

Fighting the Good Fight

Books of Ezra and Nehemiah

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Bible Text: Nehemiah 13
Preached on: Sunday, October 17, 2021

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Turn with me in your Bibles, if you will, to Nehemiah 13. Some chuckling in the... It's well-deserved. And I try to say this as much as I can, if the Lord wills, you know, as James encourages in James 4, if you say you're going to go to a city, say if the Lord wills I will go and do such and such, because we plan our ways but the Lord directs our steps, and so I said last week we would be done with Nehemiah last Sunday, chapter 13, and the Lord just really put on my heart that we needed to think about this chapter a little more and so we're here again. And I'm not going to say but I really do think this is very likely the last Sunday in it, but the Lord knows.

Nehemiah 13 and the title of the message is "Fighting the Good Fight." Fighting the good fight. I take those words from the Apostle Paul in describing near the end of his life the work that he had been doing for more than three decades, he writing to Timothy in 2 Timothy 4 preparing for his death, knowing that it was imminent, said to Timothy, "I have fought the good fight of faith. I have finished my course. I have kept the faith." So fighting the good fight, he described his ministry as fighting the good fight and I think this chapter in Nehemiah is an example of a man who is fighting the good fight. Remember last week when we looked at Nehemiah 13, we looked at one of the powerful realities that this chapter unfolds for us is, and this was the title last week, there are no happy endings in a fallen world, there just simply are no happy endings, there are no they lived happily ever after because we still live in a world that is under the dominion of the enemy of our souls. And so even though we may have moments of great victory and we may see as the people in Israel saw, an extraordinary revival, I mean, they experienced a tremendous movement of God in returning the life of God to the people of God and they experienced the real measure or evidence of that is real lasting repentance. They really repented of their sins. Remember, repentance is a whole person turning from sin to God. It happens when a person comes to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ. Faith is always the initial response to the gospel. You must believe and then in believing and being united to Jesus, repentance flows out of that. It's the mark of true faith. You don't repent before you believe, you have no power to turn from sin. We're all sinners by birth and so we must have Christ and so the gospel is offered to us when we see our sinfulness, we see our hopeless condition, that we are separated from God, under his righteous wrath and indignation because we are rebels, and yet we see Christ. That as we just sang about or we just heard sang, he was willing to die for us. God died for us that we might return to

him. He took our punishment in himself on the cross and when you come to understand that Jesus then invites anyone who will come to him, believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved, and you look to him in faith and you rest in him fully, not in your works, in nothing in yourself, what wonderful news that is. Nothing in you hinders you from coming to Christ no matter how deep the sin because the Savior's love and the Savior's blood are greater. Nothing hinders you from coming to Christ and when you come to him, then repentance is the evidence of that.

When you come to him truly, then you will turn from sin. It's not going to be a perfect thing though, what we see in this, they really experienced real repentance but before long they were struggling in profound ways. What happened we talked about last week was Nehemiah in the preaching service in Nehemiah 8 that they preached for hours and the people were just convicted and returned to God, and then in Nehemiah 9, they confessed their sins to God, they renew the covenant with God, they dedicate the walls which they have rebuilt and it should be "and they lived happily ever after." You kind of hope for but the book doesn't end there. Chapter 13 comes along and tells us that there really are no happy endings because Nehemiah goes away, for 12 years he continues as governor and apparently things remain pretty sound while he's there but then he returns back to Persia and while he's gone, probably gone for several years, conditions deteriorate rapidly, the spiritual health of the people declines precipitously so that when he comes back, he finds things have deteriorated. So he then takes action and that's what we talked about last week was the action that he took. You know, he was a man of action and we see his just dramatic action, bold and dramatic action. We're going to read it in a moment but for those of you who were here last week, if you hadn't read Nehemiah in a long time or you've never read it before, you may have found yourself thinking he acts so boldly that he offends our sensitivities, doesn't he? I mean, what he does is definitely not nice. He tramples on social convention. He runs roughshod over our expectations of politeness and how one ought to act. We are tempted at first glance to see him as a bull in a china shop. He seems to not know what he's doing but in reality he is right and we are wrong.

