

## THE REFORMED WITNESS HOUR

August 5, 2012

The Dedication of the Walls

No. 3631

Rev. Carl Haak

Dear radio friends,

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e have arrived at chapter 12:27-47 of the book of Nehemiah. Please open your Bible to that passage to follow along. We come here to the dedication of the walls of Jerusalem. The passage that is before us is really the culmination of Nehemiah's work, as well as the spiritual high-water mark of the book. It is the record of a joyful dedication ceremony.

Nehemiah had waited a bit, after the walls had been completed, for the dedication service. The reason for this wait (some seven to eight weeks) was, first of all, that things could be put in order and that Jerusalem could be repopulated with families before the dedicatory service and ceremony. But now the walls are completed. He has placed things back in order. He has sought the good of the people and has called the people to repopulate the city. Now he will stand upon the top of the walls surrounding the city. And on those walls he will lead the people of God in a great service of the dedication of the walls of Jerusalem.

What does all of this say to us? I believe there will be many lessons for us today. First of all, it should be a great encouragement to us. We see here that the blessing of God ever rests upon His people in their faithful labors. Whenever God's people, by His grace, are committed to do His will, to love His cause, and to love His church and to serve Him faithfully in their individual callings, God's blessing is resting upon them. That work may be very discouraging to you. In fact, the work of the Lord is always, to the flesh, discouraging. But here we have great encouragement to the faithful, true church, to the elders, to deacons, pastors, families, husbands and wives, to those who are enthusiastically involved in evangelism, to those who are battling personally against struggles, against sin, and against sorrows. Here we see the blessing of God resting upon His people in their faithful labors.

The second thing that we are going to learn in this passage is some good instruction on worship. There can be many truths gleaned from this passage that must govern our worship services within the church of Jesus Christ today – that our goal is to glorify God and not man.

Finally, we see in this passage a recognition of what God has done for us His church, and thus of the thankful dedication to Him that must characterize our lives. We are, by God's grace, in the church today. In that church we have the triumph that is in Jesus Christ. Therefore we must also recognize what God has done for us and be resolved to serve Him with all of our strength.

As Solomon, when the temple was completed, dedicated the temple, and as Ezra, when the foundation of the temple had been laid, also had a dedicatory service, so now Nehemiah calls for a dedicatory service for the completion of the walls of Jerusalem. I call this the “Dedication of the Walls.”

What is dedication? Dedication is not that we give something to God for His use. But a dedication is the profound awareness that God has given something to us and a vow that we will use it for the purpose that He gave it. Children, remember that. When we dedicate something to God we are not saying, “Here, Lord. Here is something that comes from our hands and we are going to give it to you so that you can use it.” No. When something is dedicated to the Lord, it is the acknowledgment that He gave it for a specific purpose and that we thankfully receive it and are committed to use it for the reason He has given it to us.

God has given to us many things. He has given to us church buildings, yes. But He has given to us the truth of the gospel. He has given to us believing confessions, Reformed, biblical creeds. He has given to us (to the church) the deposit of the truth of the Holy Scriptures. He has given to us marriages. He has given to us families. All of these things God has given to us. He has given to us our Christian life. He has given to us repentance. Everything that we have, He has given to us. We give nothing to Him. He has given it all to us. When we dedicate all of these things, when we dedicate ourselves, when we dedicate all that God has given, we are acknowledging, in thankfulness, that God gave it for a purpose and that we are committed to using it for that purpose.

We have here a program of events that took place in the dedicatory ceremony of the walls of Jerusalem. There were some preliminary events, first of all.

The first thing that Nehemiah did was to gather all the Levites and the singers together from the surrounding villages and country. We read, “They sought the Levites out of all their places, to bring them to Jerusalem, to keep the dedication with gladness” (v. 27). The Levites, of course, had to dwell in the various cities as the servants of God to teach the people the way of the Lord. Now they have been summoned to Jerusalem with joy and with their instruments. We read that also the singers were gathered together. Singers were a special branch of the Levites set aside at the time of David. Their job was to supply singing at the temple. Each one was assigned a time when he had to be there to sing. Now all of them, all of the singers, are gathered together in a mass choir.

The next thing that was done was that there had to be purification of themselves. We read, “And the priests and the Levites purified themselves, and purified the people, and the gates, and the wall” (v. 30). Not only the gathered people were purified. The Old Testament law required that there also be a ceremonial washing and cleansing of the gates and of the wall. Purification is very important. This points to the heart. When we come before God to thank Him, and we come before Him at a joyful time of service, it is not “come as you are,” but always “come in a way that you prepare your heart to seek the Lord.” How do you come before God to thank Him on the Lord’s Day? How do you come before God to thank Him in your prayers? Well, you cannot do that if you are saturated with the world, if you are indifferent to Him, if you are bitter against

your brother. No, you have to purify yourself. You have to bring yourself before the cleansing blood of Jesus Christ.

Then we read of the actual ceremony of the dedication. There are a number of things that are very interesting here.

The first thing that Nehemiah did was divide the people into two great companies. They all climb the steps to the top of the wall. And at the top of the steps they divide to the right and to the left to form two companies. One company is led by Ezra (including half of the princes and half of the priests with trumpets). The other company, composed of the other half of the people, follow Nehemiah. And they spread themselves on the opposite wall, so that there are two companies standing face-to-face on the top of the walls, with the city of Jerusalem in between. It was a massive gathering. And at the set moment, these two companies burst forth into praise. We read, “So stood the two companies of them that gave thanks in the house of God” (v. 40). The city is beneath them and the temple is beneath them. And upon the walls these two companies, face to face, sound out with a loud song of joy. With the psalms of David upon their lips, they express great thanksgiving before God – praise to God for His power and for His mercy toward the needy people of God, in answering their prayers and in so blessing them.

Then, after this, the day was filled with services at the temple. We read, “also on that day they offered great sacrifices, and rejoiced: for God had made them rejoice with great joy: the wives also and the children rejoiced: so that the joy of Jerusalem was heard even afar off” (v. 43). After that preliminary moment of the people standing upon the walls and sounding forth in joy, the day was filled with an atmosphere of great joy, wives and children – all the people of God – caught up in praise to God for what He had done for them.

A number of things are standing out for us to take note of. Great thanksgiving was given to God for His mercy. That first of all. Great thanksgiving to God. The people were overwhelmed. They had come through great trial. They had come through the feeling of hopelessness and despair. They had spent years moaning about the deplorable state of things. They saw that they were nothing, they deserved nothing, they could do nothing, and that God now had arisen to bless them. And their hearts are simply overwhelmed at the wonder of God’s grace.

Is that true of you today? Do you know that you are nothing, deserve nothing, and can do nothing – and that everything that you have in Jesus Christ is entirely of God and His grace? Then your heart has to be overwhelmed with humble, deep, unending praise.

