

"Hearing the Commandments Again"

We're going to look at a story from the 8th chapter of the Book of Nehemiah. The setting is this: God's people had been defeated, Jerusalem destroyed, and many citizens taken into exile to Babylonia. But now they have returned. Nehemiah has successfully led in the rebuilding of Jerusalem's walls in just 52 days. In celebration of this near miraculous feat, all the people gather together into the square before the Water Gate. We know this is an extra special event, because women and children old enough to understand were included.

They ask Ezra, their high priest and scribe, to bring the Book of the Law of Moses which the Lord had given to Israel. (This would have been the first 5 books of our Bible – the Pentateuch). Remember, people didn't have Bibles. There were few copies of the Law. No doubt, with the people scattered in exile, and the temple destroyed, the law of God had fallen into neglect. Many were unfamiliar with God's commandments.

Ezra stands on a high platform, built just for this purpose. The book of the law is read during the entire morning. Its words are read in Hebrew, then interpreted and explained so all the people might understand. It says, "the ears of all the people were attentive to the book of the law" (Nehemiah 8:3). "And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was standing above all the people, and when he opened it, all the people stood up. Then Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God, and all the people answered, 'Amen, Amen,' lifting up their hands. Then they bowed their heads and worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground" (Nehemiah 8:5-6).

Why was this reading of the book of the law so important? This divinely inspired book reminded them of who they are as God's people, of how they are to live and order their lives! Gathering to read, interpret and understand this book of God's laws was to give a moral structure for their community, and provide a moral foundation to insure their future. This would enable them, as the people of God, to fulfill their mission as a priestly and holy nation, a light to the whole world.

How did the people respond to this reading of God's commandments? It says "all the people *wept* when they heard the words of the law" (verse 9). Why did they weep? Apparently as they're reintroduced to God's commands they realize their sins and shortcomings, and how far off track they had gotten – in fact, the reason their nation had been defeated was God's judgment on them for their sins. But...the people are told: "Don't weep! Stop mourning! This is to be a day of celebration and rejoicing! "And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, 'This day is holy to the Lord your God; do not mourn or weep.' For all the people wept when they heard the words of the law. Then he said to them, 'Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions of them to those for whom nothing is prepared, for this day is holy to our Lord, and do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength'" (verses 9-10). They are to rejoice, and share their food and drink with others. Notice verse 12: They greatly rejoiced "because they had understood the words that were declared to them."

What a great story! And I think it's some ways it describes the scenario today – in our lives, in our country. *God's laws and commandments have fallen into neglect; they're being nudged out of*

our private and national life. American society, Western culture, was built on Judeo-Christian values and teachings. The Ten Commandments, for example, were regarded highly, and even inscribed on government buildings. Even if you didn't much bother to keep the commandments, or claimed to be a Christian, at least it was assumed that these were rules and standards for life. That is changing now!

We are, what some call, a "postmodern" society. One of the hallmarks of postmodernism is that there are *no moral absolutes*. Instead of God's unchangeable commands being the measuring stick of right and wrong, *each person or group* now decides *their own* truths and values. Lowell Halverson is a former Washington State Bar Association president. He admitted to having sexual affairs with several of his clients whom he was representing in divorce and child-support cases. When this attorney was asked if he thought his conduct was "inappropriate", Halverson called that a "value-laden word". He replied, "What is inappropriate for one person is not for another. I respect other people's values, but they don't have to be my values." So, what's wrong for you isn't necessarily wrong for me. If I cheat on my income taxes, or have an affair with a coworker, that's ok, and you should respect my values.

We're also much more of a pluralistic society. Christianity is not the only religion on the block. Other religions and philosophies – Islam, Buddhism, even satanism and atheism, demand equal time and recognition. We see this played out in the debates over whether the Ten Commandments can be posted on public buildings, or whether prayers can be prayed in schools or as part of public events. I suppose it's fair for other religions to claim equal time, even if we may not like it. And I don't think we'll ever go back to the days when Christianity was the accepted faith at the heart of our country. But all of this has eaten away at our nation's recognition of the authority of God's laws and commands over our lives.

Many people don't even know what the Ten Commandments are. Sometimes children get a bit mixed up on the Ten Commandments. One youngster said, "The first commandment was when Eve told Adam to eat the apple. Another said, "The fifth commandment is to humor thy father and mother." Still another said, "The seventh commandment is thou shalt not admit adultery." A Sunday School class was studying the Ten Commandments. They were ready to discuss the last one. The teacher asked if anyone could tell what it was. Susie raised her hand, stood tall, and quoted: "Thou shalt not take the covers off thy neighbor's wife."

Well, children may not know the commandments, but many adults aren't much better. Radio host and author, Dr. Laura Schlessinger, in her book, *The Ten Commandments*, tells of asking an audience of almost 3,000 people if the Ten Commandments were out of date. Many hands went up. Then she asked, "Which ones, specifically?" No one moved, and there was a feeling of discomfort in the room. She observed that it was like they were trying to justify their belief that the commandments were obsolete, but realized they had nothing to back it up.

