

Good morning everyone – my name is Richard Kerry and I serve on staff as the Marriage and Care Pastor. It's good to be with you this morning. I am privileged to be on the preaching team here and look forward to each Sunday I'll get to be with you moving forward.

As most of you know, we've been in the book of Nehemiah for several weeks now. Two weeks ago, we transitioned from Divine Discontent to Divine Disciplines. A divine discipline as we have defined it is – **“godly training to develop godly character and to deepen our relationship with God.”** In chapter 8, we saw that the Israelites were committed to a reading and understanding of God's Word. They opened themselves up to God's Word and to let His Word do a work in their hearts. In chapter 9, we saw the Israelites make two major confessions: a confession of sin and a confession of God's faithfulness and character – that He is a God who constantly and consistently brings an unfaithful people back to Himself. They are celebrating who they have known Him to be, who He is, and who He will be to them in the future and this morning we're going to see His people make a life-altering decision based on who they know God to be.

Ten years ago, last week, I made a similar life-altering decision. If you have been in the pre-marriage class with us you've heard this story. My wife, Erin, and I had been dating for 8 months or so and knew our relationship was leading to marriage. That night, we drove to the Shops at Legacy – a place we had frequented during our dating. Erin, being the one familiar with Dallas, drove the car that night. As we drove up, with the engagement ring in my pocket, I reached over and put my hand on her knee. A few minutes later she asked me a question with raised inflection, “Oh my gosh – is your hand sweating?” I brushed it off, “Oh...uh...yeah...man it's hot in here. Let's turn the air on.” I had spent months getting to know her. I spent months getting to know her passions, her strengths, her goals – getting a very up-close and personal look at her character. I found her to be challenging – spiritually, physically, and emotionally. She made me want to be different – to be better. By being around her, I was inspired to be a better man. Less than two hours later I was getting down on a knee asking this woman to be my wife.

A few months later, on a hot summer day outside of Hillsboro, outside in the heat – drenched in sweat again – this time because of the heat – I was committing my life to her – speaking vows that I would declare to not just her but just as importantly – before the Lord and others. Because of her integrity and her faithfulness – who I knew her to be and who I knew she would be the rest of our lives – I committed my life to her. I vowed to never leave her side, that no matter if for richer or poorer, in sickness or health, in joy or sorrow that I would love her, cherish her, and be faithful to her until death do us part.

Show Picture – Here's us after making those vows. Man – we were young and happy!

I am going to assume that most of us in here have had some wedding experience – whether that be our own, us participating in one, or just there as an attendee. We've all heard men and women commit their lives to each other. It's a holy moment. It's a sacred moment. There's something beautiful about those moments. **And I would imagine most of us – hopefully all of us – are FOR those vows being lived out. We want – we hope – we expect them to keep their commitments.** Most of us long to be people of our word.

Turn to chapter 9 in Nehemiah – that's where we're going to find the Israelites preparing to make some vows of their own. Their vows aren't vows of marriage but vows of commitment. Vows of change and obedience. **Their decision isn't based on feelings found in a romantic relationship – but on the awe-inspiring, faith-injecting, life-changing character of God.**

Look at chapter 9 – verse 38 – “Now because of all this, we are making an agreement in writing; And on the sealed document are the names of our leaders, our Levites, and our priests.” At the beginning of chapter 10, we're given a list of the names of people who have signed this agreement. And then we get to verses 28-29 and we see what they're vowing to do. Nehemiah 10:28-29 ²⁸Now the rest of the people, the priests, the Levites, the gatekeepers, the singers, the temple servants and all those who had separated themselves from the peoples of the lands to the law of God, their wives, their sons and their daughters, all those who had knowledge and understanding, ²⁹are joining with their kinsmen, their nobles, and are taking on themselves a curse and an oath to walk in God's law, which was given through Moses, God's servant, and to keep and to observe all the commandments of God our Lord, and His ordinances and His statutes;

Here's the first thing I want you to know this morning: If you're going to commit your life to someone – like I did when I married Erin – you must know their character and the same is true in our relationship with the Lord. **God's character invites us to commit ourselves to Him.**

Let's look back at 9:38. It says, “Now because of all of this...” Everything that is said about the Lord in chapter 9 elicits a response from the Israelites. **Remembering His greatness sparks a desire for change in**

them. They've just confessed the following: He's forgiving, gracious, compassionate, slow to anger, protective, abounding in lovingkindness, awesome, mighty, great, and faithful to keep His covenant. He stays committed to them even when they're not committed to Him and the same is true for us. Even when we were His enemies – even when we were children of wrath – Christ died for us. **God's character is what makes the gospel both possible and compelling. Remembering His faithfulness and goodness to us enhances our desire to obey Him.** Now, when I say obey – what I mean is trusting God's love and faithfulness towards you so much that when you hear or read God's Word – you act according to what It tells you. And you're committed to that because to do so proves your love for Him.

