

International Sunday School Lesson Study Notes

Lesson Text: Nehemiah 13:15-22

Lesson Title: Sanctifying the Lord's Day

Introduction

History records the sad and discouraging truth that spiritual renewals and revivals are often short-lived. After all the wonderful events recorded in the book of Nehemiah we come to the final chapter that begins with less than encouraging news. Nehemiah 13 is one of the last portions of the Old Testament to be written and contains a turn of events that should place all of God's children on spiritual alert, especially after we have been spiritually renewed.

In the 32nd year of the reign of Artaxerxes, about 433 B.C., Nehemiah left Jerusalem and returned to Persia. It seems from Nehemiah 2:6 that he had promised the king and queen that he would return. Since Esther was the queen of the previous king Ahasuerus, it could be that she had influenced the present king and queen to be kind and favorable to the Jews. That would have made it easier and possibly even desirable for Nehemiah to return. Either way, Nehemiah returned to Persia.

During Nehemiah's absence of about 10-12 years, the people returned to their former ways, led by the high priest Eliashib (Nehemiah 13:4-5). It was during Nehemiah's absence that the prophet Malachi wrote his prophecy indicting the priests and the people for their sinful actions. When Nehemiah returned and realized what had happened, he said, "*...it grieved me sore*" (Nehemiah 13:8). The spiritual decline of the people involved three general areas. First, they failed to keep their promise of remaining separate from their pagan neighbors (Nehemiah 10:28-30). Second, Eliashib the priest, who had been put in charge of the storehouses, failed to support the Levites and priests (Nehemiah 13:10). Third, they violated the laws of the Sabbath which is the heart of our lesson text (Nehemiah 10:30).

The Sabbath was a special day to Old Testament Israelite. The word "Sabbath" means "ceasing," or, "rest." The first biblical reference to the "Sabbath" as a day of rest for the people of God is found in Exodus 16:23-30. The basis for the "Sabbath" as a day of rest is Genesis 1:1-2:3. When God as Creator finished His work, He rested on the seventh day or "Sabbath" (Genesis 2:2-3). In relation to God's work and then His resting when His work was finished, the Old Testament Israelites

were to work six days and rest from their labors on the seventh day (Exodus 20:8-11). That was part of their covenant relationship with God (Exodus 31:13-17; Deuteronomy 5:12-14; Ezekiel 20:12). If God's people violated the "Sabbath," the consequences were severe (Leviticus 26:14-35; Ezekiel 20:13-24).

Teachers Note: Before we make application of Sabbath law to the Lord's Day in each verse of our lesson, let's examine what was happening in Nehemiah's day when the Israelites were living under a covenant relationship with God and the Old Testament Sabbath law. Then, at the end of the lesson we will prayerfully and biblically make application to believers today and the Lord's Day.

The Charge (Nehemiah 13:15-16)

Verse 15

"In those days saw I in Judah some treading wine presses on the sabbath, and bringing in sheaves, and lading asses; as also wine, grapes, and figs, and all manner of burdens, which they brought into Jerusalem on the sabbath day: and I testified against them in the day wherein they sold victuals."

"In those days" is a reference to Nehemiah's return to Jerusalem which would have inaugurated a sort of second term of leadership for him. Nehemiah wasted no time in leveling an accurate charge against God's people in relation to Sabbath violations. Upon his return he "saw in Judah" a general violation of the law of rest in several areas. The Sabbath requirement was "no work," yet the people were "treading wine presses," or making wine on the Sabbath, they were "bringing in sheaves," or harvesting crops on the Sabbath, and working their animals, "lading asses." They had their farmers markets open for operation on the Sabbath selling "wine, grapes, figs" and about anything imaginable.

"And I testified against them in the day wherein they sold victuals" simply means Nehemiah spoke up and warned them about the wrong they were doing.

Verse 16

"There dwelt men of Tyre also therein, which brought fish, and all manner of ware, and sold on the sabbath unto the children of Judah, and in Jerusalem."

The "men of Tyre" is a referenced to the merchant men of ancient "Tyre" who were well known for their success as salesmen. They "brought fish, and all manner of ware" and the "children of Judah" bought their goods, "in Jerusalem," on the

Sabbath. As Gentiles, the "men of Tyre" didn't care about the Sabbath but Nehemiah's point here is that there were selling on the Sabbath to "the children of Judah" who should have known better than to buy on the Sabbath and to add insult to injury they transacted these deals "in Jerusalem." If you carefully and prayerfully read this verse you come away with the thought that Nehemiah is not rebuking the "men of Tyre." His issue is with "the children of Judah."