We learn further that these people were devoting themselves to God and to His honor. They felt committed, they felt compelled to serve Him, to use everything that God had given for the purpose for which He had given it. Is that true also of you and of your soul – that you are resolved in the light of God’s mercy and grace to you to give everything that you have in the service of your God?

And we see also that the people of God were simple, in trust, placing themselves under God’s protection. That, too, is part of dedication. Dedication is not only that we thankfully receive

something, that we vow to use it for God's purpose. But when you dedicate something you also place it under God's protection. You say, "Lord, it is from Thee. Lord, we want to use it to Thee. And now, Lord, Thou must preserve, Thou must protect, Thou must defend it. We cannot." Except the Lord (Psalm 127) keep the city; the watchman waketh but in vain. Dedication is also this: "Almighty God, watch over us, protect us, preserve us, defend us."

There are a number of questions now as you meditate upon this passage with me – the passage of the dedication of the walls of Jerusalem under the leadership of Nehemiah.

First of all this. Are you thankful for what God has given to you? The walls of Jerusalem, you remember, refer to all those things that God has given to keep us in the faith and fellowship with God. It is the true church, the instituted church, under offices of elder, pastor, and deacon. It is the church committed to the truth, the Reformed and the biblical faith of the sovereignty and the glory of God. God has given to us more than the church. He has given to us Christian marriages, Christian families. Are you thankful? Are you filled with praise to Him? Do you see that God has shown His faithfulness and His grace to you? Are you thankful for what He has given? If not, why not? I believe that when we reach the end of our pilgrim's journey and we look back on this life, we shall be ashamed of one thing the most – of how little was our thanksgiving and how large was our worry and dissatisfaction and fear and, much worse, complacency over the goodness of God to us. So the Scripture is constantly telling us, it is constantly calling us, to give thanks. "Oh give thanks unto the Lord. He has not dealt with any as He has so dealt with us."

Are you thankful? Thankful for the church of Jesus Christ? Not constantly expressing your gripe here and your gripe there and your resentment there and your bitterness against this person and that person? But are you thankful? Are you thankful for your marriage? Are you thankful for your husband or for your wife – the one whom the Lord has chosen for you? Are you thankful for your children? Thanksgiving is a debt that we owe to God, a debt that increases with the knowledge of God and of His faithfulness and goodness to us. The more you see of what He has done, the greater becomes our responsibility to praise and to thank. Is that true of you?

The second thing that we see here is that we are called to worship God with joy. A real spiritual joy filled the people of God and filtered down to their children. And this was the witness to the world. We read, "So that the joy of Jerusalem was heard even afar off" (v. 43). It was not a manufactured joy. It was a joy rooted in faith and knowledge. But it was fervent. You could hear it. You could sense it. I can well imagine that Sanballat and Tobiah and Geshem, the crowd that had done their utmost to stop the building of the walls, could hear it, and it sickened them. The enemies of the church – you want to know what they really hate? They hate the joy of God's people. Martin Luther put it this way: *The devil hates singing*. Oh, yes, he does. But the people of God were filled with joy–joy over what God had done, joy over who God was. Is that true of us?

Then let us purify ourselves before coming to the Lord's house. Let us take into account all of His blessings to us. Let us prepare our hearts. Do you come to worship God on Sunday as if it was a burden to you? Do you sit in an attitude of being bored? How dare you? How dare any

of us? How dare I do that? We must come out of an abundance of heart to stand joyfully before God and to receive the blessings of His Word. We must sing loudly. We must take up the Word of God and sing meaningfully and thoughtfully and contemplatively. We must use the voice that God has given to us.

And then the third question is this. Do you dedicate yourself to Him in all of your life? The dedication that day was built upon a spirit of self-denial and unity. Self-denial—abandoning of one's own way. And unity—in the great work of God that had joined them together. Is that true of us? Dedication from the heart to live a true, godly life in the church?

Let us be thankful for all that God has given. Let us worship Him with joy. And let us dedicate our heart and our life to Him in service.

The dedication ceremony that Nehemiah had organized as we read of it in chapter 12 had some very lasting effects upon the people of God. It is one thing, of course, to get all wound up on a certain occasion and then to forget about it. It is quite another to live and to carry on in the way of thanksgiving. We are to carry on in the way of thanksgiving. Our thanks and praise to God must not be a flash in a pan, but it must be a steady burning light.

The lasting effects were seen in two ways. First of all, the ministers of God, after this dedication ceremony, went about their work in a careful manner. Men had been appointed over the treasury by Nehemiah to gather in the tithes for the support of the priests. This was necessary. If the work of God is to continue and the truth of God is to be known among the people, it is necessary that men take up the work and that men are supported in that work. We read that, as a result of the dedication, men took up this work carefully and seriously. We read further that the singers and the porters were kept before their duties. Their duties were, of course, necessary to maintain Jerusalem in its zeal. There needed to be these porters and singers. So also we need faithful laborers today in the kingdom of God.

Then we read that the people themselves, as a result of this dedication ceremony, were faithful to maintain themselves in a Christian walk of life, to maintain themselves as the servants of God. They took care to bring in their portion, their tithes. They contributed to the cause of God as God prospered them. The fruit of the dedication of the walls of Jerusalem was not something that quickly passed away. But it had its lasting effects in that all the people of God gave themselves to a faithful and careful walk.

The people of God in Nehemiah's day stood on top of the walls of Jerusalem, walls raised up out of rubble, walls protecting God's city wherein God's children could fellowship with Him. And as they stood upon those walls, they acknowledged that all of these blessings were from God, they vowed to use them all in His service, and they committed it all to God to keep it. They were thankful and they were joyful. Then they left that dedication ceremony changed. They left that dedication ceremony resolved to live faithfully before God.

Let all of this be more and more true of us as we take up our place in the church of Jesus Christ. May there be in us a humble and joyful acknowledgment of all that God has done for us in Jesus Christ. And may there be the vow to dedicate ourselves to Him and to His cause in the

church with all of our strength, with all of our heart, that we may rejoice. And may the joy of Jerusalem be heard afar off. To God's glory and to our good.

Let us pray.

Father, we do thank Thee for Thy Word today. We pray for its blessing upon us. We thank Thee for all that Thou hast given and we pray that we may never lose the sense of the joy, the sense of the enthusiasm, that is to be ours as Thy children. This we do pray in Jesus' name, Amen.

## THE REFORMED WITNESS HOUR

August 12, 2012

The Separated Life

No. 3632

Rev. Carl Haak

Dear radio friends,

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ne of the clearest proofs of the inspiration of the Bible is its realism. Scripture tells it like it is. It does not paint a romantic picture, a storybook ending of God's people living in near-perfection and obedience on this earth. But it tells us of sin and grace, of our failure and God's faithfulness, of repentance and pardon, and, ultimately, of the faithfulness of God.

