

Commitment is a Four Letter Word

Intro:

I made a mistake last week when I said we were jumping to chapter 13 –that will be next week. This morning we're going to be in Nehemiah 10, so please turn with me there. Before we read, let's take a quick flyover of what's happening leading up to this chapter.

Neh. Chapters 1-7 is about God working through Nehemiah to rally the disheartened and vulnerable Jews in Jerusalem to rebuild the walls surrounding the city and make it strong again. The wall is finished in chapter 7 and then in chapters 8-13 God begins to work in His people to build them from a fractured and disunified people into a strong and unified community of faith. In chapter 8 Ezra begins to read the Word of God to the people and they begin to *obey* God's word and a month long revival takes place. Then in chapter 9 they begin to openly confess their sins and the sins of their fathers to God and a spirit of repentance sweeps over them. By the end of chapter 9 they have been experiencing a spiritual revival for almost an entire month and so let's pick up the story in **Neh. 9:38**.

Because of all this...as a direct result of the month-long spiritual revival they have experienced...we make a firm covenant in writing. Literally we cut a firmness. Beginning with Nehemiah and their other leaders – they are publicly ready to sign on the dotted line their commitment to obey God's word.

Neh 10:1, 28-39

There are two things that preachers need to be careful NOT to do when they preach. The first thing is to never aim their messages specifically at someone in the congregation. It's ok if people *feel* like they were in the preacher's crosshairs as he preached the message – it's never ok for the preacher to actually have someone in their sights when they preach.

The other thing preachers need to be careful NOT to do is bring their personal frustration into the pulpit and vent it on the congregation. It's not wrong to carry a burden from the Lord into the pulpit, and sometimes that burden may be a strong word, and even a hard word, but we need to be very careful that the burden we carry isn't our own burden of frustration or personal agenda and hit the folks with that instead of the heart of God for them. I think over the 20 years that I've been preaching, I've tried to be pretty careful not to do either of these two things in general. But there is one message that I preached in the first church I pastored, where I'm pretty sure I carried some personal frustration into the pulpit and vented it on the poor listeners.

The message was about commitment, and I believe the Lord was doing a legitimate work in my heart to see us grow in our commitment to the Lord. But I didn't take the time to prayerfully and carefully filter that good desire through the filter of grace and humility and so I stepped into the pulpit with my focus fixed on what people weren't doing, and *should* be doing, and needed to *start* doing, and I unloaded an "I don't think you're committed enough" message on that poor church. Now this church was filled with many wonderful people who served and cared in countless daily ways but all I was focused on that morning was what I felt they weren't doing and it came out in an awkward and painful message. Honestly I felt crummy giving the message, and I felt crummier after I preached it. It's one I'd like to have back, and to this day I still remember the title of that message. It was titled "Commitment isn't a four letter word". The idea was that for some Christians a call to commitment is automatically equated with legalism and is as distasteful as a curse word.

This morning Nehemiah 10 brings us to the subject of commitment – and it’s a good subject – but let me begin by assuring you that I’m not frustrated with you. I’m not upset with anybody here. I’m not even frustrated that my computer got some kind of malware virus last night and I spent hours trying to fix it when I should have been working on the message. Ok, I was frustrated last night, but not at any of you, and today, I’m in a good mood. I’m even optimistic that the Giants might beat the Eagles today. So if you’re good, I’m good this morning. And just to make sure this message on commitment is *nothing* like that message on commitment, I’ve changed the title from “Commitment isn’t a four letter word” to, “Commitment *is* a four letter word!” And we’ll get to what that means in a little bit.

But let’s get back to what’s happening with the Jewish community in Jerusalem. Moved by the spiritual renewal that they have experienced, they make a firm covenant with God and each other– verse 29 says they enter into a curse and an oath- that they are going to obey God’s word. They committed themselves in four ways:

a. Committed not to inter-marry with the Gentile nations surrounding them

BTW, this is not a prohibition against mixed marriages. The issue for the Jews was an issue of spiritual compromise, not ethnic separation. To intermarry would pollute their faith in the living God by influencing them to embrace their spouse’s pagan gods, just as Solomon’s heart was moved away from devotion to God to pagan idolatry by his many foreign wives. That, not ethnic intermarriage, is the issue as we can see in the example of a godly Jew named Boaz who married a Moabite woman named Ruth and even though the Moabites were Israel’s enemies, for Boaz this was marrying out of his league cause Ruth was a giant of a woman who had a pure love for God that set her apart even among the Jews.

b. Committed not to conduct business on the Sabbath

The Gentiles surrounding Jerusalem would have treated the Sabbath like any other day. Every day is a good day to make money. Every day is a good day to conduct business. But they knew God had commanded them to observe the Sabbath and so they commit to set the Sabbath apart as a day of rest and worship.

c. Committed to observe the Sabbatical Year

God commanded in Exodus 23 that every seventh year they weren’t to plant crops but allow the land to rest, and allow the poor to eat from what grows in that seventh year. They were also to forgive debts on the seventh year. These commandments broke the grip of greed and strengthened their faith in God because they had to trust God to provide what they needed for two years instead of just one. They also committed to freeing any indentured servants who, in order to pay their debts, had sold themselves into slavery. It was a firm commitment to let go of the financial gain they could benefit by exploiting needy people to the max.

d. Tithe for the service of the house of God

This is very relevant for them because in the middle of Jerusalem was a newly rebuilt temple. Their devotion to God needed to express itself in giving for the work of the house of God. They had neglected it; but now they commit not to neglect it anymore but to give faithfully to His house.

