

Spiritual Renewal: Step Two
Getting Serious About Obedience

Spilman Memorial Baptist Church

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July 16, 2023

Text: Nehemiah 8:13-18

Purpose: The people of Israel returned and rebuilt Jerusalem. They came together to hear the word of God and wept bitterly as they saw how far they had disobeyed God's Word. They got serious about their sin and became obedient and reinstated the Feast of Tabernacles. They were obedient and they found satisfaction and joy through obedience.

A man was stranded on the proverbial deserted Pacific Island for years.



Finally one day a boat comes sailing into view, and the man frantically waves and draws the skipper's attention. The boat comes near the island and the sailor gets out and greets the stranded man.

After a while the sailor asks, "What are those three huts you have here?" "Well, that's my house there."

"What's that next hut?" asks the sailor.
"I built that hut to be my church."

"What about the other hut?"
"Oh, that's where I used to go to church."¹

Last week I began a ten-part series on the steps towards Spiritual Renewal. I don't know about your life, but in my life, I need a renewal and revival in my spirit. You may find that difficult to grasp that your pastor would need spiritual renewal, but there are seasons in my life when God seems far away. The things of God seem slightly distant, just out of my reach.



Have you ever felt that way in your life? Then don't become distraught. Simply realize that there are seasons in our life that we may move away from God. But we need to be spiritually attuned to our drifting and take deliberate steps of renewal, deliberate acts of obedience, deliberate steps of repentance.

Last week we examined a particular time in the history of the nation of Israel. The nation was taken into captivity for their direct rejection of God and their total disregard for God's word. They thought they were invincible, but God said they would be punished for their rebellion. God sent the Babylonians to come and take captive the brightest and best citizens of Israel, slaughtered the middle class, and abandoned the poor and ignorant to watch the weeds grow up among the rubble of the former glorious city of David.

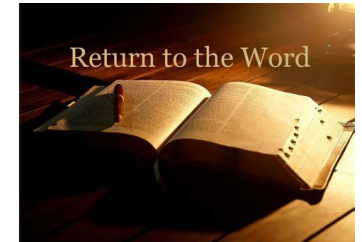


After 70 years, God's chosen people were allowed to return to the city of Jerusalem and rebuild the city. Not only was Nehemiah given permission to return, but about 50,000 people



joined him in rebuilding the city. Artaxerxes the King gave Nehemiah money and permission to rebuild the city, walls, and streets. After only 52 days, the walls and the gates of the city were restored.

Last week we read about how the entire nation of Israel came and listened as Ezra, the scribe read from the Old Testament to the people. In this we learned the first step towards spiritual renewal was to return to the **Word of God**.



How can we know God's will for our lives apart from reading and hearing God's Word? How can we know the right way to live with our spouse, children, neighbor, and nation, apart from reading and understanding God's plan for our lives? We must make the regular reading of God's word **CENTRAL** to who we are. We are supposed to be "People of the Book." So let us return and make God's word central to our lives.

Today I want to look at the second step in spiritual renewal – that is **obedience**. There are many people that have read the Bible, but they are choosing to reject it and not be obedient to what they find there. Even Satan knows God's word, and used verses from the Book of Deuteronomy against Jesus while He was in the wilderness for 40 days. Simply knowing the Word does not make you a disciple or follower of God.



The Bible is a book like no other. It comes with wonderful instructions for living life. It comes with tremendous blessings for those that are obedient to it. But it also has warnings for those that choose to disobey. As we open God's Word, we need to come with a willing heart of obedience.

A Bad Example of Obedience

One day, a man decided he needed direction for his life. His family life was a wreck, his business was failing, his friends had betrayed him – he was in a difficult place in his life. Instead of reading the Bible systematically to obtain advice from God's Word, he decided to simply open it and do what it said.

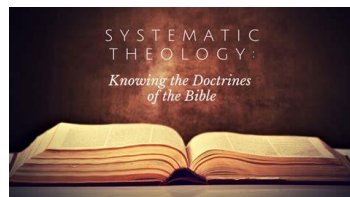


He closed his eyes and opened it Matthew 27:5, which says, *“Then he threw down the pieces of silver in the temple and departed and went and hanged himself.”*

The man obviously was not looking for that kind of advice from God so he decided to try again with this flawed method of instruction.

