

LESSON 13

LOOKING FOR A FEW GOOD MEN

BY RAY C. STEDMAN

If you like stories with happy endings you will not like Chapter 13 of Nehemiah. You will probably feel that the prophet should have quit with the great celebration, recorded in Chapter 12, of the dedication of the rebuilt walls of Jerusalem. This closing chapter is really the story of a backward slide on the part of these people while Nehemiah was gone for awhile. "When the cat's away, the mice will play," goes the old proverb. But the trouble actually began on the very day of the dedication of the wall, while Nehemiah was still present.

On that day the Book of Moses was read aloud in the hearing of the people and there it was found written that no Ammonite or Moabite should ever be admitted into the assembly of God, because they had not met the Israelites with food and water but had hired Balaam to call a curse down on them. (Our God, however, turned the curse into a blessing.) When the people heard this law, they excluded from Israel all who were of foreign descent. (Nehemiah 13:1-3 NIV)

In Chapter 10, the Israelites, after a very solemn time of rededication of their lives, took a vow that they would not intermarry with the members of these other races. They bound themselves with a curse and an oath to obey the commands of the Law of God. And yet here, some ten years later, that covenant has already been broken. Many Ammonites and Moabites are found in the congregation of Israel. They got there because Israelite men married the daughters of Ammonite and Moabite families, something which God had strictly forbidden in the Law of Moses.

You may be disturbed by this apparent case of racial discrimination, or at least bigotry, on the part of Israel. Why should they exclude from their

assembly the Ammonites and Moabites, the inhabitants of two countries located on the eastern side of the Dead Sea (the area which we call Jordan today)? Some of you are probably asking, "What is wrong with Ammonites and Moabites?" We live in a day when no one can stand to be excluded from anything. Women want to join men's clubs. Mexicans want to enter the United States without any restrictions whatsoever. Homosexuals are demanding marriage rights. People resent private beaches, private parks — private anything! If this happened today you can be sure there would be demonstrations in front of the walls of Jerusalem. You would see people bearing placards saying, "Ammonites and Moabites demand equal rights!" This is the spirit of the times in which we live.

But as always in the Scriptures, there was a good reason for what God was doing here, although it may sound a bit strange to us. When the Israelites left Egypt they came to the edge of the Promised Land, into the country of the Ammonites and the Moabites. But these people did not offer them the normal desert hospitality of food and water. Instead, they hired the prophet Balaam to curse them. Balaam is forever famous because he was rebuked by his donkey. When he was trying to ride to the hilltop to curse the people, as he was hired to do, the donkey saw an angel of the Lord standing in the pathway. The beast refused to go past the angel although the prophet beat him three different times. Finally, God gave the donkey a voice and he rebuked his master: "Why are you beating me?" Then the Lord opened the prophet's eyes and he, too, saw the angel. It is a humiliating thing to be rebuked by a donkey! This is a great lesson to us. There are oftentimes hidden reasons why God is

acting the way he does. We need to be very careful that we do not violate those reasons and insist on our own way against all obstacles.

It was actually nine centuries before Nehemiah that Israel was mistreated by the Ammonites and the Moabites. Some of you must be saying, "How long does God stay mad anyhow? Nine hundred years is a very long time." This is why many critics of these Old Testament stories misrepresent the God of Israel as being vindictive and easily angered. They accuse him of overreacting to situations like this, of cursing people for no good reason and then allowing them to remain under that curse century after century. This offends their sense of justice. Perhaps some of you feel the same way. But the attempt of the Ammonites and the Moabites to curse Israel reveals something about their hearts. What we often forget about God is that he is reading the hearts of men and women. He sees what is going on in our inner lives. We cannot conceal our motives and our attitudes from him. Therefore we often misjudge what God is doing because we think he is being unfair. But he is reacting to something that is much deeper. We will discover that when we check the reasons why he allowed this long-enduring curse.