Commitment is a four letter word

Re:building
Allen Snapp
Grace Community Church
Oct. 27, 2013

For these Jerusalem Jews, their commitment was bound up in the four letter word *oath*. They took a public oath and signed their names on the dotted line that they would obey God's word and called curses down on their heads if they ever broke their commitment.

Commitment is a four letter word for Christians, but it's a different word. Our commitment isn't motivated by an oath, it's motivated by love. If we don't get this right, we will quickly drift into legalism in the name of commitment. Well intentioned messages on commitment will ask questions like "*are you committed enough to God? Are you committed enough to evangelism? Are you committed enough to your church? Are you committed enough to reading the Bible every day?*" And the implied answer is, *no, you're not committed enough. Promise God –take an oath! - that from this day forward you are going to be more committed to Him and His work.* It's commitment based on an oath and it didn't work then – as we'll see in chapter 13 next week – and it won't work today. Our commitment cannot be motivated by oath, but by love.

When God wants to address our commitment, He doesn't start with our commitment – He starts with His commitment. He doesn't call us to cut covenant, He cuts covenant with Himself for us because He knows that we are hopeless covenant-breakers. That's what Jesus the Son of God did when he became a Man and obeyed God's laws perfectly, and then died condemned in our place. To find a man who could cut and keep covenant with God faithfully, God had to become man and cut that covenant with Himself. Our relationship with God and acceptance by God isn't based on our being committed to Him, but His being committed to us. And that commitment flows from His great love for us. Four letter word: love.

And when God moves in a person's heart to believe in Jesus – for we are saved by faith, not by works - it's not a sterile and emotionless faith, but a loving faith. We come to Jesus to be saved because we believe, we trust, we *love*. That's why Peter can write to believers who never saw Jesus and say, *though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him... (1 Peter 1:8).*

Love always leads to commitment. When a man and woman want to express the deepest love two people can have for each other, they *commit* themselves to each other for the rest of their lives – for better, for worse, till death do them part. Love always leads to commitment.

So when God wants to grow our commitment, He doesn't start with our commitment, He starts with our love. Jesus said, *if you love me, you'll keep my commandments*. If our commitment is flagging, the answer isn't to prop up our commitment but to stir up our love. This order is vital because while love always leads to the right kind of commitment, commitment doesn't always lead to the right kind of love. Turn with me to Rev. 2:1

"To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: 'The words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands.

"I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false. I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake, and you have not grown weary..."

Jesus commends them for doing the right stuff and believing the right stuff. Think about that: they are doing the right things and believing the right things. What more is there? But there is something very out of alignment with this church.

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But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. (Rev. 2:1-5)

Sometimes people talk about *losing* their first love. But Jesus didn't say they lost their first love. He said they'd abandoned their first love. There's a big difference. The New King James says, *You have left your first love*. When we lose something we don't do it on purpose and we don't know where it is – it's lost. When we leave something, we do it on purpose, and we know where it is – it's where we left it.

Jesus doesn't say, search for what you lost, he says "remember, repent, and do the first works..." Go back where you were and retrieve what you left. But what does that mean... *do the first works*? They're doing the right works – so what does Jesus mean, do the *first* works? I think Pastor Crawford Loritts gets it right when he says that some texts are meant to be taken emotionally. Jesus is saying go back and remember those tender moments when you loved Jesus more than life itself – and everything you did, you did out of that love. You were pagans living in a godless, pagan city, when you heard this guy named Paul talking about Jesus and scales fell off your eyes and you believed and scales fell off your heart and you loved a Savior you had never seen. And you were crazy ready to do anything to serve him and lead others to know and love him. Remember those days, remember those tender moments in your heart and return to those works. You're doing the right things and believing the right things but you have an alignment problem: you are committed to Jesus but not loving Jesus.

Fixing our alignment problem

Probably everyone of us would admit that our commitment level isn't where it should be. I know I can say that. And maybe some of us, if we're honest, would admit that we are more committed to doing the right stuff and believing the right stuff than we are to loving Jesus. Whether our problem is that we lack commitment, or that our commitment is lacking love, God's answer is to realign our hearts to His again, to take us back to that love we once had for Jesus. Crazy love. Radical love. First love. That's what we want to be all about as a church: loving Jesus and doing the things that come from loving Jesus. Our mission statement begins with "Loving God" and then moves to "growing together, serving others, going to the world." That's the right order.

Commitment is a four letter word: love. Let's ask God to supernaturally move in our hearts and our church so that our first love is stirred and stirred and stirred in our hearts– and then let's do the works that flow from a commitment that flows from love.