So it is with the book of Nehemiah. We might have thought that the book of Nehemiah, as we come today to chapter 13, would be brought to a more cheering end. In chapter 12 we have seen the dedication of the walls of Jerusalem. Nehemiah and the priests and the rulers and the people had divided themselves into two groups on the walls, with the temple and the city down beneath them. And they had joined together in unison to sing psalms of praise. The trumpets had blasted the note of victory and triumph. And we read in chapter 12:43, "The joy of Jerusalem was heard even afar off." What a wonderful way to bring the book to a conclusion.

But, no. Chapter 13 follows. And chapter 13 will not leave us a misleading impression of Judah's spiritual life. It will tell us of sin, of neglect, of lust, of foolishness. It will tell us of God's faithfulness and God's commitment to His people.

We will read in chapter 13 that the people of God in the days of Nehemiah were well-nigh destroyed by world conformity, by neglect of God's house, by setting aside the Sabbath day, by treating marriage with impunity and impurity. How applicable that is to us as the church of Jesus Christ. Always, always the church must be on guard. Always the church must bring the truth of the Scriptures. Always the church is in need of men of God to lead the church to be faithful to the Word of God.

The distressing thing that we are going to see in chapter 13 is that the sins that are committed and that Nehemiah corrects are all sins that they had vowed they would not commit. You will recall that, a few weeks ago, we looked at the renewal of the covenant, as they renewed the covenant in chapter 10. It was a spiritual high-water mark. The people of God had come under the power of God's Word. And they had signed their names. They had vowed that they would do the following things: 1) Separate themselves from the people of the land. 2) Not forsake the house of God. 3) Not buy on the Sabbath day. 4) Not give their daughters to heathen men as wives. Now, in chapter 13, we will find that each one of these things that they vowed not to do they in reality commit.

So, I say again—always, always the people of God need the Word of God, need the true teaching and preaching of the Word of God, need biblical leadership in the church and in the home. They need pastors, elders, deacons—men of God who are sold out to the Scriptures.

We are also going to see in chapter 13 that there was a period of time when Nehemiah left Jerusalem to return to the king of Persia. When his influence was taken away from the people of Judah, the standards immediately began to fall down.

We need, as the church of God, always to be faithful to the Word of God. In chapter 13, verses 1-3, we learn of the call of God to a separate life. It was on the day of the celebration of the dedication of the walls of Jerusalem that there was a public reading of God's Word. In that reading, the people heard the requirement that the Ammonite and the Moabite might not come into the congregation of the Lord. "On that day [the day of dedication] they read in the book of Moses in the audience of the people; and therein was found written, that the Ammonite and the Moabite should not come into the congregation of God for ever" (v. 1). Note, if only briefly, the powerful benefit of reading God's Word in the public worship service. There is a special dimension of the power of Scripture felt and present when it is read in the worship service of the church. Never, ever, underestimate it. It is not a time for daydreaming. It is not a time to stare out the window. It is the time for you to listen, as the Scriptures are read by the pastor. Because, as God's people are gathered in worship, the Holy Spirit comes in a powerful way to honor the very Word that He has given and inspired. In the congregational reading, the Word of God comes in a special, powerful way to pierce, to lay bare the heart, perhaps to show us the evil that we have allowed to come into our lives, or to comfort us.

They read, on the day of the dedication of the walls of Jerusalem, from Deuteronomy 23:3-6, where there was a prohibition of the Ammonite and Moabite entering into the congregation, grounded in the evil that those two nations had done against Israel. Both had tried to prevent Israel from entering into the land of Canaan. That had happened when Moses led the people of God through the lands on the east side of the Jordan. The Ammonites, we read, "...met not the children of Israel with bread and with water." The Ammonites had committed a sin of omission, of callous indifference to God's people. Israel was exhausted. They asked the Ammonites for permission to buy necessities in their markets. They had promised to stay on the highways and nor forage or plunder the vineyards or wells. They would not go through the nation of Ammon as Sherman marched through Georgia. They would keep themselves respectful. They asked only for a few things. But they were denied. Cruelty toward the people of God was exercised. They were told, "You may not pass through." And Ammon came out to fight Israel.

Then the Moabites. Of them we read in Numbers 22, that they hired Balaam, that Balaam should curse Israel. Balak, the king of Moab, hired the wicked prophet Balaam to curse the people of Israel. Three times Balaam attempted to do that. Each time his cursings were turned into blessings. Moab wanted to call a curse down from heaven on God's people. Moab plotted and schemed to destroy Israel.

Now the requirement was that the Moabite and the Ammonite should not enter into the congregation of the Lord for ever. The idea is that they could not enter as an Ammonite, as a Moabite, as one who was given unto the service of the gods of those nations. It was not a racial or



national prohibition. These were the ones who were worshiping other gods. These were the people who had done their utmost to destroy Israel. Therefore, the prohibition was that Israel was to be separate from them.

What is God's requirement of us? The requirements of the Scriptures are these. That we, as Christians, live a life spiritually separated from the sin of this world. And that we do so because we are the friends of the living God.

That spiritual separation is defined in the Bible not first as being fulfilled in a physical separation. It is a spiritual one. Yes, there are physical aspects to the holy, separate life. Psalm 1:1: "Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful." There are places, as Christians, we may not go: bars, parties where there is drunkenness and fornication, various places perhaps on the Internet. Always we must ask, as a child of God: "Would I want the Lord to return and find me in this place?" There are people we may not make our friends: the profane, the vile, those who live their life in profanity against God.

But, I say again, the prohibition for us is not physical separation, not that we leave the world, not that we put up walls and think that by simply separating ourselves in a physical way from the world, we thereby live a holy life. We must not forget that we carry the world of sin within our hearts. The Word of God tells us that we are in the world, but we must not be *of* the world. We must be *of* Jesus Christ. The world, apart from Jesus, lives life out of its principle. That principle is the lust of the eyes, the lust of the flesh, and the pride of life (I John 2). By the grace of God alone, we who know Jesus Christ now live our life out of a different principle: the love of God, the seeking of the things that are above. Physically we are in this world. We go to our jobs. We live in our neighborhoods. We go about our business. We live within the world. But we are called to live a holy life in this world, separate from sin.

Do we welcome the Ammonite and the Moabite into our life, into our heart, into our thoughts? Do we welcome into our heart those things that God hates? Look at your heart, look at your inward life. What do you allow within your heart? Cruel indifference toward your fellow saint, even as the Ammonites toward Israel? Envy and jealousy, as the Moabites, plotting to bring your fellow saint down and to ruin his reputation? Do we allow into our heart covetousness, greed for the things of this life, an insatiable thirst for all the things that the world considers so important? Do we let the lusts of the flesh – pornography, fornication, cursing and swearing—enter our life, enter our heart, under our breath?

You cannot, as a child of God in Christ, peacefully co-exist with any known sin within your heart. You must unceasingly fight it or you will be conformed to it. We must remain separate from the world of sin, the world of temptation. One of the blessings of daily communion with God is that He will show you those things that are temptation to you, that draw you away from His face. What are those things in your life? Do you analyze them, do you seek to find those things to which you are most susceptible, those sins that tempt you the most?