His action motivated out of fear of God and out of an awareness of seeing what God sees is exactly what God would be doing in the moment, and we in our sensitivities, in our politeness and niceness, tend to miss the boat. I think it's something especially difficult, I mean, American culture is this way in general but Southern culture especially, this idea of politeness and niceness and I want to be nice. I've grown up with that. I have to fight against that tendency, you know, to beat around the bush in trying to confront something, to say it the most palatable way. There's a wisdom and, listen, let me be clear, I want you to hear this very clearly, there are passages in the Scripture which present to us the balancing truth of the tenderness of Christ. One of my favorite verses is Isaiah 42, I think it's verse 3. It says that a bruised reed he will not break and a smoldering flax he will not extinguish. The Messiah when he comes will be so gentle that a bruised reed he won't break and a smoldering flax he will not extinguish. So when Jesus comes, there's a tenderness in his heart and the tenderness is there always. If you look at the gospels clearly, carefully, the tenderness is always there for those that even the deepest sinners are the ones that find the welcome invitation of Christ. Why? Because they know they need him. When they encounter his righteousness, his holiness, they're convicted. People

like Mary Magdalene, a prostitute, formerly demon possessed, encounters Jesus and he is everything to her and she turns from her sin. And remember the Pharisees complained about him, "He's a companion of sinners and tax collectors." They accused him of being a drunkard and a winebibber because he was hanging around the people that lived that way. He wasn't participating in their sinful ways. No, he was delivering them from their sinful ways but the compassionate heart of Christ, when people saw their sin and their need, there is a tenderness in Christ that cannot be fully anticipated. We never would expect him to be that way but he is.

But listen, there is also, the Lamb of God is also the Lion of Judah, and we encounter him at times being very firm and trampling on our sensitivities. I mentioned last time that the ministry of Jesus, this is so profoundly important, the ministry of Jesus is bracketed by two events that are basically the same thing: the cleansing of the temple. Twice he goes into the temple not worrying about sensitivity or politeness, not saying, "Hey, guys, we need to have a meeting. We need to discuss this." No, the Son of God who has put all of this together comes into his house and he puts it in order, and he cleanses the temple, he drives people out, he turns over the tables of the moneychangers and he drives them out. He does it at the beginning of his ministry and a few days before he dies. There's a place for the attitude of Nehemiah in this chapter. This is like Christ and you know that because, listen, the Bible sometimes describes bad behavior and everything the Bible describes is not affirming but this passage is describing behavior that we might at first glance think is bad but the passage is affirming it which means when we think it's bad, we're the ones that are bad. Our standards are just not right and we need to see that.

Anyway, let's look at Nehemiah 13. Fighting the good fight.

1 On that day they read aloud from the book of Moses in the hearing of the people; and there was found written in it that no Ammonite or Moabite should ever enter the assembly of God, 2 because they did not meet the sons of Israel with bread and water, but hired Balaam against them to curse them. However, our God turned the curse into a blessing. 3 So when they heard the law, they excluded all foreigners from Israel. 4 Now prior to this, Eliashib the priest, who was appointed over the chambers of the house of our God, being related to Tobiah, 5 had prepared a large room for him, where formerly they put the grain offerings, the frankincense, the utensils and the tithes of grain, wine and oil prescribed for the Levites, the singers and the gatekeepers, and the contributions for the priests. 6 But during all this time I was not in Jerusalem, for in the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes king of Babylon I had gone to the king. After some time, however, I asked leave from the king, 7 and I came to Jerusalem and learned about the evil that Eliashib had done for Tobiah, by preparing a room for him in the courts of the house of God. 8 It was very displeasing to me, so I threw all of Tobiah's household goods out of the room. 9 Then I gave an order and they cleansed the rooms; and I returned there the utensils of the house of God with the grain offerings and the frankincense. 10 I also discovered that the portions of the Levites had not been given

them, so that the Levites and the singers who performed the service had gone away, each to his own field. 11 So I reprimanded the officials and said, "Why is the house of God forsaken?" Then I gathered them together and restored them to their posts. 12 All Judah then brought the tithe of the grain, wine and oil into the storehouses. 13 In charge of the storehouses I appointed Shelemiah the priest, Zadok the scribe, and Pedaiah of the Levites, and in addition to them was Hanan the son of Zaccur, the son of Mattaniah; for they were considered reliable, and it was their task to distribute to their kinsmen. 14 Remember me for this, O my God, and do not blot out my loyal deeds which I have performed for the house of my God and its services. 15 In those days I saw in Judah some who were treading wine presses on the sabbath, and bringing in sacks of grain and loading them on donkeys, as well as wine, grapes, figs and all kinds of loads, and they brought them into Jerusalem on the sabbath day. So I admonished them on the day they sold food. 16 Also men of Tyre were living there who imported fish and all kinds of merchandise, and sold them to the sons of Judah on the sabbath, even in Jerusalem. 17 Then I reprimanded the nobles of Judah and said to them, "What is this evil thing you are doing, by profaning the sabbath day? 18 "Did not your fathers do the same, so that our God brought on us and on this city all this trouble? Yet you are adding to the wrath on Israel by profaning the sabbath." 19 It came about that just as it grew dark at the gates of Jerusalem before the sabbath, I commanded that the doors should be shut and that they should not open them until after the sabbath. Then I stationed some of my servants at the gates so that no load would enter on the sabbath day. 20 Once or twice the traders and merchants of every kind of merchandise spent the night outside Jerusalem. 21 Then I warned them and said to them, "Why do you spend the night in front of the wall? If you do so again, I will use force against you." From that time on they did not come on the sabbath. 22 And I commanded the Levites that they should purify themselves and come as gatekeepers to sanctify the sabbath day. For this also remember me, O my God, and have compassion on me according to the greatness of Your lovingkindness. 23 In those days I also saw that the Jews had married women from Ashdod, Ammon and Moab. 24 As for their children, half spoke in the language of Ashdod, and none of them was able to speak the language of Judah, but the language of his own people. 25 So I contended with them and cursed them and struck some of them and pulled out their hair, and made them swear by God, "You shall not give your daughters to their sons, nor take of their daughters for your sons or for yourselves. 26 "Did not Solomon king of Israel sin regarding these things? Yet among the many nations there was no king like him, and he was loved by his God, and God made him king over all Israel; nevertheless the foreign women caused even him to sin. 27 "Do we then hear about you that you have committed all this great evil by acting unfaithfully against our God by marrying foreign women?" 28 Even one of the sons of Joiada, the son of Eliashib the high priest, was a son-in-law

