THE PROBLEM OF PERMISSIVENESS

Nehemiah 13:1-31

By

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Nehemiah Lesson 13

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The second law of thermodynamics states that in a closed system, things move toward the maximum state of entropy, or disorder. That physical law has a parallel in the spiritual realm: Even among God’s people, unless we are constantly fighting against it, things tend toward the maximum state of spiritual entropy. We live in a spiritually and morally permissive society. Unless we constantly wage war against the flesh, we tend to become more and more like the spiritual degeneracy that surrounds us.

Last week I received an email that listed some statistics about American pastors, sent out by Bill Bright and the Global Pastors Network. It stated that each month, 1,500 pastors leave the ministry due to moral failure, spiritual burnout, or contention in their churches. Fifty percent of pastors’ marriages will end in divorce. Seventy percent of pastors constantly fight depression. Almost 40 percent report that they have had an extra-marital affair since beginning their ministry. Even if the truth were only half those numbers, is it any wonder that the American church is not making a more significant impact on our nation!

The changes in our cultural morals since my childhood are staggering! The TV shows I grew up with were “Leave it to Beaver” and “Ozzie and Harriet.” Even though Ozzie and Harriet were married in real life, they slept in separate beds on the show.

Now, explicit sexual references and scenes are commonplace. An article in the Arizona Daily Sun [2/5/03] reported that while sex is more common on TV, at least it is more “honest,” meaning that there were more references to safe sex! It said that among the top 20 shows among teenagers, 20 percent included implied or depicted intercourse and 83 percent had some sexual content. Among primetime shows, seven out of 10 have sexual content. If we think that this cultural degeneracy has not damaged the church, we’re blind! The supreme cultural value of tolerance toward everyone and everything has permeated the church.
But the slide into moral permissiveness is not a recent problem. Nehemiah faced it. He had taken leave from his position as cupbearer to King Artaxerxes to go to Jerusalem, where he led the people to rebuild the walls in record time. Once the walls were up, God used Nehemiah and Ezra to lead the people in spiritual renewal. In chapter 10, the people signed a spiritual covenant, agreeing to obey God’s law as it applied both personally and to their corporate worship. The climax of the book is the dedication celebration in chapter 12, where the people “rejoiced because God had given them great joy” (12:43). It would have been nice if the book ended there: “And they all lived happily ever after.”

But real life isn’t like that. After 12 years as governor, Nehemiah had returned to Persia. We don’t know how long he was there, but during his absence, spiritual permissiveness and decline set in. The time references in chapter 13 are ambiguous, so it is not clear whether the reforms of 13:1-3 took place on the day of the dedication of the wall, or at another time. But the reforms were short-lived. Spiritual compromise snuck in through the spiritual leadership. When Nehemiah returned, he found that permissiveness was rampant in the very areas the people had covenanted to stand against just a few years before!

A lesser man may have said, “I give up! It’s useless to try to reform these people!” But Nehemiah strongly confronted the perpetual problem of permissiveness. His example teaches us that...

To deal with spiritual permissiveness, we must be aware of the problem areas and we must strongly confront them.

1. To deal with spiritual permissiveness, we must be aware of the problem areas.

Why hadn’t others in Israel dealt with these problems? Ezra may have died by now (in 13:13, Zadok is called the scribe, perhaps indicating that Ezra no longer held that post). Perhaps the other leaders just didn’t see the problems to the degree that Nehemiah did. Often missionaries who have been gone from the United States for a few years are shocked at the moral decline here when they return, whereas those of us who live in it are like the proverbial frog in the kettle. We may sense that the water is getting hot, but not enough to jump out before it cooks us!
Before the moral slide had set in, the people had listened to the reading of Scripture, which made them aware of God's standards for holiness for His people (13:1-3). In Deuteronomy 23:3-5, God declared that no Ammonite or Moabite should enter the assembly of Israel because of the way those nations had treated Israel when they were in the wilderness.

You may think, “That’s not very loving or fair! That’s penalizing people for what their ancestors did.” Frankly, I don’t know how those who deny God’s sovereign election of some to salvation deal with such verses. But the Bible clearly teaches that God owes sinners nothing. He would be perfectly just and fair to send everyone straight to hell. But He has chosen to pour out His love and grace on an elect people, whom He sovereignly chose from all others on this earth (Deut. 7:1-8).

