

Commitment is a Four Letter Word

We're going to take a brief detour from our study in Colossians this morning so please turn with me to Nehemiah chapter 9. This is a message that I've adapted from a series we did several years back in Nehemiah and I want to share it this morning for two reasons: 1) I think it will provide a good link between Paul's warning about legalism and his encouragement in chapter 3 to set our minds on Christ and 2) I've been camping in a tent all week and knew I wouldn't be able to do justice to Col 3. What I want to talk to you about this morning is the subject of commitment: our commitment to the Lord and more importantly His commitment to us and we see in Nehemiah 9 and 10 God's people brought by God's word to an extraordinary moment of renewed commitment to obey God, it's a beautiful and powerful thing. But like a movie that has a surprise twist at the end, the lesson Nehemiah teaches us about commitment has an unexpected twist at the end.

Before we jump in, let me give a very brief overview. The book opens with Nehemiah, a cupbearer to the Persian king, hearing a report that the city of Jerusalem is in disarray. The walls are broken down, leaving it vulnerable to attack from all sides, and the Jewish exiles living there are in great trouble and distress. Moved by God, Nehemiah goes to Jerusalem to rally the demoralized Jewish exiles to the great task of rebuilding the city walls and the first seven chapters are about God building the walls through His people. Then, beginning in chapter 8, the Lord begins to focus on the work of building up His people from a fractured and disunited people into a strong and unified community of faith.

Chapter 8 opens with Ezra reading the Word of God to the people and they take it to heart and begin to obey His word and what happens is there month long revival takes place. Their hearts being deeply moved by God's word, in chapter 9, they begin confessing their sins and the sins of their fathers to God and pray for His forgiveness and deliverance from their oppressors. At the end of chapter 9 the Jews make a commitment before God and it's at that point that I want us to pick up the story in verse 38. **Neh. 9:38-10:2**

³⁸ *"Because of all this (that is, the spiritual revival ignited by God's word) we make a firm covenant in writing; on the sealed document are the names of our princes, our Levites, and our priests.*

10 *"On the seals are the names of Nehemiah the governor, the son of Hacaliah, Zedekiah, ² Seraiah, Azariah, Jeremiah... and the list goes on as one leader after another steps up to sign this firm covenant. Let's jump down to verse 28 because it will be important for us to see the four things they commit to.*

Neh 10:28-32,38-39

They say that one of the cardinal rules of preaching is never, never, never vent your personal frustration from the pulpit. The pulpit is for expounding God's word, not for pastors to "get things off their chest". I think that over the more than twenty years I've had the privilege to preach, I've tried to be pretty careful not to do that. But there is one message that I preached 19 years ago that still makes me cringe when I think about it because I definitely carried frustration into the pulpit and unloaded it on the church.

The message was on the subject of commitment and I think that somewhere deep inside it was born out of a sincere desire to see us grow in our commitment to the Lord. But I didn't take the time to prayerfully and carefully filter that good desire through the filter of grace and humility and the result was that as I stepped into the pulpit, my focus was fixed on what I felt people weren't doing, and what they *should* be

doing, and what I thought they needed to *start* doing. It was your basic, "*you're just not committed enough!*" kind of message. Now this church was filled with many wonderful people who served and cared and showed their commitment to the Lord in countless daily ways but all I was focused on that morning was what I felt they weren't doing. I thought it would be a powerful message, but awkward would probably be a better description. I felt crummy giving the message, and I felt crummier after I preached it. To this day I remember the title of that sermon. I titled the message - get this - "Commitment Isn't a Four Letter Word". I thought that was a clever way of conveying that for some believers the call to commitment is considered as distasteful as a curse word. I was definitely rocking the condescension!

I don't know if there's such a thing as a "message mulligan" but with your permission, I'd like to try that message again this morning. Commitment is a wonderful and necessary thing and when Jesus calls us to follow him, he is calling us to a deep and undying commitment. But just to make sure this message on commitment is *nothing* like that message on commitment, I've changed the title from "Commitment Isn't a Four Letter Word" to "Commitment *Is* a Four Letter Word!" And we'll get to what that means in a little bit.