of Sanballat the Horonite, so I drove him away from me. 29 Remember them, O my God, because they have defiled the priesthood and the covenant of the priesthood and the Levites. 30 Thus I purified them from everything foreign and appointed duties for the priests and the Levites, each in his task, 31 and I arranged for the supply of wood at appointed times and for the first fruits. Remember me, O my God, for good.

Let's go to the Lord in prayer.

Our Father, we thank You for Your word and we, as we come to it, Lord, are aware of our great need of Your Spirit. Open the eyes of our hearts to see and understand wonderful things from Your law. We pray that in Your light we might see light, that we might be conformed to the image of Christ for the glory of His name. Amen.

Fighting the good fight. Fighting the good fight. This idea, as we read this morning here again, you see the actions of Nehemiah. I mean, he throws out the goods of Tobiah. He threatens the non-Jewish traders who were waiting outside of Jerusalem. When he finds people that have intermarried, he contends with them, he strikes them, he pulls out their hair, he pronounces a curse on them. I mean, there's no way that these things, we're not to apply these things literally anymore. None of us needs to be pulling out hair or striking one another because in the new covenant these physical types have been replaced with spiritual realities, but it shows us the earnestness and the urgency of the moment.

You know, when you really see what's wrong that other people don't see, you have a tendency to know that, "Hey, it doesn't matter what social convention is, it doesn't matter that I might be misunderstood, there's something urgent that must be done." When we were first married, Patti and I had been married I guess about a year, and we were sitting down, we had a little place we were renting and so we were sitting down in the kitchen, I was sitting down in the kitchen, she was over at the stove and she was cooking and it happened to be, it's kind of a long kitchen. Anyway, I was a good ways away from her because the table was over here and we were just talking. I had come home from work and we were talking. She was making something and we're talking and she gets cold, you know, some of you have that dynamic, and then, of course, it changes over time. But anyway, so she gets cold and so she was leaning up against the oven and it was a gas stove and so she's leaning up against it, she turns around to stir the pot again and I see a flame going up her sweater. I mean, it's catching on fire and it's burning up pretty quickly so I sprint across the room, thankfully it happened when I was only about 23 years old, much better than today that distance, you would have been gone. I sprint across the room and I grab her and throw her down on the ground and I roll her around and roll the rug over her. I think I could have done it a little better than I did, okay? I didn't have a lot of time to think but I didn't say, "Honey, I need to talk to you about something," because it was a matter of life and death. I saw it going up the back of her sweater, if it got her hair, I mean, who knows how bad it could have been.

You see, when you see an urgent need that must be addressed because there's danger, you act in a way that tends to trample on sensitivities. That is the heart of Nehemiah in this

passage. That is the heart of Jesus when he drives out the moneychangers. That is the heart of Christ when he speaks such stern words occasionally to those who are the most hardened like the Pharisees, see Matthew 23. It's actually done in love. It doesn't look loving. Sometimes love doesn't look like we expect it to.

So Nehemiah understands and he is trying to bless the people of Israel with everything that he can, and to do that he knows he must fight against evil and that's what he's doing. He's fighting the good fight and I think he's an example. I mentioned last time that we should try to be a man of action, a person of action like Nehemiah, a person of prayer. Those are important things but I want to look at this passage again and look at him as a model of someone who fought the good fight and see how we can fight, and the things that he recognized. I want us to look at that and that's why I wanted to come back to this passage, to try to apply it a little more directly than we did last week.