In Chapter 9 of the book of Ezra, there is an account of a similar situation that arose thirty years before Nehemiah's day. Ezra had led a group back from Babylon to Jerusalem and he, too, discovered that the people were intermarrying with these neighboring tribes, contrary to the Law of Moses. Here is what the account says in Ezra 9:

After these things had been done, the leaders came to me [Ezra] and said, "The people of Israel, including the priests and the Levites, have not kept themselves separate from the neighboring peoples with their detestable practices, like those of the Canaanites, Hittites, Perizzites, Jebusites, Ammonites, Moabites, Egyptians and Amorites. They have taken some of their daughters as wives for themselves and their sons, and have mingled the holy race with the peoples around them. And the leaders and officials have led the way in this unfaithfulness." (Ezra 9:1-2 NIV)

That was a cause of great distress to Ezra. If you read the whole account, you will see that he was actually appalled into silence over this terrible violation. In the midst of his prayer that follows he adds these words,

"But now, O our God, what can we say after this? For we have disregarded the commands you gave through your servants the prophets when you said: 'The land you are entering to possess is a land polluted by the corruption of its peoples. By their detestable practices they have filled it with their impurity from one end to the other. Therefore, do not give your daughters in marriage to their sons or take their daughters for your sons. Do not further their welfare or prosperity at any time, that you may be strong and eat the good things of the land and leave it to your children as an everlasting inheritance.'" (Ezra 9:10-12 NIV)

We see from this that there was good reason why God forbade this social intercourse with the Ammonites and the Moabites. Their practices were terribly degrading. If they were allowed to intermarry with Israelites they would interject into the life of Israel some of these detestable customs.

But there is even more to it than this. What we must never forget in reading these Old Testament stories is that God is using a kind of visual aid to teach his people, both in Israel and in the church today, some very vital lessons. These stories are indicating something going on within — and not only among the Israelites but in the church as well. The Apostle Paul tells us that "all these things happened to Israel as examples for us upon whom the ends of the ages have come," (1 Corinthians 10:11).

What do these stories reveal is happening with us? If you trace the Ammonites and the Moabites back to their beginnings, you will discover that they are relatives of Israel. Ammon and Moab, the founders of these countries, were the sons of Lot, the nephew of Abraham. During the destruction of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, as the fire and brimstone was raining down upon these wicked cities, angels led Lot and his family up onto the mountainside. Lot's wife looked back and was turned into a pillar of salt, but Lot and his two daughters hid in a cave in the mountain while the cities burned before them. It is a rather sordid tale of how these girls, evidently feeling they were the last two women left on earth, contrived to trick their father into laying with them sexually. They both conceived and bore sons. One was named Ammon and the other Moab, and they went on to found tribes and countries of the same name. So Ammon and Moab are relatives, yet they are eternal enemies of Israel.

Do you have relatives like that whom you would love to get rid of but you cannot because they are related to you? They are troublesome, obnoxious and hard to live with, and yet there is nothing you can do about them because they are relatives. That is the way Ammon and Moab were with respect to Israel. They were constantly harassing Israel, trying to undermine them. They were forever trying to corrupt them, pollute them and destroy them. But Israel was forbidden to wipe them out because they were related to them.

The New Testament tells us that we have an enemy like that. It is called "the flesh," the old, Adamic nature that we inherited when we were born because we are children of Adam. The flesh is that inner commitment to self-centeredness that afflicts us all. I looked in the mirror this morning and I saw my greatest problem! It is I. This is true of all of us. There is something about us that wants to be king, wants to be lord, wants to be served, wants to be ministered to, wants to regulate everything, wants to run the world with ourselves at the center of things.

The New Testament calls this "the flesh." We would love to get rid of it sometimes because it tricks us and traps us, corrupts us and injures us. We deplore it at times and see how miserable it can make us. It leads us into hurtful actions that we repent of later. Sometimes you would like to get inside and rip that thing out and get rid of it forever. But you cannot because it is related to you. Yet we are called to live above it, in victory, while we struggle with it. We are called to overcome it, and to walk with God nevertheless. That is the struggle of the Christian life. All this is beautifully represented here in these stories.

In Verses 4-9 we get the detail of how this came about.

Before this, Eliashib the priest had been put in charge of the storerooms of the house of our God. He was closely associated with Tobiah [this is Tobiah the Ammonite, one of the enemies who consistently opposed the rebuilding of the wall and gave Nehemiah much trouble and opposition], and he had provided him with a large room formerly used to store the grain offerings and incense and temple articles, and also the tithes of grain, new wine and oil prescribed for the Levites, singers and gatekeepers, as well as the contributions for the priests.

