

Sabbath Reforms

Lesson Text: **Nehemiah 13:15-22**

Bible Background: **Nehemiah 13:4-31**

Devotional Reading: **Mark 2:23-27**

Aim for Change

By the end of the lesson, we will: **KNOW** and **UNDERSTAND** that the **SABBATH** is to be honored; **SHARE** with others the importance of honoring the **SABBATH**; and **PLAN** to honor the **SABBATH**.”

In Focus

We must always give God the firstfruits of everything He affords us, and He will in turn bless us with more—including our time. Today’s lesson is about honoring the Sabbath.

Keep in Mind

I commanded the Levites that they should cleanse themselves, and that they should come and keep the gates, to sanctify the sabbath day. Remember me, O my God, concerning this also, and spare me according to the greatness of thy mercy.”
(Nehemiah 13:22 NLT)

Lesson Text

Nehemiah 13:15-22~NKJV

15 In those days saw I in Judah some treading wine presses on the sabbath, and bringing in sheaves, and lading asses; as also wine, grapes, and figs, and all manner of burdens, which they brought into Jerusalem on the sabbath day: and I testified against them in the day wherein they sold victuals.

16 There dwelt men of Tyre also therein, which brought fish, and all manner of ware, and sold on the sabbath unto the children of Judah, and in Jerusalem.

17 Then I contended with the nobles of Judah, and said unto them, What evil thing is this that ye do, and profane the sabbath day?

18 Did not your fathers thus, and did not our God bring all this evil upon us, and upon this city? yet ye bring more wrath upon Israel by profaning the sabbath.

19 And it came to pass, that when the gates of Jerusalem began to be dark before the sabbath, I commanded that the gates should be shut, and charged that they should not be opened till after the sabbath: and some of my servants set I at the gates, that there should no burden be brought in on the sabbath day.

20 So the merchants and sellers of all kind of ware lodged without Jerusalem once or twice.

21 Then I testified against them, and said unto them, Why lodge ye about the wall? if ye do so again, I will lay hands on you. From that time forth came they no more on the sabbath.

22 And I commanded the Levites that they should cleanse themselves, and that they should come and keep the gates, to sanctify the sabbath day. Remember me, O my God, concerning this also, and spare me according to the greatness of thy mercy...

The Lesson

The People, Places and Times

God's Law: When God first established the Children of Israel as a nation, He did not just deliver them from the Egyptians and give them a land to dwell in; He provided everything they needed to function as a proper nation. From Exodus to Deuteronomy, we read how He set out a comprehensive structure, which framed the constitution of their lives. He provided laws for personal injuries, property rights, civil and criminal matters, and various other situations, as well as details regarding the people's worship. He even outlined the feasts and holidays they should celebrate. In return, God required their utter obedience to Him as their Ruler. They were to show complete submission to Him as their King and total adoration of Him as their God.

However, time and time again through history, we see Israel's continued rebellion and disobedience to God, which eventually led to their exile. In Nehemiah, hopes existed the Israelites would not repeat the past, but would instead live a life obedient, committed, and dedicated to the ordinances of God."

Background:

After the nation of Judah rebuilt the wall, the Israelites continued to slowly rebuild their nation. Rebuilding their nation required not just the physical effort of constructing houses, roads, and the Temple. Their laws, ordinances, and spiritual framework needed reshaping, too. The wall provided safety and security from outsiders and set a boundary around them as a nation. As a result, immediately following the wall's completion, scribes read the Law out loud to inform and set the groundwork for their constitution.

Once the law was read, this motivated the remnant in Judah to confess their sins and recommit to God as a nation based on the original law He ordered. They made a covenant and set out detailed obligations, which they would comply with to please God. This document set the legal

framework for their establishment as a nation with Nehemiah as governor over the land. He and the people voted for leaders to rule over various provinces set up across Jerusalem. In addition, the Levites were reestablished as priests, and procedures were created for the Temple such as Levitical priest service, tithes, and worship.

In Depth

1. Sabbath Observance (Nehemiah 13:15–18) Once the Israelites accepted the law again it meant they also accepted observance of the Sabbath. *“The formal institution of the Sabbath is a basic part of the Mosaic Law system. Each division of the law contains specific sections relating to the practice of the Sabbath: the moral law (the Ten Commandments), the civil law (Exodus 31:14), and the ceremonial law (Leviticus 23:3). The keeping of the Sabbath was a sign that God truly ruled Israel. To break His Sabbath law was to rebel against Him—an action meriting death (Exodus 21:14). Society was not to seek advancement outside of submission to God. Therefore, all work except acts of mercy, necessity, and worship were forbidden on the Sabbath”* (Nelson’s New Illustrated Bible Dictionary, 1106). To disobey the Sabbath meant to profane the holiness of the day, or to make it unclean or unholy.

