

Pastor Steven J. Cole
Flagstaff Christian Fellowship
123 S. Beaver Street
Flagstaff, Arizona 86001
www.fcfonline.org

PUTTING GOD'S TRUTH INTO PRACTICE

Nehemiah 10:1-39

By

Steven J. Cole

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Nehemiah Lesson 11

Putting God's Truth into Practice Nehemiah 10:1-39

A man had just put the finishing touches on a fresh concrete driveway. He went inside to enjoy a glass of lemonade when, to his horror, he saw his little neighbor boy playing in the fresh concrete. He went outside and yelled angrily at the boy. After he had fixed the concrete and come back inside, his wife said, "Why did you yell at him? I thought you loved little boys." The man replied, "I love little boys in the abstract, but I don't like them in the concrete."

Many Christians are like that when it comes to spiritual truth. We love it in the abstract, but we don't like it in the concrete. When truth gets too specific, when it means that I actually need to change my life, that's going too far! With Linus, we can echo, "I love mankind; it's people I can't stand!"

Every Christian is for spiritual renewal in the abstract. It's a wonderful concept. But when it means that I must actually change the way that I think, the way that I relate to my wife and kids, the way that I spend my time and money, or the way that I do business, now just a minute! You've gone from preaching to meddling!

In Nehemiah 8, we saw the beginning of a revival as God's people gathered and listened to His Word being read and explained. In chapter 9, the people repented and confessed their sins. Now, in chapter 10, they make a corporate covenant to put God's truth into practice in a number of specific areas. The chapter lists the names of the leaders who signed the covenant (9:38-10:27); the general obligation of the covenant (10:28-29); the agreement not to give their children in marriage to outsiders (10:30); to keep the Sabbath (10:31); and to provide for the ongoing maintenance of temple worship (10:32-39). We learn that ...

Personal application of God's truth must be
the outcome of any spiritual renewal.

Before we look at the specifics of the chapter, I want to comment on the subject of making vows or covenants before God. As many of you know, a popular seminar leader encourages people

to make a vow before God to spend five minutes a day reading the Bible. He warns his audiences that it is better not to make a vow than to make it and then break it. He tells how after he made this vow, one night he fell into bed and was almost asleep when he remembered that he had not spent his five minutes. So he got up, propped his eyelids open, and did his five minutes.

Should we follow his example? I first heard him say this in 1969. I almost stood up and shouted to everyone not to do it! It struck me as legalism, and I pretty much still see it that way. I agree that we rightly make vows to the Lord when we are baptized and when we enter into marriage. I also believe that it is helpful prayerfully to set some spiritual goals in order to grow in the Lord. For example, I am aiming at reading through the new English Standard Version of the Bible in 2003. But I don't want just to check off that I read it. I want to know God better and to conform my life to Jesus Christ. It would be far better to only get through half of the Bible and have my heart transformed than to get through the entire Bible just to say that I did it.

I tend to agree with Charles Spurgeon, who wrote (*Autobiography* [Banner of Truth], 1:103):

I have found, in my own spiritual life, that the more rules I lay down for myself, the more sins I commit. The habit of regular morning and evening prayer is one which is indispensable to a believer's life, but the prescribing of the length of prayer, and the constrained remembrance of so many persons and subjects, may gender unto bondage, and strangle prayer rather than assist it. To say I will humble myself at such a time, and rejoice at such another season, is nearly as much an affectation as when the preacher wrote in the margin of his sermon, "Cry here," "Smile here." Why, if the man preached from his heart, he would be sure to cry in the right place, and to smile at a suitable moment; and when the spiritual life is sound, it produces prayer at the right time, and humiliation of soul and sacred joy spring forth spontaneously, apart from rules and vows.

So my counsel is, be careful about making vows to the Lord. Our hearts are so prone to fall into a legalistic spirit, where we congratulate ourselves for keeping our vows, but our hearts are far

from the Lord. The main thing is to walk closely with the Lord, judging all known sin and gladly obeying His Word out of a heart of love. If you miss your morning quiet time, your day is not under a curse. Walk with God that day and make it your priority to meet alone with Him as soon as you can. The biblical balance is: Don't put yourself under manmade laws or rules that have the appearance of wisdom, "but are of no value against fleshly indulgence" (Col. 2:20-23). On the other hand, do discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness (1 Tim. 4:7).