So we're talking about fighting the good fight and we're going to see three things that Nehemiah fought against that we need to fight against, or that are fulfilled for us in this new covenant, we can see that there's an application for us today. And the first is we need to fight against the acceptance of evil in the church. The acceptance of evil in the church. This is the first thing. Remember I mentioned last time that we see that Nehemiah when he came back, that the text has a way of saying like, "I learned about something," verse 7. Verse 10, "I discovered something." He discovers the Levites are not being cared for. Verse 15, "I saw that they were treading winepresses on the sabbath." Verse 23, "I saw that they," the Jews, "had married foreign women." You see, he's learning, discovering. When he learns or discovers or sees something, he acts on it. And the first thing that he discovers or learns or sees is he learns about the evil that Eliashib had done for Tobiah in verse 7, by preparing a room for him the courts of the house of God.

Now it's interesting, this is one of the reasons that verses 1 to 3 were put there in the text by the author was to set the stage for what was going to come up next. He reminds us of what did happen, they did come to an understanding, the Bible says, the Old Testament said no Ammonite or Moabite should ever enter the assembly of God, could never come into the assembly of God. Now remember I mentioned this last and I want to remind you of this, read the book of Ruth to see that there is a counterbalance, there is a sense in which God invites anyone, Moabite or Ammonite, to be saved. Ruth the Moabitess is the hero of the book of Ruth. In the line of Christ. It means that no Moabite who stays a Moabite, who is committed to the Moabite religion has any place among the people of God. And this is not about intermarriage, ethnicity or anything like that. It's about spiritual realities and you see that even as we were reading because he talked about Solomon who was led astray to worship other gods by his love for foreign women. It wasn't that they were foreign, it wasn't that they were of a different ethnicity, it was that they were of a different faith.

But here, back to Tobiah. Tobiah is an Ammonite. We know that. It's been repeated over and over earlier in the book of Nehemiah and so the reason verses 1 to 3 are there, that no Ammonite or Moabite should ever enter the assembly of God, now Nehemiah finds Tobiah, that he's not only being, you know, accepted, he has a room in the temple.

Nobody is supposed to have a room except a priest and this man, an Ammonite who has shown himself through the book of Nehemiah to be a sworn enemy of God has a place in the temple. These verses 1 to 3 are basically a reference to Deuteronomy 23:3-4 where it talks about no Ammonite or Moabite, and it was because the Ammonites and the Moabites did not allow the nation of Israel to pass through when they were coming into the Promised Land but fought against them and tried to destroy them. But we know that he's not only an Ammonite, he's a hostile Ammonite.

You go back to chapter 2 and I want to just walk through these verses because it's just important to see this. The character of Tobiah. When Nehemiah comes in chapter 2, verse 9, when he comes from the king of Persia back toward Israel, he comes "to the governors of the provinces beyond the River and gave them the king's letters. Now the king had sent with me officers of the army and horsemen. When Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official heard about it, it was very displeasing to them that someone had come to seek the welfare of the sons of Israel." From what we can tell, Sanballat was the governor of Samaria and Tobiah was the governor of Ammon. Of course, he's called Tobiah the Ammonite. He was the governor of Ammon, a region next to Judea. And we're told more about his response, he's angry, he's displeased that someone is going to do something for Israel. Why does he care? Because he's an enemy of God and it's shown out as we go forward.

Chapter 4 we see it further. Sanballat and Tobiah both are the enemies and both of them show up in chapter 13. Chapter 4, verse 1, "Now it came about that when Sanballat heard that we were rebuilding the wall, he became furious and very angry and mocked the Jews. He spoke in the presence of his brothers and the wealthy men of Samaria and said, 'What are these feeble Jews doing? Are they going to restore it for themselves? Can they offer sacrifices? Can they finish in a day? Can they revive the stones from the dusty rubble even the burned ones?'" He's mocking the people of God as they try to restore worship. "Now Tobiah the Ammonite," that's the second time we're told he's the Ammonite, "was near him and he said, 'Even what they are building if a fox should jump on it, he would break their stone wall down!'" Look at verse 6, "we built the wall and the whole wall was joined together to half its height." They get right to work and they build the wall and it's to half its height. Look what it says after that, "for the people had a mind to work," this is chapter 4, verse 6. Verse 7, "Now when Sanballat, Tobiah, the Arabs, the Ammonites and the Ashdodites heard that the repair of the walls of Jerusalem went on, and that the breaches began to be closed, they were very angry. All of them conspired together to come and fight against Jerusalem and to cause a disturbance in it. But we prayed to our God, and because of them we set up a guard." Verse 11, "Our enemies said," this is Tobiah and Sanballat, the Ammonites, the Ashdodites, "Our enemies said, 'They will not know or see until we come among them, kill them and put a stop to the work.'" They were so against the work they were intent on murdering the people that were doing the work. Why do they care? They're just rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem so that the worship of Jerusalem can be carried on but there is an antipathy on the part of these particular individuals that hates what God is doing and Tobiah is a ringleader.