Then we are called to remove ourselves from those paths of temptation. It might be a magazine. It may be visual for you. It may be certain talk – talk that gets you started. And, before you know it, once you are started you go on and on and say all kinds of things that are hurtful and

shameful. It may be times when you are feeling sorry for yourself. Do you know those things that tempt you? Do you remove yourself from those things?

We must be separate, separate also from the sinful things and sinful entertainments of this world. We are to have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness (Eph. 5:11). But rather, we are to reprove them. That word “reprove” means “to convince them of their sin by means of clear argument from the Word of God.”

Why? Why did God call His people in Nehemiah’s day, and us in Jesus Christ, to this separate, holy life? A number of reasons.

Because the world of sin seeks our destruction. The world seeks the destruction of the church. The world is not neutral. It can put on a kind face. It can put on a tolerant smile. It can, apparently, make itself to be indifferent. But underneath, the world of sin hates the cause of God because that world is ruled by the prince of darkness. And it will not stop at anything less than spiritual genocide of the people of God. The Ammonite and the Moabite reacted against Israel as they would react against no other nation. To any other people of the world, they might have said to them, “Well, of course. Of course you can come through. We’ll help you. We want to prosper you on your journey, on your noble quest.” But when the children of Israel asked, Ammon had no human kindness, no flow of sympathy for beleaguered travelers. Their word was: “Get out.” And, “Don’t pass.” And, “We will come out against you.”

The Moabites did not exercise religious tolerance. The Moabites did not say as Israel appeared on their borders: “We should talk about pluralism.” No, they were against them. Why? Because God was in Israel, because Christ was promised to Israel. And, apart from grace, man and the world of sin stands in enmity against God and His Son. We read in Genesis 3:15, “And I will put enmity between thee and [the seed of] the woman,” between the church and the devil. We read in Romans 8:7, “The carnal mind is enmity against God.” We read in John 15 these words of Jesus: “If the world hate you, ye know that it hated me before it hated you.” We read in II Timothy 3:12, “All who will live godly shall suffer persecution.” Sin is hatred of God. If you are in the world, you have not been made to know your sin and you live yet in love of your own way of sin. Then you will hate God—because that is what sin is: hatred of God. There is no truce there. There is no coalition, no cease-fire. Therefore, when the church and the child of God fly the flag of God, of love for God, obedience to God; when the church lifts high the cross as the *only* way of salvation, only in Christ and no other way – then the church comes under the hatred of the world. The fangs of the devil, the hatred of the world, is unleashed against the church. Perhaps the world and the devil use now the means of seduction in an attempt to get the church to compromise. But that will not last. The world of sin is intolerant of the church. Why? Because the world of sin is the enemy of God.

We read again in Romans 8:7, “The carnal mind is enmity against God.” You see, salvation is a matter of spiritual conquest. It is when God has come to subdue your heart, to take you away from the realm of darkness and hatred of God and to bring you on bended knee to love God and to obey Him. But that will bring reaction. It will bring the hatred of those who yet walk in the way of darkness; intolerance against you, against the God that you confess.

But there is another reason why Israel and why we are called to spiritual separation. That is because of the friendship of God. Separation from sin and sinful living is not only a flight away from something, it is also a pursuit of someone. A holy, separate life is the pursuit of godliness and of God. Only God can make a Christian. Man can make the outward. We can say, “Don’t, don’t, don’t do this. Stay away from that. Don’t go there. Dress this way. Go to church.” But that is not the heart of Christian living. It is not first the outward. Why does the Christian desire to do those things? There is one answer. Because he loves God and he enjoys being with Him and in His company.

Do you understand that? Separation from sin is only serving a purpose. That purpose is the desire to be devoted more and more to God. Is that why you want to live a godly, different life? Is that why you want to keep the Lord’s Day? Is that why you go to church? Is that why you flee fornication and love purity? Is it because you *have* to? ...or because you *want* to—because you understand that the embrace of sin means that you cannot know experientially the embrace of your heavenly Father? Is that why temptation and materialism and all the other sins are resisted in your heart and in your life – because you have come to love and honor God?

You see, this is all rooted in the love of God *as God*. For God’s sake, for Him, the Christian lives. God creates this separation when His grace shows us who He is, that He has loved us and forgiven us in Jesus Christ and has purchased us to be His own in the blood of His Son. You who love the Lord, hate sin, for He is just and pure.

“For Christ the King forsake the world and every former friend.” The separate, Christian life is a life dedicated to God, godliness, and Christ. Separation from the world does not mean that we are some kind of cult, that we are ruled by some external form. But it means that our hearts are married to God. We love Him and seek His honor and His glory. That is why we love the church. That is why we love God’s house. That is why we love our families. That is why we love God. That is why we want to be faithful to God. Underneath the Christian life is the only loving principle in this world, the only solid, good truth in this world—God. Because God is glorious, because God is right, because God is life, because God is truth, we therefore want His smile upon us.

And for that smile of God and embrace of God we are ready to endure the reproach of this world. We read of Moses in Hebrews 11 that he forsook Egypt, not fearing the wrath of the king. Why? Because he had respect unto the recompense of the reward. Because he saw God.

Let us apply then today this Word of God to our lives. Let us ask God for His grace that we live a spiritually separate life from temptation and from the world of sin—a life that in principle is the expression of love for God.

This brings comfort, great comfort into the Christian life. The Christian life is not a morbid, sour, depressing thing. It is comforting. It is a wonderful, exciting gift of God. We are always desiring to see how God will reveal more and more of Himself to us, of how God will turn the latest attempt of the devil to destroy us on its head and lead us to victory.

The life lived to God is a confident, victorious life. A life separated unto God is the only life worth living.

Let us pray.

Father, we thank Thee for Thy Word and pray for its blessing in our hearts today. Through Jesus Christ, Amen.

## THE REFORMED WITNESS HOUR

August 19, 2012

Why Is the House of God Forsaken?

No. 3633

Rev. Carl Haak

Dear radio friends,

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o you have zeal for the church of God? Is your life a testimony of sacrifice for the precious cause of God and His church, the cause of truth and righteousness, the cause of the gospel, of His grace?

The answer to that must be given today. Let us look into the Word of God.

We come today to Nehemiah 13:4-14. The events of our text took place after Nehemiah had been absent from Jerusalem and had returned the second time. He had been there, during his first visit in Jerusalem, for about 12 years. Then for a period of, perhaps, 4-5 years he had returned to the land of Persia. While Nehemiah was present in Jerusalem for those first 12 years he had exerted a strong influence upon the religious life of Judah. But apparently in his absence the light of Israel's testimony had dimmed, probably slowly and imperceptibly. The people of God, you remember, were struggling to make a living. They were busy with their trade and livelihood. They rubbed elbows with the world. And slowly they stopped asking what the Lord had to say on each issue of the Christian life. More and more they consulted their own opinions and what was expedient. The flame of love flickered low. The purity of the church was broached and the people of God pursued earthly treasure and left the house of God to founder.