So let's get back to what's happening with the Jewish community in Jerusalem. Moved by the spiritual renewal that they have experienced, they make a firm covenant with God and each other— verse 29 says they enter into a curse and an oath- that from this point on they are going to obey God's word. They commit themselves in four ways:

a. They commit not to inter-marry with the Gentile nations surrounding them (vs 30)

BTW, this isn't a prohibition against mixed marriages, the issue for the Jews wasn't ethnic separation, it was spiritual compromise. They were marrying foreigners and, as was the case with Solomon, those foreigners were moving their hearts away from worshipping the one true God to worship their pagan gods. So for that reason they committed to stop inter-marrying with the Gentile nations around them.

b. They commit not to conduct business on the Sabbath (vs. 31)

The Gentiles surrounding Jerusalem would have treated the Sabbath like any other day. Every day is a good day to make money. Every day is a good day to conduct business. But the Jews knew God had commanded them to observe the Sabbath and so they commit to set the Sabbath apart as a day of rest and worship.

c. They commit to observe the Sabbatical Year (vs. 31)

God commanded in Exodus 23 that every seventh year the Jews weren't to plant crops but allow the land to rest, and allow the poor to eat from what grows in that seventh year. They were also to forgive debts on the seventh year. These commandments broke the grip of greed and strengthened their faith in God because they had to trust God to provide what they needed for two years instead of just one. They also committed to freeing any indentured servants who, in order to pay their debts, had sold themselves into slavery. It was a firm commitment to let go of the financial gain they could benefit by exploiting the needy among them.

d. They commit to tithe so that God's house not be neglected any longer (vv. 32-39)

This is very relevant for them because in the middle of Jerusalem was the rebuilt temple. Their devotion to God needed to express itself in giving for the work of the house of God. Up to that point they had neglected it; but now they commit to neglect it no longer but to give faithfully to the house of God.

So they make a firm commitment. And that commitment is bound up in a four letter word: *oath*. They took a public oath and signed their names on the dotted line that they would obey God's word and called down curses on their heads if they ever broke their commitment. The commitments they made were good and biblical. They were in response to God's word speaking deeply to them and a spirit of repentance falling upon them. If the book of Nehemiah ended at chapter 10, it would provide us a powerful springboard to preach oath as the four letter word necessary for commitment. Make an oath that from now on you're going to keep your commitments to the Lord! I've heard messages on commitment - I've preached messages on commitment - that press us with questions like, "*are you committed enough to God? Are you committed enough to your church? Are you committed enough to evangelism? Are you committed enough to reading the Bible every day? How about prayer?*" And the implied answer is, *no, you're not committed enough. Let's right now make a promise to God - let's take an oath! - that from this day forward we are going to be more committed to the Lord and His work. Just like Nehemiah and the Jews did! Commitment is a four letter word - that word is oath!*

Maybe someone here, you don't need anyone to preach that message to you cause you're doing a good job preaching it to yourself. You go back and forth from propping up your resolve to do better and try harder, to feeling discouraged and demoralized because you see yourself failing and falling short every day. Recently I heard a Christian song that in essence says "if I could go back and do it over again, I'd love more and take more risks and stand up more and serve God more faithfully." It's kind of an oath in reverse: by golly, if I could just do it over again I'd do it better. But do you hear the emphasis? "I'd do better...I'd do more for God...I'd be a more committed Christian... *I'd grit my teeth, try harder, and get it right this time!*" And if Nehemiah ended at chapter 10, it'd be the perfect text for that message.

But the book of Nehemiah doesn't end at chapter 10. It goes on to chapter 13. And guess what happens in chapter 13? For the sake of time we're not going to turn there but I encourage you to read it later. Nehemiah leaves Jerusalem to go back to Persia for a while and when he comes back to Jerusalem he finds the Jews have broken pretty much every one of the commitments they had made. Not only were they neglecting the house of God, they had let Tobiah the Ammonite- an enemy who had actually opposed the work of rebuilding the wall- rent a room in the temple! Nehemiah found the Jews were back to working on the Sabbath. And not only had they married foreign women, they were allowing those foreign women to raise their children and Nehemiah found a generation of children were growing up unable to speak Hebrew, which meant they were growing up with no knowledge of the one true God or His word. In a relatively short time the Jews had broken all the firm commitments they had made. Their "firm commitment" wasn't so firm after all.

