

Nehemiah 8:13 - 10

Holy Obedience

About five or six months ago Keren and I were driving on County Line Road, heading west. I was in the driver seat. Keren was in the passenger seat. We were crossing over 31, very close to our Shelby Street campus. Now, if you are familiar with that intersection, you know how busy it is--there is a total of seven or eight lanes. Lots of traffic all the time. We were heading through the intersection, I'm focused on the road ahead of me, and all of a sudden Keren takes a huge deep breath (Huh!!!!). I grip down on the steering wheel and brace for impact. I'm sure that a semi-truck is going to T-bone us. I wait a second or two. When nothing happened, I look up; Keren has this huge smile on her face--as big as I've ever seen her. There are tears coming down her face, and she says, "They are putting a HomeGoods on our side of town." She had tears of joy. I had tears of sadness. I called and cancelled our credit cards! That HomeGoods has made my wife a very happy lady.

As we go about our day, we take in all sorts of information. I was reading this week about how much content the average person consumes in a given day: Let me pull up a few numbers for you: In a typical day, the most of us will process about **105,000** words, will be exposed to roughly **4,000** ads per day, and in all, will consume **34** Gigabytes of data. