

NEHEMIAH 13

Esteem our office bearers as gifts of God's grace

Nehemiah 13

Esteem our office bearers as gifts of God's grace

Beloved congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ:

Introduction. We come now to the last chapter of the book of Nehemiah. Last week we saw how Nehemiah was able to finish his work with a feast of *Hanukkah*, a festive dedication of city and temple to God. Nehemiah completed his work in a grand style; he could look back on a very successful mission: the wall rebuilt, the city restored, and the temple again functioning properly. For twelve years Nehemiah has been governor of Israel, and now he must return to the king who had given him this leave of absence.

Nehemiah returns to Susa. We read in verse 6 (second part): “. . . in the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes king of Babylon I had returned to the king.” We may be sure that Nehemiah returned with a great sense of satisfaction: the LORD had allowed him to do what was considered almost impossible, and Nehemiah could be especially pleased about the spiritual reformation of Israel. Everyone, priests and Levites, leaders and people, male and female, young and old, had sworn to follow the law of God given by Moses (10 : 29).

So the book appears to have a happy ending. Mission accomplished. And it would have been fitting, perhaps, to end the narrative at the end

of chapter 12. After all, everyone loves a happy ending. But chapter 13 tells us about a return-visit of Nehemiah to Jerusalem, and how he finds there a terrible situation of deformation. Nehemiah is appalled at what he finds and must resort to very strong measures to correct the situation.

We do not know how long Nehemiah was in Susa between these two visits. It must have been some time, for meanwhile (verses 23, 24) children had been born and grown who could already speak. So it will have been a period of time from 5 to 10 years at least. In any case, when he returns he finds that the Jews have kept none of their oaths and promises. Everything is as it was before his first visit. The temple is profaned and neglected, the Levites and singers have gone to their own homes, the Sabbath is not kept, and marriages with non-Israelite women are again common! What a disappointment this must have been for Nehemiah.

Imagine, you go to Jerusalem at the risk of your own life, spend twelve hard years of your life there to rebuild everything, and then come back a few years later to discover it was all for nought. Israel has fallen back into the old ways of sin and disobedience. I think that this is perhaps the greatest disappointment which office bearers can experience: all that work and effort, and often with so little effect. (Some of those coming back into office today will find that nothing much has changed since their last term; what a let-down, really.) Sometimes it even goes from bad to worse.

Someone once wrote that the book of Nehemiah does not end with a bang but with a whimper. In chapter 12 we saw the fire works; in chapter 13 we see the candle already burned out. How disappointing. Yet, this is the realism of the Word of God. Chapter 13 is not an appendix, an after-thought, but an integral part of the book. The Word of God tells us the sad truth about ourselves; it shows us how quickly we fall back into old, sinful ways. We also learn that reformation is a constant process.

It's good to note this especially today when new brothers are ordained to office. Church builders know that they have to deal often with the same problems and weaknesses all over again. Constant reformation is required. Much patience and perseverance is needed to be

a minister, elder, or deacon, for time and again you face the same situations of weakness, unwillingness, neglect and abuse. There is no people more stubborn and difficult, sometimes, than God's people! Don't believe me, just read Nehemiah; he knew by experience.

Now the LORD does not give up on His people. On the contrary. What we find in this chapter is that the LORD causes Nehemiah to return to Jerusalem to deal with the apostasy and deformation that has occurred after his departure to Persia.

Nehemiah's return is another sign of God's grace. Again the call is heard and opportunity is given to repent and change.

This is how we should also today esteem our office bearers, as gifts of God's grace, who come to guide us in the ways of the Lord

We find here that three things are done by Nehemiah:

- 1. deformation is boldly exposed.**
- 2. discipline is strongly exercised.**
- 3. dedication is humbly expressed.**

1. We have come to know Nehemiah as a man of action who goes right to the heart of things. No pussy-footing around. No hesitation, but the direct approach. Not everyone has the same character or gift, but we can learn from this that the direct approach is the best. Office-bearers must have a spiritual boldness. Always act wisely, but certainly boldly.