Remember the context of Nehemiah 10: There has been a lot of spiritual fervor, both joy in the Lord and mourning over sin. Emotion is fine, but you can't live on an emotional high. After you come down from the mountaintop experience, you have to face the daily grind. So here they lay out a specific plan to put the truth of God's Word into daily practice. The text reveals five principles for personally applying God's truth:

1. Personal application of God's truth must begin with the leadership (9:38-10:27).

The list begins with Nehemiah and Zedekiah, who was probably his assistant. Next to sign were 21 priests, the heads of priestly households (10:2-8). Ezra's name is not here because the head of his household was Seraiah (10:2). Then come the names of 17 heads of Levitical households (10:9-13), followed by 44 heads of leading families (10:14-27). Some of these names are identical to those on the lists in Ezra 2 and Nehemiah 7. Others represent either new families that have branched off of those from Zerubbabel's time, or more recent arrivals from Babylon.

The point for us is that those in leadership set the example for others. They put their names on the dotted line and committed themselves to do what they expected the people under them to do.

A mother was reprimanding her son for not telling the truth. "Johnny," she said sternly, "do you know what happens to little boys who tell lies?" "Yes," the boy replied, "they travel for half fare." He had obviously learned from his mother's leadership!

If we set the example of telling so-called "white lies" when it is not to our advantage to tell the truth, our kids will learn quickly! Whether it is in our families, in the church, or in the business

world, leaders must set the example by applying God's truth to their everyday lives. To preach one message and live differently is hypocrisy, and people will only follow hypocrites in hypocrisy, not in their exhortations to godliness.

2. Personal application of God's truth begins with personal holiness based on understanding (10:28-29).

In verses 28 & 29, the rest of the people join their leaders in taking on themselves a curse and an oath to obey all of the commandments that God had made known in His law. The curse refers to Deuteronomy 27:15-26 & 28:15-68, which called down numerous curses on Israel if they forsook the covenant. You may wonder, "Are Christians under God's curse if we disobey Him?" The answer is no—and yes.

It is no in that "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us" (Gal. 3:13). If we have trusted in Christ as Savior, we do not need to fear God's eternal judgment if we sin. But even though that is true, being under grace does not negate the law of sowing and reaping (Gal. 6:7-8). God will severely discipline His children who disobey Him to teach us to fear sinning (1 Cor. 11:27-32; Heb. 12:5-11). Thus we should "cleanse ourselves from all defilement of flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God" (2 Cor. 7:1).

Note that these people joined this covenant with their kinsmen. It can be helpful to be a part of a group where you help hold each other accountable in your walk with God. The Forum of Four groups that we have in this church are designed for that purpose. God made us to function as Christ's body, and independent body parts, cut off from the rest, don't usually function very well!

The standard to which these people committed themselves was "to walk in God's law, which was given through Moses, God's servant, and to keep and to observe all the commandments of God [Yahweh] our Lord, and His ordinances and His statutes." By referring to the Law as "God's law," given through Moses, they were affirming that they believed in the full inspiration and authority of Moses' writings as the Word of God. Because it is God's Word, not Moses' word, they were obligated to obey it *all*.

If you reject the fact that the Bible is God's inspired Word, then you can sit in judgment on it. You can say that certain portions were Paul's outdated ideas, and thus do not apply to us today. But if the Bible is God's Word through His servants to us, then we cannot pick and choose to obey the parts we like and reject what we don't like. Granted, to apply the Bible correctly we must interpret it correctly. But once we do interpret it, we must obey it *all*, even if it runs counter to the trends of our times. This applies to controversial topics like the roles of men and women in the home and in church; the doctrine of eternal punishment; God's sovereign predestination of some to eternal life; etc. The question is, does God's Word teach these things? If so, we must submit to it all.

