, "God didn't really create the earth as seen in Genesis; it was created through the evolutionary process."

“Jonah wasn’t really swallowed by a whale.” “Jesus didn’t really turn water into wine.” They choose what is of God and not of God, and therefore, they choose what not to submit to.

Eliashib might have rebelled because of his doctrine which, no doubt, would have also negatively affected the people.

2. Maybe, he was a people pleaser—meaning he wanted the applause of the people instead of God.

Potentially, it was the Israelites clamoring for more liberality and for him to stop being so narrow-minded. Later in this chapter, we see that many of the people married foreigners and their children couldn’t speak Hebrew (v. 23-24). Maybe he wouldn’t stand up for God.

As mentioned previously, Paul declared that this would happen in the last days. People would heap up many teachers that would itch their ears and make them feel good. Many ministers won’t preach strong doctrine or hold the church accountable for fear of losing their jobs, status, or numbers in the church. Today, we have many leaders in the church who are “men of men” instead of “men of God.”

3. Maybe, he was simply a hypocrite.

He might have been preaching the truth but not practicing it in the temple. In that case, he would have been a hypocritical leader.

Whatever the reason, we can be sure that his actions contributed to the sins of the people. As we look at the rest of the text, we see that the people are living in great compromise as well. Like priest, like people; we see this happening all around us, and therefore, decay has crept into many of our churches.

Leaders of the church must ask themselves, “Are we setting the example?” (1 Peter 5:3). It is the leaders who set the spiritual ceiling for the congregation. It is enough for a student to be like his teacher. If the pastor, elders, and teachers are no longer growing in zeal for Christ, how can they expect it from the congregation? If the leadership in the church is no longer growing in the knowledge of Scripture, how can they expect it from the congregation? The leadership sets both the ceiling and the direction of the congregation.

Let this challenge us as we serve in any form of leadership to never be lacking in zeal or obedience and to always be abounding in the work of the Lord (cf. 1 Cor 15:58). But also let this challenge us to pray daily for the leadership of our local church and churches around the world. It is enough for a disciple to be like his teacher.

Application Question: In what ways have you seen both the positive and negative effects of leadership in the church? How can the church better support our leaders in order to encourage their continual growth in the Lord?

Misuse of Finances Is a Sign of Spiritual Decay

I also learned that the portions assigned to the Levites had not been given to them, and that all the Levites and singers responsible for the service had gone back to their own fields.

Nehemiah 13:10

Nehemiah 13:10 says the Israelites stopped supporting the Levites who maintained the temple and taught the people. Because they were not being supported they moved back to their fields to earn a living. Listen to what Nehemiah said: “I also learned that the portions assigned to the Levites had not been given to them, and that all the Levites and singers responsible for the service had gone back to their own fields.”

Most commentators say that Malachi was prophesying during this period of time.⁷ God said through the prophet in Malachi 3:8 that the people had robbed God through their tithes and offerings. They had stopped giving to God.

Similarly, this is a common sign of spiritual decay with us. Whatever we really love, we put our money into. If we really love books, movies, food, or anything else, one can tell by looking at our bank statements.

In the same way, when God is no longer our priority, we will find it harder to support his work with our finances. This is what was happening with Israel. God had ceased to be their priority, and therefore, they stopped giving to his work. Similarly, when they were on fire for God, their offerings were great. Remember the giving in the previous chapter:

And on that day they offered great sacrifices, rejoicing because God had given them great joy. The women and children also rejoiced. The sound of rejoicing in Jerusalem could be heard far away. At that time men were appointed to be in charge of the storerooms for the contributions, firstfruits and tithes. From the fields around the towns they were to bring into the storerooms the portions required by the Law for the priests and the Levites, for Judah was pleased with the ministering priests and Levites.

Nehemiah 12:43-44

When they were on fire for God, they gave great sacrifices with joy. Similarly, when we are on fire for God, we also give joyfully, but when our relationship with God cools, we start to give less or the giving ceases all together.

I have seen this personally in my own life. I remember being in college on a full basketball scholarship, without any real financial needs. I was growing in God—knowing his voice more and enjoying his presence. With that came a growing desire to give to him, simply because I loved him. But the problem was I didn't make any money. My scholarship provided all my needs, but it didn't provide any spending money. So, I remember getting a part-time job just because I wanted to have something to give, not only to God but also to others who had needs. This is a natural occurrence. When you are growing in love with someone, you naturally want to give, not only financially, but you want to share in all good things with that person.

