

Fighting the Currents of Complacency Pt. 1

Neh. 13:1-31

One of the things my family loves to do on vacation is go to the ocean. Some of us love it more than others, but some of our best vacations have been spent at the ocean. But when Matthew was younger, once he learned to body surf, we had to keep a really close eye on him cause once he got in the waves, he wasn't keeping a close eye on us. He'd be surfing the waves and getting banged around, and every wave would be moving him further down the beach and he wouldn't even know it. He'd start out right in front of us, then a couple minutes later he'd be 20 yards down the beach, then 50 yards, then 100 yards, until he became a little dot among crowds of swimmers – then Janice or I knew it was time to go get him and bring him back. And then it would start all over again. We'd tell him to keep his eye on us, and stay close to us, but inevitably he'd get caught up in the fun of the waves and lose track of his position and we'd have to go get him again. The ocean current would slowly but relentlessly carry him away from us.

As we come to the last chapter of the book of Nehemiah, after all the success and spiritual renewal that the book recounts, chapter 13 is the honest and sad account of God's people drifting far from the commitments they made in chapter 10. In chapter 10 the Jewish community – every man, woman, and child, had signed an oath to *observe and do* all that God's word commanded them to do and they even went so far as to call down curses on their heads if they ever broke their oath. But when Nehemiah returns from having been away for several years, he finds that they were breaking every vow:

They had vowed to keep themselves set apart from the surrounding pagan nations and the temple set apart for the work of God. (10:28) But Nehemiah discovers that Eliashib the priest, because of family ties by marriage, has rented out a room in the temple to Tobiah the Ammonite, the same man who had mocked and threatened the Jews as they were working to rebuild the wall. This man is an enemy of the Jews who's pretending now to be a friend and he's living in the very house of God. Nehemiah immediately recognizes that this is an evil defiling of the temple, but no one else in the city seems to notice or care.

Nehemiah also finds that, though the Jews had vowed to give faithfully to the house of God and not neglect it, that they had stopped giving for so long that the Levites, who were supposed to live off of the tithes as they served God, had to abandon the service of God's house to go back to their farms and till the land in order to survive. They promised with an oath not to neglect God's house, but Nehemiah the *house of God forsaken. (Vs.11)*

They had also broken their commitment not to conduct business on the Sabbath. Everyone is working, trading wine, bringing in crops, and buying and selling on the Sabbath just as if it were the same as any other day.

Finally, they had drifted far from their commitment not to intermarry with the Gentile nations surrounding them. In verse 23 Nehemiah describes what he saw as he walked through the city: *23 In those days also I saw the Jews who had married women of Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab. 24 And half of their children spoke the language of Ashdod, and they could not speak the language of Judah, but only the language of each people.*

Last week I said this isn't a prohibition against mixed marriages but a protection against their being influenced by the pagan worship of the surrounding nations and here we see exactly what God warned them would happen. Jewish men have taken foreign women as wives and they've had children, and those children, as most children are, are being taught by their pagan moms, and guess what? They're

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not teaching them to worship Yahweh, they're teaching them to worship the pagan gods of Asdod, Ammon, and Moab. Nehemiah finds that these children aren't learning Hebrew so they won't even be able to read the Hebrew scriptures to learn about Him. This is the opposite of what we saw in the dedication this morning. These father's hearts have drifted so far from God that they are condemning their children to be lost to God, and jeopardizing the very future of Israel and the unique revelation of Yahweh it has been entrusted with.

Only a few years earlier, the people of God in Jerusalem were so on fire for God that they vowed with oaths to observe and do all that God commanded – but they have drifted so far from that commitment that they are breaking every commitment they made, and no one sees or cares.

Fighting the currents of complacency

Spiritual drift is a reality in the life of every believer. We start out here and before we know it we end up there. Some of us have had powerful experiences with God, maybe we knelt at an altar and with tears streaming down our face, and love glowing in our hearts we surrendered our lives to the Lordship of Christ and all we wanted to do is to serve Jesus with everything inside of us. But over time, little by little, we didn't even see it happening, that fire began to cool. Last week I talked about leaving our first love – most believers don't say, "I'm gonna leave my first love" – no, we drift from it a little at a time and *don't even know we're drifting away from it*. This is a constant issue in our lives. I'll bet some of you felt stirred in your hearts to return to that first love last Sunday – but maybe by this morning you can't believe that already you've drifted a ways from that desire. It's still there, but it's not as strong as last week. You can still see it, but man you've moved down the beach in just one week.

I know this, not because I am a keen observer and see it happening in others. I know this because it goes on in my heart all the time. Yeah, my heart drifts too. We live in a world, and with a heart, where there are relentless and powerful currents pulling and pushing us away from God. It's something we will have to face – and fight – for as long as we live on this earth.

How can we fight it? I want us to consider four lessons we can learn from Nehemiah and the Jews of Jerusalem about our fight against spiritual drift and the currents of complacency. Look at two this morning and then finish up with two next week.

1. It takes more than just commitment alone to fight the currents of complacency, we need Jesus

You'd think that if the currents are pressing us towards complacency and disobedience, that the best way to fight it would be by recommitting ourselves to love and obey God.

Commitment to God is a good thing and we should cultivate it, but I submit to you that we can't fight the currents of complacency by raw commitment alone. I've been in churches that try to do that. I remember one church I went to for a while, it was loud and high energy and they pumped us full of a "no compromise, I'm done with fooling around, I taking back this city for God and living a radical life of obedience to God" message every service and we'd leave so ramped up we were ready to storm hell with a squirt gun (as we used to say). Without going into all the details, I watched that large church die a slow and painful death, and knew many believers who were left shell-shocked and confused. We can't fight the currents of complacency and drift with raw commitment alone – we need Jesus. Here's why.