But while all this was going on, I was not in Jerusalem, for in the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes king of Babylon I had returned to the king. Some time later I asked his permission and came back to Jerusalem. Here I learned about the evil thing Eliashib had done in providing Tobiah a room in the courts of the house of God. I was greatly displeased and threw all Tobiah's household goods out of the room. I gave orders to purify the rooms, and then I put back into them the equipment of the house of God, with the grain offerings and the incense. (Nehemiah 13:4-9 NIV)

This involved political intrigue sounds very much like what goes on in Washington, DC. The high priest had allowed his grandson to marry into this Ammonite family. We learn later in this chapter that he had married the daughter of Sanballat, the governor of Samaria, who was an ally of Tobiah the Ammonite. Both of these were vitriolic, bitter enemies of Nehemiah. This cozy alliance led to an invitation to Tobiah to actually move into the temple itself. To make room for him the high priest took over the storeroom that was set apart for the grain, oil and incense used by the Levites in their purification and ritual ceremonies. So there were two wrongs involved. An Ammonite and his family were actually living in the temple of God, contrary to the Law of Moses; and second, in order to permit that they had deliberately defrauded the Levites of their rights of storage.

When Nehemiah returned he went into prompt and passionate action. He threw the baggage out, fumigated the room, and returned the oil, grain and incense to their proper place. Many people feel that he overreacted. Today we do not get upset by the presence of evil and think it strange that a man should act like Nehemiah did. We have lost to a great degree our ability to express outrage and public indignation over things that are wrong. Read the letters to the papers, where the public has an opportunity to speak out, and you will see how infrequently outrage over evil is expressed. Nehemiah apparently loses his temper, behaves disgracefully and throws the people out with great violence.

We must remember, however, that this is similar to the incident in the New Testament when Jesus came into the temple and found it filled with money-changers making extravagant income off the sale of the sacrifices and offerings required in

the temple. It was a sordid scene of commercializing the worship of Israel. Jesus reacted in a way similar to Nehemiah's response here. He made a whip and went slashing and flashing around the Temple, upsetting tables and driving the moneychangers out — much to the distress of many pacifists ever since! It indicates that there is a time for drastic action. There is a time for strong stands against evil which others have indifferently accepted.

The story reveals clearly the way evil works. It invades us quietly. Before we are aware of it we have compromised ourselves and gone along with standards widely accepted around. We find the people of God have often been corrupted and polluted by this kind of thing. There are many instances of it today. When it comes down to individuals this is a picture of our struggle with our flesh. What this story depicts is the times when we must take a strong stand against evil in ourselves. We must be prepared to be drastic and take often painful action to clear up the things that are wrong in our own affairs. This is certainly true today when people have gone along with the world's attitudes toward divorce, or pornography, or the use of drugs or alcohol. Many Christians shrug their shoulders and allow evil to take root in their own lives. This story pictures the way these false forces can invade our lives and take up rooms in the very temple of our spirit, polluting and destroying us in the process. Remember what Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount: "If your right hand offends you, cut it off. If your right eye offends you, pluck it out," (Matthew 5:29-30 KJV). Take action. Do not allow these evil things to remain. Even if it takes painful effort to do so, end it! If you have allowed your heart to be involved with something that is evil and it is painful to give it up — you must give it up. That is what Jesus is saying. Bear the pain and stand firm. That is also what this great story teaches us.

Nehemiah went still further, as Verses 10-12 record:

I also learned that the portions assigned to the Levites had not been given to them, and that all the Levites and singers responsible for the service had gone back to their own fields. So I rebuked the officials and asked them, "Why is the house of God neglected?" Then I called them together and stationed them at their posts.

All Judah brought the tithes of grain, new wine and oil into the storerooms. (Nehemiah 13:10-12 NIV)

This neglect of the Temple is a result of the practice of intermarrying with Ammonites and Moabites. When Tobiah moved into the temple and they had to throw out the grain and oil and incense that the Levites needed, it meant that the Levites had no supplies to work with. Since they could not perform their ministry, they could not even be adequately supported, so they went to work in the fields to earn a living for themselves. As a result, the services of the temple were sorely neglected. The prophet Malachi inveighs against this same thing. He calls the people to face the fact that the temple was being neglected. The center of their life as a nation was not being maintained.