A healthy, spiritual church-life in one year can slip. Not always immediately. Not always perceptibly. But always there is the temptation to slip.

Now we read that God brought Nehemiah back to Jerusalem for the second time for reform, reform of the house of God. Our title today is Nehemiah's question: Why is the house of God forsaken?

During Nehemiah's absence in Persia, Tobiah the Ammonite had wormed his way into the temple of God and had taken up residence. Tobiah, called the servant in chapter 2:19, was one of the three, along with Sanballat and Geshem, who had tried to stop the rebuilding of the walls. He was a quasi-religious leader of a mixed religion of Judaism and the heathen Ammonites, which would later become the religion of the Samaritans and would be centered on Mount Gerizim. He was a false teacher. He was subtle. And he was a disarming man. He was the servant. He was the man at your service, at your pleasure. He was a religious guide to help you find your inner peace.

Of Nehemiah's opponents, Tobiah was the most crafty and diabolical. He had tried numerous times to set Nehemiah up. His son had married the daughter of a prominent wall-builder who reported to Tobiah all that Nehemiah said. Tobiah was filled with self-aggrandizement and religious compromise. He resented the absolutes of Jehovah. He believed that religion should be self-made. It should be "pick-and-choose."

During Nehemiah's absence Tobiah had persuaded a priest named Eliashib (who had the oversight of the chamber of God's house) to let him have the spacious chamber in the temple that was used to store the tithe or the supplies for the Levites and to give him that chamber for his personal living room – his apartment while he was in Jerusalem. We read in verse 5, the "great chamber, where aforetime they laid the meat offerings,... which was commanded to be given to the Levites." Instead of using it as a storage chamber for the supplies of the Levites, Eliashib allowed Tobiah to use this chamber for his pent-house, his studio apartment when he came to Jerusalem. Eliashib was not the high priest, but was a priest who was put in charge of various things. And Tobiah, in Nehemiah's absence, had weaseled his way into Eliashib's favor. Eliashib had, we read in verse 4, allied himself to Tobiah through marriage. One of Eliashib's grandsons was son-in-law to Tobiah's crony, Sanballat. And the result was that the essential stores for maintaining God's house and the priest were put out on the curb. And Tobiah's stuff, his furniture, was put in.

Eliashib was entrusted with a sacred responsibility – keeping that room stocked with all that was necessary for the supply of the Levites and priests. But now that very room, the chamber that represented God's faithful care of His people, that room was emptied. And into it came Tobiah with all of his stuff. This was evil!

Why did Eliashib the priest do this? Was he getting something on the side from Tobiah? Was it prestige? What was it? We are not sure. But, first of all, it is plain that Eliashib cultivated the wrong friendship. He was not careful who his friends were.

And, second, it was very plain that Eliashib was misusing his office. His office was all about the promotion and the maintaining of God's name and God's servants. His office was to please God and not men. What witness was left of God's cause when those in charge give God's house over to men like Tobiah? Eliashib was in a sacred office. In thankfulness to God, God's people brought tithes for the support of the Levites. And, instead of storing up those gifts in the chamber of God's house, Eliashib rents the chamber out to Tobiah.

And, third, Eliashib shows that he was not sensitive to the seriousness of sin. He was not close to God. He had lost his spiritual perspective. Think of it! The chamber for the tithes is rented out to one who wants to destroy the truth of God. Within the sanctuary, within the temple, is housed a man who wants to destroy the truth that the temple is representing. This sanctuary was given out for that. It was like renting the church's sanctuary on Saturday for a disco or for a meeting of atheists. How could you ever entertain the thought—the local chapter of the atheists meeting in the consistory room of your church? But Eliashib did that. How did he do that? He lost sensitivity. He lost his spiritual common sense.

How does one lose his standards? How does one lose his spiritual common sense? There is only one way. Eliashib did not stand in awe of Jehovah. He did not walk with God. He did not humble himself daily before the absolutes of God's Word. Sin in his life became known by another name: bad decisions. And the awfulness of sin and the sense of its horror before God were lost on him because his heart was not right with God.

When Nehemiah returned his remedy was dramatic. It was thorough. And it was now. You may read of it in chapter 13:7-9. Nehemiah, when he returned, did not call for a study committee to address the church's response to the inroads of modernism. He did not say, "Well, we should probably get together and talk about this. Maybe we could find another place for these stores." Or: "The church sanctuary looks like a dance-floor. What are we going to do?" Or: "The catechism classes—theistic evolution is being taught in these classes in the church. What should we do?" Or: "What are we going to do about women holding office? Well, let's appoint a committee." He did not do that.

We read this: "I cast forth all the household stuff of Tobiah out of the chamber. Then I commanded, and they cleansed the chambers." He did not come and serve an eviction notice. But he simply came and took Tobiah's things and threw them out at the street curb. Then he said, "Clean this place up and bring in what God says has to be brought in." This chamber was built to glorify God. On entering the temple the worshiper must be reminded of Jehovah and of Jehovah's praise.

Now apply this to your body and to your mind and to your life, to the mind and the heart that are the chambers of God, that are to store up all kinds of His thoughts and goods. Your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit within you. What have you placed within the chamber of your heart and of your mind? What have you given to take up residence there? What music, what pictures, what thoughts are in the chambers of your mind? Are you given to figure out how you can have more of this life? Or do you fill the chambers of your mind and heart with Scripture? Do you know the score of the game yesterday? Do you know Psalm 23?

Let us apply this to the church of God. The church of God is to be filled with fruits of repentance, humility, love, and kindness. Does there dwell in your heart unforgiveness, suspicion, evil talking, envy, jealousy, bitterness, and resentment? You need to clean it up. You need to sweep that stuff out and put it out in the gutter where it belongs. You must fill yourself with meekness and love for God and His people.

Nehemiah did what he did because he was sensitive to the holiness of God, because he loved God for who God was. He wanted the church, the temple, to be clean. He wanted the church to be filled with the good and pleasant things of God. He wanted in the church that which God had ordained and God had chosen. And, in awe of God's holiness and love, he was committed to keep the chambers of the temple uncluttered, and filled with the things of God.

So it must be in the church. There must be the right, biblical doctrine, the truths of the inspired Scriptures. There must be the truths of godliness and love and zeal for the spread of the Word of God, and repentance and humility. And throw out that which is displeasing to God – out of the heart, out of the life, and out of the church.

But there was another problem that Nehemiah found to be most disturbing when he returned. The support of the Levites was neglected. Now, of course, these abuses were connected. It could be that, with no place to store up the supplies for the Levites because Tobiah was in there, the people's giving slacked off and turned into a dribble. But I suspect that it was more this way. The people, in Nehemiah's absence, slowly succumbed to materialism and brought in less offering. Tobiah could, perhaps, say to Eliashib the priest, "I see that the chamber in the temple to be a storehouse for the Levites isn't really being used. You know, we are in an economic downtime and people just are not offering anymore. I'll tell you what. Why should you have that place standing empty. Let's be reasonable. Let's be economical. Let's be ecumenical. I'll tell you what. I'll rent it (or you can give it to me), and I'll make a good use for it."