He closed his eyes and turned to Judges 7:17. This verse says, *“Look at me and do likewise; watch, and when I come to the edge of the camp you shall do as I do.”*

A mature believer will read God's word with discernment and seek to learn from it carefully and systematically. That is why



Sunday school is so important. That is why Wednesday Bible Study is so important. That is why, years ago, many Baptist churches had Royal Ambassadors, Girls in Action, Sunbeams, Mission Friends, Women's Missionary Union, Baptist Men and Bible Drills. You can learn about God's will for our lives as you come and study week by week. God instructs us to obey His Word.

Each Wednesday we gather and study various passages of scripture from the Lectionary. Psalm 19 lets us know how important valuing the Law really is.

*The Law of the Lord is perfect, converting the soul.
The statutes of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart.
The commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes.*

If the people of Israel obeyed the words found in the Law, they would be blessed. If they were disobedient then God said they would be cursed. The same is true for us as well. If we trust God and obey God, we will be blessed. We need to sincerely grasp the idea that God's blessings flow out of obedience.



As we read earlier this morning, we saw that the people of Israel were hungering for the word of God. The heads of each family came for hours listening to the instructions of God. They discovered they had not been obedient to the instructions related to the Feast of Tabernacles. They immediately began to correct their disobedient behavior.

Obedience is at the heart of our relationship with God. Are we being obedient to the revealed Word of God? David Jeremiah in his study on Nehemiah said, “*God is our Father, and obeying Him is our duty as His children. But we are also stewards of God – His representatives, bearing His image in the earth. Obedience to the master is the primary responsibility of a steward in any setting. From more than one perspective, obedience is the heart of our relationship with God.*”



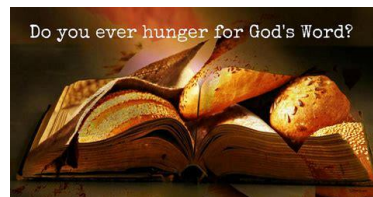
Jesus even told His disciples, “*If you love me, you will keep My commandments.*” (John 14:15) If you love Jesus Christ, you will begin opening His word once again, read it as if it was a personal love story to you, and then become conformed to the commandments of Christ. *If you love Him*



David Jeremiah in his study on Nehemiah outlines five observations concerning obedience. Maybe by examining these five observations, we will be able to find where we may not be as obedient as we should be and take steps to correct our disobedience.²

1. Obedience is Related to Hunger

The first thing we can observe about the people of Israel was they were **hungry**. They were hungry to hear the word of God.



After standing for hours listening intently to the Book of the Law, they lamented their spiritual condition and sought to remedy what was happening in their life. They were so hungry; that we see in verse 13, the heads of each household came back the next day to learn more.

J. N. Darby wrote, “*To be hungry is not enough. I must really be starving to know what is in God’s heart toward me. When the prodigal son was hungry, he went to feed upon the husks; but when he was starving, he turned to his father.*”³

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, “*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.*” That kind of thirsting for righteousness is what Israel felt. They had not been fed the word of God for decades.



There was definitely a famine in their midst and now they wanted God’s life-giving word. According to verse 18, as the people of Israel observed the Festival of Tabernacles, they came and heard the word of God for 8 straight days!

Would you be willing to stop all the activities in your life and listen to God’s word for eight days? The people of Israel were hungry! They had an inner longing for God and they did something about it. If your life is in need of spiritual renewal, you need to turn back to God’s word, read it, and then be willing to obey it. So few people have a hunger and thirst for God’s word. But those that do, you can see it on their face, hear it in their voice, and you know they are close to God.

King David had a heart searching for the things of God. He said in Psalm 27:7-8, *“Hear, O Lord, when I cry with my voice! Have mercy also upon me, and answer me. When You said, “Seek My face,” my heart said to You, “Your face Lord, I will seek.”* We need to have a heart willing to hunger and thirst after God. Until we have a hunger, we will not care about our obedience.

