

This morning we wrap up our series in the book of Nehemiah. We've spent the last twelve weeks considering how to respond when God stirs our hearts and the spiritual practices needed to live that out. If you were here on the first Sunday of the year, you may recall we had a family meeting to kick off the series. I'd like to end this series in the same way, though I won't call this a family meeting, but a family check-in.

We are about to enter the last quarter of our ministry and fiscal year, and I want to update you and encourage you on a few things. I want us to be open about what's going on while trusting that God is at work and in the middle of all we are doing. So, to begin the final message of this series, let's spend a few minutes talking about where things stand for Fellowship Dallas and look forward to the rest of the year.

I begin with the same message I gave you in January: **We are ok!** God's got us, and by his grace we continue to not only persevere but to thrive in so many ways during this time of transition. I want to call your attention to the back of your worship guide. After prayer and evaluation, and an earnest desire to be good stewards of our resources, we have decided to reduce our expense and giving budget by \$300,000. As we were told by the experts, there was a good chance we would see a decrease in giving, so we have made the necessary adjustments to reflect that reality.

I want to thank all of you who have been so faithful in your giving during this time and would encourage you to keep going in this last quarter. Additionally, if you are here and have not been giving regularly, would you pray about that? We want to finish the year strong and head into 2019/2020 with some momentum. And rather than waiting until June for the big push, I thought it prudent to consider this last quarter a time to put ourselves in a strong financial position.

We continue to search for our next worship pastor. Collectively there has been hundreds of work hours dedicated to the search. We have evaluated and interviewed 15 candidates, seven of whom have advanced in the process and spent time with both our staff team and a group of members who are part of the interview process. We will continue bringing in guest worship leaders, some of whom will be candidates. Our next guest worship leader will be here on April 7, and I continue to thank God for our worship team who have led us so well over the last few months. So please continue praying for God to bring his person in his timing.

But understand, this time of transition is not just a time of sitting around and waiting. **God is at work here.** I personally want to thank you for your engagement of me. There are days where your stories, emails, conversations and words of encouragement are exactly what I need, days that, for whatever reason, I need my spirits lifted. And just a few numbers: We will finish the winter/spring Training Experience semester with over 80 Repurposed graduates, and the total number is nearing 1,000 graduates. We just trained around 100 church leaders in Nicaragua, we have had a large number of visitors so far this year, and we continue to hear dozens and dozens of stories about how God is working in your life, and we will be telling those stories more and more in the months to come. **God is on the move!** And my prayer and hope for Fellowship today remains the same three things it was on January 6.

Fellowship will grow in clarity. That each of us would end 2019 with a greater understanding of who God is, who we are in him, and what he's created us to do.

Fellowship will grow in unity. That we would not only understand what God has for us individually, but what he has for us together, and that if you are still waiting to be all in, that 2019 be the year you lean in, say “these are my people, this is my church.”

Fellowship will grow in intimacy and dependency. That you will live with God at the center of your life more in 2019 than you ever have before.

So my encouragement this morning is that you **keep going!** God knows exactly what he’s up to at Fellowship. He has something for us to do and we can trust that he will accomplish it in and through us. And as we keep going, he also has something for us to learn in Nehemiah 13.

Like I did two weeks ago, I want to take you back to my freshman year of college. I arrived there on fire for the Lord and excited about going to a Christian school. In fact, I was so on fire for the Lord that, while on spring break in Florida, we were spending some time with one of my friends who was both a high school and college classmate, he told Martha I went to church way more than I went to class! But while college started that way, it didn’t end the same way. My faith grew stale, my relationship with God faded, and I began to drift as I neared graduation.

Have you ever experienced a season like that? A time that started with an encounter with the Lord and you were on fire but, after a time, it sort of faded? What do you think happened? How did it start one way and end in a different way? This morning, we are going to see that very thing happen to the nation of Israel.

General William Booth, founder of The Salvation Army, once said to a group of new officers, “**I want you young men always to bear in mind that it is the nature of a fire to go out; you must keep it stirred and fed and the ashes removed.**”

By the end of chapter 12, Israel was on fire. The wall had been built, they had been restored spiritually through the disciplines of engaging God’s Word, confession and repentance, and even signing a covenant before God to live a certain way. It included:

10:30 – We will not give our daughters to/take daughters of peoples of the land.

10:31 – We will not buy grain on the Sabbath.

10:39 – We will not neglect the house of our God.

But things change between chapters 12 and 13. The stirring and feeding of the nation began to diminish, and old habits die hard. And chapter 13 tells us one of the main reasons why.