Chapter 6, verse 1, they're getting close to being finished now, "Now when it was reported to Sanballat, Tobiah, to Geshem the Arab and to the rest of our enemies that I had rebuilt the wall, and that no breach remained in it, although at that time I had not set up the doors in the gates." They're almost done now. Now it's all the way up but the gates aren't finished, "then Sanballat and Geshem sent a message to me, saying, 'Come, let us meet together at Chephirim in the plain of Ono.' But they were planning to harm me." So Sanballat and Geshem the Arab are working together. It's now they go kind of into intrigue, rather than open hostility, "Hey, come out and have a meeting with us. Hey, come way over away from Judah into a region where we can kill you but we can make it look good and we can have somebody else witness it and they can report to the king that, you know, you probably attacked us first," or something like that. "You know Nehemiah, he's a hothead."

Well, that's the intrigue of verses 2 to 10 but Tobiah has another attack that he's trying to work against the work. In verse 10 of chapter 6, "When I entered the house of Shemaiah," now this is another Jew, "Shemaiah the son of Delaiah, son of Mehetabel, who was confined at home," this is what Shemaiah, this is a prophet, a guy who claims to be a prophet in Jerusalem says this, "Let us meet together in the house of God, within the temple," talking to Nehemiah, "and let us close the doors of the temple, for they are coming to kill you, and they are coming to kill you at night." Now remember the work is almost done. Nehemiah is finishing the work. He's got to get the gates installed and so Shemaiah says, "Listen, they're coming to kill you. You need to take refuge in the temple."

Look what he says in verse 11. Nehemiah responds to Shemaiah, "Should a man like me flee? And could one such as I go into the temple to save his life? I will not go in." Look at verse 12, "Then I perceived that surely God had not sent him," this is not a prophet from God though he claims to be, "but he uttered his prophecy against me because Tobiah and Sanballat had hired him." They are bribing people in the community of faith to hinder the work. They've gone underground. It's no longer open opposition but it is every bit as hateful as before, it's just masked now.

Verse 13, "He was hired for this reason, that I might become frightened and act accordingly and sin, so that they might have an evil report in order that they could reproach me." And Nehemiah's prayer, "Remember, O my God, Tobiah and Sanballat according to these works of theirs, and also Noadiah the prophetess and the rest of the prophets who were trying to frighten me."

Then verse 18. We found out in chapter 13 Tobiah is related to the family of the priests. Verse 18 of chapter 6, "For many in Judah were bound by oath to him," talking about Tobiah, "because he was the son-in-law of Shecaniah the son of Arah, and his son Jehohanan had married the daughter of Meshullam the son of Berechiah. Moreover, they were speaking about his good deeds in my presence and reported my words to him. Then Tobiah sent letters to frighten me." They were saying, "Listen, Tobiah is a good guy. You need to accept him, Nehemiah. Stop being such a hard, you know, fellow to get along with." And Tobiah is sending letters to try to frighten him.

Now this is the Tobiah that we meet in chapter 13. Nehemiah has gone back to Susa and while he's gone a few years, Tobiah not only is welcomed in, he's given a place to live in the temple complex. That's interesting, his name Tobiah actually is Hebrew. He's the only one of the enemies of God that has a Hebrew name so it shows he's got some Hebrew lineage. Tobiah means Yahweh is good. So he has a name and he's probably as we were just seeing, he's convincing people, "Hey, I'm on your side." And many of the people are swayed to believe that Tobiah is on our side but when Nehemiah finds out what's happened, Nehemiah takes action. He knows Tobiah is not on our side. Look, it's not his words, look at his deeds. The things that he has done shows that he opposes the gospel. At this point in time, the gospel, the message of salvation was that you needed to worship, at this point in time it's pointing to Christ to come. The way that you meet God is you meet God in the temple, the one place you can meet God is the temple in Jerusalem through the sacrificial system as God ordained in the word according to his design, not our own, and so Jerusalem must be rebuilt, the walls restored so that this place can function properly and that's what Sanballat and Tobiah are opposing. They're opposing the way of salvation. They're opposing the gospel but they say they're nice guys. They say they're with us but the fact is they're not. Nehemiah understands and so he takes all of his stuff, throws it out into the street. He cleans house.

This man had been given a prominent place in the house of God. That's emphasized, it was the house of God, the courts of the house of God, back to chapter 13, verse 7. Eliashib had prepared a room for him in the courts of the house of God, the temple itself. Verse 9, "Then I gave an order and they cleansed the rooms; and I returned there the utensils of the house of God." When he gets finished talking about this section, in verse 14 he says, "Remember me for this, O my God, and do not blot out my loyal deeds which I have performed for the house of my God and its services." Nehemiah knows at that moment in redemptive history it's all about the temple because God has said it's all about the temple. There's only one place to meet God, it's the temple. That's why there's such an emphasis on this. You read your Old Testament carefully it's clear. Why is that that way? Because there was going to be only one place, one person to meet God. The Lord Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of the temple.