You see, the Word is telling us that when the good that we are supposed to do is not done, then evil will fill the vacuum. When God's people did not bring in the sacrifices to the temple, the temple did not remain empty. It became filled with the things that were abhorrent to God.

Nehemiah was the one who saw this. He saw that the Levites were going out to the fields to farm and were abandoning their calling. We read, "And I perceived that ... the Levites and the singers, that did the work, were fled every one to his field." They were not being supported by the tithes, by the one-tenth of the produce of the people of God. And the result was that the ministry of God's house was neglected. Behind it was a shift of priority from the spiritual to the earthly, from the heavenly to the material. And this was a great problem. The people of God, under economically hard times, sought to have their treasures here. They believed that life was first to take care of themselves and of their own things and of their own home. So the money went first for a boat, for clothes, for a new car. And the cause of missions, and the cause of Christian education, and the cause of the church—well, that is second, if we have something left over. The reason was that Jerusalem's spiritual life was impoverished because their heart now was set on the things below instead of the things that were above. Jesus said, "This is a matter of the heart. Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also."

Do you treasure His Word? Do you treasure Christ? Do you treasure the gospel? Do you treasure God's cause? Then the priority of your heart will be seen in how you handle your pocketbook, how you manage your money. Do you treasure the things that are below? Do you believe that they are the things that are the most important? Do you believe that they will give you happiness and pleasure and a sense of self-worth? Then that will be seen too. It will be seen this way, that the needs of the church will go begging.

Nehemiah's remedy for this, too, was direct and now. We read in verse 11, "Then contended I with the rulers, and said, Why is the house of God forsaken? And I gathered them together, and set them in their place." Once again, notice that Nehemiah addressed the rulers or elders, the ones who were responsible for seeing to it that the house of God was maintained properly. He set them in their place. That does not mean that he told them a thing or two, put them in their place. That is sin. It is sin to talk to the rulers of God's people that way. You go to an elder and say, "I'll set him in his place." No, it means that he reminded the elders of their place. He said, "Sit in your place of leadership. He that ruleth over men must be just, ruling in the fear of God," he reminded them. He said to them, "You know that the people are not doing what they should.



They are not supporting the cause of the kingdom as they should. Now you must sit in your office as elder and you must address this.”

Then note, secondly, that he asked the right question, the hard one. “Why is the house of God forsaken?” No one wanted, in Nehemiah’s day, to put it in those terms. They would say, “Well, uh, it’s not really that I want to forsake God’s house or don’t believe that I should give to the church and to missions and to Christian schools. Don’t misunderstand. It’s not that I don’t want to support these things. It’s not that I’m opposed to the temple or to the Levites or to the ministry. It’s just that right now, um, well, right now we’re a little short.” Nehemiah cuts to the heart: “Why is God’s house forsaken?”

Nehemiah’s question means that if we do not make God, His church, and His causes our *priority*, we have *forsaken* them. You cannot have devotion to God in halves. That helps us. That makes the temptation of the flesh very simple. That makes the devil’s confused issues abundantly plain. Will you forsake the house of God? Will God’s work get the seconds, the leftovers? Will you serve God with second best? That strikes a deep chord—forsake God’s house, serve God with second-best, give God the retreats? God’s house and God’s cause demand my best, my all.

So Nehemiah organized things again. And he appointed men responsible to keep the books and to set up a system to assure that everything would be in good order. He picked out faithful men to keep record of what came in and what went out. Nothing was to be done haphazardly. Nehemiah was not a man who simply decried the wrong. Nehemiah was a man who was a leader. He was innovative; he was imaginative in promoting the right. He encouraged the good. He said, “Now this is how we’re going to do it. This is how we’re going to get everybody involved. This is how we’re going to promote the right. And we’re going to do it out of the right reason.” And God’s blessing came upon them.

Nehemiah sought the blessing of God, verse 14. “Remember me,” he prays, “O my God, concerning this, and wipe not out my good deeds that I have done for the house of my God, and for the offices thereof.” There Nehemiah’s heart is open for us. Not only *his* heart, but the heart of all those who are the servants of God in Jesus Christ. Listen to what is in that heart.

He cherishes God’s cause. “I have done this for Thy house, for Thee, for Thy glory, because that is dear to my heart. And I desire Thy blessing, for I know that without Thy blessing all of my works are utterly in vain. My chief desire, Lord, in all of these things is that Thou wilt preserve Thy church and preserve the gospel of grace and keep Thy church pure in order that the Word of the life of Christ in the light of Christ may go forth in all of its beauty. That is my desire.”

And such loving sacrifice and holy zeal for God and for His house is rewarded. It is blessed of God. Work done for God’s cause, God’s church, is never work in vain. All other human endeavor will be wiped out. It is in vain ultimately. But not this work. It abides. It passes beyond this life into glory. God will remember it. Life lived for God’s church is life that is worth it.

Beloved in the Lord, let this fruit of Christ's death be unmistakably clear about you and about me. May it be said of us that we are those who remember in love the church of God and that it may be said of us that our love and our care for the church and for the cause of the gospel of grace shall never cease.

Let us pray.

Father in heaven, we again thank Thee for Thy Word so clear, so wonderful. Write it upon our hearts, apply it to us, give us to walk therein. In Jesus' name, Amen.

## THE REFORMED WITNESS HOUR

August 26, 2012

Why Is the Sabbath Day Profaned?

No. 3634

Rev. Carl Haak

Dear radio friends,

I

read the Word of God at Nehemiah 13:15-17: “In those days saw I in Judah some treading wine presses on the Sabbath, and...I contended with the[m]...and said unto them, What evil thing is this that ye do, and profane the Sabbath day?” Why is the Sabbath Day profaned? That is the question from God to you and me today to His church.

Nehemiah asked this question when he returned to Jerusalem. He had been in Jerusalem for 12 years to build the walls. Then he had gone back to the king of Persia for three-four years and again returned to Jerusalem. During his brief absence, the spiritual life of God’s people had gone downhill drastically. They were no longer a shining light of God’s love and covenant.

We saw in the last message that one of the great abuses was that the house of God was forsaken. The tithe (or offering) was not brought into the chambers of God’s house. The Levites, the priests, and the singers were not being supported. The people had put their businesses first, had put their money and property above God.

Now we come to an even more serious and widespread evil that Nehemiah sees in Judah. The Sabbath Day was profaned. It had become like every other day. There was no attempt to keep the day holy. The Sabbath, a sign that God’s people are devoted exclusively to God, was lost.