I experienced this with my daughter, especially when she was a baby. I remember going to the store to buy groceries, and without a real need, I went straight to the baby section. I was thinking, "What can I buy for my daughter?" There was great joy in buying things for her. I got new diapers and a special no-throw-up formula. I got some scented baby bath liquid that would help put her to sleep (which my wife swiftly threw away, saying something about "chemicals"). I bought a bunch of stuff that at that stage of life meant nothing to my daughter, and she couldn't even thank me for them. However, giving to her helped fulfill my joy. It's a natural thing to give when you really love someone and that includes giving to God.

Jesus said this about our treasures—our finances: "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matthew 6:21). He taught that wherever one puts his money, it will show where his heart really is.

In fact, what a person spends his money on is often an indicator of his spiritual health—including his salvation. Let's look at John the Baptist when he called Israel to bear fruits worthy of repentance or to prove their salvation (cf. Lk 3:8). He said:

"What should we do then?" the crowd asked. John answered, "The man with two tunics should share with him who has none, and the one who has food should do the same." Tax collectors also came to be baptized. "Teacher," they asked, "what should we do?" "Don't collect any more than you are required to," he told them. Then some soldiers asked him, "And what should we do?" He replied, "Don't extort money and don't accuse people falsely—be content with your pay."

Luke 3:10-14

To the wealthy who had two tunics (or jackets), he said, "Share." To the tax collectors, he said, "Don't collect more money than is required." To the soldiers, he said, "Don't extort money and be content with your pay."

Isn't that interesting? Every fruit that had to do with true repentance, which really means true salvation, was shown in their finances. How people handle their money shows whether they truly love God. It shows where their relationship with God is.

What does the way you use your finances say about your relationship with God? The decay in Israel's spiritual life was shown in their lack of giving to the Lord.

Consider what Paul teaches about our giving in 2 Corinthians 8:7: "But just as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in your love for us—see that you also excel in this grace of giving."

He says as believers, we should seek to grow in our giving to the Lord. It should be abounding. This makes perfect sense because giving is an indicator of our love for God. Since our love for God should always be growing, by necessity, so should our giving. Therefore, when our desire to give is less, it is a sign of spiritual decay. That's what happened with Israel and that's what happens with us.

What does your giving say about your heart? How is God calling you to excel in giving?

Application Question: What do you spend most of your money on? What does that say about your heart?

A Decrease in Time Given to Worship Is a Sign of Spiritual Decay

In Nehemiah 13:15-16, we also see that the people stopped practicing the Sabbath. Look at what it says:

In those days I saw men in Judah treading winepresses on the Sabbath and bringing in grain and loading it on donkeys, together with wine, grapes, figs and all other kinds of loads. And they were bringing all this into Jerusalem on the Sabbath. Men from Tyre who lived in Jerusalem were bringing in fish and all kinds of merchandise and selling them in Jerusalem on the Sabbath to the people of Judah.

The Sabbath originally was meant to be a time of rest, where the Israelites focused on God instead of work or other things. However, at this point, many people no longer practiced the Sabbath but instead compromised with the world, as they bought and sold on the Sabbath day. Instead of focusing on God and worshiping him, they focused on their work and making money instead.

No doubt, Israel had excuses. If everybody was working and they closed their businesses, they would lose money and customers. They could rationalize it.

It's the same for us. It's easy to rationalize missing church, small group, or our personal Bible study, but that doesn't make it right. "I've got school." "I've got work." "If I don't work, how am I going to pay my bills? I can't commit to church or small group." "I got home from work late; I can't go to church tomorrow." We have all types of excuses that keep us from worshiping, keep us from reading our Bible or serving the church. This was a sign of spiritual decay with Israel, and it's the same for us.

I don't believe we are under the Sabbath as a law because Christ is our Sabbath (cf. Col 2:16-17), but the principle is the same. Typically, when there is moral decline in our life, we will find that there has also been a decline in our time given to worshipping God.

