

Learning from the Guv'nor

Leadership in Nehemiah

Introduction: learning from Nehemiah today

One of our core commitments at Reach Ministries UK is listening more carefully to what God says in his Word about how to conduct our church ministries today. It's probably true Evangelical churches have recently neglected the rich treasures of practical wisdom in the scriptures, *'which are able to thoroughly equip you for every good work'* (2 Tim.3) for fear of indulging in fanciful interpretations. But the Scriptures are God's 'Swiss Army Knife' – everything we need to know from him for our salvation and service – able to *'thoroughly equip'* us for our ministries. However there are three primary challenges to drawing lessons for our church ministries from an OT Bible book like Nehemiah:

- a) God's primary purpose in giving us Scriptures was plainly to explore and exalt the ministry of his Son Jesus Christ not ours;
- b) Following principles modelled for us in the New testament, responsible interpretation should always begin with evident human authorial intention. While it's possible Nehemiah hoped his memoirs would shape future patterns of leadership, there's no explicit authorial intention they should be read as a leadership manual;
- c) Even where we can learn from the ministry of God's servants in the OT, the historical and cultural contexts are radically different from our own e.g. we wouldn't want to promote Nehemiah's approach to those who've married outside the faith in 13:25, *'I confronted them and cursed them and beat some of them and pulled out their hair. And I made them take an oath in the name of God...'*

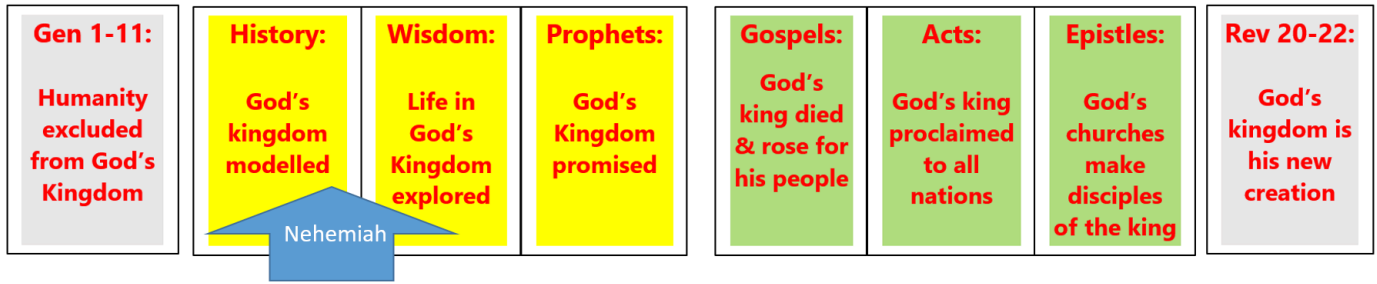
Yet there are sensible responses to these cautions which encourage us to persist with learning ministry principles from Nehemiah:

- a) While we should always begin with human authorial intention, we should remember Jesus and his Apostles affirm dual authorship of the Scriptures – so New Testament writers often expound OT texts with meanings beyond what the original human author could have known; this is the classic reformed doctrine of 'sensus plenior' e.g. Hebrews interprets Moses and Joshua and David as signifying the glories of Jesus way beyond what the OT writers knew or intended; and we can likewise recognise in Nehemiah's role as Governor of Judah and builder of Jerusalem a foreshadowing of Christ the Governor of God's Kingdom and builder of his church – even if Nehemiah wasn't himself aware of the deeper significance of his writing;
- b) While it's true the Scriptures are primarily concerned with the saving ministry of Christ so the strengths and weaknesses of Old Testament judges, prophets, priests, kings and governors compare and contrast with him, we should not limit Jesus saving ministry to his death on the cross. Jesus' saving ministry included his leadership in teaching and training his disciples, and we are surely intended by God to learn from the whole ministry of Jesus as it is foreshadowed in Nehemiah. As Governor of Judah, Nehemiah models the governorship of Christ and so of elders governing his churches for him; and as a man of faith and prayer, Nehemiah models the godly Christian life of Jesus and therefore of all Christians pastors today. We must explore which behaviours are commended, which condemned, and which are neutral background narrative. Often the text describes behaviour commended in the NT, but occurring in Nehemiah in helpful contexts e.g. the NT tells us to pray on all occasions, but Nehemiah 2 encourages us to pray when meeting powerful people, as Nehemiah did when meeting the Persian King Artaxerxes. As Paul reminds his Corinthian readers to learn from the experience of Israel in the desert, *'These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the culmination of the ages has come'* (1 Cor.10), we can assume the events of Nehemiah's ministry happened and are written down in Nehemiah for us to learn from. Nehemiah was not written *about* us or *to* us but it was written *for* us. And thirdly...
- c) While the culture in which Nehemiah was leading was very different and his project of unique theological significance, God is the same, the human condition is the same, and the means of salvation through the gospel is the same in every age and culture. So before diving let's briefly rehearse two aspects of a healthy *'Biblical Theology'* with which to approach our interpretation responsibly:

a) Nehemiah governing Judea foreshadows Jesus governing his people and so how we should govern his churches for him

It is not fanciful or merely optional but necessary to think of Nehemiah foreshadowing Jesus. For Jesus plainly said, *'these are the scriptures that testify about me'* (John 5:39). So while the New Testament doesn't specifically refer to Nehemiah, the unfolding theology of the Bible *requires* us to understand the account of Nehemiah governing God's people in Judea as vital for understanding the ministry of Jesus as our governor today. The following diagram portrays how we might understand this unfolding message across Scripture...

The Bible is God's unfolding gospel promise of his Kingdom



The OLD TESTAMENT is: **GOD'S PROMISE**
...of his **kingdom & his king**

The NEW TESTAMENT is: **GOD'S FULFILMENT**
...in **Jesus Christ our Lord**

Since the Bible is about the unfolding gospel of the Kingdom of God, we should interpret Nehemiah governing God's earthly kingdom in Judea as foreshadowing Jesus governing his heavenly kingdom today. Having clarified how Christ governs his people, leaders of his churches should learn from him how to govern his churches today for him;

(b) Nehemiah rebuilding the walls teaches us how Christ is building his church and so how we should build up his churches for him



In 445BC Nehemiah was a trusted Jewish cup-bearer to the Persian King Artaxerxes. In Nehemiah chs.1-3 we read how, after hearing Jerusalem, the capital of God's earthly kingdom was in ruins, his grief drove him to confess the sins of his people to God and then to ask the king for permission to go back to Jerusalem and rebuild the walls of God's city. Unexpectedly promoted to be Governor of Judea, he then led God's people in the apparently impossible task of rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem **in just 52 days!** He restored temple worship, renewed public instruction in the Bible, and re-established godly patterns of family life among God's discouraged people! Nehemiah's ministry of building the walls of Jerusalem foreshadows and points to Jesus building his church today through the edification of his people by his bible-teachers. And as we shall see, he is indeed a leader worth learning from!

The account of Nehemiah leading Israel to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem teaches us about God, "*the builder of everything*" (Heb3) who is building his church *through* the ministry of his Son and appointed Governor Jesus Christ, the wise man who builds on the rock of his teaching, saying, '*on this rock (the Apostolic gospel) I will build my church*' (Mat.16). The NT writers explain how Christ is building his churches on his gospel *through the bible-teaching ministries* of his pastors which *edify (or build up)* God's people, "*for works of service so the body of Christ may be built up*" (Eph4) with, "*the word of his grace which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified*" (Acts 20).

⇒ **Nehemiah inspires us to GOVERN & BUILD his churches with prayer, compassion & humility**

In Nehemiah, the LORD is not just called God, but 10 times called "*My God*". For Nehemiah, God is not only the awesome and sovereign Almighty in heaven, but also our merciful LORD who keeps his covenant promises to save and answers the daily prayers of his people in need. These convictions powerfully shaped his leadership and especially his response to problems and threats - prayer before action, compassion before criticism and humility before recognition. Here are 18 leadership principles from the Guv'nor:

No.1: Pray - with lament, confidence & confession (1:1-11)

Like Nehemiah upon hearing the sad news of Jerusalem's demise, let us pray with *lament* for God's people under pressure, *confidence* in God's faithfulness, *confessing* our people's sins and *making our appeal for gospel renewal* on the basis of God's grace.

No.2: Seize opportunities (2:1-8)

Nehemiah prayed and seized an incredible opportunity to ask the King for permission and resources to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem to the glory of God. Let us likewise prayerfully and boldly seize opportunities for gospel work and never fail to acknowledge our success was as Nehemiah puts it, 'because the gracious hand of my God was upon me'.