Remember I mentioned he cleansed the temple. He cleanses the temple in John 2. He takes that cord and he drives out the people in the temple and they come to him after it happened, the priests and the Pharisees come and say, "By what authority do you do this? Why are you doing this?" And he says to them, "Destroy this temple and in three days I will rebuild it." And they're like, "This took 45 years to build this temple and You're going to rebuild it in three days?" And John says they didn't realize that he was speaking of the temple of his body. He says, "Listen, this temple is really not the temple anymore, the temple is right here."

So all of that emphasis is on there's only one place and it must be kept holy and pure and it must be done according to God's design because there must be a way, if sinners like you and me that are as filthy as we are, are to come into the presence of a holy God, we must come in a way that he designs, that he designs, and he's laid it out with such clarity in

the old covenant because he was telling us that Jesus had to fulfill every specification perfectly, that Jesus when he would come would have to live a perfect sinless life, tempted in every way yet without sin, tempted again and again and again but always always always doing the perfect will of his Father. Then he must offer himself a blameless sacrifice, no sin, unblemished, without spot. And on the cross bear the sins of everyone who would ever believe. And he was punished in our place and all of that Old Testament sacrifice, all of that Old Testament imagery finds its fulfillment in the cross and there is no other name given under heaven by which men must be saved but the name of Jesus which means Yahweh is salvation. This is how he saves and so that Nehemiah looking ahead to the cross, the Spirit of God, the zeal of the Lord, the fear of God compelling him. He's being zealous for the way of salvation because, listen, if ever it was a matter of life and death, this is it. To compromise here is not just physical harm, physical death, but is eternal spiritual death.

That's the urgency and so for the temple to have Tobiah in it, a man who hates God, is the defilement of the highest order. How did that happen? I mean, think about that. Now we can see a little bit, chapter 6 where we read earlier, people are saying, "Hey, he's a good guy. Hey, his name means Yahweh is salvation. He's one of us. He's not got an Ammonite name, he's got a Jewish name." He was probably a pretty persuasive fellow. But when the church, when the people of God, and remember the New Testament Jesus is the temple and then those who belong to him, those who believe in him who are united to him by faith, you just place your faith in Jesus and you become united to him and you become built on the foundation, he's the cornerstone of the new temple and we're built up into a living temple. The church is the temple. We're each living stones, 1 Peter 2, in the temple. Ephesians 2:19-22, we're being built up into a spiritual house for God to dwell in. So what it means is when the church now allows evil and it accepts it, embraces it in the church, this is the kind of thing Nehemiah would react to and which we ought to react to.

To lift up people, I think there are different ways you can apply this but I think one of the ways that I notice this happens in modern America at least, and I'm sure it's happened in different ways throughout different cultures as the gospel goes different places, but I remember noticing this when I was a younger man even, you know, you would hear about somebody who had a conversion experience, a celebrity, and then immediately the celebrity would be having prominent opportunities to give their testimony and speak in the church. And as I grew in my understanding of the Scriptures, I was like, "You know, that's really not biblical." I mean, when Paul got saved, he spent three years in the Syrian desert before he ever got an opportunity to teach and lead in the church. That's the Apostle Paul and he was meeting with Christ himself to get that and he was an apostle. So when some celebrity gets saved, the church should be thrilled because there is supposed to be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents, "We are so delighted that you are here! We're so delighted that you love Jesus! Now come walk along with us and let's follow Christ together." Not let's come, let's have a big meeting and invite all kinds of people to come hear you teach. The Bible says don't lay hands on too quickly, 1 Timothy 5, and thus incur judgment. 1 Timothy 3 speaking of elders, he must not be a novice lest he fall into the temptation of the devil, that is to elevate himself.

So wisdom says you don't give that to a brand new believer. You don't put a spiritual baby up in front of the people of God. Now what happens often is they do that and then you find out the person really wasn't a believer because they don't end up following Christ for very long. And those who really know Christ continue to follow him. When we do that, we're elevating celebrity and the idea of celebrity in the church. This is what's really important is that you be well-known and loved by the masses. Does that sound like the gospel? But it also is evident when the church, the church accepts evil when the church knowingly accepts people who though they may present an appearance of being with us, their doctrine and their lives show they're not. False teaching. When the church embraces false teaching, and when the church sees false teaching, we should have an indignation about it the way Nehemiah did. It's not something to treat with kid gloves. Why? Because it's a matter of life and death. It's not just a matter of personal preference. When someone is compromising the gospel, it is a matter of life and death.