2. Obedience is Related to Humility

Secondly, our obedience is related to our **humility**. During the days of Ezra and Nehemiah, the people of Israel came to their teacher and said, *“Teach us – we want to learn.”* Humility is a prerequisite for spiritual growth.



The Bible talks about the connection between humility and pride.

- Proverbs tell us not to be wise in our own eyes. (3:7)
- Proverbs reminds us there is more hope for a fool than for a man who thinks he is wise in his own eyes. (26:12).
- Isaiah said *“Woe to those who are wise, and prudent in their own sight.”* (5:12)

These verses of scripture remind us that **a person who is full of himself has no room for God**. A person who thinks they know everything has no need to call upon God. But a humble person is one that realizes that they do not know everything. If we humble ourselves, then we can be taught by God.



We need to remember that the children of Israel had just spent 70 years in captivity in Babylon. They knew all about humility. Now they humbled themselves before God, under the leadership of their teacher, and learned of the things of God. They put away spiritual pride and placed themselves in a position to be taught.

J. I. Packer wrote, *“Not till we have become humble and teachable, standing in awe of God’s holiness and sovereignty ... acknowledging our own littleness, distrusting our own thoughts and willing to have our minds turned upside down, can divine wisdom become ours. It is to be feared that many Christians spend all their lives too unhumbled and conceited a frame of mind ever to gain wisdom from God at all.”*⁴

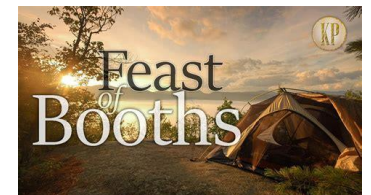
If we are to grow spiritually, we need to say, *“Teach me Lord.”*

3. Obedience is Related to Honesty

A third word related to obedience is **honesty**. We need to be willing to be honest with God and honest with ourselves. We are fooling no one but ourselves if we don’t “come clean.” We need to be willing to acknowledge our shortcomings and then be willing to take steps to correct those areas in which we are lacking.



As the men and women of Israel were listening to the words from Ezra, they noticed God

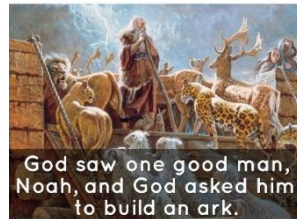


commanded them to make small booths in which to live in to remind them of their time spent in the desert. The command to build these small tabernacles is found in Leviticus 23:33-44. The people of Israel failed to keep this word of the Lord for almost a thousand years. Even during the days of King David and Solomon, they failed to keep this festival.

Some may have stood up and said that they were too cultured now to obey this commandment. They were too sophisticated to live in tents for a week. If we were to issue that call for our church members to live in tents for a week, would we be willing to do that?

When we approach the scripture, we need to be open and honest with ourselves and be willing to obey what it teaches. But we need to be discerning as we read. Some of the scriptures apply only to a certain person or group. Christians don't celebrate Jewish feasts for that reason. But we need to be careful not to use Biblical interpretation as a way to avoid being obedient to what God tells us clearly to do.

You remember the story of Noah. God asked Noah to build a boat on the middle of dry ground during a time when rain had never fallen on the earth. God asked him to be obedient and build a large ark because a great flood was coming. You can imagine all the ridicule and scorn this man had as he built this floating ark. But he took God at His word and obeyed.



Until we are willing to say to God, "I will do whatever your word says for me to do – no excuses," we have not been honest with God or ourselves.

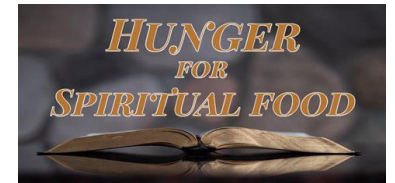
4. Obedience is Related to Habit

Closely related to our obedience are the habits in which we involve ourselves. In verse 18, the people of Israel came day-by-day to hear the word of God. They could not get enough of God's word. This points us to something unusual about God's word.