The signals of this are hard to miss. Some people may stop going to church all together and others become sporadic. They stop going to small group and start missing their daily quiet times. Many never commit to any type of consistent worship. These are all signs of spiritual decay. You must be fighting to grow or your relationship with God and your holiness will decline. Paul said, "Exercise yourself to godliness" (1 Timothy 4:7). Without disciplining ourselves to worship, we cannot be godly people.

How is your daily and weekly commitment to worship? What does it say about your relationship with God?

It should also be noted that what we give our time to in lieu of worship shows our idolatry. The Israelites were making wealth an idol over God. They would shop, buy, and sell on the Sabbath instead of worshipping the Lord. Materialism had become their idol.

What is keeping you out of worship? Is it work? Is it friends? Is it rest? What is keeping you from finding your Sabbath in Christ? Whatever you do instead of worshipping the Lord or spending time with him shows the idols in your heart.

Application Question: What are common things that cause you to neglect the worship of God? How is God calling you to put him first?

Worldly Relationships Are a Sign of Spiritual Decay

In Nehemiah 13:23-24, we see that the Israelites also compromised by marrying pagan women. Nehemiah said this:

Moreover, in those days I saw men of Judah who had married women from Ashdod, Ammon and Moab. Half of their children spoke the language of Ashdod or the language of one of the other peoples, and did not know how to speak the language of Judah.

Nehemiah 13:23-24

This compromise was so bad that many of the children couldn't even speak Hebrew, which meant they couldn't read the Holy Scriptures or understand the teaching of the priests and Levites.

When we compromise with the world, not only does it affect us, but it affects those close to us, like our children. They will grow up speaking and thinking like the world, instead of speaking and thinking like God. God gave strict rules against marrying foreigners in the Old Testament because of the tendency of being drawn to worship other gods. Solomon compromised in this area and, essentially, turned the nation of Israel away from God, eventually leading to their exile. This dangerous compromise had previously almost destroyed Israel. The marrying of a foreigner itself probably wasn't sin, for Ruth and Rahab were both foreigners. However, they had committed to worshipping Yahweh and were, eventually, placed in the lineage of Christ.

In the New Testament, we similarly have clear admonitions and prohibitions against marrying an unbeliever. Look at what Paul says to the widows in 1 Corinthians 7:39: "A woman is bound to her husband as long as he lives. But if her husband dies, she is free to marry anyone she wishes, but he must belong to the Lord."

A widow was free to marry anyone, but the person had to belong to the Lord. It had to be someone who was serving God. Similarly, Paul declared how he had the right to take a "believing wife," which implies he didn't have a right to take one who didn't believe. Look at what he said in 1 Corinthians 9:5: "Don't we

have the right to take a believing wife along with us, as do the other apostles and the Lord's brothers and Cephas?"

However, this call to separation does not just apply to marriage but to all intimate relationships with the world. Second Corinthians 6:14 says this: "Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness?"

Paul used an analogy from the Old Testament law about not yoking two different animals together, such as an ox and a donkey in Deuteronomy 22:10. Many believe this work-related law had to do with their inability to plow a straight line. The ox and donkey have different natures and different temperaments. The ox is so strong it would pull the donkey in a different direction, and therefore, the work would be unproductive.

In the same way, Christians are not to be in any worldly relationships that keep them from walking a straight line with Christ—that pull them away from God and hinder them from being productive in serving him. Certainly, this applies to marriage, but it also applies to friendship, work, and everything else.

One seminary professor said where a person will be in ten years will mostly be affected by the books they read and the company they kept.⁸ What do your most intimate relationships say about your relationship with God and your future? Solomon said something similar. Proverbs 13:20 says, "He who walks with the wise grows wise, but a companion of fools suffers harm."

Now, certainly we are called to minister to the world and to love them, but we are not called to be "yoked with them." Christ ate and drank with the world in hopes of winning them to God. He befriended them, prayed for them, and served them, but, when you look at his most intimate relationships, it shows that his most intimate relationships were with believers.

It has often been said that Christ had five rings of fellowship around him. He had the three apostles: Peter, James and John—his most intimate friends. He took them up on the Mount of Transfiguration when he didn't take others. He took them to pray before his death. Then Christ had the nine other apostles who were always with him. He had the seventy-two (cf. Lk 10:1). And he had other followers outside of that, and then he had the world.