The reason He did not want Israel accepting these foreigners into their midst was that they would corrupt Israel from following the Lord alone. The insidious counsel of Balaam (13:2) was for the king of Moab to get his people to intermarry with Israel, and pretty soon Israel would be just like the Moabites, following their gods. The same thing happened with King Solomon, whose foreign wives led him into idolatry (13:26). I should point out that repentant Moabites, like Ruth, were not only accepted into Israel, but even included in the genealogy of David and Jesus Christ. But those who would not give up their foreign gods would only serve to pollute Israel spiritually. They had to be excluded.

So sometime during Nehemiah’s absence, the reading of Scripture had led to obedience. But then Satan wormed his way in by introducing spiritual permissiveness in four areas. Keep in mind that it was Nehemiah’s knowledge of Scripture that enabled him to see these deviations. The only way that we will detect spiritual permissiveness in ourselves and in our church is by being steeped in God’s Word.

(1) There was theological permissiveness because of wrong relationships (13:4-9).

The temple contained some storage rooms that were used for the grain offerings, the utensils, and the tithes of the people (13:5). While Nehemiah was gone, Eliashib the high priest had cleared out one large room and one or more smaller rooms (13:5, 9) so that
Tobiah the Ammonite could set up an apartment there! Tobiah was a mocker who strongly opposed Nehemiah’s earlier efforts to rebuild the wall (2:10, 19; 4:3, 7-8). He had many connections with the Jews and had persuaded them that he was a good man. But meanwhile he had sent threatening letters to Nehemiah (6:17-19). But here he is, setting up a personal residence in the temple!

What’s going on here? Why would the high priest allow such a thing? There were probably several factors. One was that the high priest and Tobiah were related, probably through marriage (13:4). Another factor was that Tobiah had a Jewish name (which meant, “God is good”). So he wasn’t totally Ammonite! Just partially! It’s always more difficult to draw the line against a “good” person who is just mixed up on some things than against an outwardly wicked person who is spouting obvious blasphemy.

It’s tough to side with a strict commandment of God’s Word, such as excluding all Ammonites from the assembly of Israel, when your relative is an Ammonite, especially when he seems to be part Jewish! Let me put that in more modern terms. It’s tough to insist that the Roman Catholic way of salvation is not God’s way when you have Catholic relatives and friends. After all, we have so much in common! Why not focus on the areas where we agree, rather than the areas where we disagree? Theological permissiveness creeps in through the door of relationships with those who are partly right but partly very much wrong.

Dr. Howard Hendricks told us during my fourth year in seminary that the two factors that would most determine where we would be in ten years were the books we read and the friends we kept. Wrong friendships can seriously damage us spiritually. Paul told Timothy concerning those who hold to a form of godliness, but deny its power, “Avoid such men as these” (2 Tim. 3:5). By the way, teach your children the danger of wrong friendships and the importance of choosing friends who want to follow Jesus Christ.

(2) There was financial permissiveness (13:10-14).

This problem was connected to the first problem. Spiritual problems seldom occur in isolation! Because the high priest had moved Tobiah into the temple, there were not enough storerooms for the tithes. So the priests had not required the people to bring in
their tithes, and as a result, the Levites had to go to work in the fields to support their families, thus neglecting their temple duties.

While we are not under the law of the tithe, but rather are to give as the Lord has prospered us (1 Cor. 16:2), the principle holds true: Spiritual permissiveness invariably has a negative effect on our giving. The prophet Malachi was ministering at this time. He confronted the people for robbing God by not bringing their tithes into the storehouse (Mal. 3:8-10).

(3) There was permissiveness in the use of time (13:15-22).

Even though the people had agreed in their covenant with God to keep the Sabbath holy (10:31), they quickly fell into doing business on that day, even in Jerusalem (13:15). Some merchants from Tyre, who had no scruples about the Sabbath, were doing a brisk business selling imported fish and merchandise in the city on that day. No doubt the Jews had excuses (they would have called them “reasons”) for violating the Sabbath. “If I don’t tread my grapes that day, they will rot!” “Everyone else is doing business then. I can’t compete if I close up shop!” “All those imported fish will just rot and go to waste if we don’t buy them! It wouldn’t be right, to waste all that good food.”

Again, we are not under the strict Sabbath laws of Israel. But like these religious Jews, it is easy to make up excuses for why we put business and our pursuit of pleasure ahead of worship. “I’d like to spend time alone with God every day, but I’ve got to work long hours. When I get home, I’m exhausted and need some down time in front of the tube to relax.” “I’d like to go to church more often, but Sunday is my only day to sack in, eat a leisurely breakfast, and read the paper.” Spiritual permissiveness always affects how we spend our time.