This is another stake in the ground moment for the Israelites – we've seen them here before. God is faithful. They sin. They wander. God is faithful. They wander and sin. They're story is our story. And now, once again – they're choosing to make a change.

When I get a picture of who God is and who I am in light of that, I must decide something about my life. I must decide to commit my life to obeying Him or not. The goal should be that the time between the recognition of sin and your recovery from that decreases.

When I keep the gospel narrative in front of me – when it's something I recount and celebrate – obedience makes a lot more sense. Commitment to the Lord makes more sense. God's love towards me turns my heart and my affections towards Him. And when my heart and affections are turned towards Him – over everything else in my life, I desire to live according to His Word because I know His ways, His plans, His thoughts are always better than mine.

But this has to be the case no matter the season of life. It doesn't matter if I am at the top of the mountain or life seems to be caving in on me. It's not about obeying only when things are good. It's obeying all the time because **ONLY HE IS GOOD.**

I am sure most of you know today is Saint Patrick's Day. I have green on my socks or something, I think. I have a picture of him here.

Whoops. Wrong Irish Icon.

If you don't know the story of Saint Patrick, let me share a little. He wasn't actually Irish. He was a rich, spoiled, rebellious Roman citizen kidnapped from his family's estate in Britain when he was a teenager. He was sold into slavery across the sea in Ireland where he would become an atheist. Sometime during his 6 years there he believed God told him to become a missionary to Ireland. Upon escaping slavery, he went back to Britain where he was welcomed home. Once again, Patrick heard the voice of God calling him back to Ireland. He returned back to a place where he would face violence, threats of kidnapping, and his followers would face abuse, murder, and enslavement themselves.

But through it all, Patrick maintained his faith and persevered in his Irish mission. Patrick wasn't the first missionary to Ireland and he wasn't even the first bishop there. But Saint Patrick, as we know him, possessed an unrelenting commitment to God because of the salvation and goodness he found in Christ. He committed his life to obedience to God because of who he experienced God to be to Him.

Saint Patrick committed his life to God based on who He believed God to be and obeyed even when it was tough. **God's character invites us to commit our lives to Him.**

But notice, they didn't make a verbal commitment. They made a community wide written commitment. We best live out our commitments by surrendering ourselves to God's people. **Our commitment to Him thrives in consistent Biblical community.**

Let's go back to the end of Nehemiah 9. "Now because of all this, we are making an agreement in writing; And on the sealed document are the names of our leaders, our Levites, and our priests." And then again in 10:28-29. ²⁸ Now the rest of the people, the priests, the Levites, the gatekeepers, the singers, the temple servants and all those who had separated themselves from the peoples of the lands to the law of God, their wives, their sons and their daughters, all those who had knowledge and understanding, ²⁹ are joining with their kinsmen, their nobles, and are taking on themselves a curse and an oath to walk in God's law, which was given through Moses, God's servant, and to keep and to observe all the commandments of GOD our Lord, and His ordinances and His statutes;

This document is signed and sealed by first Nehemiah – the governor, then it is signed by the leaders, Levites and priests. So, those in positions of authority sign it first as a symbol of leadership and commitment but then we're also told that the rest of the people all agreed. They all committed to a life of obedience to God's law and were willing to take on the consequences together if they were to be

disobedient. They will thrive or they will suffer. They'll experience a blessing or a curse – and they will do it together.