One of the just astonishing things and I encourage you as you read the New Testament, just as you read through the epistles, just note how much of an emphasis there is in the early church on combating false teaching. I mean, Jesus had said it was going to be this way. In Matthew 7 he says there will be false prophets who will rise among you. They will be wolves in sheep's clothing. And he talks about how to test them, you'll know them by their fruits. Now think about that, the very beginning of this new covenant relationship, the church now being born through the work of Christ actually coming to its fulfillment, all of the Old Testament coming to a fulfillment in Jesus and the Holy Spirit being given, and now the church has the Holy Spirit, the church has the word of God, and yet he says there's going to be continually false teachers, it's Satan's strategy always to counterfeit the truth. He always does that. This is his modus operandi. He's going to do it until the end.

And you see it, like I said, you start reading and they're having false teachers. It's discussed almost every book they're dealing with some kind of heresy in the church. There are people who say they love God, they say they believe that God is good, Tobiah, Yahweh is good, but their teaching is attacking the gospel. There are people who don't believe what the Bible says is true. They don't believe in the inerrancy of Scripture, that this book is God's holy word. They're not submitting to the authority of God in his word. They may sound like they are but if you look carefully, they're really not.

I encountered this when I was a student in seminary. Actually I finished my last year at a divinity school which was a seminary attached to a university and the university I attended or the divinity school was at an undergrad religion department and the graduate school was conservative. The professors at that time were all committed to the inerrancy of Scripture, believed in the gospel, but the undergrad religion department at the same institution, so the graduate students are being taught one thing and the undergrads are being taught something totally different. There was an article in the paper, the Washington Post ran an article about our school. This was I think 1990-91, I can't remember. But you know how you get those things at Easter, some kind of Christian emphasis that, you know, the New York Times or whatever, the Washington Post will write an article and they wrote an article about these two men and one was the dean of

our divinity school, Timothy George, who believed the gospel, believed the word of God, and the other was this guy Bill Leonard, they were both church historians and they both had taught at the same seminary before and now on that faculty they had left and they had come and they ended up being at the same place again but in different schools. And they were talking about Easter and Timothy said, Timothy George, my dean said, "I believe that Jesus Christ was crucified, dead and buried and that He rose again bodily from the grave." That's the gospel. And they quoted Bill Leonard, this other guy who was the dean of the undergraduate school and he said, "I believe that Jesus died and was buried and rose again but just not so literally." He didn't believe in literal resurrection but he used the words. He didn't say that every time he talked. He didn't say, "Hey, I want you guys to know right upfront I don't believe in a literal resurrection. I don't believe in substitutionary atonement." No, he would talk about Jesus, he would talk about the word of God but if you looked under the surface a little bit and you probed and questioned and if he would really tell you what he said and you watched what he said, you would say he's an enemy of the gospel. And what needs to happen in those circumstances is we need to call it out not just for the health of the flock which is the main reason, to protect the sheep, but also for that person's soul. He needs to know that if you really just believe in a figurative resurrection of Christ, you are on your way to hell no matter how much you profess Jesus.

So please, my friend, believe in Christ, believe in the gospel that the Bible presents. That's what we should see and if it's a life and death matter, you see, you don't just wink at that, you don't act nice about it. I mean, I'm not saying you're rude and there's certainly no hair pulling and all that stuff, but you go and you spiritually you do some hair pulling. You say, "Listen, why are you doing what you're doing? Why did you study all of this time and now come to deny the message that you claimed to preach? Professing to know God, you deny Him."

Let me show you this in the New Testament. Look at Titus 1. This shows how we're supposed to deal with false teaching in the church. Paul is talking about the danger of false teaching when he's explaining what the role of elders are. This is Titus, this is right after 1 and 2 Timothy, before Hebrews and Philemon. Titus 1 he says, verse 9, this is a qualification for elders, they must "hold fast the faithful word," because elders are shepherds of the sheep, they're to protect the sheep. They must "hold fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching, so that he will be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict." An elder must be skilled enough with the word to be able to exhort in sound doctrine, healthy doctrine that promotes life, and he must be able to refute those who contradict because there will be those who contradict.

Look what he says, "For there are many rebellious men, empty talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision." There was a group of professing Christians who said they believed in Jesus but Paul is telling us they're actually not Christians. They're empty talkers. They're rebellious. They're deceivers. And they, verse 11, "must be silenced because they are upsetting whole families." What he means is you've got to tell the people don't listen to them, give them no platform.