[Nehemiah 13:6-7a] ⁶ While this was taking place, I was not in Jerusalem, for in the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes king of Babylon I went to the king. And after some time I asked leave of the king ⁷ and came to Jerusalem.

After completing his 12th year as governor of Judah, Nehemiah returned to King Artaxerxes. We’re not sure how long he was gone, but most suggest around two years. And when Nehemiah returned to Judah, he found that the people had drifted. Their fire for God was on its way out.

This morning, I want us to learn and be cautioned by the way the Jews compromised their faith and, in so doing, drifted from the Lord, so that we can recognize the signs and keep it from happening to us as we keep going to live out what God has called us to.

We drift when we compromise our devotion. When we keep from God what rightfully belongs to him, our heart soon follows.

[Nehemiah 13:4-5, 8-12] ⁴Now before this, Eliashib the priest, who was appointed over the chambers of the house of our God, and who was related to Tobiah, ⁵prepared for Tobiah a large chamber where they had previously put the grain offering, the frankincense, the vessels, and the tithes of grain, wine, and oil, which were given by commandment to the Levites, singers, and gatekeepers, and the contributions for the priests...⁸And I was very angry, and I threw all the household furniture of Tobiah out of the chamber. ⁹Then I gave orders, and they cleansed the chambers, and I brought back there the vessels of the house of God, with the grain offering and the frankincense. ¹⁰I also found out that the portions of the Levites had not been given to them, so that the Levites and the singers, who did the work, had fled each to his field. ¹¹So I confronted the officials and said, “Why is the house of God forsaken?” And I gathered them together and set them in their stations. ¹²Then all Judah brought the tithe of the grain, wine, and oil into the storehouses.

Even though the Jews had covenanted to not neglect the house of God, they did that very thing. The Law commanded they tithe a portion of all they had for the care and feeding of the Levites, and those offerings would be stored in rooms in the temple. Apparently, those offerings stopped.

This lack of devotion had significant consequences. Because the Levites and other temple workers were not cared for, they had to leave the temple and go work in their fields to eat. And if they were working in their fields, that means they weren't at their posts in the temple, which means the work of the temple was compromised. And if the work of the temple was compromised, the means by which the people related to and worshipped God was compromised.

Additionally, because of the lack of offerings, there was plenty of empty space in temple, and Eliashib saw fit to give one of those rooms to an enemy of Israel. He was more concerned with his loyalty to Tobiah than he was the Lord.

You and I are assaulted daily with things that beg for the devotion of our hearts. The abundance of stuff, the praise of man, the fulfillment of the flesh. **The object of our devotion determines the trajectory of our hearts.** If it's not God, drifting and compromise are sure to follow. If you are here this morning and feel like you are in a season of drifting, ask God what besides him has captivated your heart. And if he shows it to you, do what Israel did in Ch 9 and confess it to him and ask him to draw you back to himself. That is a prayer he is eager to answer.

We drift when we compromise our priorities. We are finite beings with finite energy, focus, and time. We simply cannot “have it all”.

[Nehemiah 13:15-18] ¹⁵In those days I saw in Judah people treading winepresses on the Sabbath, and bringing in heaps of grain and loading them on donkeys, and also wine, grapes, figs, and all kinds of loads, which they brought into Jerusalem on the Sabbath day.

And I warned them on the day when they sold food. ¹⁶ Tyrians also, who lived in the city, brought in fish and all kinds of goods and sold them on the Sabbath to the people of Judah, in Jerusalem itself! ¹⁷ Then I confronted the nobles of Judah and said to them, “What is this evil thing that you are doing, profaning the Sabbath day? ¹⁸ Did not your fathers act in this way, and did not our God bring all this disaster on us and on this city? Now you are bringing more wrath on Israel by profaning the Sabbath.”

The Ten Commandments include keeping the Sabbath holy, in Exodus 34:21 God commanded Israel to rest every seventh day, and honoring the Sabbath was part of the covenant they signed in Nehemiah 10. There was to be one day a week that focused on rest, worship, and restoration. But upon his return, Nehemiah found that Israel had fallen back into their old ways. They were engaging in commerce on the Sabbath and profaning the day God had set apart.

While the Church has not been explicitly commanded to keep a Sabbath, I believe it is still an essential practice. I'm going to give you two options, and, in your head, I want you to pick the one that best describes you: 1) Well rested and energetic. 2) Exhausted. If you're too tired to think about it, go with option #2!

If the American church resembles Israel at all, I believe this may be the most consistent way. Busyness is an incredible temptation that can keep us far from God and leave us completely exhausted. Neither of those conditions are conducive to living a life on fire for the Lord. But God does not want you to live like this because he loves you. In Mark 2, Jesus says “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.” He means God instituted it because he cares about us and wants us to make time to connect with him and be restored spiritually and physically. Without that, we leave ourselves vulnerable to living a life of minimal impact at best and outright disobedience at worst.