No.3: Recruit workers to a gospel vision (2:9-3:22)

Like Jesus in his 'great commission', Nehemiah recruited the residents of Judah to commit themselves wholeheartedly to a daunting vision: rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem. His approach to communicating this vision is highly instructive. He began with diagnostic research to establish the reality of the challenge (11-16). Then he presented a clear, gospel-motivated vision (17-18) in which he doesn't sugar-coat the challenge but presents a simple, godly goal and encourages his hearers with news of God's gracious provision. Then he

bravely rejects the malign accusations of his opponents (9–20). And we see the impact of his inspiring vision-casting in the incredible list of people who served in this mammoth project in Ch.3.

No.4: Defeat cynicism with prayer (4:1-6)

Our Spiritual enemy is *Satan* the slanderer. One of his most destructive tactics is to stir up cynicism by which he seeks to erode the morale of God's people by slandering their leaders. Cynicism is the refusal to appreciate *the value or potential in something* – including gospel mission. We hear this in Sanballat's ridicule of Nehemiah's bold proposal to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. So N. prayed, entrusting the situation to God. Some question him praying for judgement. But opposition to gospel work is not just a minor failure. It is opposition to God's glorious work of saving sinners from hell for heaven forever, which is fuelled by Satan, and will incur God's severest judgement. Nehemiah's response is not personal pique. He is angered by those who *'have thrown insults in the face of the builders'*. Having heard Nehemiah pray, the people responded, *'So we rebuilt the wall till all of it reached half its height, for the people worked with all their heart'*. How magnificent! As the people heard Nehemiah boldly renounce the cynicism of their enemies, God answered his prayer and the people were encouraged to resume working wholeheartedly. Churches need to hear their leaders in prayer for it's amazing what Christians will do for a cause they know is for God's glory and entrusted to God in prayer, despite frightening opposition.

No.5: Calm people's fears by recalling God's power (4:7-15)

When faced with a massive task, terrifying enemies and weakening support, N doesn't give up the plan or slow the timescale or reduce the burdens. He reminds the people of the power of God and calls on them to fight! It's hard to do this now without being accused of coercive behaviour. We certainly don't want to be spiritual bullies. But with consultation and support from other leaders, we must find ways to encourage our church families to fight bravely in taking gospel initiatives, for the salvation of the lost and the glory of God, and like Nehemiah and Jesus, do so leading by example from the front, not pushing people from behind.

No.6: Survive a heavy workload by building teams (4:16-23)

Here's how God built up the walls of Jerusalem, and how Christ builds his church today: Nehemiah *resisted cynicism by praying for vindication...survived plots by proclaiming the power of God...and coped with the workload by organising teams* and then humbly joined in the work himself. This recognition, training and empowerment of different gifts and ministries entrusted to different members of his body is how our risen Governor Jesus wants us to lead his people in his great work today of building his church for the salvation of the lost and *to the glory of God!*

No.7: Confront injustice (5:1-13)

At a time of serious shortage, some in Judah were commercially exploiting those who were struggling. God's law plainly said, *"if one of your countrymen becomes poor and is unable to support himself among you, help him..."* (Lev.25). Instead, some were now (2) **hungry** while the middle class built up their property portfolios; (3–4) **in debt and over-mortgaged** – forced to borrow to pay the Persian King's taxes and buy food by mortgaging their homes; (5) **enslaved** – some were even forced by their poverty to sell their children as slaves to repay loans from their own people, which Lev.25 had explicitly forbidden; all of which left them **powerless** do anything about those exploiting them. Jesus condemned the Pharisees because they, *'neglect justice and the love of God'*. Likewise Nehemiah was righteously **very angry**, not for himself, but for those being exploited. Before responding he wisely **pondered** what to say rather than make rash judgements or announce ill-considered policies. But he was not frightened to confront the powerful nobles and officials... *'What you are doing is not right.'* Sometimes, church leaders are tempted to behave like secular managers to keep the powerful in their churches on their side, negotiating compromises rather than confronting injustice and requiring repentance. Nehemiah confronted exploitation, just as our Governor, Jesus, confronted the religious leaders of his day who burdened and exploited the people. Wonderfully, by the grace of God, the guilty repented. Nehemiah knew repentance means a change of mind to the depth of our will, so contrite words are worthless without action. So he *'summoned the priests and made the nobles and officials take an oath to do what they had promised.'* reinforced in an OT covenant way...with a curse (13) upon any who fail to keep their promises. Nehemiah confronted injustice. So must we.