Verse 16, he's talking about these same folks, verse 13 he says, "For this reason reprove them severely so that they may be sound in the faith." Reprove the people who were listening to them severely and reprove the people who are teaching like that severely. Hear the tone. Verse 16, "They profess to know God, but by their deeds they deny Him, being detestable and disobedient and worthless for any good deed." You know, that's the evaluation of God over someone who's a false teacher. Now those are words that are even unsettling, you think about that, you're saying this person is detestable and disobedient and worthless for any good deed but that's what God says about them. We say it in the sense of, "Please turn from your false teaching, but if you won't turn, know that God says this about you, that you are detestable to God because you are deceiving His sheep. He loves His sheep."

Jesus laid down his life for his sheep and he will deal with wolves and that's what you see as you read through. I'm telling you this, every epistle you'll see it and there's a sense in which the way we deal with it is not the way that culturally we deal with it. We have to get past our cultural proclivities. Like I said, we're having to learn, I'm having to learn that it's not about being nice, it's about being kind. It's about being loving. Kindness seeks the good of the other person. Niceness seeks not to offend the other person so that they will think well of me. Which one is love? Not niceness, kindness. Kindness looks a lot like niceness most of the time but it's better, much much better because it really seeks the good of the other person and it's willing to offend because that's the kind and loving thing to do. It is willing to rush across the room and throw somebody on the ground because you've got to save your life.

One of the things we see as we read through and I encourage you just as you read the New Testament, look for this. Paul in 2 Timothy, the book right before if you're in Titus still, look at 2 Timothy. One of the things that Paul does is he names names. This is very, this in the evangelical community, it's unacceptable today to name names, to talk about false teachers and speak about them directly. You know, I mentioned Bill Leonard and there's a sense in which you shouldn't name names. The people reject people's books because they name names. Well, I just think you need to look at the New Testament. Look what Paul does in 2 Timothy 1 and 2. He speaks in chapter 1, verse 15 and he names names, "You are aware of the fact that all who are in Asia turned away from me, among whom are Phygelus and Hermogenes." And look at chapter 2, verse 16, "But avoid worldly and empty chatter," he's talking about false teaching here, "avoid worldly and empty chatter, for it will lead to further ungodliness, and their talk will spread like gangrene. Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus, men who have gone astray from the truth saying that the resurrection has already taken place, and they upset the faith of some." He names names. He says, "These are the guys and they're teaching this."

Now like I said, they didn't walk around with a sign saying, "I'm a false teacher." So somebody has to call it out and the Spirit-inspired Apostle Paul called it out. Now we've got to be wise about it and, I mean, very careful, not reckless at all, but when it's clearly established and we should go to the person first whenever we possibly can, but when people have gone in public in print, it's appropriate to in public reprove them, when they've made public statements that are false and errant. So what I'm trying to say is if we

have an attitude that is tolerant of evil and says, "Listen, well, we know they probably mean well and we really shouldn't upset the apple cart," if we're thinking like that, I would submit to you we're not thinking the way Nehemiah thought. I don't think we're thinking the way Jesus thinks about it. We need to love the truth and because we love the truth, we must necessarily hate error and we have to hate it in each other. This is why the Bible says that when you hear anything taught from this pulpit or any Bible study that we have, anytime anyone is teaching the word of God, that we are to examine what's being taught, examine carefully what you're taught and hold to that which is good. You're to be like a Berean according to Acts 17:11, and remember they were more noble-minded than those who were in Thessalonica who were very noble-minded, by the way. But Luke writes in Acts 17:11, speaking of Paul's journey to Berea, the Bereans were more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica because they searched the Scriptures daily to see what the Apostle Paul said was true. When they heard Paul preach and teach, even though he was an apostle sent by God, they checked him out with their Bibles. Does what he's saying conform to the Scripture?

So we all have a responsibility to hold each other accountable. You need to love me enough to correct me when I am out of line, and I need to love you enough to correct you when you're out of line, and we all need to do that. It's a matter of life and death. And we need at the same time to learn the other truths of the Scriptures that tell us how to do it gently and where we need to be loving and kind, but the Bible has a way of hitting certain truths and certain passages and hammering that truth home because it's the only way we'll really hear it. So I want you to hear this today: what Nehemiah did was he fought the good fight. He fought against evil in the church and we must do so too because we love Christ and we love his people.

Let's go to the Lord in prayer.

Our Father, we thank You for Your truth, for its perfection. We acknowledge our great need of grace, every time we get into Your word, we need help by the Holy Spirit but, Lord, make us diligent students of Your word. Make us people who are like the Bereans who test everything and we're always looking to see if it fits with what the Bible is saying and make us wise by Your word, that we can know how to live for the glory of Christ and we can know how to walk in truth, we know how to recognize error, and we know how to even confront it lovingly, with kindness, but a willingness to do it with boldness and fervency. Lord, help us to be pure in our doctrine individually and corporately in our church. May we hold one another to the standard of truly loving Jesus and loving His word and always reforming, always submitting to our deeper understanding of the word of God. We pray this in Christ's name. Amen.