Nehemiah has to deal with four main issues. They are all related, and I'll get to that in a moment. First, the priest Eliashib, who had been placed over the storerooms of the temple, and who happened to be related by marriage to Tobiah (the great enemy of Nehemiah, remember), had given this man Tobiah an "office" in the temple. Somehow Tobiah had managed to worm his way back on to the scene and even procured a room in the temple, precisely the room that was used to store the provisions for the for the temple personnel. Tobiah was the Ammonite governor of Samaria, and he was not even allowed in the temple, let alone have an office there.

Tobiah had virtually taken over the temple of God and made it into his governor's residence. The nerve of the man! This means also that he creamed off all that came into the temple, and made a lucrative business out of it. The temple, God's house, had become once more a den of thieves. That's the first issue Nehemiah faces.

Second, the Levites and singers were apparently not being supported properly, and they had therefore gone "home" to their own areas and families to provide for themselves. This means that the service of the LORD no longer functioned in the temple as before. Tobiah and his people ran the place; there was not a Levite to be seen.

Third, on the Sabbath work went on as usual. Food and drink were being brought into the city, processed and sold on the Sabbath. Merchants came from far and near to sell their wares, especially from the port city of Tyre, and the LORD's day was not kept. Of course not, the temple didn't function anymore anyway. There were no worship services, just business as usual. People went to market instead of church.

And finally, Nehemiah noticed that many men of Judah (not from the outlying tribes, but from Judah) had married women from Ashdod (a Philistine city), Ammon, and Moab! These peoples were the arch-enemies of the people of God. We read that half of their children did not even speak the language of Judah, but spoke the native tongue of their mothers. These children could not even understand the language of God's covenant people. In such mixed marriages, the children often become utterly heathen in conviction and lifestyle.

The temple was a Samaritan's palace, the Levites were gone, the Sabbath was not held, the children were already fully pagan. Why, there was nothing left of the special character of God's people: Israel had again conformed to the world.

I said: these four things are all related, because each one gives evidence of world-conformity, of the church becoming like the world. People of the world do not become like us, children of light, we become like them, children of darkness. There is no longer a distinction

between "church" and "world." The lines have become very fuzzy, if not unrecognizable. The people of Israel do everything the heathen do.

It did not take Nehemiah long to figure out what the problem was. He says: I learned and I saw. He looked around, saw what was happening, asked a few questions, and soon had it all figured out: Israel had fallen back into the old sin of world-conformity, of friendship with the world. It made me think of what James wrote in his letter (4:4): "You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred towards God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God." It is an inevitable development: if you choose friendship with this world you become an enemy of God. You see it happening how people leave the church, join the world, and become the greatest enemies of the Lord, of His Word, of His people. The fiercest enemies of the church are those who once were members of the church; it's a process of becoming an enemy of God.

At the heart of all this world conformity as it is described here lies the matter of mixed marriages. Here: Jews marrying Gentiles. In the New Testament: believers marrying unbelievers. Tobiah got his office in the temple via his brother-in-law Eliashib. When you are related by marriage, that creates mutual responsibilities and common activities. This is the tactic the devil uses when outright persecution does not work. He tried it long ago via Balaam and Moab: if you can't lick 'em, join 'em; make friends with Israel, entice them, mix with them, intermarry, for then you can infiltrate and draw them away from the LORD. Deformation is often the result of steady infiltration. When an unbeliever and believer marry, share one life, the unbeliever usually wins, because the way of the flesh is the way we naturally all like to go.