The twist ending of Nehemiah is that oaths simply don't work. The problem isn't with the oaths, the problem is with us: we are oath-breakers. Covenant breakers. But where does that leave us? What, then, is the lesson of Nehemiah? I mean, God moved in their hearts - it was genuine revival, inspired by God's word, and leading to heartfelt confession and repentance. And yet, Nehemiah ends with their abysmal failure to keep their commitments.

It leaves us with a wonderful truth, a truth that is central to all of scripture: Nehemiah isn't the story about the commitment of God's people to God, it's the story of the commitment of God to His people. Commitment is a four letter word, but that word isn't oath, it's love. The Bible isn't the story of a frustrated God who's wondering when are we going to get our act together and keep our commitments to Him. It's the story of a gracious God who knows that in our own strength we can never keep our commitments to Him and yet loves us so much that He has made an unbreakable commitment to us.

1. *The covenant God has made with us through Christ isn't based on our commitment to Him at all, it's totally based on His commitment to us*

The new covenant in Jesus' blood isn't God cutting covenant with us, it's God cutting covenant with Himself on our behalf because He knows that we are hopeless covenant-breakers. For God to find a man who could faithfully keep covenant with Him, God had to *be* that man! God the Son became a man and through the cross God cut covenant with Himself on our behalf. Jesus bore the curse that should have fallen on us as covenant breakers, and gave us his righteousness as though we have always obeyed God and kept our end of the covenant perfectly. The new covenant isn't 50% God and 50% us. It's 100% percent God. Our part is to look at the finished work of Jesus on the cross and believe in him.

Our relationship with God and our acceptance by God isn't based on our commitment to Him, it's based on His commitment to us. Our assurance of salvation isn't based on how firm our grip on Him is, it's based on how firm His grip on us is! And that commitment that flows from the Lord's great love for us. Commitment is a four letter word and that word is love.

My precious little 8 mo. old grandson Asher (who is here with us this morning!) was adopted by my daughter and son in law at birth. Do you know what he had to do in order to be adopted? What he had to commit to, or accomplish to make himself worthy? Nothing. Just be born. Their love and commitment to him was cemented quite apart from anything he did or accomplished. Brothers and sisters, that is the loving commitment that God has bestowed on you in Christ.

In love ⁵ he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, ⁶ to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved. Eph. 1:4-5

When God speaks to His children about commitment, He doesn't start with our commitment to Him, He starts with His commitment to us. And that commitment is unshakable. Jesus said, "I will build my church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it." Unshakable commitment, unfailing love.

But with that as our bedrock foundation, we do know that the Lord calls His children to a life of growing commitment. The first disciples were so committed to Christ they were willing to joyfully die rather than deny their Savior! But once again, not commitment powered by oath, but commitment powered by love. I want to close with this thought:

2. *When God wants to **grow** our commitment, He doesn't start with our commitment, He starts with our love.*

Jesus said in Jn. 14:15, *if you love me, you'll keep my commandments*. Love always leads to commitment. When our commitment is ebbing, the answer isn't to try to prop up our commitment, it's to

stir up our love. This order is vital because while love always leads to commitment, commitment doesn't always lead to love. Please turn with me to Rev. 2:1

1 "To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: 'The words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands.

2 "I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false. 3 I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake, and you have not grown weary...

Jesus commends them for their commitment to the work and their commitment to the truth. They are committed to doing the right things and to believing the right things. But Jesus knows there is something seriously out of alignment with this church:

4 But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first.

They are doing the right things and believing the right things, but their heart isn't right with Jesus. They have left their first love. And to Jesus, that's serious. In his loving commitment to them, Jesus gives them the way back to that first love:

5 Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. (Rev. 2:1-5)

Three things: remember, repent, and do the first works again. This isn't a formula. There is no formula or set of principles for growing love. This is a heart thing. I think Crawford Loritts is right when he says that this is one of those texts that are meant to be taken emotionally.

Remember...

