

Fighting The Good Fight Part 3 Fighting Against Worldliness

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Books of Ezra and Nehemiah

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Bible Text: Nehemiah 13:23-29
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Please turn with me in your Bibles to the 13th chapter of Nehemiah and the last passage, verses 23 to 29 will be our focus this morning. In thinking about it's coming to the end of the study and the purpose of the book Ezra/Nehemiah which we've taken to be one book with these two parts as the Hebrew Bible also takes it that way, Ezra/Nehemiah is one book in the Hebrew Bible, and we see that it's all about the returns of the people from Babylon to Jerusalem and the third part of that return, threefold return is the book properly we call Nehemiah. The third return under the man Nehemiah which occurred in 445 BC was with the direct purpose of rebuilding the wall. That was his purpose. He had heard that the wall of Jerusalem was down, the gates were burned with fire and the people of God were suffering great shame and disgrace because the wall was broken down. And so Nehemiah went back with the mission to rebuild the wall and there's a sense in which the application of this entire book, this particular part of the book Ezra/Nehemiah, the book of Nehemiah itself, is about rebuilding the wall and that is separation, it is establishing a clear demarcation between the church and the world. The wall is that which sets apart the people of God unto worship. The temple is in Jerusalem and now the wall surrounding it separates the people from the encroachment of the world which would damage worship, which would prevent it.

So in the truest sense that's the focus of the entire, this part of God's revelation in the canon. Nehemiah is about this idea of separation from the world. An unwallled city is defenseless, think about that, enemies can come in at any time, and so the church if there is no separation, if there's no distinctness, if there is no concern for holiness, then the world comes into the church and the worship is corrupted and there is nothing for God among the people of God. So we must rebuild the wall. We must help one another. We must seek the biblical sense of separation that God has called us to when he says, "Be ye holy for I am holy," that is, be separate, be distinct.

It doesn't mean that we're to be out of the world. No, that's impossible. We're not to be out of the world, we're to be in the world but we're not to be of the world, and so that's the sense in which this book is, the major focus of the whole book and it comes at the very conclusion of Nehemiah again, this powerful reminder that for the people of God to defend themselves from worldliness, to have the wall is to defend themselves from

spiritual enemies, not from people themselves for our struggle is not against flesh and blood but it's against principalities and powers and spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places. Our warfare is a spiritual warfare and so for the people of God to defend themselves from spiritual enemies, we must pursue the holiness that God is calling us to in this, and that is we must defend ourselves from the lure of the world, from the way that the world seeks to encroach upon our lives, from the way that the world seeks to conform us into its mold. That's what this passage is about in particular and it's a fitting end to this book.

We're going to be looking at verses 23 to 29 we're in this passage where Nehemiah comes back after, remember, a 12, well, it's about 15 years since the events of chapter 12 transpired and we're told that Nehemiah had been away for more than a dozen years after he left and probably he left 2-3 years after the events of chapter 12, so it's probably about a 15 year gap between chapter 12 and chapter 13. And in his time away, things have rapidly deteriorated. He left, remember, a people that had experienced an unprecedented revival, really almost, many of the events of this book are unprecedented in Scripture, the revival that happens in Nehemiah 8, 9 and 10. I mean, there are great movements of God in the Old Testament but the covenant renewal that happens there, the widespread repentance, the preaching of the word of God like it was done, many of those things are without precedent in the pages of the Old Testament. So this is a high water mark. Nehemiah left on a mountaintop and he comes back and he finds himself in a valley. In this last section, we've seen that he addresses some of the things that he finds. He finds that the temple is in absolute disorder and disarray. Tobiah the Ammonite is living in the temple. Unthinkable. Then he finds that the sabbath is being violated which we talked about last week, and today we're going to see that he finds that the people have been intermarrying with the nations around them.

Let's read God's word together. Nehemiah 13:23 to the end of the chapter.

23 In those days I also saw that the Jews had married women from Ashdod, Ammon and Moab. 24 As for their children, half spoke in the language of Ashdod, and none of them was able to speak the language of Judah, but the language of his own people. 25 So I contended with them and cursed them and struck some of them and pulled out their hair, and made them swear by God, "You shall not give your daughters to their sons, nor take of their daughters for your sons or for yourselves. 26 Did not Solomon king of Israel sin regarding these things? Yet among the many nations there was no king like him, and he was loved by his God, and God made him king over all Israel; nevertheless the foreign women caused even him to sin. 27 Do we then hear about you that you have committed all this great evil by acting unfaithfully against our God by marrying foreign women?" 28 Even one of the sons of Joiada, the son of Eliashib the high priest, was a son-in-law of Sanballat the Horonite, so I drove him away from me. 29 Remember them, O my God, because they have defiled the priesthood and the covenant of the priesthood and the Levites. 30 Thus I purified them from everything foreign and appointed

duties for the priests and the Levites, each in his task, 31 and I arranged for the supply of wood at appointed times and for the first fruits. Remember me, O my God, for good.

Let's pray.

Father, we ask that You might grant us the ministry of the Holy Spirit as we consider this passage of holy Scripture. Lord, we confess our great need of grace. We say with the psalmist, Lord, please send out Your light and Your truth and let them lead us to Your holy hill, to the place of Your habitation, the place where Your glory dwells, and let us be changed and let us offer to You worship that is more holy and may it bring glory to Christ. We pray in His name. Amen.