Martha and I made a tough decision in light of this. As you've heard me say, my boys are athletic, and one in particular has excelled to the point where he had an opportunity to join an elite baseball team. This would have given him tremendous exposure to wonderful coaching and competition, but it also would have eaten up 12 of the next 16 weekends. So, after a lot of prayer and conversation, Martha and I decided against it. We knew it would not be good for our family because it would get in the way of our worship of the Lord, time as a family, and rest.

Now, I'm not telling you having your kids in sports is a bad thing. But there are plenty of options that want to compete for your time to worship and rest in the Lord. They are not necessarily bad in and of themselves, but when they begin to take priority over our relationship with the Lord, we will drift. **Believe the Lord has your best in mind**, and follow his prescription for restoration, time for rest and focus on him, even at the cost of doing less.

We drift when we compromise our distinctiveness. Like the nation of Israel, we are to live a life set apart. But the more we let the world in, the less different we'll be.

[Nehemiah 13:23-26] 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.

²⁵ And I confronted them and cursed them and beat some of them and pulled out their hair. And I made them take an oath in the name of God, saying, “You shall not give your daughters to their sons, or take their daughters for your sons or for yourselves. ²⁶ Did not Solomon king of Israel sin on account of such women? Among the many nations there was no king like him, and he was beloved by his God, and God made him king over all Israel. Nevertheless, foreign women made even him to sin.

God is not a xenophobe, but he calls his people to be set apart from the world. When Nehemiah returned, he found that Jews had married foreign women. Historically, the results of such unions were disastrous for the nation of Israel. The concern was that marrying them meant absorbing their culture and absorbing their gods. And in Nehemiah’s time, many of the children of these unions spoke the native tongues of their mothers. If you could not speak, read, or understand Hebrew, you would not be able to understand God’s Word and, therefore, would not know how to live your life for him.

You and I are also beloved by God and have been called to be salt and light, to be in the world but not of it, to be set apart and holy, and to attract the world to our God through our “differentness”. But a reality that none of us can avoid is that we will begin to look like that which has the greatest influence in our lives. It’s why, after spending a week in Florida with my dad, my boys have said a number of times “Oh dad, you sound just like grandpa.”

The more we let the world influence us, the more we’ll drift and begin to look like everybody else. We won’t stand out, and we can expect to have little impact. But the more we allow God to influence our lives, the more we will look like him and have an impact for him.

I have to admit this is an interesting way to end this book. You’d like it to end after chapter 12, where things are looking up, instead of this downer of a chapter where things seem to be regressing. But I think God may have placed this here as a warning to us and to cause us to ask the question “How can we avoid drifting?”

I believe the answer can be found back in chapter 12. There was something prevalent there that we see none of in chapter 13.

[Nehemiah 12:43] ⁴³ And they offered great sacrifices that day and rejoiced, for God had made them rejoice with great joy; the women and children also rejoiced. And the joy of Jerusalem was heard far away.

You see, chapter 13 isn’t about the Jews just not following the rules closely enough. It’s evidence of people who stopped enjoying their Lord. When you give yourself completely to the Lord, joy follows, and you desire for more. An adherence to divine disciplines without the foundation of a relationship is the recipe for drifting. When spiritual disciplines that genuinely engage the divine become forced spiritual habits that simply check off a list, a fading interest is sure to follow. And when we fade, we will begin to compromise.

I don’t want you to do Repurposed so I can come up here next January and give you an even bigger number. I want you to know God more and know who you are in him and what he’s

created you to do. I hope you allow him to stir your heart with Divine Discontent, your God-given purpose, where you, like Nehemiah, where you are so moved you just have to go!

I don't want you to give so we can keep the lights on in this building and make the bottom number on the back of worship guide smaller. I want you to worship the Lord with what he's given you, and as you offer him your resources, to have your heart follow.

I don't want you to come to church so this room looks and feels more full. I want you to be among a family who loves you and is for you and who will show you Jesus and who will ask you to do the same for them.

I don't want you to change your behavior so that you can avoid disapproving looks from other Christians. I want you to experience God in a way that only a devoted life will allow. That you would know him deeply and live a life so full of him that you burst with joy and become irresistible to others because you worship an irresistible God.

That's the message of Nehemiah 13. It is a warning of what could happen, but it's also a reminder of what can be. **We are not a people who have been created to fulfill religious tasks. We are a people who have been created to be fulfilled by a remarkable God.**