His most intimate relationships were not with those going a different direction. He was a friend of sinners, but his deepest friendships were with those who were following God. Christ said this: "Who are my mother, brother, and sister but those who obey God?" (Matt 12:50, paraphrase). You are affected by your most intimate relationships. Amos said this: "Can two walk together unless they are agreed?" (Amos 3:3). Your most intimate relationships not only affect your ministry, but they also reflect who you are. They reflect what is inside you and what you agree with.

What do your most intimate relationships say about your relationship with God? Are your closest relationships with those who will pull you closer to the Lord or farther away from him? Friendship with the world is a sign of spiritual decay (cf. James 4:4).

Application Question: What is the balance of being salt and light in the world and also being separate from the world? Do you have any relationships that commonly pull you away from God? How is God calling you to remedy that?

How to Fix Spiritual Decay

We just looked at signs of spiritual decay in the life of a community or an individual believer. We can discern spiritual decay by looking at our leaders, our use of finances, our time given to worship, and our relationships.

What should we do if we see areas of decay in our life or in the church? How can we fix it? What can we learn from Nehemiah who is a type of Christ, as he zealously sought to turn the nation back to God?

Application Question: How can we fix spiritual decay, as demonstrated through Nehemiah?

1. We must become aware of areas of sin.

In this chapter, we commonly see how Nehemiah saw or was informed about the sins happening in Israel. Look at the passages below:

And came back to Jerusalem. Here I learned about the evil thing Eliashib had done in providing Tobiah a room in the courts of the house of God.

Nehemiah 13:7

I also learned that the portions assigned to the Levites had not been given to them, and that all the Levites and singers responsible for the service had gone back to their own fields.

Nehemiah 13:10

Moreover, in those days I saw men of Judah who had married women from Ashdod, Ammon and Moab.

Nehemiah 13:23

Similarly, if we are going to fix areas of compromise in our lives or others, we must be aware of it. This is the first step. The problem with many individuals and communities is the fact that they don't even know they have a problem. They are unaware of the idolatry in their hearts. They are unaware of their sin or don't think the sin in their lives or their community is a big problem. Therefore, they don't seek to remedy it.

Application Question: What are ways that we can better discern areas of sin or compromise in ourselves and others?

We must be people of the Word of God.

This is implied in verses 1-3. The Israelites were reading the Scripture on the day they dedicated the wall (cf. Nehemiah 12), and they learned they were forbidden to allow Moabites and Ammonites to enter the temple, leading them to repent. Look at what it says:

On that day the Book of Moses was read aloud in the hearing of the people and there it was found written that no Ammonite or Moabite should ever be admitted into the assembly of God, because they had not met the Israelites with food and water but had hired Balaam to call a curse down on them. (Our God, however, turned the curse into a blessing.) When the people heard this law, they excluded from Israel all who were of foreign descent.

Nehemiah 13:1-3

In the same way, we must constantly be in the Word if we are going to recognize sin. It is like a mirror that reveals our sin and compromise (cf. James 1:22-25) and the sin of others.

We must have accountability relationships where people have the right to speak into our lives.

This is what we see with Nehemiah. Nehemiah came back to Israel and pointed out all the wrong things being committed within her. David had Nathan. Nathan, as a prophet, would confront David when he was in sin, no matter how uncomfortable it must have felt. Similarly, we should have people that we allow and invite to be prophetic in our life.

These accountability relationships include sometimes asking questions like: "How is your spiritual life going?" "How is your marriage going?" "How is your time in the Word of God?" If we are going to be part of the solution, we must be aware of the problem.

Who is your Nehemiah? Who has the right to speak into your life?

We should pray for God to point sin out in our lives and our communities.

Listen to how David prayed: "Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting" (Psalm 139:23-24).

David sought for God to reveal things in his life that were not right. We must continually bring ourselves before God as well and ask him to show us areas of compromise so we can become more like him.

We must spend time with the people we lead and get to know them in order to discern how we can help them.

The good shepherd knows his sheep by name (John 10:3, 14). We must spend time with them. We must be with them in times of celebration, in times of mourning, and in everyday activities. We must know them. As we know them, we will better discern areas of compromise in their lives and how to minister to those areas.