The title of the message this morning is the same message we've had the last couple of times, "Fighting The Good Fight," and today the subtitle is, "Fighting Against Worldliness." We've noted that Nehemiah in chapter 13, he is fighting. I mean, he has a fighter's mindset. You saw in this particular passage he actually seems to be fighting. I mean, he says he cursed them, struck some of them and pulled out their hair and made them swear by God, verse 25. He contended with them. Now we've noted that this is obviously not a one-for-one application of how we're to minister to one another. We're not to curse one another, strike one another, and pull out each other's hair but in Nehemiah's day he was actually, he was the civil authority. He was not only a brother in Christ, he was the man in charge to administer discipline and to judge the case and to try it and to punish it.

So there's this blending of civil and spiritual because the people of God are the nation of God at that time, and he had authority to do that, but we see in his heart the heart of God and how much more God hates our sin than we do. We don't hate our sin entirely enough. We tend to minimize sin. We excuse it. We have a low view of sin. We think it's a small thing. But God sees sin as it really is, as cosmic treason, as an assault on his righteous rule, and we are blessed by changing the way we see sin to line up the way we see it, the way God sees it, and Nehemiah certainly sees it the way God sees it and that's why he's moved to action and he's fighting the good fight. In fact, the word in verse 25, "So I contended with them," some translations say "confronted" or "reprimanded," it's a word that's repeated three times in the passage. Three times Nehemiah says he did this particular Hebrew word translated "contended" here in verse 25, it's translated "reprimanded" in the New American Standard Bible, it's translated "reprimanded" in verse 17, "Then I reprimanded the nobles of Judah and said to them." It's also translated "reprimanded" in verse 11, "So I reprimanded the officials and said." The idea, though, is I think "contend" is actually a better English translation. It means, it connotes something of fighting. It means a strong reproof. It's in words, it's not the physical part of it that's being described here but he's saying that the confrontation has a sense of violence about it, not physical violence but spiritual violence. "I contended with them. I realized I was in a warfare, a spiritual warfare." And if you're at war, it changes how you see things. There's a solemnity and an urgency when life and death hang in the balance and Nehemiah has that sense of urgency and solemnity.

Now he is defending the people in this particular section as he discovers that they have intermarried with women from Ashdod, Ammon and Moab, as it says in verse 23. He's defending them from worldliness and this is closely related to sexual sin. In fact, I think it has a lot of application to the issue of sexual sin, this message in this passage, because they were intermarrying. The men were finding the Moabite and Ammonite and Ashdodite women to be attractive and they were choosing them for wives, but the women also were giving themselves in marriage to these men from there because we see that as he rebukes them later, "Don't give your daughters and don't take any of their daughters for your wives." So it's both ways, but the issue really is worldliness. That's what he's concerned about. He's concerned that these relationships are producing a conformity to the nations around them. In fact, it's really important to understand that this is not about race, as I've said before, race is really a construct, a modern construct. The Bible sees one race, the human race, Adam's race. It sees various ethnicities within that one race. But this isn't about ethnicity even primarily. It's not about physical or national or racial differences. It's about spiritual differences and the text bears that out and certainly the rest of the context of Scripture. It's not that they were intermarrying with foreign people, that wasn't the problem per se, the problem was they weren't marrying people who had the same faith commitments. You see, the people of Ashdod worshiped the gods of Ashdod. The people of Ammon worshiped the gods of Ammon. The people of Moab worshiped the gods of Moab. And therefore in intermarrying, what was happening was they were, their hearts were being led astray from purity of devotion to the one true God.

The way that we see this is even more clearly true. I went ahead and reread the book of Ruth this week or skimmed through it and noted the book of Ruth, one of the smallest books in the Old Testament is an amazing picture of the grace of God. Now the Bible has some strong things to say about Moabites and Ammonites because of the evil things that Moab and Ammon did to the people of God and we're going to look at some of those passages in a moment, but one of the things you have to understand is there is always, all throughout the Scriptures though there is the wrath of God being poured out upon evil, there is the thread of grace that runs throughout the entire Bible that if anyone will turn to the Lord no matter where they come from, no matter how evil their past has been, if they will turn to the Lord and look to him for redemption, they will find a welcome in the arms of God. Absolutely true. Without doubt.

Now one of the reasons, though, that we see things like this is our tendency – listen – our tendency is to have a small view of sin and a high view of ourselves and so we come into it thinking, "Surely God would welcome me. Of course He would welcome me. I'm so lovable. Yeah, I know I've got some sin and that's a problem but it's a small thing. Basically I'm a good person and the Lord would want me." You see, isn't that the way sinners think? And so the Scripture has a way of hammering away and demolishing that part of it to say, "No, in reality I'm not lovable." I mean, there's elements of beauty in all of us, the Bible has this balancing truth, we're created in the image of God, every human being has great value because they reflect in some way the glory of God. Even the most ardent atheist and hateful ungodly person still bears the image of God and is worthy of our respect and compassion. But respect. But we tend, our biggest problem is not that we

need to, you know, understand how loving God is. That's a problem. Our biggest problem is we need to understand how in need we are of grace. And so the Lord, one of the dominant things throughout the Old Testament is the wickedness of sin because we need to know how truly awful we are. Created in the image of God, yes, but there's something fundamentally wrong with us.