In the newly established nation, Nehemiah observed some Israelites did not observe the Sabbath. He found some treading wine presses, bringing in sheaves, saddling donkeys, and selling produce and goods on the Sabbath. The Israelites performed these tasks so much on the Sabbath that merchants from other nations began to come through the gates on the Sabbath to do business with the Israelites.

Nehemiah challenged the leaders of Judah regarding their conduct in how they broke the Sabbath. He reminded them such behavior originally contributed to their demise and exile from the Promised Land. If it continued and they did not correct it, such behavior would certainly bring wrath and contribute to another downfall. Nehemiah reminded them about this; he also took corrective action by closing the gates to the city so the Israelites could not leave the city to conduct business and outside merchants could not come into the city to conduct business. *“And it came to pass, that when the gates of Jerusalem began to be dark before the sabbath, (he) commanded the gates should be shut, and charged they should not be opened till after the sabbath: and some of (his) servants set (he) at the gates, there should no burden be brought in on the sabbath day”* (Nehemiah 13:19).”

In the Old Testament, to observe the Sabbath was a key law the Israelites needed to follow. If they broke the law and disobeyed God, they needed to cleanse themselves. Nehemiah commanded the Levite priests to cleanse themselves to assist with keeping the gates as well as to sanctify the Sabbath. To “sanctify” refers to a “separation from ordinary use to a sacred purpose” (McClintock and Strong, 331). The Sabbath day was set aside for Judah to focus on God—to rest

from all their daily labor and a day of obedience to Him as King and Ruler over all their lives and possessions.”

2. Keeping the Sabbath (Nehemiah 13:19–22) When we compare the Old Testament with the New Testament, a few references indicate keeping the Sabbath refers more to a principle than strict literal observance. For example, Colossians 2:16 says, “Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of a holyday, or of the new moon, or of the sabbath days.” Additionally, in Mark 3, we see Jesus healing on the Sabbath and Mark 2:27–28 (NASB) recounts, “*Jesus said to them, ‘The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath.’*” What God established under the law in the Old Testament was still expected in the New Testament, but in a different way.

Some denominations believe that believers are obligated to keep a formal Sabbath day to occur on either Saturday or Sunday. They feel that this is a part of the moral system as set out through the Ten Commandments, which should bind all Christians. Other denominations do not take the Sabbath observance literally, but believe it should be taken figuratively and instead keep “the Sabbath through a worship day on Sunday, which is observed by attending church.

The Sabbath is a means by which a person’s living pattern imitates God’s (Exodus 20:3–1). Work is followed by rest. “*This idea is expressed by the Hebrew word for Sabbath, which means ‘cessation.’ ... a time for God’s people to think about and enjoy what God has accomplished ... (It) holds promise of the ultimate salvation God will accomplish for His people. As certainly as He delivered them from Egypt through Moses, so will He deliver His people from sin at the end of the age through the Great Redeemer (Genesis 3:15; “Hebrews 4:1). (Also,) the Sabbath includes the idea and practice of... a day for public convocation (Leviticus 23:3)*” (Nelson’s, 1107). On this special day, His people could gather in public worship to signify their submission to His lordship over them and their way of living (Exodus 31:13; Ezekiel 20:12).

Regardless of one’s understanding of whether the Sabbath should be formally or symbolically kept, the key purpose of why God instituted it should always be maintained. We keep a Sabbath day to rest from our daily jobs, conducting of business, anxiety or worry. We keep a Sabbath day to reflect on the goodness of God and His blessings toward us. We keep a Sabbath day to set aside and take time out of our week to publicly worship Him to demonstrate our submission to His Lordship over our lives.

Application for Activation

The busyness of life can distract Christians from performing basic duties, such as reading one's Bible, praying, meditating on God's Word, and even attending church. Due to family commitments, job responsibilities, and many other tasks we must do each day, sometimes we forget or neglect to take time out for God. As you go through your week, make a point each day to spend time talking to God. If you feel as though time will not permit, try God. You will see once you take time for Him, He will in turn give you the time required to take care of everything you need.

Take Aways

Closing Prayer



Our Read-Ahead for: 27 Aug 2023

Dedication of the Wall

Monday: A Sabbath to the Lord (**Exodus 16:13-26**)

Tuesday: Keep the Sabbath Holy (**Exodus 31:12-18**)

Wednesday: Honoring the Sabbath (**Isaiah 58:9c-14**)

Thursday: The Lord of the Sabbath (**Mark 2:23-27**)

Friday: Doing Good on the Sabbath (**Mark 3:1-6**)

Saturday: Restoring the Sanctity of the Temple (**Nehemiah 13:4-14**)

Sunday: Restoring the Sanctity of the Sabbath (**Nehemiah 13:15-22**)