What else should we do to help fix spiritual decay in our lives and others'?

2. We must develop a righteous anger that leads us to confront sin.

Nehemiah 13:8 says, "I was greatly displeased and threw all Tobiah's household goods out of the room."

Nehemiah became very displeased when he heard about Tobiah being in the temple. However, not only was he displeased, he went into the apartment, threw everything outside, and then filled it with the offerings and the other things of God.

His anger also led him to confront many of the other people. Consider these texts:

So I rebuked the officials and asked them, "Why is the house of God neglected?" Then I called them together and stationed them at their posts.

Nehemiah 13:11

I rebuked the nobles of Judah and said to them, “What is this wicked thing you are doing—desecrating the Sabbath day?”

Nehemiah 13:17

I rebuked them and called curses down on them. I beat some of the men and pulled out their hair.

Nehemiah 13:25

One of the sons of Joiada son of Eliashib the high priest was son-in-law to Sanballat the Horonite. And I drove him away from me.

Nehemiah 13:28

Not only did his anger lead to rebuking the people, but also to beating the men who had compromised by marrying the pagan women. He beat them and pulled out their hair (v. 25). When he said that he pulled out their hair, he was probably referring to the hair on their beards. By pulling out the hair on their beards, he was probably disrespecting their Jewishness. Jews were called to be holy, and one of the ways they represented that was by the males growing beards. Essentially, he was saying, “You are not following God! You are not a Jew!”

Another outlet of his righteous anger was running the High Priest’s son away from the temple for also marrying a pagan (v. 28). This man had defiled the priesthood. God gave specific commandments for a priest’s wife. She had to be a Jew and a virgin (Leviticus 21). Therefore, the High Priest’s son was disobeying God and consequently leading others to do the same.

Now many of us struggle with what Nehemiah did, and it may even seem unkind. However, this is exactly how Scripture calls us to handle sin, especially our own. Listen to what Jesus said:

If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell.

Matthew 5:29-30

Christ said you must be drastic in trying to get rid of sin in your life. If you struggle with lust, get rid of whatever is leading you into sin. Get rid of the TV; turn off your Internet connection. If it’s a friendship or a relationship leading you into sin, be willing to separate yourself from it. John Owen said, “Be killing sin or it will be killing you.” We must be drastic in seeking to get rid of sin in our lives.

But this is not just for individuals, it is also needed in the church when there is unrepentant sin. Look at what Paul said to the Corinthians:

hand this man over to Satan, so that the sinful nature may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord. Your boasting is not good. Don’t you know that a little yeast works through the whole batch of dough?

1 Corinthians 5:5-6

In this context, a believer was having sex with his father’s wife. Paul told them to kick this person out of the church (hand over to Satan) because the yeast of this person’s sin would spread. It would spread like a deadly cancer. Paul commanded them to not even eat with a professing believer who was living in unrepentant sin (1 Cor 5:11).

In the same way that it is not cruel or unloving for a doctor to cut cancer out of a patient to save his life, it is not cruel or unloving for the church to do the same with sin. We must lovingly help our friends get rid of habitual sins. At times, we must even separate ourselves from those who will not repent. Although this may be hard, we must do this in order to become holy and to help others become holy.

Because the church does not often practice this, it has become more and more compromising and less effective for the kingdom of God.

Yes, we must be wise as serpents and gentle as doves (Matt 10:16). There is a place for tact, but I think the church has too much wisdom and too much tact, which often means that we do nothing. There is a place for this in the wise plan of God. It is those who are righteously angry who do something about abortion. It is those who are righteously angry who do something about trafficking. It is those who are righteously angry who say this is not right and who fight for justice. It is the righteously angry who mourn, weep, and pray for the God of heaven to move on our behalf. We need to be forceful men and women who advance the kingdom of God (Matthew 11:12).

3. We must be people who truly desire to please God.

Nehemiah 13:14 says, "Remember me for this, O my God, and do not blot out what I have so faithfully done for the house of my God and its services."

Four times Nehemiah prays that God would remember him. This reflects the reason that Nehemiah was so zealous. It was because he truly wanted God's approval and favor over his life. When one is living for the world's approval instead of God's, it will be easy to compromise and not respond to sin.