So the Bible tends to hammer those facts home so that we then will be in a place where we can receive grace, because you can't receive grace, this is absolutely true, you cannot receive grace until you acknowledge your need for grace. If you don't ever see your need for grace – listen very carefully – if you don't ever see your need for grace, you will not receive grace. You can't be saved until you know you're lost. Remember how Jesus said to the Pharisee who asked him, the Pharisee that he went into the house of the Pharisee Simon and a woman is weeping and washing his feet and he says to him, you know, "Who loves more, a man who is forgiven little or one that's forgiven much?" And he says, "The one who is forgiven much." And he says, "Simon, you didn't give Me water for my feet when I came in but this woman has not stopped washing My feet," because she's weeping over, I mean, she had been weeping over her sin and her need of grace and the gratitude that flows out of that. And Jesus says to him, "I am the great physician who did not come to heal the well but the sick." The idea is if you think you're well, you don't get Jesus. You have to know you're sick. The reality is everyone is sick, some people know it and some people don't, and when we come into this world, none of us knows it. It's only by grace that you begin to know it.

So the Scripture makes clear when he talks about these things about the Ammonites, they can't come into the temple for 10 generations, and yet, I mean, the Moabites and the Ammonites can't come into the temple for 10 generations, Deuteronomy 23:3-6, 10 generations and yet then you have the book of Ruth where the hero of the book is a Moabitess. Ruth the Moabitess. Her name is mentioned 11 times, five times it's followed by the words when it says "Ruth the Moabitess. Ruth the Moabitess." Moab occurs 11 times in that short book. God wants you to know Ruth is from Moab but what is it about Ruth that made Boaz, the male hero of the book, so to speak, but Ruth's really the hero, he's like best supporting actor, what made him not guilty of the sin that Nehemiah would have gone up and pulled out his hair? Why isn't somebody doing that to Boaz? The Bible is consistent from Genesis to Revelation. Why not? In Ruth 1 you hear these words. Ruth says to her mother-in-law when her mother-in-law says go back to your family, she says, "Please stop asking me to leave you, for where you go, I will go, and where you lodge, I will lodge. Your people will be my people and your God my God." You see, she came home to the Lord and she received a welcome response and Boaz when he hears about her faith immediately his heart as a fellow Jew, he has no prospects of thinking he can marry her. She's a lot younger than him. Here is this pretty young lady, he's an older guy, not married, but he just out of the goodness of the joy of what she's come home to, he wants to bless her. And so you read it and he's just caring for her, and he commends her and he says this to her, you know, he pronounces a blessing upon her and he says this, "May you be blessed of the Lord under whose wings you have come to seek refuge."

The God of the Bible though he speaks very clearly about sin and wrath, he is a God who invites anyone to come home under his wings of refuge. That's the gospel. It is for every single person. No one is so lost that they cannot be saved and Jesus Christ has made that reality. Any of us can know the welcome of God but to understand that you need, the amazing reality of that is that you have to understand how proud we are and how prone we are to think we're not that bad and we're to think sin is just not that big a deal. And then as Christians once we come home to the Lord and we really have come to experience his welcome, we still tend to think of sin as a small thing. "It's not a big deal. Yeah, I'm working on that, struggling with that. It's not a big deal." So we let sin build in our lives and Nehemiah, this passage is basically telling us, "Listen, in the area of sexual sin and the area of worldliness, we must see this is a life and death issue even for Christians." That's the force of this passage. Don't try to live your life without the walls of separation, a godly separation being built up in your life, without pursuing holiness intentionally. Fight the good fight of faith. Fight against the lure of worldliness. That's the theme that this passage calls us to consider and the avenue through which worldliness comes at them is sexual sin itself, intermarriage. They're committing spiritual adultery by marrying people that are not committed to God and it's having dramatic impact upon them.

So let's consider this message under three points this morning to help us unpack what God is saying to us here. The first we want to consider is the nature of the problem. The nature of the problem, that's our first point. What Nehemiah sees that perplexes him in verse 23, "I saw that the Jews had married women from Ashdod, Ammon and Moab." These are the surrounding nations. Ashdod, that's one of the capital cities of the Philistines that would have been to their west. Ammon and Moab, the two nations to their east, Ammon to their northeast, Moab to their southeast. And he implies the other women as well, in fact, we're going to find out that one of the men has married into the family of Sanballat the Horonite who we know is the ruler of Samaria to the north. The idea is they're intermarrying with the nations around them.

He sees that and it's interesting when we look at, in context, remember as we looked at this earlier, I didn't read this, this morning, but chapter 13 begins with these words, look at verses 1 to 3 and then let that impact what we just read in verse 23. Chapter 13, verse 1, "On that day they read aloud from the book of Moses in the hearing of the people; and there was found written in it that no Ammonite or Moabite should ever enter the assembly of God, because they did not meet the sons of Israel with bread and water, but hired Balaam against them to curse them. However, our God turned the curse into a blessing. So when they heard the law, they excluded all foreigners from Israel." That's from Deuteronomy, what they apparently had been reading was Deuteronomy 23:3-5. That's where you find that. And so Nehemiah tells us about that, then he tells us right away that the next thing you know Tobiah is in the temple. Tobiah is an Ammonite. Then he says they had intermarried with people from Ashdod, Ammon and Moab. The reader is to be appalled. "How could this happen?" The people of the time Nehemiah was telling them by his actions, by his tone in reproving them, contending with them, taking the radical actions he did, he was telling them, "You guys are not seeing this. You're blind. You are taking poison into yourself. Stop it!"