All of the activities of God's people mentioned in verses 15-16 were in violation of Sabbath laws and their repeated promises to keep the Sabbath Day. Nehemiah's charge was appropriate and accurate.

The Confrontation (Nehemiah 13:17-18)

Verse 17

"Then I contended with the nobles of Judah, and said unto them, What evil thing is this that ye do, and profane the sabbath day?"

"Contended with the nobles of Judah" means Nehemiah went straight to the problem. He also clearly defined the problem. What they were doing in buying and selling on the Sabbath was an "evil thing" and it resulted in the Sabbath being "profaned." The word "evil" means "bad in kind and value." It also means "bad in comparison with what it could be." "Profane" means "polluted, desecrated, dishonored." Nehemiah is not mincing words. This is nothing to be overlooked or taken lightly.

Verse 18

"Did not your fathers thus, and did not our God bring all this evil upon us, and upon this city? yet ye bring more wrath upon Israel by profaning the sabbath."

Nehemiah gives the people a little history lesson here wrapped up in a couple powerful questions. "Did not your fathers thus..." means "your ancestors did the same things on the Sabbath you are doing." "Did not our God bring all this evil upon us, and upon this city" means the reason God sent them into captivity in the first place was because their "fathers" and ancestors had "profaned the Sabbath" (Jeremiah 17:21-27). Nehemiah has confronted the people with historical truth.

The Changes (Nehemiah 13:19)

Verse 19

"And it came to pass, that when the gates of Jerusalem began to be dark before the sabbath, I commanded that the gates should be shut, and charged that they should not be opened till after the sabbath: and some of my servants set I at the gates, that there should no burden be brought in on the sabbath day."

The Jewish "Sabbath," which is Saturday by our calendar, begins at sundown on Friday and continues until sundown on Saturday. Sabbath's differ among some races and religious beliefs but it is normally a twenty-four hour period. For Nehemiah, he changed the Sabbath from just another day among God's people by ordering "the gates of Jerusalem" to "be shut" at sundown "before the Sabbath." He "charged" that the "gates" remain "shut" until the Sabbath was over. This action would prevent the violations of traveling merchants coming into the city and the people going in and out and being involved in unlawful Sabbath activities.

In order to see that the gates remained shut, Nehemiah "set some of my servants at the gates" to enforce the changes. Nehemiah is serious about all of this because God is serious about His Sabbath!

The Challenge (Nehemiah 13:20)

Verse 20

"So the merchants and sellers of all kind of ware lodged without Jerusalem once or twice."

When you first read this verse you are tempted to ask the meaning or the significance of what Nehemiah is saying. Evidently, "the merchants and sellers of all kinds of ware" camped just outside the gates of Jerusalem. Nehemiah had noticed this "once or twice." Although the gates of the city were closed, there were other smaller access doors individuals could walk through. The closed gates prevented the donkeys or beasts of burdens from carrying in the loads of merchandise to be sold. It seems these "merchants" were camped outside the gates with their goods in an attempt to sale to the Jews moving in and out of the city. They made it as easy as possible for the Israelites to violate the Sabbath.

The Consequences (Nehemiah 13:21)

Verse 21

"Then I testified against them, and said unto them, Why lodge ye about the wall? if ye do so again, I will lay hands on you. From that time forth came they no more on the sabbath."

Nehemiah is speaking to the merchants when he asked, "Why lodge ye about the wall?" This great man of God is not ashamed to confront these merchants concerning their seductive actions. In fact, Nehemiah says, "I will lay hands on you." As Doctor Jerry Vines said, *"Nehemiah isn't talking about ordaining a deacon when he said he would lay hands on them."* If these merchants continue to set up their goods "about the wall," Nehemiah will exercise his authority as governor and have them arrested. He had already exercised his authority with Tobiah in chapter 13:7-8. Tobiah the Ammonite had been given a room in the temple by Eliashib the high priest (Nehemiah 13:28). Commenting on Tobiah and how Nehemiah handled him, Doctor Warren W. Wiersbe writes, *"It was bad enough that an Ammonite was living in the temple, and that a Jewish high priest had let him in; but this intruder was using a room dedicated to God for the storing of the offerings used by the Levites. He defiled the temple by his presence and robbed the servants of God at the same time. Nehemiah lost no time throwing out both the man and his furniture, rededicating the room to the Lord, and using it again for its intended purpose. Like our Lord, Nehemiah had to cleanse the temple; and it appears that he had to do it alone. Bible Exposition Commentary (BE Series) - Old Testament - The Bible Exposition Commentary – History.*

Nehemiah was successful in his words and actions. "From that time forth came they no more on the sabbath." Perhaps these merchants had heard about Tobiah and knew Nehemiah wasn't kidding!