Also, note that the people of this covenant had "separated themselves from the peoples of the lands." I think that the biblical doctrine of separation needs to be emphasized in our day. There are probably a few situations where God's people have separated from the world so much that they are isolated from the world that they are called to evangelize. Some groups, like the Amish, are so separated that they have no effective outreach to our culture.

But it seems to me that most Christians have swung to the other extreme, where there is no significant difference between the way they live and the way the world lives. We may go to church a bit more. But we have adopted the world's values and goals. We're living for personal success and happiness. To the extent that God can help us in those goals, we use Him and follow His Word. But if obedience to God gets in the way of our success and happiness, we're quick to set Him aside and get on with our agendas.

The proper balance is that we are called to be *in* this world, but not to be *of* this world (John 17:14-17). We are to live in the world in terms of neutral cultural customs. But we are to be distinct because we know and obey God's Word (John 17:14, 17; Neh. 10:28). That knowledge makes us distinct from the world in terms of our relationships, goals, and values.

3. Personal application of God's truth must extend to the home (10:30).

The people agree not to give their children to intermarry with the peoples of the land. God had warned Israel of this danger when

they first entered the land of Canaan (Deut. 7:3-4). Although I know of many instances where God has graciously used a believing mate to lead an unbelieving spouse to salvation, those situations do not justify disobeying the clear command of God not to enter into an unequal yoke with unbelievers (2 Cor. 6:14). Ezra had dealt with this problem a few years before (Ezra 10), and Nehemiah will be dealing with it again in a few years from this time (Nehemiah 13).

The temptation of mixed marriages as a snare to God's people is a perpetual problem that Satan has used for centuries. If you are single, I cannot emphasize strongly enough that you must *never* enter into marriage with an unbeliever! Also, beware of nominal believers who claim to know Christ, but who are not committed to live in obedience to Him. If you are considering marrying a person whom you know is not all-out for Jesus Christ, it indicates that knowing and following Christ is not central to you. So you must start with personal repentance and renewal of your love for Christ.

In spite of what he may say, an unbeliever will not be an encouragement to you in pursuing God. He will not share your commitment to instill the knowledge of God in your children. He will not seek first God's kingdom and righteousness. Rather, he will pursue personal pleasure through the things and ways of this world. His values will be at odds with your values. You will be torn in two directions. Parents, I encourage you to instill God's standards for marriage in your children before their teen years. Pray for and help guide your children into God-centered marriages.

Thus personal application of spiritual truth must begin with the leadership. It starts with personal holiness based on understanding God's Word. It extends to the home.

4. Personal application of God's truth must extend to our work (10:31).

The Mosaic Law prohibited the Jews from working on the Sabbath, but it didn't say anything about buying from foreigners on the Sabbath, so there was a sort of loophole. But the people knew in their hearts that it was wrong to buy from foreigners on the Sabbath, and so they agreed to stop doing so. Also they agreed to let the land lay fallow every seventh year and to forgive all debts against fellow Jews on that year as the Law stipulated. In other

words, their spiritual commitment led to some practical changes in how they did business.

Although there are different views on whether Christians must keep the Sabbath and if so, how, my understanding is that we are not under the Law (Rom. 6:14). Therefore, Sunday is not the Christian Sabbath, with a list of things that we can or cannot do (Rom. 14:5; Gal. 4:10; Col. 2:16-17). At the same time, there is a principle in the Old Testament Sabbath laws that we can and should apply today. God designed us to need a day for rest and worship. Sunday is the Lord's day (Rev. 1:10) and it is proper to set aside our normal work routines and gather with the Lord's people for worship and edification. Sunday is also a good day to spend time with other believers and time with the Lord that we cannot spend during the busy schedules of the work week.

Although there is no direct application for us of letting the land lay fallow and of forgiving debts every the seventh year, those practices required the Jews to trust God in their business dealings. They had to trust that He would make up the crops that they lost and that He would provide the money that they let go by forgiving debts. Often when you obey God in the business world, you pay a price in the short run. Honesty often costs you in business and on paying taxes. But believers should trust that the God who sees everything we do will take care of us and reward us if we obey Him. Our business practices should reflect our Christian commitment, even when it is costly or inconvenient. Finally,

5. Personal application of God's truth must extend to our church commitments (10:32-39).

These verses mention a number of specific commitments to provide for temple worship, summed up by, "Thus we will not neglect the house of our God" (10:39). The phrase "the house of our God" occurs nine times in these verses.