It is similar to an individual who allows his Bible reading and his prayer time to disappear from his life. Soon he begins to live like the world around. False forces start to creep in and take over. What it calls for is drastic, deliberate action to change the whole picture. This is what Nehemiah did. He rebuked the officials, we are told. Insistent on obeying the Scriptures, he calls them to account. Then he calls on the people to bring in the tithes and the oil and the incense again and to refill the temple storage areas, allowing the Levites to go back to work. Thus God's order was restored in the nation.

There is still a third step here:

I put Shelemiah the priest, Zadok the scribe, and a Levite named Pedaiah in charge of the storerooms and made Hanan son of Zaccur, the son of Matthewaniah, their assistant, because these men were considered trustworthy. They were made responsible for distributing the supplies to their brothers. (Nehemiah 13:13 NIV)

And, in a characteristic prayer, Nehemiah adds:

Remember me for this, O my God, and do not blot out what I have so faithfully done for the house of my God and its services. (Nehemiah 13:14 NIV)

Notice how representative this group is that he chooses. There is a priest, a scribe, a Levite, and a layman. All four represent various aspects of the life of Israel and share one great quality. He tells us: "these men were considered trustworthy." They were faithful men. I have discovered that today faithfulness is a quality not highly esteemed, although we often pay lip service to it. It is disheartening to me at times to see how few people

take seriously the responsibility to carry through faithfully what they have undertaken.

Faithfulness is the quality that God admires. Paul says in First Corinthians that those who minister in the church are "servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God, and it is required of a steward that he be found faithful," (1 Corinthians 4:1). That is the primary thing God looks for: the ability to hang in with an assignment until you are through; the willingness to fulfill responsibility year after year after year and not need to be praised or thanked or publicly encouraged in order to do so; to work unto the Lord; to show up on time and to not leave until the work is done. I find that quality is often missing in people today, especially in men leaders.

Our former associate, David Roper, is coming out soon with a wonderful book written just for men. When it is published I hope every man in this congregation will get a copy of it. It is rich, and it has a great title, *Men Made of Mud*. Here is what David says in his opening words:

Most of my friends here in Idaho consider themselves real men. They're outdoorsmen and sportsmen. They hunt and fish. They hang their snowmobiles upside down under the snow cornices on West Mountain. They hie (to go quickly; hasten) themselves across the desert in 4x4's at what I consider terminal velocities. I have one friend who pulled a grizzly off his wife with his bare hands. I saw another ride a log straight down a canyon wall. He almost broke the sound barrier on the way down and did break two ribs at the bottom, but to hear him tell it, it was the thrill of a lifetime. Yet for all our macho I think we're mostly uneasy about our manhood: no one seems to know for sure what it means. We have to be told: "Real men don't eat quiche; they never bunt; they don't have 'meaningful dialogues' and rarely do they think about the meaning of life." Real men love John Wayne, Monday Night Football, chain saws, and Coors. Pete Rose is a real man and, according to Time Magazine, so is Maggie Thatcher!

I am afraid he rang the bell on that one. He has described what a great many men think of manhood. But not Nehemiah. He does not look for someone who is macho or has a great personality. He looks for someone who is faithful. God honors that. Those who serve God acceptably in this life he will reward with the words, "Well done, thou good and faithful servant," (Matthew 25:21 KJV).

I have learned through the years to look for four qualities in leaders, whether they be men or women. Let me share them with you:

I look first for a searching mind: a person who is mentally alert, who has curiosity about life, who wants to learn all the time, who never gives up learning. Such a person is always reading, always listening, always thinking about what he or she hears and trying to reason out what is behind it. A searching mind has an innate curiosity. It is aware of its lack of knowledge and keeps hoping to remedy the problem by learning more all the time. That is the first thing I look for.