Now in the Old Testament there were racial, physical, and national elements that played a role in the forbidding of mixed marriages. Israel had to be holy and pure, set aside, to prepare for the coming of the great Messiah. Therefore no marriages were allowed with the nations around them, lest they be led astray. But in the New Testament the matter is spiritual and hence even more important than in the Old Testament: how can you ever become one flesh if you are not one

spirit? Today the Lord does not ask anything less: the basis of holy marriage is still a common faith and worship of the Lord. You cannot sleep in the same bed if you do not sit in the same pew. If the church today does not maintain this consistent biblical principle it promotes world conformity. Therefore the norm is that only marriages of communicant members of the church are solemnized. That's not a matter of discrimination or haughtiness, but of spiritual discernment.

Once you allow a common marital ground with unbelievers, you may as well put them in the office, send home the Levites, and do business as the world does business; from the one practice all the rest follows.

2. Now Nehemiah mentions all this to expose it, and to deal with it directly. Friendship with the world is hostility toward God. He's not looking for stuff that isn't there; it stares him in the face, and he boldly exposes it! He is greatly displeased (Verse 8). He goes right to Tobiah's office. He calls the officials together and rebukes them (verse 11). He tackles the nobles (the rich merchants) and tells them that the Sabbath will be kept. He rebukes and curses the men who married non-Israelite women.

It is not easy being an office-bearer because you more than once have to go somewhere and tell it the way it is, expose sin, lay it on the line, and say: the Lord forbids this. People do not like that and may refuse to submit. The danger is always that those who are called to lead are afraid to do so boldly. But Nehemiah acts with swift determination and true boldness in the Lord. He takes some strong disciplinary measures.

With respect to Tobiah and his nice office in the temple, Nehemiah goes there, and we read in verse 8: "I was greatly displeased and threw all Tobiah's household goods out of the room." Out with this junk! There goes his couch, his desk, his bed, his filing cabinet, out on the street! The man doesn't belong here, let alone have an office here! We even read in verse 9 that Nehemiah gave orders to purify the rooms. The place has become unclean and impure: scrub it clean! And only

then is the holy equipment put back in place. The temple is a place of worship where God's servants dwell, and not a place where pagan men do their wheeling and dealing. Does it not remind you of how our Lord Jesus later purified the temple? Kicked everything over, the money went flying all over the place! My Father's house is not a den of thieves!

Nehemiah called the officials together and rebuked them. That means: he told them in no uncertain terms what was wrong. Why is the house of God neglected, against your specific vows? Shame on you! Verse 11: I called them together and stationed them at their posts: back to work to do your duty! He also replaced the crooked officials with trustworthy men.

And he rebuked the nobles who let the merchants sell on the Sabbath, and said: no more! There's an important detail here, verses 19 – 22. When the merchants on the Sabbath camped just beyond the gates and outside the wall, Nehemiah said: get away from there, I do not even want you close to the wall. If you stay there, I will lay hands on you! Wow. Why? Because if the merchants stayed close to the gates and the wall, some Israelites might still be tempted to go out to them and buy, and Nehemiah wants no dealings even outside the city on the Sabbath. Get away or I'll remove you by force.

How does he deal with the men who married the foreign women? Verse 25: "I rebuked them and called curses down on them. I beat some of the men and pulled out their hair." These are severe measures, which were quite humiliating for these men. To be publicly rebuked, even beaten, and having your hair pulled out was the greatest of humiliations! The hair was not cut or shaved – which would have already been a shame, but plucked. In Persia it was a common punishment for unfaithful officials and also among Jews a great shame. And Nehemiah says to them: if even Solomon, the great and wise king, was led astray by foreign women, what makes you think you can handle this? One senior official, a son of the High Priest who had married a daughter of Sanballat the Horonite, was even sent away, suspended and deposed from office, for office bearers bear greater guilt than common members.

This reminds us of the measures which Ezra had taken earlier. The difference is, however, that Nehemiah does not demand that they send their foreign wives and children away. That measure of Ezra perhaps went too far, for who would take care of these women and children? But Nehemiah does make these men swear not to let any of their children marry heathen men or women. No more of this. Nehemiah especially deals so severely with these men of mixed marriages because this the real issue of world conformity. The church is weakened especially through division in the families.