Now he shows us how it had already impacted them, though. "I saw in the days that they had married these women from Moab and from Ashdod, Ammon and Moab. As for their children, half spoke in the language of Ashdod and none of them was able to speak the language of Judah but the language of his own people." They are becoming conformed to the world. They no longer speak the language of the Jews. You know, language is such an important thing. It's something we're learning and seeing in our day right now. I've been reading more on this lately, the power of words. One of the things that has been talked about among some people and it's not really something that I thought about until just recently, but that if you change the words you use, you change the culture. Words actually frame the way we think about life and reality. I mean, think about this, you change a word from like, think about the difference and the difference between the word sodomy, the word sodomy, sexual perversion, and sexual preference. Do you see how different those words are? And if you think in terms of sexual preference, how does that frame the way you see life?

Now in reality I'm not advocating that you walk around just speaking the language, the word sodomy and all that all the time. I think there's a place and a time for it and I say that because I think, in a sense, this is a complicated thing but we have to as Christians today be, in a sense, bilingual. That is, we have to learn to speak the language of the culture but we need to have as our mother tongue the language of Scripture. We need to think about life as God says to think about life and then we need to be able to relate to people and use the terms they do to start with. Obviously you don't start a conversation with someone who's struggling with gender identity, another new term that frames the way people think about something that the Bible says is very clear, but that's the language. If we love lost people, God loves lost people, as we said, God invites all people to be saved, we have to speak their language but we must think, as it were, in biblical terms and translate that into their language and God helping them, they come to faith and we then say, "The way that you're supposed to follow Jesus is to learn to think God's thoughts after Him. Change the way you think about these things." In fact, all of those words and terms in reality the way God sees it, is those are lies that are wreaking destructive force on the lives of people. The lies are killing people spiritually. They're devastating their souls but we can't walk around speaking, it would be like you and me walking around speaking a foreign language. That's not going to be helpful. We have to speak in their tongue but we need to think biblically.

You know, have you ever heard the, what do you call someone who speaks two languages? Bilingual. What do you call someone who speaks three languages? Trilingual. More than that, multi-lingual? What do you call someone who speaks one language? An American. So we don't even know what this is like. I mean, some of you are multi-lingual, some of you, your mother tongue is Chinese or it's Spanish or other language, Russian, and you now are here worshiping with us in English. And many of us Americans really are true to that, we just speak one language and we don't know what it's like to think in different languages but every language, and as you look at cultures, culture and language have an intimate connection. What a people values affects the way

they say things and the way that they say things affects the way what they value. There's a reciprocal impact.

So this is what's happening, the world, there is this war on language that is happening that is actually something that we could help other people even think about in just practical ways. This is what's happening but the ultimate answer is for people to come to see themselves as God says in his word, to understand what God says about us, that our problem is not, you know, lack of self-esteem ultimately, our problem is that we're sinners. Our problem is not that we just misunderstood what's happened to us, that's what our problem is. No, those things affect us but our problem is we're rebels against God and his righteous rule and we need a Savior and when we see that, there's really good news because there is a Savior who says, "Come. Come unto Me." He's always saying, "Come." Any who will come. That's the gospel.

So the nature of the problem is that the intermarriage is producing this movement of the...think about what's going to happen. That generation doesn't speak the language of the Jews. They only speak the language of the Ashdodites or the language of the Ammonites or the language of the Moabites. They don't speak the language of the Jews so these children are growing up and their thought forms, the words they use are formed by the gods of Ammon, the gods of Moab, the gods of the Ashdodites, and their thought forms are different. Then beyond that, they have no access to the Bible. They're being conformed to the world, worldliness, the danger of it, the lure of it, and their involvement in these relationships, they apparently want what, you know, what they see out there in the world so much that they give themselves to it and they're sacrificing their future spiritually. That's the nature of the problem, worldliness.

The second point is the danger, the danger of worldliness. This is, first of all, seen again in the acts, I want to talk more about the language for a moment. I mean, to think about this, that for them to not be able to speak the language of the Jews, the language of Judah, isn't just a matter of them not growing up speaking their historic language. There's nothing fundamentally eternally important about whether you stay true to your mother tongue, English or any other language, but for these people at this time, they didn't have translations of the Bible in the language of Moab. There were not translations of the Bible in the language of the Philistines or the language of the Ammonites. So if these young people grew up not speaking the language of Judah, Hebrew, Aramaic, they would be cut off from the Scriptures.

Remember I mentioned last week we talked about the Reformation, Reformation Day, one of the great movements of God in all of history, the Protestant Reformation? And one of the key things that happened was the Scriptures were translated into the language of the common man. It was no longer just in Latin. It had been locked away in Latin. Now it was in the language of the common man. It was accessible. In fact, one of the things, let me just say this real quickly, the reason we know that God wants the Bible to be translated beyond Hebrew and Greek into other languages is we know he wants everybody to have his word and not everybody knows biblical Hebrew and Greek, that's a good inference out of that, but beyond that one of the really cool things is when God gave

his New Testament, he didn't give it in Hebrew. All the guys who wrote were Jews. The apostles were all Jews. It wasn't given in Hebrew or Aramaic, it was given in Greek, and not only was it given in Greek, it was given in a particular type of the Greek language called koine, k-o-i-n-e, koine Greek. We get an English word from koine and it's the word coin. You take out a coin. Do you know what coin means? It means common, vulgar, that which is accessible, everybody has, everybody recognizes. When God gave his New Testament gospel, what Jesus came to show the world was that salvation is for all men. "I want My truth to go out in the language of the common man." It's accessible to everyone and so the inference from that is keep translating the Bible into every language. This is one of the great things that the Wycliffe movement, the Wycliffe organization has done, translating the Bible into every single language. That's their goal. Every dialect to get the holy Scriptures in every language.