Then, second, I look for a humble heart: someone whose ego is not on the line all the time, who must be praised and honored and encouraged in order to get them to do anything at all; who gets disgruntled and turned off if they do not get recognized. I look for someone who understands that service is a privilege; that power is not conferred upon you by an office but by serving people; that becoming a servant to others is the means of awakening a sense of gratitude on their part that makes them willing to follow what you suggest. People who learn how to lead that way are always tremendously useful in God's work and in God's kingdom. Jesus himself taught us that. "He who would be greatest among you" (Luke 22:26), he said, "let him become the servant of all," (Mark 10:44). So a humble heart is a very necessary qualification.

Third, I look for an evident gift: God's people are gifted people. There is not one of the members of the body of Christ who has not been equipped by the Holy Spirit with a special ability to do something. When they know what it is, they always enjoy doing it. It is their delight. It is not a burden any more than wings are a burden to a bird. It is a delight to them. I look for people who have the gift for what we are asking them to do because they will stay with it and enjoy it to the end.

And then, fourth, undergirding all the others and making them possible, is a faithful spirit: someone who will not quit; someone who sees his work as a ministry of service to the Lord himself; who has undertaken it out of gratitude in his own life and heart and no matter how tough it gets and how rough it gets, will not quit. That is what Nehemiah found.

Isn't it marvelous as we go through this account to recognize how beautifully each of these qualities is seen in Nehemiah himself? What a great administrative gift he had! How he could organize things, put people to work and help them understand what they had to do! And yet, how faithful he was in this. Of all the people who observed the terrible ruin of Jerusalem, who knew about its walls broken down and its gates burned, it took a man far off in the kingdom of Persia to come and do something about it. At great personal cost, and at much expenditure of labor and of commitment, he came and undertook the project and carried it through. He never quit. And when the enemies gathered against him, that did not slow him down. He stayed with it, encouraging others and pressing on until the job was accomplished. That is the lesson of this book.

God looks for these kind of people to change the age in which they live. That is what we are called to do today. We are all involved in it, not just the obvious, visible leaders. Someone in the couples class this morning commented on the fact that the work of the ministry is going on all the time around here by people in their shops, homes and offices. That is where the ministry is being carried on. What is required are faithful men and women who are willing to carry this through to the end.

Let us remember that when we read this prayer of Nehemiah in Verse 14. (He repeats it twice more in this chapter). Some people think it sounds self-serving, that he is concerned that God is going to forget him and not reward him adequately. But that is the wrong way to read this prayer. What he is doing is recognizing his own frailty and his own tendency to self-deception. He is saying, in effect, "Lord, I have done all this but you may see it differently than I. You may see something in me that would cause you to blot this all out of your book. If you feel that way, show it to me." That is what he is asking.

It is really the same prayer that David prayed at the end of Psalm 139. Everybody loves Psalm 139.

It is a great psalm about how we are fearfully and wonderfully made; how well God knows us; our down-sitting and our uprising; that if we take the wings of the morning and travel to the uttermost parts of the earth, still God is there; how he watches over us; how he guards us and keeps us and knows our thoughts, etc. Then it ends with this wonderful prayer, "Search me, O God, and know my heart. Try me and know my thoughts and see if there is any wicked way in me and lead me in the way everlasting," (Psalms 139:23-24 NIV). That is a wonderfully honest prayer. It is saying, "Lord, I do not know myself very well. I deceive myself easily. I think I am doing fine, but you may see a lot of things that are terribly wrong with what I am doing. So Lord, search me and know me and see if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me to the point where I can see that, too." That is what he is asking.

And that is what Nehemiah is praying here. "Remember me for this, O my God, and do not blot out what I have so faithfully done for the house of my God and its services."

It is a great prayer for all of us as we come to the conclusion of this service. God has placed us in a critical moment of human history. The voices of all the great leaders of the past are silent, as far as this generation is concerned.

Who is going to reach the drug addicts? Who is going to reach the yuppies who are trying to climb the ladder of success, seeking to satisfy themselves by material gain and possessions? Who is going to reach the hundreds of thousands of spiritually bankrupt people all around us? They do not come to church. Who is going to talk to them? God has called us to a ministry to reach out to them. And we need God's help in doing so.

Therefore this is a call for faithful leadership that will stay with the task and see that it gets done, whether it be within the confines of a church ministry itself, or whether it be touching the world around us. This is what God calls us to.

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