These people know that Biblical community is meant to be a place where you can be as fully known and fully loved as humanly possible. It's meant to be a place where we can bear with one another in our burdens – we can bear with one another in our sin – and we can celebrate with one another when we see each other living in obedience. That only happens when we open our hearts to one another – when we open ourselves up to be vulnerable and real about life. Because when I am open and vulnerable with someone in my community, I give them permission to do the same. **Vulnerability is a gift.** It communicates safety and security. And it breathes life – refreshing life into the group because we all begin to feel a sense of belonging. **There is something good – something right – something godly about being in the company of the committed.**

One of our enemy's greatest tactics is to isolate us from community because if we aren't in community we can't be called to something greater than ourselves. In isolation – all we can think about is ourselves. In isolation – we and our sin can remain hidden. In isolation – I cannot be called to live out my God-given purpose in Christ. I need God's people to push me towards obedience and to hold me accountable in my commitments to Him.

I am just going to speak for myself here and maybe you can relate. In order for me to be obedient – to keep my commitment to God – I have to keep my life open-handed to others. I have to invite them to be honest with me – sometimes brutally so. I need to be honest with my community – my family – my life group – my friends – the staff here – so that when I start to get out of alignment with what God has called me to – someone can bravely speak up and say, "Richard, this isn't what you've committed your life to."

Two weeks ago, I got invited into this kind of community by one of our church members and a dear friend. My friend here has been through our Repurposed Training Experience. If you aren't familiar with that process – it's all about increasing your God-awareness and your self-awareness. Each person who goes through that process comes out with a two-word purpose statement. These are two words that you would say God has called you to live-out. It's what you believe He has asked you to commit to as a person.

So, two weeks ago I received an email from my friend. Inside that email was a document proclaiming his two words – "Engaging Reconciliation." Not only does he have his two words, but he has a description of what it would mean for him to leave those two words out. He's telling me – this is what God has called me to. This is what I believe I am to commit my life to.

But then he went a step further. He gave me permission to edit this document – he gave me permission to speak into these two words. Now, I don't know how wise that is, right? I mean, I'm real tempted to go in and change his two words to "Eating Cheeseburgers. Flying Kites. Giving Friends Money."

But here's what I love about what he has done. He has been courageously vulnerable – and if you know this guy – you know that can be hard for him at times. But it's not just with me. He sent this email to several of us guys he trusts and given each of us the same permission. He has let several of us know what he has committed to and given us permission to hold him accountable to obedience. He knows if he doesn't do that – he can veer off the path. Sometimes towards apathy. Sometimes towards making reconciliation difficult. So, he's inviting me into his life and saying, "I need people like you to keep me on the right track."

Notice, my friend didn't send this document to random people. He didn't send it to people that don't believe what he believes. He sent it to people He knew would care and would call him to the carpet. Friends, that's hard work. That's a risk. It's hard. But man, does it make obeying who God has called you to be easier. My friend has surrendered his life to consistent Biblical community so that he can thrive in his commitment to God.

"We often think of community as simply one more thing we have to follow in the rules of behavior. 'I have to read my Bible, pray, stay sexually pure & I need to go to fellowship.' But community is best understood as the way we are to do **ALL** that Christ told us to in the world. Community is more than just the result of the preaching of the gospel; it is itself a declaration and expression of the gospel. It is the demonstration of the good news of freedom in Christ through the evident display of our transformed character & our life together. It is itself part of the good news, for the good news is this: this is what Christ has won for you on the cross - a new life together with the people of God. Once you were alienated from others, but now you have been brought near." – Tim Keller

Last week some of you confessed sin to God. But you haven't confessed to others and you haven't invited them into that space in your life. I want to encourage you this morning to invite others into your story and your commitment. Open your life to them.

God's character invites us to commit ourselves to Him. Our commitments thrive in consistent Biblical community. And here's the last principle that will impact your commitment: Changing our minds confirms our commitment to Him.

Alright, let's go back to Nehemiah 10 one more time.

²⁸ Now the rest of the people, the priests, the Levites, the gatekeepers, the singers, the temple servants and all those who had separated themselves from the peoples of the lands to the law of God, their wives, their sons and their daughters, all those who had knowledge and understanding, ²⁹ are joining with their kinsmen, their nobles, and are taking on themselves a curse and an oath to walk in God's law, which was given through Moses, God's servant, and to keep and to observe all the commandments of God our Lord, and His ordinances and His statutes;³⁰ and that we will not give our daughters to the peoples of the land or take their daughters for our sons. ³¹ As for the peoples of the land who bring wares or any grain on the sabbath day to sell, we will not buy from them on the sabbath or a holy day; and we will forego *the crops* the seventh year and the exaction of every debt.

