

“We Promise”

Nehemiah 9:38-10:39

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

Rev. Charles S. Blackshear • December 3, 2017

Anybody ever made a promise before? Have you ever had something that was so important to you that you wanted to make an official commitment with people witnessing it? Marriage vows come to mind. When you get married you make promises “to have and to hold from this day forward, for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, until parted by death.” Those promises are then put into writing, signed by everyone involved and filed at the courthouse as a public record. And I think most people who go through all that are serious about those promises.

We make other promises, too. When we moved here we went through a ceremony where we promised to pay back the money we borrowed to buy a house. There were fewer guests witnessing those promises but they made up for it with extra papers to sign. When our children were baptized we made public promises that we would raise them in the church and teach them to observe all that Jesus commanded. When you joined the church you made several promises. You promised to live as a follower of Christ. You promised to support the church in its worship and work, and you promised to work for its purity and peace. And if you’ve been ordained as an elder or deacon of the church you made even more promises.

Here’s the thing. Promises are not worth very much unless they’re backed up by action. I can *say* I’m committed to losing weight, but I’m not really committed if I still polish off half a package of Oreos every afternoon. As a friend of mine says, “if nothing changes, nothing changes.” New Year’s resolutions usually fail because we’re not really committed to the things we say we are.

As we’ve been talking about the past few weeks, after finishing the wall around Jerusalem, the Israelites began studying the Bible. I mean seriously studying it. And they were convicted by how different their lives were from what God commanded. That led them to begin to obey and to confess. Now, just as they

had done at other pivotal moments in their history, they wanted to renew their commitment to God’s Word. The last verse of chapter 9 says, “Because of all this we make a firm covenant in writing; on the sealed document are the names of our princes, our Levites, and our priests.”

These leaders, who are listed in the first 27 verses of chapter 10, are not the only ones making a commitment, though. Verse 28 begins the actual covenant. “The rest of the people, the priests, the Levites, the gatekeepers, the singers, the temple servants, and all who have separated themselves from the peoples of the lands to the Law of God, their wives, their sons, their daughters, all who have knowledge and understanding, join with their brothers, their nobles, and enter into a curse and an oath to walk in God’s Law.”

In other words, every person who was old enough had to make a personal commitment, a commitment to obey God’s Word. It wasn’t enough for them to confess their sin, they wanted to renew their commitment to follow God in the future. They wanted to spell out the actions they would take. I think it’s important to note that this commitment, this covenant, was not an attempt to earn God’s favor. They were very clear in understanding that they couldn’t. This commitment, following their time of confession, and their celebration of the Day of Atonement, was a response to God’s grace. You and I need to do the same thing. We need to live every part of our lives in a way that thanks God. We’re going to get into specifics in a moment after we see the commitments the Israelites made.

Bible scholars have analyzed this covenant renewal and found five or six separate statements of commitment, depending on how they divide them. But the thing that ties them all together is the issue of *priorities*. Specifically, the issue is where God fits in with their priorities. The mistake we usually make is to decide what *we* want to do and then try to figure out how to squeeze God into our plans. And

when there's a conflict between our plans and God's expectations of us, we tend to dismiss what God wants as outdated or impractical. But I want to tell you that God is not interested in being in second place. The first of the Ten Commandments is "you shall have no other gods ahead of me. I am first."

This commitment by the Jews in Nehemiah 10 addresses the four areas we are probably most tempted to put in front of God – our money, our time, our work, and our family. In each of these they are saying, "we promise to do it God's way."

It begins with family. "We will not give our daughters to the peoples of the land or take their daughters for our sons." The motivation is not racial or ethnic at all but rather religious. Since the family is the place where faith is learned, they cannot afford to bring pagan religions into the family. The second statement, in verse 31, deals with keeping the Sabbath. "And if the peoples of the land bring in goods or any grain on the Sabbath day to sell, we will not buy from them on the Sabbath or on a holy day." This is about time. God asks for one day out of every seven to be set aside to stop our usual daily routine. We are to worship and rest. That means we have to budget our time to enable us to do so, and it means we should keep our shopping to a minimum on that day.

The third area is work. "We will forego the crops on the seventh year and the exaction of every debt." We talked several weeks ago about the problem they were having with essentially "loan sharks." These were fellow Jews and Nehemiah insisted that they stop. Here the people are making a promise to God that they won't do that anymore. In addition, they are agreeing to let their fields sit idle one growing season every seven years. This requires trusting God to provide enough in the sixth year to last. It's an act of faith. Modern agriculture has determined that it's also what's best for the land.

The final commitment – the one that takes up the majority of the passage – is their money. Money is also the area that you and I are most likely to make an idol, which is why Jesus talked more about how we handle money than any

other subject. The key to understanding how God wants you to handle your money is to recognize that it's not actually your money – it's God's money. Through the prophet Haggai God says, "The silver is mine and the gold is mine." Everything you have is from God. You are only the manager and God expects you to manage his money in a particular way.

The Israelites promised to give to support the Temple. They promised to pay the Temple tax, to give the wood for the altar, and to give the food offerings. As verse 39 says, "We will not neglect the house of our God." What the Jews were recommitting themselves to was God's law of "firstfruits." The concept is simple. God wants the first and best portion of whatever you receive.

Right now is the time in the life of the church when you need to make a commitment to support the work of the church next year. This coming week you will receive a commitment card in the mail and I want to ask you to seriously pray about *your* commitment. When you think about how much to give to the church, the question shouldn't be, "how much of my money am I willing to give up?" It all belongs to God. The question you must ask yourself is this: "how much of God's money is right for me to keep?" If you want to experience God like never before, one of the keys is biblical tithing. Give God the first ten percent of your income. Some of you won't be able to do that and still put food on the table. Figure out what percent you can do now and then work to increase it next year. Some of you wouldn't notice ten percent. If that's you, you need to find a higher percent. Your giving to God should be a sacrifice. It should cause you to have to give up something else you want. I will tell you that we started tithing about 12 years ago and it changed our relationship with God.

When you get your commitment card there are three areas we are asking you to commit. First, we are asking you to pray for your church. If you are a follower of Christ you should be willing to pray. Please check that box. Everyone should turn in a card with at least that one box checked. The second commitment we are asking

you to make is to serve. Everyone can do something and so everyone can check that box. Finally, we are asking you to “observe and do all the commandments of the LORD” by committing to bring your firstfruits “for all the work of the house of our God.” It helps the elders greatly if you will also estimate how much you think you can give next year. And then next Sunday bring your cards with you to worship.

This morning I want to challenge you to renew your commitment to God. Renew your commitment to His Word, renew your commitment to worship, renew your commitment to His church, and renew your commitment to make God your first priority – in your time, your work, your family, and your finances. Give God the first and best portion of each.

Amen.