We must be people who truly desire to see God pleased with our lives. The fact that this is repeated four times demonstrates how great of a priority this was for Nehemiah, and it must be for us as well.

4. We must be people with perseverance.

Another thing clearly demonstrated in this text is Nehemiah's great perseverance. He had already challenged Israel about all these things in the previous chapters. He had already helped them get rid of the compromise with foreigners. He had helped restore the Sabbath. In fact, in chapter 10, Israel made commitments to be faithful in all these areas, but now they had compromised again.

It is no different for us when battling with sin in our lives or others. For many Christians, Satan will get them so discouraged at their failures that they just give up and wallow in their sin. Similarly, others will give up on trying to help people all together. They say to themselves, "This is impossible."

Again, statistically 1,700 pastors leave the ministry each month. No doubt, a major reason for this is discouragement. They feel like they are not making a change, that people are stuck in their ways, and the church is not growing. Therefore, they get discouraged and quit.

However, when God rewards his servants in the Parable of the Talents, he doesn't reward them because they were successful; he rewards them because they were "faithful." He says, "Well done good and faithful servant" (Matt 25:21). In the same way, we must be faithful in battling sin, faithful in battling compromise in our lives and the lives of others in order to honor God. We must be people of perseverance if we are going to get rid of sin.

Galatians 6:9 says, "Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up."

Application Question: Do you have any people who are allowed to speak prophetically in your life? In what ways is God calling you to be an agent of change like Nehemiah in the lives of others?

Conclusion

In this text, we see common signs of decay in the lives of the people of God. What are signs of compromise amongst the people of God?

Compromised leadership

Misuse of money

A decrease in time given to worship—Sabbath

Worldly relationships

In what ways is God calling you to fix areas of compromise in your life or others? How is God calling you to be like Nehemiah, a type of Christ, who zealously confronted sin?

Application Question: What are the primary leadership lessons you learned from the book of Nehemiah and how is God challenging you to implement them into your life to become more of a godly leader?

Gregory Brown

Greg Brown earned his MA in religion and MA in teaching from Trinity International University, a MRE from Liberty University, and a PhD in theology from Louisiana Baptist University. He has served over fifteen years in pastoral ministry, and currently serves as chaplain and professor at Handong Glob... More

More from this author

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Most Relevant Verses

Romans 8:21

Verse Concepts

that the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God.

James 5:2

Verse Concepts

Your riches have rotted and your garments have become moth-eaten.

Genesis 3:17-19

Then to Adam He said, "Because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten from the tree about which I commanded you, saying, 'You shall not eat from it'; Cursed is the ground because of you; In toil you will eat of it All the days of your life.

"Both thorns and thistles it shall grow for you;

And you will eat the plants of the field;

By the sweat of your face You will eat bread,

Till you return to the ground,

Because from it you were taken;

For you are dust, And to dust you shall return."

Romans 8:20

Verse Concepts

For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it, in hope

2 Corinthians 4:16

Verse Concepts

Therefore we do not lose heart, but though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day.

Psalms 90:3-10

You turn man back into dust

And say, "Return, O children of men."

For a thousand years in Your sight

Are like yesterday when it passes by,

Or as a watch in the night.

You have swept them away like a flood, they fall asleep;

In the morning they are like grass which sprouts anew.

read more.

Job 19:26

Verse Concepts

"Even after my skin is destroyed,

Yet from my flesh I shall see God;

Psalms 49:8-9

For the redemption of his soul is costly,

And he should cease trying forever—

That he should live on eternally,

That he should not undergo decay.

Matthew 6:19-20

"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in or steal;

Psalms 102:26

Verse Concepts

"Even they will perish, but You endure;
And all of them will wear out like a garment;
Like clothing You will change them and they will be changed.

Matthew 5:13

Verse Concepts

"You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt has become tasteless, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled under foot by men.

Luke 12:33

Verse Concepts

"Sell your possessions and give to charity; make yourselves money belts which do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near nor moth destroys.

Luke 14:34

Verse Concepts

"Therefore, salt is good; but if even salt has become tasteless, with what will it be seasoned?

1 John 2:15-17

Do not love the world nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world. The world is passing away, and also its lusts; but the one who does the will of God lives forever.