No.8: Embrace sacrificial service (5:14-19)

While entitled to an extravagant lifestyle in his role as Governor, Nehemiah refused to live luxuriously, and it seems, funded his own generous hospitality, rather than be a burden on the hard-pressed people of God. This was dramatically counter-cultural...then and now. The motivation behind Nehemiah's sacrificial is revealed in his appeal to God, *'Remember me with favour, my God, for all I have done for these people.'* He was 'a go-giver' not 'a go-getter'. He lived for God's approval in serving the welfare of God's people and God's gospel work (foreshadowed in rebuilding the wall) than enjoying the trappings of his exalted position or securing a comfortable future for his family or favourable reputation with wealthy fiends and foreign dignitaries. You could summarise his pattern of leadership as *serving* God's people not *lording* it over them. His leadership points to Jesus – who *'came to serve and not to be served'* (Mk.10). And so Peter tells Elders, *'Be shepherds of God's flock, serving as overseers...not lording it over those entrusted to you but being examples to the flock'*.

No.9: Avoid dangerous meetings (6:1-14)

Nehemiah's godly wisdom included the discerning wisdom and strength from God to *refuse dangerous meetings, reject false accusations and resist suspicious intimidation*. As Jesus shrewdly avoided distraction and danger, perceiving Judas treachery and refusing to answer faithless questions, a wise church leader will sometimes have to say 'no' – and *refuse dangerous meetings, reject false accusations and resist suspicious intimidation*. We might even say someone's ministry is best measured not so much by what they say, 'yes' to, as by when they say, 'no'. It's our 'no' which reveals our convictions and priorities.

No.10: Choose godly leaders (6:15-7:73)

The challenge in recruitment comes in weighing the relative value of Competence, Character, Chemistry and Culture in candidates. No candidate is everything. Each will have gaps in competence, weaknesses in character, clashes in chemistry and differences in their culture. Are these all equally important? Or is there one aspect of supreme importance above the others? Yes. Character. Many Senior Pastors have experienced the cost of employing staff or elevating to leadership, someone impressively gifted in competence or likeable in chemistry or familiar in culture but then suffered from a damaging lack of godly character, perhaps in their willingness to let someone else take centre stage or take appropriate direction or just work hard. The only thing God wants us to know about Nehemiah's senior appointments is this, '**because he was a man of integrity and feared God more than most people do**'. Character. Choose godly leaders.

No.11: Honour God's Word (8:1-6)

Ch.8 describes an extraordinary day of renewal of God's people by God's Spirit through God's Word. The renewal of God's people began with cultivating a deep **respect** for the Bible revealed in three stages...the people *asked* to hear it taught, they *listened* attentively, and then they *honoured* it as the voice of their living LORD. Since this was an epic assembly, the names of everyone present are recorded. There was serious commitment to everyone being able to hear God's word clearly in building a large platform for Ezra – much as we'll invest time and money in the operational ministries that enable people to hear the Word of God and as Christians in politics will take every opportunity to build a platform for the nation to hear God's word e.g. in schools. When the Bible was opened, the people stood up out of respect and Ezra led them in a prayer of praise. The people lifted their hands in dependence on the LORD, crying "*Amen*" and bowed to the ground in *reverence before God*. Have we made our Sunday gatherings more about *socialising* than *hearing from God*. It's worth asking if we communicate respect for the power and authority and sufficiency of God's Word. If we seem more *excited* about the *band* than the *Bible*, more *invested* in our *events* than our *preaching*, more *confident* in our *strategies* than *God's Spirit* and *place our best leaders in care* teams rather than Bible studies, we shouldn't be surprised to find our congregations don't listen to the Bible and aren't growing much spiritually. Renewal begins with honouring the voice of God in his Word.