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Commitment can only address what we do, it can't fully address our hearts. So we can commit ourselves to doing all the things we're supposed to do: read the Bible, pray, go to church, tell people about Jesus. Commitment can nail down our actions but it can't nail down our hearts. We can learn the language of commitment and talk about loving Jesus and being radical in our obedience and cutting edge and all that cool language, but what goes on in our hearts is we begin to do it because we want to be known as loving Jesus and radically obedient and cutting edge.

While we're being careful not to drift in one direction, we're drifting away in another. The currents of complacency will push us up the beach just as gladly as push us down the beach. In one direction is flagrant disobedience, in the other is self-righteous, prideful obedience – which is just as nauseating, if not more so, to God. Commitment is a good thing, but it's never enough to keep us close to God.

You say, *how do you get that from this chapter?* I get it by placing this chapter into its larger context of the Old Testament. As we see the failures of this Jewish community, and as we look at the history of broken promises, failures, idolatries and disobedience of the Israelites throughout the OT, the lesson that we learn from Israel isn't, *they failed, but we need to try harder and do better!* The lesson is that their failure was meant to reveal their need for a Savior and drive them to Christ and we need Jesus just as much to keep us close to God and fight the currents of complacency because those currents are limited to what we do, they run right through our hearts, pressing us away from God – sometimes in this direction, sometimes in that direction.

Janice and I would never leave it up to Matthew to find his way back to us, we would keep our eye on him all the time and finally go and get him back. Jesus came to bring us back to God and we need him to continually bring us back. We need to be committed, but we need Jesus more. Isn't it great to be saved – not just from the outside currents pummeling us, but from those treacherous inside currents that pummel us too? It's what the hymnist understood when he wrote the insightful 3rd verse in the hymn *Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing*:

*Oh, to grace how great a debtor daily I'm constrained to be
Let Thy goodness, like a fetter bind my wandering heart to Thee
Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it, prone to leave the God I love
Here's my heart, oh take and seal it, seal it for Thy courts above*

Do you hear the refrain of dependency on God? We are debtors to God and dependent on the Lord to bind our hearts to the God we love– everyday! Commitment alone cannot bind our wandering hearts to the God we love – we need Jesus.

2. We need constant and consistent engagement with God's word to fight the currents of complacency

Nehemiah doesn't tell us the exact chain of events that occurred, but I think we can piece together some clues from his account to find out what led to their being so far from God that they are breaking all their oaths made to God.

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Some of you may not know that Mike Rawleigh has training as a glass fracture analyst. When glass breaks it leaves clues that, if you know how to read them, will point back to the original source or reason for the breakage. I think Nehemiah has left clues that help us understand what was the original source that shattered all the promises they had made to God.

The first thing Nehemiah sees is Tobiah living in the temple – using the chamber that was meant for storing the tithes and offerings of the people. And the second thing he sees is that people have stopped tithing altogether to the temple. That's the fracture point: whether the people grew disillusioned by the scandal of Tobiah living in the temple, or whether the room meant to store the tithes was available for Tobiah because the people stopped giving, that is where the promises shattered. Because they stopped giving, the Levites, who were entrusted with teaching the people the word of God, fled back to their lands and the word of God was no longer being declared or taught to the people.

Without the daily and consistent input from God's word calling them to obey, the Jews drift further and further away. The crowds get indifferent to the Sabbath because they're not being challenged from God's word to obey, and hey, we can make more money if we work on the Sabbath. Men get complacent about who they marry and how their children are raised. With a famine of God's word, all the commitments they made start to shatter, one by one. The currents push them further and further away from God and there is no clear call from God's word to bring them back.

Conclusion

We need to be constantly and consistently taught and instructed by God's word. If we neglect reading God's word daily (not legalistically, but knowing our need for it) our souls will grow thin. Our passion for Jesus will grow cold. The fire will burn low and ultimately go out.

Every Sunday we meet together and someone preaches God's word. Let me ask you a question: do you remember everything we've ever taught? Do you even remember half of what we've taught? Do you even remember the points from last Sunday? I'd have to stop and think and I preached it! Harder question: are you *doing* everything you've ever heard God's word call you to do? Think about the messages that have really touched you – how long before it's, *I don't remember what he said, but it was a powerful message*. Yes, we do need to grow in hearing and applying and remembering. But to another degree, there is an accumulative effect that builds us up in Christ, and it's not limited to any one message or what we do or don't remember. We need to be reminded constantly from God's word. Our growth is accumulative and we need to engage with God's word and the preaching of God's word constantly to keep the growth happening.

When Jesus saw the church of Ephesus leaving its first love, he spoke to them and his word were meant to call them back (we don't know if they listened or not). The currents of complacency will never push us towards a love for Jesus but always away from a love for Jesus. God uses His word to call us back to Himself and fight the currents of complacency. So we need to stay in God's word. We need to constantly

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be engaging with God's word or we will drift. As Matt preached a couple of weeks ago – we need to be a people of the word. That is a commitment we must never see shattered: to stay close to God's word, in our homes, our hearts, and our church, because engaging with the word of God is the primary way we fight the currents of sin and compromise and complacency that would drift us far from God. So let's pray and ask God to help us (my first point) to stay close to His word.