Acts 2:24-31

But God raised Him up again, putting an end to the agony of death, since it was impossible for Him to be held in its power. For David says of Him,

'I saw the Lord always in my presence;
For He is at my right hand, so that I will not be shaken.

'Therefore my heart was glad and my tongue exulted;

Moreover my flesh also will live in hope;

read more.

Acts 13:34-37

As for the fact that He raised Him up from the dead, no longer to return to decay, He has spoken in this way: 'I will give you the holy and sure blessings of David.' Therefore He also says in another Psalm, 'You will not allow Your Holy One to undergo decay.' For David, after he had served the purpose of God in his own generation, fell asleep, and was laid among his fathers and underwent decay; read more.

1 Corinthians 15:42

Verse Concepts

So also is the resurrection of the dead. It is sown a perishable body, it is raised an imperishable body;

Hebrews 13:14

Verse Concepts

For here we do not have a lasting city, but we are seeking the city which is to come.

Revelation 21:4

Verse Concepts

and He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away."

Leviticus 26:14-16

'But if you do not obey Me and do not carry out all these commandments, if, instead, you reject My statutes, and if your soul abhors My ordinances so as not to carry out all My commandments, and so break My covenant, I, in turn, will do this to you: I will appoint over you a sudden terror, consumption and fever that will waste away the eyes and cause the soul to pine away; also, you will sow your seed uselessly, for your enemies will eat it up.

Numbers 5:20-22

if you, however, have gone astray, being under the authority of your husband, and if you have defiled yourself and a man other than your husband has had intercourse with you" (then the priest shall have the woman swear with the oath of the curse, and the priest shall say to the woman), "the Lord make you a curse and an oath among your people by the Lord's making your thigh waste away and your abdomen swell; and this water that brings a curse shall go into your stomach, and make your abdomen swell and your thigh waste away." And the woman shall say, "Amen. Amen."

Deuteronomy 32:24

Verse Concepts

'They will be wasted by famine, and consumed by plague
And bitter destruction;
And the teeth of beasts I will send upon them,
With the venom of crawling things of the dust.

Job 18:13

Verse Concepts

"His skin is devoured by disease,
The firstborn of death devours his limbs.

Psalms 32:3

Verse Concepts

When I kept silent about my sin, my body wasted away
Through my groaning all day long.

Psalms 112:10

Verse Concepts

The wicked will see it and be vexed,
He will gnash his teeth and melt away;
The desire of the wicked will perish.

Isaiah 5:24

Verse Concepts

Therefore, as a tongue of fire consumes stubble
And dry grass collapses into the flame,
So their root will become like rot and their blossom blow away as dust;
For they have rejected the law of the Lord of hosts
And despised the word of the Holy One of Israel.

Isaiah 17:4

Verse Concepts

Now in that day the glory of Jacob will fade,

And the fatness of his flesh will become lean.

Lamentations 2:6

Verse Concepts

And He has violently treated His tabernacle like a garden booth;

He has destroyed His appointed meeting place.

The Lord has caused to be forgotten

The appointed feast and sabbath in Zion,

And He has despised king and priest

In the indignation of His anger.

Hosea 4:3

Verse Concepts

Therefore the land mourns,

And everyone who lives in it languishes

Along with the beasts of the field and the birds of the sky,

And also the fish of the sea disappear.

Isaiah 51:6-8

"Lift up your eyes to the sky,

Then look to the earth beneath;

For the sky will vanish like smoke,

And the earth will wear out like a garment

And its inhabitants will die in like manner;

But My salvation will be forever,

And My righteousness will not wane.

"Listen to Me, you who know righteousness,

A people in whose heart is My law;

Do not fear the reproach of man,

Nor be dismayed at their revilings.

"For the moth will eat them like a garment,

And the grub will eat them like wool.

But My righteousness will be forever,

And My salvation to all generations."

2 Corinthians 5:1-5

For we know that if the earthly tent which is our house is torn down, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For indeed in this house we groan, longing to be clothed with our dwelling from heaven, inasmuch as we, having put it on, will not be found naked.

Moral Decay

Romans 8:20

Verse Concepts

For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it, in hope

No Decay

Psalms 16:10

Verse Concepts

For You will not abandon my soul to Sheol;

Nor will You allow Your Holy One to undergo decay.

