

## Sermon – 19/04/2009 am

### Neglecting the House of God

Study Text: Nehemiah 10:32-39

God sent his people into exile in Babylon when they broke the covenant he made with them. That covenant included the Ten Commandments given to Moses on the mountain. The people turned away from God to worship idols. They failed to worship the God who created them and delivered them from bondage in Egypt. They neglected the house of God and refused to listen to God's word. They did what was right in their own eyes, not God's eyes.

When the remnant returned from exile they determined to live according to God's word. They heard Ezra read and explain that word, so they understood not only what God had done for them but what God required of them. They confessed their sin before Almighty God. They vowed *to walk in God's law which was given by Moses the servant of God and to obey all the commandments of the Lord our Lord* (10:29).

What things do you notice when people start to turn away from God. What do people turn towards as they turn away from God? They turn to the world. They begin to worship created things rather than the Creator. They walk according to their own sinful nature, in all its pride and selfishness. Money and material things become the focus of people who turn away from God.

'You cannot serve God and money' said Jesus. You cannot serve two masters. Either Jesus is Lord or he is not. If Jesus is Lord of your life you must trust him completely. You must seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and not the things of this world.

*Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world the love of the Father is not in him* (I John 2:15). What does it mean to love the world? John says this is seen in the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes and the pride of life (I John 2:16).

In what particular matters had Nehemiah and the people of God turned away from God? Had they turned to murder, lying and stealing? They did not say this. It was in more subtle but still sinful ways that they had turned away. In the lust of the flesh they had started marrying pagans – a seemingly harmless thing but sinful before God. In the lust of the eyes that had started trading on the Sabbath. And in the pride of life they were keeping all their produce and all their wages for themselves. 'I worked hard for this and it is mine' they said. They were not giving their tithe to the Lord to maintain the house of God and the work of the Lord.

### Temple Tax

As the exiles reformed their life and worship to comply with the commands of God they made a solemn vow to tithe of their produce and money to the house of the Lord. See how many times 'the house of our God' is mentioned in these few verses (8 times). This is the controlling focus in this passage. They promised not to neglect the house of our God any longer (10:39).

God had wonderfully moved King Cyrus to underwrite the rebuilding of the temple (Ezra 6:8). But they could not expect him to keep on supporting them. It would not have been right for a pagan to support them in their worship. The people of God must maintain their own house of worship according to the word of God.

In the book of Exodus they would have read about the ransom money that was collected each census from Jews over twenty years of age. This money – half a shekel – was given as an offering to the Lord for the service of the house of God (Exodus 30:11f). You will notice that the temple tax Nehemiah set was one third of a shekel and it was to be brought annually. Why this slight difference we cannot be sure. But the people read and they realized they should be paying a temple tax.

In the Old Testament the priests needed materials for the purpose of worship. They needed showbread and animals for the daily burnt offerings. The temple tax which continued into the New Testament era (Matthew 17:24) provided for the materials used in worship. We do not need to provide such things today but we do need to maintain the house in which we worship and provide facilities for the minister.

### **Wood Offering**

Apart from giving money the people agreed to physically help in the house of God as they were able. Burnt offerings needed a lot of wood. In fact the fire was kept burning around the clock (Leviticus 6:13). Previously the Gibeonites were given this task (Joshua 9:27), but after the exile things were different.

Who would bring the wood to the house of God? Did everyone sit back waiting for someone else to volunteer? Did they say it is not my job to do that menial task? The people decided to take turns according to a roster which included everyone. At the appointed time, maybe weekly or monthly, a family agreed to do this job.

We have a cleaning roster; we have those who set out the chairs and do the washing up. I hope you delight in this work for the house of God. Be assured your work does not go unnoticed by the Lord.

### **First Fruits and Tithes**

We come to the third section of this passage in which we find the matter of tithes. The people had not been keeping the Sabbath. They were robbing God of his time, of one day in seven which the Lord demands. They were also robbing God of his tithe – of one part in ten of all their earnings.

Listen to what the prophet Malachi (Malachi 3:8) spoke to the people in the days of Nehemiah:

*Will a man rob God?*

*Yet you robbed me*

*In what way have we robbed you?*

*In tithes and offerings.*

Failing to tithe your income is robbing God. How many people consider this today? Many Christians give God what is left over after they have spent all they want on their needs, and greeds. They come to the house of God with a few coins left in their pocket. Where is the tithe that God demands?

In India the paper notes are of poor quality and easily get dirty and torn. Traders refuse to take torn notes. One day I was taking to the pastor of our church and he showed me the collection. It was full of dirty and torn notes. How shameful! Is this not an indication of the respect, or lack of it, that people have for God?

Malachi rebukes the people for bringing blind and lame animals for sacrifice (Malachi 1:8). God demands the best. He demands the first fruit not the last fruit. And this is what Nehemiah and the

people committed themselves to do. They promised to bring the first fruits of the ground and of their flocks year by year to the house of God (10:35, 36).

How did they do that you ask. Did they bring a bag of wheat to church? I have been in a church where that is exactly what the people did. As they came to church they brought some cabbages, a bag of rice or whatever they produced, as an offering to God. In one particular area of strong and growing Presbyterian churches the women put aside grain every time they cook. After every ten handfuls of rice they put in the pot they put one handful aside for the Lord. They take this to the church as their tithe. No wonder that church is growing. In other churches the people came to depend on the missionaries. They never learned to tithe and today they are struggling.

Nehemiah and the people vowed *to bring the tithes of the land to the Levites for the Levites should receive the tithes in all our farming communities* (10:37). The Levites were not allotted their own land when they came into Canaan. They lived in the towns and had some common land. They were the tribe assigned by God to serve him and teach the people the Law of God. The tithe was brought to them and put in storehouses for their use. They had to give a tenth of this tithe to the priests, the descendants of Aaron who served in the temple.

Up till this time the people were neglecting the house of God. They were not tithing. The Levites were being forced to work on the land in order to live (13:10). It was a simple principle in Israel that ten people paying the tithe could support one Levite. Do we see this principal working itself out today?

Our churches are struggling and our leaders are calling for the wider church to give support to struggling congregations. But the first thing we must do is look to our own giving. Are we tithing as we should? Some people want to argue about the principle of tithing. They say that all we have belongs to God anyway and tithing is just a minimum. Well, that is true. If you want to give more the Lord will bless you. In the New Testament church they gave everything. But if we at least tithed I wonder what difference it would make to our church?

It would certainly make no difference to whether or not you have enough for your family. It is just like the Sabbath. If you work on the Sabbath you will be no better off? God is the giver of all good things. When we obey him and trust him he will not fail to give us of his boundless resources. Will you tithe of your income – a tenth for the Lord – first thing? Teach your children to tithe even of their pocket money for this pleases the Lord.

Listen again to the words of Malachi (Malachi 3:10):

*Bring all the tithes into the storehouse*

*That there may be food in my house*

*And try me now in this says the Lord of hosts*

*If I will not open for you the windows of heaven*

*And pour out for you such blessing*

*That there will not be room enough for you to receive it.*

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