So for them, they were actually getting ready to go into darkness spiritually. It all happened because of the lure of the world. That's the danger of it. You start getting enticed by the things of the world and suddenly you don't even know where you're going, next thing you know you wake up completely in the dark. He goes on to talk about the danger though, not just the danger of losing the language but he uses the illustration of Solomon in verses 26 and 27. After he says in verse 25, "You shall not give your daughters to their sons, nor take of their daughters for your sons or for yourselves." And he asks them a rhetorical question, he asks them to consider Solomon, "Did not Solomon king of Israel sin regarding these things? Yet among the many nations there was no king like him, and he was loved by his God, and God made him king over all Israel; nevertheless the foreign women caused even him to sin. Do we then hear about you that you have committed all this great evil by acting unfaithfully against our God by marrying foreign women?"

That's really something profound to think about, Solomon as an example of the danger of the lure of the world, and particularly being romantically infatuated with ungodly people. The argument here is really powerful, you are not as a Christian to date a person who does not, if you love Jesus Christ you're not to date someone who does not love Jesus Christ. Period. And you do so to your own detriment and to the dishonor of God. Now have you married someone that didn't, it's too late, now you are in the position of following God with this person and God's will is for you to win them to the Lord and to live before them a life of holiness, but you have challenges that you wouldn't have had had you listened to God, difficulties and heartaches that are a part of your life because of your choice. But use that as because I love the promises of God when he says things like this, "Though your sins are as scarlet, I'll make them white as snow. I'll restore the years the locusts have eaten. You know, your sin led you to have, I sent the locusts in to eat your crops but if you turn back to Me, I'll make it so that what you have is better than you would have had had you not." The grace of God, "Where sin abounds, there does grace much more abound."

So always turn back to God for grace but this passage is telling us don't take lightly the warnings of the Lord and he's saying also that, listen, in allowing yourselves to love the things of the world, particularly, think about, in fact, a good passage, hold your place in

Nehemiah 13 and turn with me to 1 John 2:15-17. We're talking about the danger of worldliness John says in 1 John 2:15, "Do not love the world nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world. The world is passing away, and also its lusts; but the one who does the will of God lives forever."

We're not to love the world. Now listen, it's important to understand the Bible uses the word "world" in three different ways. One is the planet earth is the world. And another way is the combined, all the people that live on this planet are the world, and in that sense, we're to love that world because God did. "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son." So he loves the world, that is, all people so when it says do not love the world, what's he saying? He's talking about the world as a system of value and thought organized by the prince of this world, Satan, against God. It's a way of thinking about life, valuing the things that God hates and hating the things that God loves, and it's the cultural default that you find really in every culture in some measure, depending on how much grace has impacted that culture, you find worldly ungodly values. And John is saying, "Listen, do not love the world." It's clear, it's mutually exclusive. If you love God, you cannot be at the same time loving the world.

Now the exhortation is stop loving the world. It's still kind of easy to love the world for believers because we, this was our home, this is what we were raised in. It feels familiar and it appeals to our flesh. Do you see that, "all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life." I think those are the things that were driving the people in Nehemiah's day to commit the sin of intermarriage. These are the things, they were lusting with their eyes, they were lusting with their flesh, and they wanted the boastful pride of life, that is, the pride in what they had, physical possessions, the esteem of others. These are the things that drive worldliness and John is saying don't love those things, love God. Value supremely being a child of God. Value supremely knowing God and as you do that, you'll see that that's mutually exclusive with loving the world. It doesn't mean, you live in the world but don't be of the world.

So what happened with Solomon was that he, as he talks about back to Nehemiah 13, though he was a man of unparalleled wisdom, arguably the second wisest human being that ever walked on the face of the earth, second only to Jesus Christ, Solomon. He pleased the Lord. God delighted in him. Remember when he was, you can read this story in 1 Kings, the first 11 chapters you'll see this unfold, but right after David dies, Solomon prays to the Lord and asks him to give and God basically says, "Ask Me what you want from Me," and Solomon asked, God says, "Whatever you want, I'll give it to you based on for the sake of David, your father." And Solomon says, "What I want more than anything else is wisdom." And God is so pleased with that. "You didn't ask for long life. You didn't ask for possessions. You didn't ask for just earthly blessings therefore you will have all of those things but you're also going to get what you asked for, wisdom."

Then you see Solomon's wisdom is absolutely dumbfounding, I mean, he has wisdom that is the envy of the whole world. People come, kings come from all over the world,

they give money to him out of tribute to him, and they want to hear his wisdom. The Queen of Sheba, 1 Kings 10 I think it is, or chapter 9, she comes and she's like, "I've heard about you," and she comes with all these questions. I mean, she's ready. She's a smart lady herself and she comes prepared to really put him to the test. "I've heard these things about you and I want to see if it's true." And at the end when you look at, I think it's the Chronicles passage that parallels it, the same story is told in Kings and Chronicles, and in Chronicles it says, "When she heard him, she was breathless." And Kings says she says, and both places say this, "What I heard about you and your amazing wisdom came nowhere close to doing justice what I have seen."

And what is wisdom? Wisdom is knowing, is fearing God, right, the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. It's knowing how life works. It's knowing how to take knowledge and apply it to life in a way that brings glory to God. He was the man who possessed wisdom. He knew these things and yet he, because he intermarried with foreign women, became an idolater. Impossible. I mean, if you knew Solomon and you'd been there with the Queen of Sheba that day and you saw what was happening and somebody said, some prophet said, "Solomon will be an idolater. Mark my words." You'd say, "You are nuts. That's a man after God's heart." And there was a sense in which he was and what Nehemiah's argument is, "Listen, even a man like Solomon who was like his father David in many ways, even a man like Solomon can be captured, captivated by an uncritical unwary involvement and engagement with the things of the world." Such is the lure of the world that it captivates even the great champions like Solomon.

So then after saying that, he says, after laying that out, these foreign women, verse 26, caused even him to sin. "Now the greatest spiritual-minded man fell into sin because of this and do we hear about you that you are also doing this?" I mean, he could have been saying, "you spiritual lightweights." Lightweights like you and me. "How can you give into these things? How can you not be fighting against worldliness? How can you not be fighting to put to death the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life?" They're a reality that's always present in our flesh, in our sin nature, because our bodies have not yet been redeemed and there dwells in us still the principle of sin. Paul says, "I know that in my flesh dwelleth no good thing." Because it's not been redeemed. Our hearts have been made new, the spiritual soul of man is made new when a person comes to know Christ, but the flesh still has sin in it and we live in a world which is given over to that and we have a spiritual enemy, Satan, who is trying to destroy us, to devour us, and so we must fight.

The danger is that you give sin an inch, it takes a mile. It kills. It destroys. And it not only makes you worldly, you find yourself, and this is what happens. I mean, there is such a danger in our culture today because I think it's one of the things that we didn't anticipate well enough. How could we? But one of the things that I've seen happen is that the more that you get involved in dialoguing with the world and the less you're dialoguing with God and with his people, and the more you're dialoguing with the world, the more worldly you become. And social media and the internet have been the source of much much of the seeds of apostasy that we see. Our children taking these things in, not being protected, not being able to handle what they're looking at, what they're dealing with, the

power of pornography, the power and lure of the lies of the world because it finds a home because in our flesh it sounds right. There's a ring to it that sounds true and yet reality it's only because sin is in us and they're in the world, evil in the world finds a home in us but it's not the ultimate truth. So we must be all the more diligent to fill our minds with the truth, to watch out, because you will become worldly if you don't resist this. The danger of worldliness is so great that it conforms you to its image. That's why Paul says in Romans 12:2, "Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed." The world is constantly trying to conform you.

Another thing I wanted to say before we move on to the third point, still talking about the danger of worldliness, is you see that it not only makes you worldly if you don't watch out, but it makes you an enemy of God. One of the astounding things in this 13th chapter is that there had been intermarriages among the high priesthood, the high priest's family had intermarried both with Tobiah the Ammonite and Sanballat the Horonite. They were both related to the high priest by marriage now. Verse 4 of chapter 13, "Now prior to this, Eliashib the priest," that's the high priest, "who was appointed over the chambers of the house of our God, being related to Tobiah." The reason Tobiah got a place in the temple was because Tobiah had intermarried with his family, had intermarried into the family of the people of God and the high priest. Then in verse 28 after he finishes that reproof, he says, "Even one of the sons of Joiada, the son of Eliashib the high priest, was a son-in-law of Sanballat the Horonite, so I drove him away from me." Now I would just encourage you to read chapter 4 and chapter 6 of Nehemiah to see what kind of despicable guys these guys were, Tobiah and Sanballat. They were overt sworn enemies of God, hating everything that God was doing in the ministries of Ezra and Nehemiah and yet the lure of the world, the lust of the eyes, the lust of the flesh, had led people in the family of the high priest to yoke themselves to these godless wicked men.

That's the lure of the world. James says in James 4:4, "You adulteresses," speaking to us as we follow the lusts of our flesh, he says, "You adulteresses, do you not realize that friendship with the world is hostility toward God?" To be a friend of the world is to make yourself an enemy of God. There's no middle ground. You see, once you move in that area, you are on the road to becoming an enemy so you have to see it that way. This is much more serious than we tend to think. That's why Nehemiah is so bothered about it and so moved to action that we see here. The danger of worldliness, it changes the way we speak and the way we think, and it makes us no matter if we're strong like Solomon, we can fall and it ends up making us the enemy of God.

Now I want to go to the third point. The first point was the nature of the problem, worldliness; the second was the danger of worldliness; the third is the response to worldliness. I've alluded to it, we talked about it briefly. Nehemiah in verse 25 contended with them and cursed them and struck some of them, pulled out their hair, made them swear, and then he argues that the truth, he applies the truth, he brings the word of God to bear. The first thing we notice is his response to worldliness in the people of God was direct and decisive. He didn't beat around the bush. He went straight at it, didn't he?

Now it's interesting there's a comparison here. You could look at the comparison between Nehemiah and Ezra. They both faced exactly the same thing. In fact, one of the things that's really interesting in the books of Ezra/Nehemiah is the unrelenting pressure of the world, and particularly the sin of intermarriage as this pressure of the worldliness, keeps coming up. Ezra 9, now that's the second return. We're talking about Nehemiah, 445 BC. Ezra in 458, when he gets there in Ezra 9, he's told that people in the priest's families have intermarried with foreign women. This is about 12 or 13 years before the events of Nehemiah chapters 1 to 10. Twelve years before, he finds out that they've done what Nehemiah finds out here in chapter 13 which is, again, another 15 years after that. I know I may be confusing because I'm confusing me. It's always a bad sign. Mist in the pulpit, fog in the pew. But anyway so but the point is it's happening here, it's happening here, and it's happening here, the exact same sin.

When Ezra came, he found out they had been intermarrying. Ezra had a different response, though. It's interesting. His response wasn't to go around pulling people's hair, he tore his clothes, shaved his own head and mourned and wept publicly. Now sometimes God leads different people to do different things. You see personalities and stuff going on here. It's interesting. The Lord doesn't always do it the same way. We're different and distinct and in both sense, they're both like Christ. Ezra is like Jesus weeping over Jerusalem and Nehemiah is like Jesus taking that cord and driving out the money-changers from the temple. But the same thing happened. Ezra saw it, he mourns, the people are basically, "Why are you mourning?" They start mourning with him and then they acknowledge all these different people have intermarried and Ezra basically holds a three month investigation so they investigate who's intermarried and more than 100 people are named, and they separate from their foreign wives and some of them even had children, they send them back home. And yet in Nehemiah's day when they have the preaching in 445 BC and the revival, they confess they're doing it again and they commit in the covenant renewal ceremony in Nehemiah 10 when God is moving upon them, "We will not marry foreign women. We will not take their daughters for our sons. We will not give our daughters to their sons." They say this in 445 BC and then 15 years later Nehemiah comes home and it's happened again. Fifteen years isn't that long. Think about 15 years ago for us, 2006. The older you get, the less that seems like a big chunk of time, isn't it? It seems like a pretty small amount of time. It shows that the pressure of the world is relentless, unstoppable, it never stops trying to conform you. Victory today doesn't mean rest on your laurels, it means praise God and keep fighting. Wake up tomorrow with the same concern, the same reality, keep fighting.

So the response of Nehemiah exhibits that relentless concern to fight not with people, we're not fighting with people. Nobody is our enemy. No physical person is our enemy. Nobody on the face of the earth is our enemy, human being, because our struggle is not with flesh and blood. We're fighting with the enemy of all of our souls for the good of every other person. We're seeking to love them and to help them know that God loves them and they can come home to him. But what does Nehemiah fight with? I think this is the application for us. The response of Nehemiah shows us that there are three things that we need to understand. We need to fight, first of all, with the word of God. What he does is he reminds them from the Scriptures, he basically expositors for them, we have a

summary, a brief summary of what he said here as we often in Scripture we have just summaries of longer conversations summarized by the Spirit of God the essence of what, this is what he said. But he basically said look at 1 Kings 3-11. Look what happened with Solomon. Remember what God said in Deuteronomy 23:3-5. He brings the word of God.

How can you avoid being conformed to the world? Romans 12:2 says, "Do not be conformed to the world," the idea of not being conformed literally it's a present tense Greek verb which means continuous action, the type of action more than the time of action is the Greek tenses, so it means there's this ongoing continuous pressure to conform to the world and so that the force of a present imperative, negative imperative is stop being conformed to the world. It's happening. Stop that. How? "By," and here's another present tense continuous verb, "being transformed." Stop being conformed, pressured from the outside to be shaped and molded into the world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. That is the word of God coming into the soul of the believer transforms us from the inside out, changes our heart, changes what we value, changes what we believe, changes what we love, changes what we do, and that's how we resist conformity. It's the word of God. So you and I need the word of God every day. We need the word of God more than we need our food. Man cannot live by bread alone, Jesus said, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.

We need the people of God. I mean, in this the people needed Nehemiah and his associates who were carrying out this stern rebuke, this contending. Think what would have happened had he not been there. He saw it and he dealt with it. That's the model. When you see it, deal with it. I've learned through the years that where there's smoke, there's fire. You've heard that. I've kind of learned that to be an experiential, confirmed in my experience. When I think something's wrong, something usually is. It's not always exactly what I think it is, it's often something a little different than I thought, but when something seems to be wrong, something usually is. You don't just assume you know. No, you go humbly, you go in an inquiring heart, you go in a loving motive when you confront sin. Our desire is to bless the person. The model is to reclaim lost sheep when we reprove one another. You reprove me, you should have the heart of a shepherd that says, "I feel like you're getting astray here and I'm coming because Jesus is sending me. I feel like He's shown me something. I've seen it just like Nehemiah saw it and I'm trying to deal with it." And I come humbly and say, "You know, it seems like this might be happening. Is that right? Is my understanding correct?" You see, it's always good to ask questions, not just make declarations because we're not God, I don't know for sure what's happening in your life when I see but I'm smelling some smoke. "Is something wrong? I'm not seeing you at church regularly anymore. You don't seem to want to talk about spiritual things. I mean, this is just my perception. Is there something to that?"