(4) There was permissiveness in their homes (13:23-29).

Ezra had corrected this problem just a few years before, but here it was again! Nehemiah discovered that some of the Jews had married foreign women, and their children didn’t even speak Hebrew, which meant that they couldn’t understand the Scriptures. We need to understand that marrying an unbeliever will not only affect us. It also has a negative impact on our children. They will
grow up speaking the language of Ashdod, and not understanding the things of God.

There is no more vulnerable area of your life than that of the emotional attachments that you form with the opposite sex. Satan never comes along and says to a Christian young person, “Wouldn’t you like to marry this nice young girl from Ashdod? She will lead your children and you astray from the Lord. Your children will be half-pagan and your grandchildren will be completely pagan.” Rather, he says, “Your parents are too strict. They follow God’s laws and insist that you follow them too. But you’re missing out! Look at how much fun this sexy babe from Ashdod would be! You don’t have to marry her. Just go out and enjoy yourself for a change!” And before he knows it, the sexy babe from Ashdod has him compromising his morals, while at the same time she promises that she will follow his God after they get married.

Moral permissiveness always begins like an innocent trickle through the dam, but it subtly widens until the dam suddenly gives way. At that point, the damage is serious and widespread. How did Nehemiah confront this permissiveness?

2. To deal with spiritual permissiveness, we must strongly confront problem areas.

Some criticize Nehemiah for not being more tactful and polite, but when God’s people are being poisoned by permissiveness, politeness may not be best. If I saw you about to drink what I knew to be deadly poison, you wouldn’t want me politely to smile and think to myself, “I wouldn’t drink that, but I don’t want to impose my views on him. Each person has a right to his own opinions.” You’d want me to shout, “Wait! That will kill you!” And if need be, you’d want me forcibly to knock it from your hand.

That’s what Nehemiah did. He didn’t worry about being polite or about what people would think of him. I’m sure that he made many enemies by what he did here, but I’m also sure that he was God’s friend. Many no doubt grumbled about what an unloving, harsh man he was. But Nehemiah describes what he did with the Hebrew word hesed (13:14, translated “loyal deeds”), which is the word used in 13:22 (and throughout the OT) for God’s loyal love for His people. It is far more loving rudely to knock the poison out
of a person’s hand than it is to smile politely and watch him drink it. In each of these situations, Nehemiah dealt with the problem head on. There are four aspects to what he did:

(1) He discovered the problem.

You may say, “That’s a no-brainer!” But if it was so obvious, why hadn’t other leaders in Israel perceived what was wrong and dealt with it? Nehemiah saw what others did not see. As I said earlier, the reason he saw it was that he compared what he saw with what he knew from Scripture.

Look at 13:7: “I came to Jerusalem and learned about the evil that Eliashib had done for Tobiah ….” Nehemiah didn’t refer to it as a creative, alternative use for the temple storerooms! He called it evil. That wasn’t a popular word to apply to the high priest, but Nehemiah didn’t tone it down. In 13:10, it says that he discovered the fact that the Levites had not received the tithes. In 13:15, he saw the violation of the Sabbath. In 13:23, he also saw that the Jews had married foreign women. In every case, he observed what was happening, compared it to God’s unbending standards in Scripture, and then took action.

(2) He got upset.

Note 13:8-9: He was very displeased about Tobiah’s temple apartment. In 13:11, he reprimanded the officials. It doesn’t take much imagination to picture him asking in a raised voice why the house of God was forsaken. In 13:17-18, he again reprimanded them for their Sabbath violations, and it’s clear that he was upset. The classic is in 13:25, where he got so upset that he contended with them, cursed them (not profanity, but he pronounced a curse against them), struck some of them, and pulled out their hair, probably from their beards! Whoa! Derek Kidner (Ezra & Nehemiah, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries [IVP], p. 131) says,

Nehemiah’s explosion was as characteristic as Ezra’s implosion had been. Both were powerfully effective, and both were to find some parallel in our Lord’s encounters with evil. The shock treatment by Nehemiah was devastating in the same manner as the assault on the moneychangers, and the display of grief by Ezra (Ezra 9:3ff.; 10:1ff.) was as moving, in its way, as the lament over Jerusalem.
We need to be careful with righteous anger, in that we can easily excuse sinful anger as being righteous. But when we see sins or false teachings that are damaging God’s people, it is wrong not to be angry! To be complacent in the face of such evil is not to be like Jesus.