We aren't going to get into the specifics of each of these verses. But know the Israelites are re-committing themselves to doing things God's way. They are no longer going to make decisions based on their own comfort. They aren't making decisions based on their own pursuit of pleasure. They aren't making decisions based on cultural norms and trends. They are bringing themselves back to God's Word and obedience to His Word. They are choosing His Word over their desires. They are choosing His plan over their own pride. Why? Because ultimately, they know His purpose and plan for them – His love for them – His wisdom – is better than their own. They're turning from their ways and turning towards His. They've changed their minds.

In the Christian world, the divine discipline here is repentance. **That word literally means, "a change of mind that results in a change of action."** It's not enough to simply confess who God is and to confess our sin before Him like we did last week. We must do the hard work of turning from our old ways and turning towards His ways.

Let me demonstrate. If walking this direction is obedience to God. That's righteousness or holiness. This is the target God has set before us. Sin happens when we begin walking the other direction. Now, most of us when we think of our sin we think of things that God has told us not to do and we've decided to do. But there are plenty of commandments of what God has called us to do and when we don't do those things – that's sin. It's why Paul says – paraphrasing here: "I am doing the things I know I hate. And I am not doing the things I know I ought to do and that's just as evil." When that happens, we begin walking in a different direction – a direction that is opposite of the way God would have us go – that's sin.

Confession – what Kurt talked about last week happens when we become aware of who God is, who we are, and how our attitude or actions are offensive to Him. Confession is the acknowledgement – "I'm out of line here." Repentance is the next step. It's the turnaround – walking back towards God. If we stop at confession, it means we have no plans to change. It really means, "Sorry until next time." **Would any of us be happy with that kind of apology?** Repentance occurs when we're confronted with our sin, we remember the goodness of God – we remember His Truth and His grace – and then we turn back around walking towards and in-step with Him.

Repentance is a change of mind that leads to a change of action. And God desires it at every level of who we are. It's a Holy Spirit empowered, grace and truth-filled process. It's not always linear or sequential because I am in this constant battle with my flesh – with what I want to do – and being obedient to the Spirit and doing what God wants me to do. It's why I say the Israelites story is our story. And that's why I need community around me too – encouraging me to stay on the right path. **So, that I might listen and obey.**

At the core of repentance is God's Word. It's hard to repent if you don't know God's word. His word and his commandments are at the heart of repentance. Here's a way to study the Bible in a way that will help you take steps towards repentance on a daily basis.

1. Start with prayer. Invite the Holy Spirit into your time reading Scripture. Ask Him to open your heart and your mind to the Word of God and to begin to change you from the inside out.
2. Pick a passage. I love the book of John. It's filled with His commandments.

3. Ask 4 questions:
 - a. What does this teach me about God?
 - b. What does this teach me about His people?
 - c. What does this teach me about me?
 - d. What would God have me do different now? Is there an area of my life the Lord is attempting to bring correction or enhancement/growth?

Some of you would say, “Richard, I have been doing that for years. That’s easy.” Alright – let’s step it up a notch for you. Find someone that doesn’t know how to do this and walk alongside of them in the process. Go and make disciples. That’s your command. Are you doing it? Open yourself up to others who need an example of someone living a life of repentance. Maybe last week you couldn’t think of anything to confess. Dig into God’s Word. I promise you’ll find something.

Repentance means turning from as much as you know of your sin to give as much as you know of yourself to as much as you know of your God, and as our knowledge grows at these three points so our practice of repentance has to be enlarged. – J.I. Packer

Last weekend, our babysitter let us know that our 5 year old threw a fit – punching, kicking, and screaming when it was bed time. When she warned him, “Roman, if you don’t stop you’re going to get in trouble he responded, “Call my dad. I love getting in trouble.” Needless to say, Roman was confronted the next day and asked to apologize.

My hope is that Roman’s little heart has recognized his wrong. He has definitely confessed it. I have asked him to commit to something better. And now I hope to watch him flourish because of his obedience. And this morning – I hope the same for you. I hope the same for this church. That we would be the kind of people walking in Truth together so that God might change each of us for His glory and our good.