Where has this neglect and ignorance of God's laws and commands gotten us? Is life better when each person decides for himself or herself what the rules for life are? Can we honestly say that the world is in a better place, that our country is in a better place, when we ease God's

commandments out of the picture?

Obedying God's commands could do wonders! "You shall not kill". If street gangs and drug cartels would stop killing people with guns or fentanyl. If all of human life were held sacred – including the life of the unborn. "Honor your father and mother." If children did honor their parents. "You shall not commit adultery." If husbands and wives stopped cheating on their spouse. "You shall not false witness." If members of Congress and Presidents and Presidential candidates stopped lying, and average citizens told the truth. "You shall have no other gods before me." If we all quit making idols of money and material things. "You shall not covet." If we stopped always wanting what other people have. "Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy." If we took time out of our busy lives to take a day to rest, and go to church.

Don't you think life might be better? It's my hope and prayer that our generation can rediscover the laws and commandments of God, and their authority over human life.

Ezra read the book of the Law to the people, and *the people wept*. When they were told again the standards God had set for how to live they recognized how far short they had come, and were convicted of their sins! One of the things that happens when we are confronted with God's word and commands is that it shows us what's wrong with our lives!

In fact, the Bible says that the purpose of the law is to show us what sin is! The Apostle Paul wrote in Romans: "Through the law we become conscious of sin" (Romans 3:20). And in Romans 7:7, "I would not have known what sin was except through the law." So, God's laws have a two-fold purpose: *First*, to show us our sin, and our need of a Savior – since no one can perfectly keep all of God's commands. And *second*, to reveal God's will for us, and how God wants us to live.

But remember, in the story from the Book of Nehemiah, the initial response of the people was to weep over their failures, but Nehemiah and Ezra said, "Don't mourn, this is to be a day of celebration and rejoicing! The end result of following God's law and commandments is joy and fulfillment.

See, life without healthy rules and guiding principles is not life at its best! We all know that at some level, don't we? Take children, for example. If parents don't set consistent, fair rules and boundaries, that child becomes a problem child and an unhappy child. Nicky Gumbel is a British pastor who founded and leads a wonderful teaching tool called The Alpha Course. He tells of one day being coerced into being a referee of a kids' soccer game when the ref didn't show up. He said there were no field markers, he had no whistle, he didn't even know the rules very well. They started the game out of bounds! He didn't know when to call fouls. It was a mess. The ref came a half hour later, took charge, followed the rules, and the kids had a great time.

Because God loves us and wants us to have a fulfilling life and healthy relationships, God has set up rules for the game of life. His commandments, including the Ten Commandments, and the teachings of Jesus.

1 John 5:2-3 says, "By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments. For the love of God is this, that we obey his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome." Notice, God's commandments *are not burdensome! Not a pain in the neck!*

Some years ago there was an article in the British newspaper, *The Sunday Times*, reporting that the Church of England's liturgical commission decided to remove the commandments from the holy communion service in the new millennium prayer book. The article said: "Philip Gore, a synod member for the Manchester dioceses, said the decision reflected the church's fear that any kind of religious challenge will alienate congregations. Earlier this year, it emerged that the church had suffered its biggest drop in attendance for more than twenty years. 'Many in the church do not want a God who makes too many demands of them,' he said. There-fore, they want to dismiss the commandments as irrelevant to our modern age.'" Incredible! Ease up on the commands, because they're a burden, stifling, constricting! That's not how the Apostle John viewed the commandments, nor how the writer of Psalm 19 viewed God's law and commands:

"The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul; the decrees of the Lord are sure, making wise the simple; the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is clear, enlightening the eyes; the fear of the Lord is pure, enduring forever; the ordinances of the Lord are true and righteous altogether. More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and drippings of the honeycomb. Moreover, by them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward (Psalm 19:7-11).

There is an ancient Jewish custom that when a young boy begins his first lesson in Torah (the Law of Moses), that a golden drop of honey is dripped onto the first page of the Torah reminding the student of the sweetness of God's Word.

Maybe it's time to gather all the people together, like Nehemiah, and read again God's commandments. It would be health to our personal lives and to society!

A man named Doug Whitt and his new bride, Sylvia, enjoyed a beautiful wedding ceremony, then a wedding reception that lasted late into the night. After that they were escorted to their hotel's fancy bridal suite. In the suite they saw a sofa, chairs, and table, but where was the bed? They discovered the sofa was a hide-a-bed, with a lumpy mattress and sagging springs. They spent a fitful night and woke up in the morning with sore backs. The new husband went to the hotel desk and gave the clerk a tongue-lashing. "Did you open the door in the room?" asked the clerk. Doug went back to the room. He opened the door they had thought was a closet. There, complete with fruit baskets and chocolates, was a beautiful bedroom!

At first, the commandments of God may seem like an inadequate and disappointing honeymoon suite – lumpy mattress and all! But if we can only open the door to the other room, we'll find God's commandments come complete with fruit baskets and chocolates!