Spiritual hunger works exactly opposite of physical hunger. If you were physically hungry, (like some of you may be right now, wondering when I am going finish) your stomach lets you know very quickly. You may eat until you are stuffed, and in a few hours, you are hungry again.

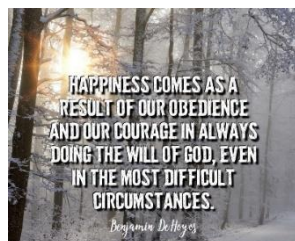
But spiritual hunger works exactly opposite. Once you begin reading and uncovering the truths found in the Bible, you want more and more. You can read and study for hours and get lost in what God is teaching you. But if you stop reading your Bible, you actually lose interest and your spiritual stomach doesn't tell you that you are spiritually starving. You have to make reading the Bible a part of your daily habit. You have to intentionally start your day with some spiritual bread. You have to intentionally read a portion of God's word before you go to sleep at night. Once you



develop these routines and habits, you will be hungering and thirsting for more.

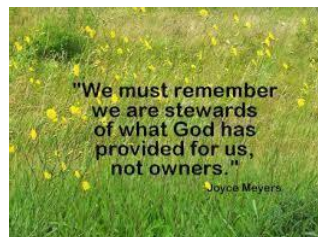
5. Obedience is Related to Happiness

Lastly, our obedience is related to our **happiness**. From the world's perspective, that seems kind of opposite. In verse 17, it says, "*And there was a very great gladness.*" Genuine gladness and happiness come from knowing and applying God's word in our life.



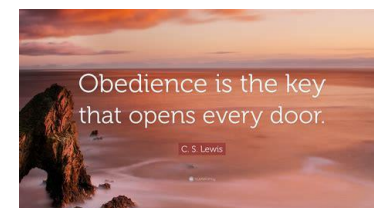
I am sure the people of Israel came away from the feast of Tabernacles with a deep satisfaction that they were obedient to God's Word and were doing something that had not been observed for almost a thousand years. That is the feeling that comes from being obedient to God's word and realizing we are doing what God asks of us.

Maybe you are struggling with various areas in your life where you may not be very obedient. It could be in the area of witnessing or tithing or some other area God is prodding you related to obedience. Joy comes to us when we set aside our pride, fears, and disobedience, and simply obey what God teaches. God will honor our obedience. **Until we are obedient in the little things, God will not trust us with greater things. Until we are good steward of the things God has put in our hands, He will not give us greater things.** The greater the challenge for us to obey His will, the greater our joy will be.



For the Israelites, this Holy day became a Holiday. They had reason to celebrate. They were obedient and they felt the joy of being and doing the will of God. You can experience this type of joy in your life as you surrender your will to God's will. There is no joy in the world like being obedient to God.

Our spiritual renewal can begin as we are obedient to what God teaches and obey what it instructs us to do.



To recap what I have shared with you this morning: First, obedience is born out of our hunger for the Word of God. Second, obedience is a matter of humility. Third, obedience is related to our honesty with God and ourselves. Fourth, obedience actually becomes easier as you make these things part of your life habits. Fifth, obedience can become the well spring of joy and happiness in our life.

If you don't have joy in your life, it could be because you are not obedient to God.

If you don't have a hunger and thirst for God's word, it could be because you are neglecting it.

If you are struggling with obedience, it could be because you are not honest with yourself and God about that specific area of disobedience.



We can be obedient if we decide to be obedient. You cannot become a disciple of Christ until you are willing to be obedient to His will for your life.

The first step towards spiritual maturity is to **Read the Word of God.**

The second is to be **obedient to what it teaches.**

Are you on the road to maturity?

LET US PRAY

Notes:

¹Micky's Funnies, An Island Funny, May 15, 2023

² Outline from David Jeremiah's Book, *10 Steps to Spiritual Renewal, The Book of Nehemiah.*

³ Quoted in Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount, Vol. 1, p. 81.*

⁴ J. I. Packer, *Knowing God*, p. 101