Specifically, the people agreed to pay the temple tax of one-third of a shekel annually. In Exodus 30:11-16, it was one-half shekel. Some say that the Babylonian shekel and the Hebrew shekel had different valuations, which could be true. Others say that the tax in Exodus was levied only in census years, whereas this tax was annual. Others say that the amount was reduced here in light of the

people's poverty. Whatever the solution, the people agreed to support the needs of the house of God.

They also agreed to provide for the burnt offerings and for a rotation system to bring the wood to keep the altar burning. They agreed to bring the first fruits of their produce to the Lord, as well as to dedicate their firstborn children and animals to the Lord by redeeming them, as the Law directed (Exod. 13:13, 15). And they agreed to pay their tithes to support the temple.

Again, we are not under the Law of Moses, but there are principles here that apply to us. The overall principle is that we should be committed to the Lord's house. Church buildings are not His house, but people indwelt by His Spirit are. Christ loved the church and gave Himself for her (Eph. 5:25). If we are like Christ, we will love His church and give ourselves for her.

Giving the first fruits means that we should give to the Lord and His work the best, off the top, and not the leftovers. It's not wrong to give the leftovers, too (the yard sale for missions needs your junk!). But our giving should be a planned, systematic, cheerful, off-the-top demonstration that God has first place in our hearts (1 Cor. 16:1-2; 2 Cor. 8 & 9).

The New Testament standard for giving is not the tithe (10%), but rather as the Lord has prospered you (1 Cor. 16:2). He owns it all; we just manage it for His kingdom purposes. Stewardship of your finances in light of God's purpose is a pretty reliable gauge of your commitment to Jesus Christ (Luke 16:10-13). I would urge you to break out of the 10 percent mentality and trust God by giving generously to His work both here and abroad. If you want to read about a man who did that in a radical way, read the life of George Muller of Bristol. It has greatly impacted my life!

Conclusion

If we want to experience ongoing spiritual renewal, we need to get personal in applying God's Word in practical ways. Two final thoughts:

First, *work on specific application of Scripture to your life*. This is always more difficult than being general, but it is always more helpful and practical. For example, you may think, "I need to be more faithful in giving to the Lord's work." That's good, but too general.

Make it more specific: "I need to work on our family budget and commit to a specific amount to give each month." That's better, but you can still improve. "I will go to the Crown Financial Bible Study at church today and I will set aside Monday evening this week to work on our budget." That's specific and it's in your schedule. When it gets into your daily schedule, it gets done.

Second, *write down your specific applications*. These Jews put this agreement in writing (9:38), spelling out the details (10:30-39). Write down your spiritual priorities and goals and the steps you need to take to reach those goals. Spend some time periodically to evaluate how you're doing and to modify your goals as needed. I have a folder with my goals going back into the 1970's. Some of them I still haven't achieved and maybe never will, but many of them are now a part of my daily life. Although it's a secular book that you need to filter through a biblical lens, Stephen Covey and Roger and Rebecca Merrill's *First Things First* [Fireside/Simon & Schuster] is very helpful in this process.

A gray-haired old lady who was a longtime member of her church went out the door one Sunday and said to her pastor, "That was a wonderful sermon, just wonderful. Everything you said applies to someone I know." The key to spiritual renewal is *not* to apply God's truth to those we know. It is to apply it *personally* and *specifically*.

Discussion Questions

1. How can we discipline ourselves for godliness and yet avoid falling into rigid legalism?
2. How does the law of sowing and reaping (Gal. 6:6-7) fit in with God's grace?
3. The Hebrew parents arranged marriages for their children. Should parents today take a stronger role in whom their children marry? If so, how?
4. If Christians are not under the law of the tithe, how should they determine how much to give?

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