The Ephesian church was once pagan, then this weird guy named Paul came preaching about God sending His Son that they might be saved if they would but believe in him. They believed and were filled with amazement at the love and grace of God so undeserved but so freely given. Remember those days, Jesus is saying. Remember those tender moments when you first came to Christ. Remember the sense of amazement that God saved you by grace alone. Remember the joy that flooded your soul as you felt the burden of sin lifted from you and the love of God fill your heart. Remember that. The heights Jesus is speaking of aren't the heights of our commitments or accomplishments - it's the heights of God's glorious grace in Christ Jesus. Remember that, not just cognitively, remember it emotionally. Let that remembrance engage and fill your heart. Remember, remember...

This is where I feel the Lord has been graciously working in my heart the past several months (and He isn't done). The Lord began to get my attention that something was out of alignment. It's not something you could necessarily see from the outside. If anything, I'm more committed to believing and doing the right things by God's grace than when I first got saved. But the Lord has been graciously showing me that my heart has been out of alignment. To be honest, I've been realizing my love for Jesus has cooled.

This isn't something I can necessarily quantify for you but I'm talking something deeper than having an off day or just not having the same emotional feelings that I once had. Too often I find I'm more engaged and excited about temporal things than about eternal things. I have the privilege of preaching the riches of God's grace in Christ Jesus, but it's not enough to preach it, I need to meditate on it and savor it so

that my own heart is more deeply affected by it. I realized I was studying God's word as a commitment but not as a joy. My prayers were more out of rote than from the heart. I was concerned to find my heart strangely flat and I thought of a line in an old hymn that Steve Camp recorded years ago that says, *the fact that he has risen no longer stirs our soul*. Believing that Jesus rose from the dead is Christian orthodoxy, having our souls stirred by the truth of that empty tomb, that's love. That hymn then prays: *Revive us, O Lord*. Revive our love for You, O Lord.

Remembering the heights of God's glorious grace to us is the first step to rekindling that first love.

Repent...

This tells us that not loving Jesus is a sin, no matter how committed we might be to the right things. There is something blocking our love for Jesus. One of the things for me is distractions. I enjoy movies to help me chill out, I'm a bit of a news junky, and these things aren't necessarily bad in themselves, but they have encroached on more and more of my time, and I see they are dulling my love for the Lord and the things of God. Turn from them, and to Jesus. Fill my heart and mind with His word, with worship songs, and other things that help my heart lean into the love of my Savior. When I was flying to Florida last month I was trying to decide between reading a light book to pass the time, or a book about discipleship that I had recently purchased. I didn't feel like reading the book on discipleship, but I chose that one. By the time we landed, my heart was filled with a sense of love for Jesus and a renewed desire to help people walk more closely with him. For me repentance is turning from distractions and escapism towards Jesus. For someone else, it might be that you are totally committed and sold out and there are no distractions - you're nailing it! But maybe pride and self reliance has crept in, and the Lord is saying "being busy for me isn't the same as spending time with me. Repent, turn from crowded committedness, simplify, and spend more time with me.

Do the works you did at first...

We know the Ephesian church was faithfully doing the right works, so what does Jesus mean? I don't think Jesus means for them to do different works, it's just that those works are completely different when we do them with a different heart. My wife and I just celebrated 30 years of marriage by getting away for a wonderful weekend. But there would be a big difference between my saying to Janice, "I want to take you away for a weekend because it's my duty and I'm committed to do it." And "I want to take you away because I love you and want to spend time celebrating how kind God was to give me you as my wife!" We could do the exact same things but everything would be different.

Love always leads to commitment. Stay committed in serving the Lord. Just don't forget to remember your first love and turn to him when other things get in the way.

As I close, if your heart is wrestling with the same things my heart is; you find yourself somewhat distant, going through the motions, heart isn't engaged, the embers of love are barely flickering, what I don't want to do is add another oath to your list of to do's: *you need to love Jesus more than you do! Now do it!* No, be honest with God, tell Him where you're at and ask Him to realign your heart and revive that first love in you. And remember, remember, remember His love and commitment to you. Let that melt your heart.

Commitment is a four letter word: love. We love because He first loved us. (1 John 4:19) Let's pray.