The Command (Nehemiah 13:22)

Verse 22

"And I commanded the Levites that they should cleanse themselves, and that they should come and keep the gates, to sanctify the sabbath day. Remember me, O my God, concerning this also, and spare me according to the greatness of thy mercy."

Finally, Nehemiah "commanded the Levites" to "cleanse themselves" and "keep" or guard "the gates." This was a somewhat different assignment for the Levites, who typically served within the temple. The fact that the Levites were to cleanse themselves ritually for such a small task seems particularly odd. Yet, it indicates the sacredness of the assignment in Nehemiah's view. By "keeping the gates," the Levites would "sanctify the Sabbath day." They would make sure it was set apart

from all the other days. True holiness, according to Nehemiah, pertains not only to what happens within the temple, but also what happen to life outside in the Holy City.

"Remember me, O my God, concerning this also, and spare me according to the greatness of thy mercy" is another of Nehemiah's powerful prayers. In fact, this is the ninth of eleven prayers recorded in Nehemiah. Prayer is so important in all that we do as exemplified in the life of Nehemiah. There is nothing too small or insignificant in regard to prayer.

Nehemiah asked God to "remember" him which is a key word in several of Nehemiah's prayers (Nehemiah 1:8; 13:14, 22, 29, 31). When Nehemiah asks God to "remember" him it seems to indicate that he is asking God to "remember" his faithfulness "concerning" how he has handled everything concerning the return, the rebuilding, the renewal, and even the relapse of the people into disobedience. Nehemiah wanted his reward from God and not from men. He also asked God for "mercy." Without God's "mercy" nothing would have been restored and everything would still be in ruins. Nehemiah is aware of the need of God's "mercy" in everything he does.

Application

The question now is how does this account in Nehemiah and all of the Sabbath Day laws of the Old Testament apply to New Testament believers? Is Sunday "the Christian Sabbath"? Is the Jewish Sabbath still in force for Christians in some way? Are there any rules concerning the Lord's Day in the Bible? Are believers today free to do anything they want on Sunday? Is anything a sin on Sunday? Such questions are important and should be answered biblically. Several truths that may help us with these questions are clear in scripture.

First, the Lord's Day, the first day of the week, is not a "Christian Sabbath," because the Sabbath is the seventh day of the week and belonged especially to the Jews. The Lord's Day is the first day of the week, Sunday, belonging to born again believers. When Jesus came He not only changed the way of worship, He changed the day of worship. Therefore, the Old Testament laws governing the Jewish Sabbath don't apply to the Lord's Day.

Second, Sunday, the Lord's Day, is a special day to God's people because it commemorates the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. That truth alone should cause believers to want to make Sunday different from all other days. While there are no rules in the New Testament as to what the believer can and cannot do

on Sunday, believers ought to use the Lord's Day to the glory of the Lord. It is very clear in scripture what should be the priority of the believer on the Lord's Day (Matthew 28:1; John 20:19; Acts 20:7; 1 Corinthians 16:2).

Third, the Israelites of Nehemiah's day honored the Sabbath as a sign of their covenant relationship with God. The basis of the Sabbath was a finished work of creation by God. Believers today honor the Lord's Day as a celebration of the new creation we are in Christ Jesus (2 Corinthians 5:17). We *"serve in newness of spirit, and not in the oldness of the letter"* (Romans 7:6).

Conclusion

The people in Nehemiah's day broke their covenant problem when they violated Sabbath rules. That special day of rest became just another ordinary day of life with the main focus on themselves instead of God. While Christians today do not have a set of "rules" to govern us in our activities on the Lord's Day, we do have the Holy Spirit in our hearts and the example of the early church as to what our priority should be on Sunday.

Is America a better nation spiritually by making Sunday a day of sporting events, shopping, family time, and just a "do whatever I feel like day"? Have teachers of God's Word and preachers helped our nation and our churches by being silent on the subject? Does your family benefit more from recreation and entertainment on Sunday's than they do the fellowship of God's people and worship at God's house. Is Sunday more about you and your family or Christ and His family? These are some important questions you must answer if you profess to be a Christian.

Remember, Sunday is the "Lord's Day," not yours!

Amen.