No.12: Study God's Word (8:7-8)

It's important to understand what kind of teaching resulted in the deep spiritual renewal of these returned exiles. Ezra was supported by the Levites as... '*they read from the book of the law...making it clear...giving the meaning...so that the people could understand what was being read*' (8:8). They did three things. They *read* the text. Then they *clarified* what it was saying (probably including translation). And then they gave '*the meaning*'. The Hebrew word used is '*perash*'. It means to 'separate' or discern *what to do*. It's plainly what we would call, '*Application*'. They needed to hear scripture *read, clarified* and then *applied to understand* what God was saying. This is what Paul tells Titus, '*Teach what accords with sound doctrine*' (Tit.2) (not just sound doctrine) but the necessary implications or, '*application*'. For the meaning of words can only be well understood from known realities, so application is vital for living by faith in Word-shaped holiness. After all the Bible is for application (salvation and righteousness (2 Tim 3:15-17)), preachers are for application ('*preach the Word...correct, rebuke and encourage*' (2 Tim.4), congregations are desperate for application to know how to love God and effective evangelism depends on it. Most people need help moving from principle to practice as they hear a sermon, working out the application or 'necessary implications' for their lives. This was the teaching which God used to renew his people in Nehemiah 8. Likewise, if our teaching doesn't move from careful interpretation into careful application, our teaching is unlikely to result in much renewal of God's people.

No.13: Celebrate God's Word (8:9-12)

The people were overcome with grief, as they realised how good God had been to them yet how dreadfully they'd ignored his Word. But grief and guilt are not the ultimate goal of Bible teaching. They are the necessary means to repentance and faith leading to the joy of obedience. Some pastors/churches who want only joy and never want to cause anyone to feel guilty or weep for their sin will paradoxically never enjoy the grace of God or the personal love for Jesus reserved for those who know the hell he has saved us from. Conversely, some pastors/churches offer unrelenting challenge and condemnation. But weeping for sin is not the ultimate goal either. The goal is repentant faith which knows God's merciful forgiveness resulting in joy in the grace of the LORD such as was celebrated in the feasts appointed for Israel and the Lord's Supper appointed to us.

In truth we need to hear, not an insipid balance, but both God's condemnation of sin and his loving forgiveness of sinners, full throttle, to know the exquisite joy of God's grace!

So Nehemiah said, 'Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is holy to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.'

There's something huge here – guilt saps our strength but joy in the Lord energises our souls. While sin is characterised by ingratitude, "they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him" (Rom.1), faith is marked by thankfulness in all circumstances, as Paul writes from prison, "Rejoice in the Lord always, I will say it again, rejoice!" (Phil.4).

And joy is deeply attractive and evangelistic! Who wants to explore a faith which makes us interminably miserable? But in a world of pain and sadness, a faith which brings irrepressible joy, even in the midst of sadness and loss, is powerfully compelling.

God's gospel really is, as the angels told the shepherds, 'good news of great joy for all the people'! So if a church really is proclaiming God's gospel – the good news of his amazing grace to us in Christ, and all the correcting, rebuking, lamenting, confessing and warning is done in the context of his incredible mercy, then its congregations will want to sing their hearts out in adoration and gratitude to God, which will strengthen them for his service. To suppress this joy and inhibit the praises of God's people is, at best, inappropriate English reserve, and at worst, sub-Christian!

On that great day of Bible-teaching, Nehemiah and Ezra led God's people to celebrate the Word of God.'

No.14: Obey God's Word (8:13-18)

After that great day of spiritual renewal at the Water Gate by God's Spirit through his Word, the following day the men left their women and children at home after the rigours of the previous day and came back to explore God's word in more detail – as we need to encourage our heads of families to search the scriptures. They discovered they were commanded to live in makeshift booths for a week to celebrate the Exodus, and get all the people to do the same. This must have seemed bizarre. They were no longer nomads in the wilderness. Like so much Biblical teaching e.g. on sexual morality, this practice sounded like it belonged to the past! But they obeyed what they read, however strange it seemed (16-17). What a joy it is to the people of God when we obey the Word of God together. Indeed any church which isn't changing constantly under God's Word, is either perfect or disobedient. We don't want to be Bible-teaching churches. We want to be Bible obeying churches. And what was the result of such collective obedience? As they gazed out across the city to see everyone living on their roofs like a Glastonbury Festival city? V.17 – '***Their joy was very great!***'! Indeed, the impact continued. '*Day after day, from the first day to the last, Ezra read from the Book of the Law of God.*' For the Word of God is like spiritual 'fudge' – once tasted you want more and more of it. And the impact of God's Word went way beyond one festival week. It empowered radical change in the following chapters: Ch.9 – **renewed reverence** for God; Ch.10 – **renewed commitment** to godliness; Ch.11 – **renewed willingness** to move house in God's mission; Ch.12 – **renewed joy in celebrating** their God; and Ch.13 – **renewed zeal for social reform**; this all derived from the renewing power of the bible!