(3) He took strong, unmistakable action.

Nehemiah didn’t just say, “It makes me mad to see how Israel is drifting from the Lord!” and go back to his newspaper. He met the problems head on! He personally threw Tobiah’s household goods out of the storerooms. Then he had them cleanse the rooms and put the grain offerings back in there. Imagine how Tobiah must have reacted when he came home, wondered what that pile of furniture was doing outside, and then opened his door and saw his apartment filled to the ceiling with grain! I wish I could have seen the expression on his face!

With regard to the tithes, Nehemiah not only reprimanded the officials (13:11-13). He also restored them to their posts and appointed faithful men to oversee the collection and distribution of the tithes. Concerning the Sabbath problem, he commanded that the doors be shut and locked on the Sabbath (13:19-22). Then he stationed men there to enforce it. When the merchants from Tyre camped outside the gates, he warned them to leave or else he would use force against them. And he commanded the Levites to purify themselves and to stand as gatekeepers.

With regard to the mixed marriages, he not only strongly contended with those who were guilty, but when he found out that one of the grandsons of the high priest had married a daughter of Sanballat, he drove the young man away (13:28)! I think that means that he chased him out of town, so that he couldn’t defile the priesthood by succeeding his grandfather in the office. Kidner (p. 132) says of the word “chased,” “glorious word!”

Before we confront anyone in sin, we need to check the flesh and make sure that our motives are pure before God. Sometimes a more gentle approach will be more effective. But we often err by thinking that gentleness means being nice. Jesus was gentle when he pronounced woes on the Pharisees and called them hypocrites, blind guides, and whitewashed tombs (Matthew 23). Paul was filled
with the Spirit when he told Elymas the magician he was full of all deceit and fraud, called him a son of the devil and an enemy of all righteousness, and struck him blind (Acts 13:9-11). Sometimes sin demands a strong, direct confrontation.

(4) He was accountable to God and aware of His presence in every situation.

Four times Nehemiah utters brief prayers (13:14, 22, 29, 31). He wasn’t taking this strong action against permissiveness for his own sake. He was doing it for God’s sake. Kidner (p. 130) says of these prayers,

Nehemiah’s private self is completely of a piece with his public one: singleminded, utterly frank, and godly through and through. ... [His plea to be remembered] springs from love, not self-love, as his tireless zeal for God has testified. ... Further, the plea springs from humility, not self-importance, for it is an appeal for help. ... Nehemiah is committing himself and his cause (cf. 29) to the only safe hands.

I think that he shot up these brief prayers for God to remember him and his enemies because he was under severe attack. You don’t do what Nehemiah did here without incurring the wrath of those whose comfortable lifestyles you upset. But Nehemiah wasn’t a typical politician, trying to placate both sides and work a compromise. He wasn’t trying to win a popularity contest. He was seeking to please God by calling God’s people back to holy living.

Nehemiah’s God-ward focus is essential if we want to confront the permissiveness of our times with the right spirit. If we lose it, we can easily become self-righteous moral crusaders who look down on those who are blinded by sin. Living with an awareness of God’s presence and that we must answer to Him will give us the courage to stand alone, if need be, and confront out of love.

**Conclusion**

It’s easy to see the faults of others but to be blind to our own permissiveness. I encourage you to begin with yourself. As you read God’s Word, ask yourself where you may have slipped into the ways of our godless culture. After you deal with yourself, I encourage husbands and fathers to give godly leadership and correction when needed to your families. When the other pastors and I warn
of spiritual dangers, rather than getting angry and leaving the church, stop and prayerfully consider whether what we say is in line with God’s Word.

Spiritual permissiveness is a perpetual problem. Like Nehemiah, we must detect it by God’s Word and strongly confront it if we want to hear our Lord’s “Well done!” when we stand before Him.

Discussion Questions

1. To what extent should we shelter ourselves and our kids from the world as opposed to seeing how corrupt it is?

2. How much theological variance should we tolerate? Where do we biblically draw lines of separation?

3. How do we know when to be restrained and gentle and when to be bold and even emotional in confronting someone in sin?

4. What distinguishes righteous anger from sinful anger? How can we guard ourselves against justifying sinful anger as being righteous?

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