This is very applicable to us, God’s church today. The enemy of our spiritual life is a threat to our keeping of the Sabbath. The enemy of the Sabbath is materialism—making an end of earthly things, thinking that life consists in what you have. The pursuit of the earthly, then, so readily goes beyond the bounds that God has established. And the result is that not only are we ill prepared for the Sabbath Day, having spent ourselves six days only on the things of this life, but the things of this life and our own business and pursuits readily crowd out the Sabbath, crowd out the heavenly. The Sabbath is profaned.

This is the question that we have to place before ourselves today: Why is the Sabbath Day profaned?

Once again, we see that Nehemiah’s question is cutting through the layers of excuses and going to the heart of the matter. Nehemiah has the ability to do that. He is very direct. He asks

in verse 17 of the 13<sup>th</sup> chapter, “What evil thing is that that ye do, and profane the Sabbath day?” We do not like it to be put that way. The people of Judah did not want to put it in those terms. They might have responded: “Profane? W-well, we are in God’s house aren’t we, at least once. And, well, yes, those loaded donkeys and bushels of corn and the farmer’s market that we have set up today, well, special circumstances warrant our need to do those things. We’re just trying to get a running start for tomorrow. We’re trying to fill the idle times of the Sabbath by getting things in shape for the business of the week. But, but, profane? We’re certainly not profaning the Sabbath!”

Nehemiah says, “Why do ye profane the Sabbath?” To profane is to corrupt by sin a holy thing, a special, holy thing of God. The Sabbath is a holy thing. We read in the commandment: “Remember the Sabbath Day to keep it holy,” that is, it is intended for a special use. It is set apart as a day for the service of God. To use Sunday for purposes that God has not given, to use Sunday for the service of mammon, for our own earthly things and pleasures, to treat Sunday as a quasi business day, is to profane the Sabbath Day, the holy day of God.

That is not my interpretation. That is God’s, who gave the Sabbath!

In verses 15 and 16 of Nehemiah 13 we see that there were three ways in which Judah was profaning the Sabbath.

First of all, some were treading winepresses on the Sabbath and bringing in sheaves. That alerts us to the fact that it was the time of harvest. Every farmer and orchard grower knows that when the crop is ripe you have to harvest it. This was a sore temptation. The crops were in the field and the Sabbath Day has arrived. The berries are ripe. But the law was specific. Exodus 34:21, “Six days shalt thou work; but on the seventh day thou shalt rest. In earing time and in harvest thou shalt rest.” God had promised that He would supply their needs, that He would give them strength for the harvest. He said that your busy season does not suspend the holy day.

The second evil was this, that they were lading asses, and bringing wine, grapes, and figs, and all manner of burdens into Jerusalem on the Sabbath Day. The donkey was their pickup truck. It was used to carry their wares to be sold in the markets of Jerusalem. They were loading everything up to be sold, bringing it into Jerusalem. Again, the law was specific. Deuteronomy 5:14: “In the seventh day do no manner of work, thou, nor thy son, nor thy cattle, nor thy ox, nor thy ass.” The man who owned a cartage business had his donkeys on the road for six days. He must rest on the Sabbath Day.

The third thing was that the peddlers and the hawkers were selling. They were buying and selling on the Sabbath Day. There was dried fish, perhaps, for sale – a food that the Israelites certainly could eat. There were household wares – pots and blankets and spoons. They had opened up farmers’ markets throughout the land on the Sabbath Day. And they were treating the Sabbath Day as a normal day of buying and selling.

Nehemiah comes to them and says, “What evil thing is this that ye do and profane the Sabbath?” It was an evil thing. All of that was evil in God’s sight. It was evil, first of all, because the people were ignoring the history of God’s people. This was Nehemiah’s word to

them in verse 18: “Did not your fathers thus, and did not your God bring all this evil upon us, and upon this city? yet ye bring more wrath upon Israel by profaning the Sabbath.” Nehemiah is referring there to Jeremiah 17. One of the major reasons for Jerusalem’s destruction and their fathers being carried away to captivity was the very profaning of the Sabbath in the manner that they were doing it. They had been through this already. We see Nehemiah pointing to the gates. And he reminds them, “Was it not just a few scant years ago that we saw those gates charred and burned and these walls in rubble? Why did that happen? Because your fathers had done the very things that you are now doing to the Sabbath. This is an evil thing.”

When we do not pay attention to history, we forget what has happened in the past. The history of God’s church is filled with hundreds of examples of what happens when the Sabbath Day is lost.

Positively, it was evil because the Sabbath had positive, crucial functions, the same functions that it has today. It was, first of all, the testimony to the world that the people of Judah (you and I today) are the people of God, devoted to Him – a people who live for Him and out of God. Exodus 31:13: “It is a sign (that is, the Sabbath) between you and me throughout your generations that ye may know that I am the Lord, that doth sanctify you.” What is the sign that God has a people and that you are a part of that people, that God has a people who long for communion with Him? What is the sign of that? What is the sign to the world that we find in God the fullness of life? What is the sign that we are pressing, as Christians, to eternal glory to be with Him and His Son Jesus in heaven? What is the sign that we love God and we esteem Him as our chief treasure? What is the sign of that to the world? It is the Sabbath Day and the way we keep the Sabbath. By making the Sabbath like any other day, the sign of the covenant, the sign of commitment unto God, was not shown to the world. Instead, the god of materialism had taken over the people of God. The people of God were saying to the world, “We are, basically, just like you.”

Ask yourself this question: Does my Sabbath-keeping reflect to the world around me my seeking of my life with God, my loving devotion to Him?

The second positive reason that it was so evil was that the Sabbath is the source of spiritual life. The Sabbath is that source given of God to keep us on the pathway through the maze of the world, to remind us that we are pilgrims and strangers. The Sabbath means rest, rest with God. It is the pilgrim’s ordinance. It was given by God to refresh us, to keep us upon the path of life eternal. Without the Sabbath, if you do not keep the Sabbath holy to the Lord, you will be sucked into the stream of the world.

What then is life? Is it to buy and sell, and to enjoy pleasures and possessions and things, and for earthly cares and worries? Is it to crowd into the Sabbath Day as well? God has made the Sabbath in order that you, who must go for six days in this world, might stop and be refreshed and draw near to God and drink waters of life eternal. If you walk with God for six days, you will feel the need for the Sabbath. You will say with the psalmist: “When shall I come and appear before God?”

Nehemiah knew that the loss of the Sabbath was due to the inroads of materialism and to the giving of the Sabbath over to the pursuits of the week. And he knew that this would destroy God's people spiritually. Do you know that?

Why is the Sabbath Day profaned in Christianity today? Do we profane the day by allowing materialism, pleasures, and possessions to flow into this day? Does the pursuit of the earthly choke the Word of God so that we have no time to come apart to rest awhile? We cannot stop from the things of this world?