Did Nehemiah go too far? Is this truly the proper way of dealing with sinners? Beatings, public humiliation etc. Will that not alienate the perpetrators even more? Well, do not forget that Nehemiah functioned in a different time and with a specific authority. As imperial official he had the right to apply corporal punishment! One might even suggest that he was still merciful for he did not apply any capital punishment, as the LORD did when He punished Israel at Baal Peor for consorting with Moabite women.

These extreme measures indicate the severity of the sins committed. That's what we must remember today. The discipline of the church today is different in that it is purely and only spiritual, but that does not make it less important or less effective. Also today discipline must be properly exercised, and there should be no fear to do so when the situation demands it. This is also true in the areas which Nehemiah deals with: neglecting the house of God, refusal to maintain the ministry and the schools, refusal to attend church regularly, refusal to maintain the antithesis between church and world, especially when it comes to courtship and marriage. Those called by the Lord to exercise discipline must act decisively and clearly. Otherwise all kinds of sins will infiltrate more and more, and we slowly but surely become like the world: church in name, but not in practice. Understand the importance of your offices, brothers; and congregation, honour the responsibility that God lays upon the shoulders of these men by receiving their exhortations and admonitions whenever these are given in accordance with God's Word.

3. Lest we get a wrong picture here of Nehemiah, believing that he is some kind of tough disciplinarian on a power trip, notice how after each time Nehemiah has to impose strong measures there is this prayer: "Remember me for this, O my God!" You find it in the verses 14, 22, and 31. The book even ends with such a prayer: remember me with favour, O my God.

We've seen this kind of prayer before, but it is remarkable that especially in this chapter it occurs so often. Why? Because Nehemiah is doing all this not for himself but for the *LORD*. This prayer expresses that all Nehemiah's work of reformation is dedicated to the *LORD* in all humbleness.

"Remember me, O my God!"

He's not an ego-tripper, Nehemiah, but a faithful servant of the *LORD*, dedicated to His cause and kingdom. I even have the impression that Nehemiah himself is upset by the extreme measures he has to take. All this pains him deeply, and he wonders about these measures. Who is he to lord it over God's people? Therefore he lays it before the *LORD*, not in a proud spirit of self-exaltation (look what I did, *LORD!*), but in the knowledge that he, too, is a sinner.

"Remember me."

These words are always a plea for the forgiving grace of the *LORD*. To the end, Nehemiah did not feel himself better than his people; he knew that he, too, was dependent on the grace of the *Lord*. It was all done in humble dedication to God. The work of office is not easy, and mistakes are made. The work of office is demanding and sometimes painful. Do you know what the most difficult moments are for office bearers, in the consistory meetings? When the consistory has to decide to exercise church discipline in a certain situation, even to excommunicate someone. When fellow elders are instructed to go out and severely admonish others. Then there is a hush in the meeting. Then you feel this deep sadness and fatigue. For that is when being an office bearer makes you feel small and humble. Who are we, who are these men that they should discipline others? Then in that hush, in that deeply moving moment when everyone understands the gravity of the

situation, there is this prayer: remember me with favour, O my God! It's an awesome responsibility. We know ourselves to be dependent on God's grace. We do our work not to lord it over others. We do it in humble dedication to the Lord, because He asks it. But it takes its toll.

“Remember me with favour, O my God.”

Every true office bearer, minister, elder, and deacon, feels the weight and the comfort of these words! The Lord will vindicate His servants who are faithful.

“Remember me with favour, O my God.”

The strength of the office bearer is that he, too, may flee to Christ, and there find peace also in the work of office.

We come to the end of our series on Nehemiah, It is remarkable that the book ends with this prayer. Nehemiah did all that work in the Lord's service; he was a man of vision and courage, a real church builder, a true reformer, and yet at the end of the day he knelt before His God, and simply said: remember me with favour, O my God.

Effective church builders are the most humble of persons; they are people whose only basis is the grace of God in Christ. When the LORD gives such men, the church is blessed.

AMEN.