No.15: Lead God's people to confess their sin & recall his mercy (9:1-38)

On 30th October 445BC, the people of Jerusalem gathered once more to hear God's Word and recall the national history of their relationship with him as their own. They confess their sins, recall his mercy and recommit themselves to his service. They conclude their long confession pleading for mercy, 'V.30...*For many years you were patient with them. By your Spirit you warned them through your prophets. Yet they paid no attention, so you gave them into the hands of the neighbouring peoples. But in your great mercy you did not put an end to them or abandon them, for you are a gracious and merciful God. Now therefore, our God, the great God, mighty and awesome, who keeps his covenant of love, do not let all this hardship seem trifling in your eyes—the hardship that has come on us...We are in great distress.*'³⁸ "In view of all this, we are making a binding agreement...' The covenant they make comes in the next chapter. But the preparation for it in ch.9 is a moving, honest, humble and lengthy confession of their sins as a people, combined with recognition of God's amazing patience, mercy and forgiveness. Surely God will likewise listen and bless his church today if leaders will lead his people in such honest, humble and sustained confession of sin and rehearsal of his mercy. But not if we won't.

No.16: Clarify what is expected of your church members (10:1-39)

Having heard the Word of God read, explained and applied in ch.8, and having confessed their sins as they recounted the history of God's mercy in ch.9, now in ch.10 they commit themselves to holy obedience in their family, work, church and financial lives. V.30 – **they promise to avoid mixed marriages! (v.30)** This principle is fulfilled in our commitment to lead our families committed to our faith and encourage our children to date and to marry "in the Lord". In v.31 – **they promise to observe the Sabbath!** (v.31) – fulfilled today in coming to Jesus, Lord of the Sabbath, to grant us access to the blessings of eternal rest with God through his death, who promised, "*come to me all who are heavy-laden, and I will give you rest for your souls*". This will mean submitting our working lives to his priorities. In v.32-34 – **they promised to contribute to temple duties** – recognising their responsibility to provide the animals and wood for the sacrifices in the temple – not just as a

social contribution but for the serious gospel business of vs. 33 “*sin offerings making atonement for sins*” i.e. they were contributing to the gospel ministry of their community. So now we should **contribute where we can to church life**, in the serious spiritual work of making disciples of all nations for Jesus through his atonement. So in v.34–39 they **promised to give financially** (v.34–39)! This chapter is a blueprint for membership of God’s church today.

No.17: Commend Church-planting (11:1–12:47)

It might seem strange to claim these two chapters listing the residents who settled in Jerusalem and then the ceremonial dedication of the walls, has anything remotely to do with church-planting today. To be sure, the two chapters are primarily recording the residents, indicative of the privilege it was to live in the city of God, and the logistics of the dedication of the walls. It was a privilege to live in God’s earthly city with access to the LORD in his temple. How much more privileged are we to be residents of the heavenly Jerusalem, with permanent access to the glory of God, even if we are temporarily away on the master’s business here. This theme is well-worn in studying the Bible. But there is an instructive detail within the text which does relate to church-planting...^{v.2} - **The people commended all who volunteered to live in Jerusalem.** The city needed people to come and live in the city to rebuild it. This was hardly an attractive option for those settled in towns elsewhere, especially given the threat from surrounding nations. But the people cast lots to raise 10% of their number to move to Jerusalem, and some volunteered. The people commended those who volunteered to move to Jerusalem. This is like church-planting where people volunteer to move house to support a new church to reach the lost in that community. It’s a very costly thing to do. It’s an expression of sacrificial commitment to God’s work of building his church on the gospel.

No.18: Keep requiring repentance...for God’s approval (13:1–31)

In the final chapter, Nehemiah recalls various episodes in his governorship when he zealously used his authority to impose godly discipline upon the residents of Jerusalem. After each episode, he offers some version of the same appeal, ‘**Remember me for this also, my God, and show mercy to me according to your great love**’ (v.22 cf.14, 29, 31). Such zeal for the godliness of his people reminds us of Jesus zealously cleansing the temple which instead of being used as a house of prayer for all nations to seek his Father in heaven, had been turned into a market place for commercial profit. Like Jesus, Nehemiah the Governor was not after popularity and acclaim from other people, but from his God. May we, likewise, keep on requiring repentance, for the approval of our God.

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