Do you see how that just loving interaction? And if they say, "Yeah, I don't want to hear from you, whatever." Then it's time to get a little more like Nehemiah in practice and say, "Listen, I'm concerned about you. Don't push me away." If they push you away, they walk away and don't want to talk to you, then wait a few days, pray about it and call them back. Try again. If they push you away again, Matthew 18:15-20 says take one or two others with you. "Hey, listen, me and Jim are concerned about you. I've told him that I'm

concerned about you because I care about you and I'm doing what Jesus said in Matthew 18:15-20, take one or two others with you. I don't know what's going on but something's not right and we're just here because we love you." And that passage, that passage on church discipline, I love how its preceded immediately before it, that's Matthew 18:15-17 precisely the steps of church discipline, 15-17, verses 12 to 14 Jesus says this, "If any man has 100 sheep and he loses one of them, what man among you will not leave the 99 in the fold and go after the one who's lost, and when he finds them will rejoice more over him than the 99 who are lost." If your brother sins, go to him. Do you see that? That's Jesus saying, "You're seeing that one of my sheep is straying. I love them. I treasure them. I rejoice more over one who turns back a sinner than over the 99 that are at home. That's My heart."

God has a welcoming heart to sinners so you go with his heart and you go with a sense of expectancy that the most wonderful thing and we go with a humility that knows that it could easily, the roles could so easily be reversed. "It could be me in the place that I think you are, and you could be coming after me, and I want to tell you even as I come, I know that could happen. It might happen a year from now and if it does, I'm telling you right now I'd want you to come after me the same way I'm coming after you. I'm giving you permission. I'm asking you to do it. Then when I feel that way, when I'm struggling I won't want it but I'm telling you now, come after me." That's essentially what we do when we join the church, we commit and submit to discipline. We're basically saying by faith, "If I go astray, I'm asking all of you, come after me," because I know how easily our hearts are hardened.

We need the people of God, that's the beauty of the church and the beauty of the people of God, and so how do we overcome the world, the pressure of the world? Well, we get around believers more. We speak the truth to one another more. Ephesians 5:18-21, we are filled with the Spirit and we speak to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, we are always giving thanks for all things, we're submitting to one another, reverence for Christ, we're talking to one another about issues where we have to say, "Yeah, you're right. I was wrong." That's what it means to submit to one another in reverence for Christ. We're all doing it. We're all called to submit and that itself is making our minds conform to Christ and to his word.

It's the word of God and the people of God and it's the grace of God. In fact, turn with me to Hebrews, we're going to end up right here, Hebrews 3 and 4, a passage I mentioned last week and I gave as homework to you. If you did your homework, I'm glad you did. If you didn't, do it this week. I mentioned reading Hebrews 3:7 to chapter 4, verse 16, that this idea of resting and we have to help one another because we're in danger of not resting in Christ, we're in danger of falling away. Hebrews 3:12 and 13 shows the importance of the people of God to protect one another. Look what it says there, Hebrews 3:12, "Take care, brethren, that there not be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God." This is a command to the community that says it's not an individual command. We tend to think of it this way as Americans, we think Atomistically. Our culture helps us to do that, the words we use and all that helps us to think Atomistically, just about me. This means for me to take care that I don't fall away.

That's not what it's saying. It's saying all of you look around you and make sure nobody is falling away. That's the command. "Take care, brethren, that there not be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God." How do I know that? It's even clearer in verse 13, "But encourage one another day after day, as long as it is still called 'Today,' so that none of you will be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin." We need people around us to encourage us, to hold onto Christ. That's what God intends.

The word of God, the people of God and the grace of God. When you end this passage in Hebrews 4:14-16, this is really one clear truth in those verses which is what it means to rest in Christ because the reality is all of us are sinners and all of us remain sinners and the answer in every situation is to stop trying in your own strength and trust in Christ and act based on trust. Verse 14, "Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin. Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need." No matter where you find yourself the answer is grace and the only way you can get grace is to trust in Jesus. In reality, every time you reprove a brother, the goal of that reproof of a brother or a sister, the goal of that reproof is to lead them to Jesus again. I'm talking about believers, believer to believer. "We already know Jesus. I already know Jesus." Yes, I do but what you need right now like I need right now, the most important thing I need right now is Jesus right now. I need to rest in his finished work and to love him and to surrender myself to him and to acknowledge that I'm being worldly, to acknowledge that I'm loving the things of the world when I shouldn't be and he hates that, but I have a Savior who never loved the world, never once operated on the lust of the eyes, never once gave into the lust of the flesh, never once gave into the boastful pride of life, and he is your righteousness. And because of that, you can run to the throne of grace no matter where you find yourself, you can run right now.

That's what God has called us to. Worldliness is a real and deadly danger. It is something that will continue to try to assault us and attack us all through our lives. It has killed far greater people than you and me and our only hope is to cling to the word of God with the people of God and to help one another abide in the grace of God.

Let's go to the Lord in prayer.

Our Father, how grateful we are for the salvation that You have made known to us in Jesus Christ. Father, as we honestly look at our lives and we look at the reality of the difficulty of living for You in this world, we're overwhelmed by the reality of sin, the profound difficulty of turning away from it, the power and lure of ungodly thinking. We realize, Lord, that our minds have been conformed in so many ways. We need the transforming power of Your grace and Your word. Thank You that You are a God who welcomes home repentant sinners and so we ask You even now to give us more repentance. Help us hate our sin. Thank You that Jesus is our righteousness and that Jesus even Him living in us is how we hate sin because He hates it. Help us to be people who love You and love one another and are able and constrained to love one another in

the way that we've seen today in the example of Nehemiah and help us be willing to go to one another and to have hard conversations and help us to be willing to have people come to us and have those hard conversations and may it all redound to the glory of God and to the well-being of His people. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.