Let us be reminded today of the sacred purpose of the Sabbath Day given by the risen Savior Himself. It is to reflect longingly on the eternal pleasure of God's presence that awaits us. It is a day of anticipation. It is a day that puts all of our trials in spiritual perspective. It is a day in which we see that the difficulties of the week and the burdens of this week were all used of God for His purpose. All things are made plain in God's house. It is a day that jars us awake. It brings us out of the stupor of the world's pursuits. It fixes our eyes upon heaven and upon the light of heaven. It is a day that we may set aside our own activities and obligations and be with our families and pray and read the Scriptures and be devoted in good works unto God. It is a day to take as much pleasure in God and in His people as we possibly can.

Do not traffic in the earthly but be busy in the spiritual. Reap a harvest of spiritual things on the Sabbath.

Nehemiah took resolute action to correct this abuse of the Lord's Day. He did not bemoan. He did not say, "Boy, things aren't like they used to be. Too bad!" He took action.

First, he had the gates shut on the evening before the Sabbath, verse 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." He announced that the work week had ended. Tomorrow will not be like any other day. The city is not open for business on the Sabbath.

Second. He threatened to jail those who loitered around the gates with their goods and produce waiting till the Sabbath was ended. Verse 20 tells us that the merchants did not get the point. And, for a few weeks, they came to locked gates. So they simply waited for the Sabbath to be over. Outside the gates they would sit with all their wares. We read in verse 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."

You see how practical the Bible is? Nehemiah knew that it was not enough simply to have the gates closed and to command that buying and selling cease. He knew that the people's minds would still be on it. We think of a little boy who is told, "You may not ride your bike on Sunday." He goes to the garage and looks all Sunday afternoon at his bike. Nehemiah says, "Now, listen. You have to put away those things that distract you. If you are tempted to resume your daily work, you have to close up shop, you have to put those things away, you have to put away the weekly worries and the weekly concerns. It is not enough that you simply do not do

them.” But God is saying, “Don’t, with your mind and your heart, be thinking about all of those things. Put them away. If there are things that tempt you, put them away.”

Then he charged the Levites to sanctify the day, verse 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.” Again we see that Nehemiah understood that if you leave a vacuum, evil will fill it. If the Sabbath is not kept with positive, spiritual things, then the world will fill the Sabbath. If you do not do positive, spiritual things on the Lord’s day— going to God’s house twice, organizing the day for your family around spiritual activities, visiting the sick and the afflicted, teaching and reading and praying with your children—if you do not do those things, you will soon be found out on the golf course. If you leave a vacuum, evil will fill it.

The fourth commandment envisions that on the Sabbath Day families will be together— talking, and reading, and teaching Scripture, and doing good, and visiting the needy, and memorizing the Bible, and resting on the Lord’s Day, and attending the Sabbath twice with the whole family. Sanctify the Lord’s Day!

The Word of God calls us to resolute action, lest our Sabbath Day be profaned, lest we find ourselves weak and listless Christians throughout the week, lest we find that we have a lack of purpose because the Sabbath has been lost.

Let us prepare for the Sabbath ahead of time because it is a special day. Let us use wise preparation. If you have young children, this is especially important. Perhaps you can select their clothes for them or find their shoes and their Bibles so that on Sunday morning you do not need to be in a rush or yelling, “Where’s this, where’s that?” Prepare. Finish up your work on Saturday afternoon. Open up the refrigerator and find out if you have some food for Sunday. Do not stay up past your normal bedtime on Saturday night. If you go to sleep at ten so that you can be alert for *work*, go to sleep at ten so that you can be alert for the *worship of God* and not be groggy.

Let us begin each Lord’s Day by reading the Scriptures personally and praying together as families before church. It may mean that you have to get up fifteen minutes earlier. It may mean that you have to schedule the showers and the hair-drying and all the rest in your home so that you can be at the table, at an agreed upon time, with the whole family on Sunday morning, before you go to church, so that you can be prepared for the Lord’s Day. Let us sit together as families in the church of God. Let us participate in that worship with our hearts, with our tongues, with our eyes. When Scripture is read on Sunday morning, let us open the Bible and read it. When the songs are announced, let us sing with all our hearts, paying attention to the words. Open your mouth in praise.

Let us return home from the service and talk about what took place in the service. Let us talk about the content of the sermon. Let us talk about what it means to you and how you will be trying to practice or remember what God has said to you in His Word throughout the week. Ask your children some good questions, geared to their understanding. Explain the things that they did not get in the sermon.

And let us spend the day with our family and with God's people—especially the lonely and sick and aged. The Sabbath should not be: Everybody off to his own room. It is not a day to be off by yourself. But let us be together. The fourth commandment pictures (as I said) the family together on the Lord's Day. Christian families need this day after a busy week. There have been many worries throughout the week. We have been bruised and beaten spiritually. We have trials and hurts. We need time to be alone with Jesus as a family. Invest in the Lord's Day. As a young family, as young people, invest in this day. Put stock into it. Throw yourself into the wholesome spiritual activity of the day.

Nehemiah concludes with this prayer in verse 22: "Remember me, O my God, concerning this also, and spare me according to the greatness of thy mercy." Remember me, O Lord, and spare me. That is striking, is it not? Let us not miss that today. Nehemiah has just performed one of the most courageous acts of faith. Here is a man who is doing what is right. He faithfully performed his calling. He called attention to an evil and he saw to it that the evil was addressed. He said, "This is where I stand. We're going to put our stake down here. We are going to keep the Sabbath Day holy to the Lord."

Now, if ever, we would say, "There is something that God must be pleased with. God will take note of that!" We would say, "Nehemiah, you have done right and good." Yet Nehemiah asks God to spare him. Nehemiah sees that in his best works he has not earned. But he believes that God must forgive him in his best works. Do you understand? The best saint in his best works needs the sparing mercy of God because his sins are involved in his best work. The closer we come to the doing of God's will, the more we realize just how sinful we are, just how much sin cleaves to our own works. Nehemiah did not go home to congratulate himself and to say, "Well, now! I did something." Nehemiah went home to confess his sins and to plead for God's mercy.

Let us conclude our time together in God's Word today the same way. Let us conclude this way: by praying.

Lord, we love Thy day. And we do understand its importance. We see what the materialism of our own nature and of this world will do to us. We see how readily we get sucked up only in the earthly. And we see how crucial it is to come apart and rest on the Sabbath Day with our Savior. But we cannot do this, we cannot attain to this, in our strength. Lord, give us to observe, love, and honor the Sabbath Day. And may our keeping of the Sabbath Day, to the measure that we are able to do so, increase our faith. Let it not become something for us to boast of. Let us not think of it as a feather in our cap. But, O Lord, as we go about obedience to Thee, may we remember our sins and know the need of Thy sparing mercy for even our best earthly Sabbath. After that we must go to our knees and ask Thee to forgive us because now we feel our sins and imperfections. Until, O Lord, the gates of heaven shall be opened and we shall enter into the eternal rest where there shall be no more sin and we shall rejoice. So give us to keep the Sabbath that is the emblem of eternal rest. Amen.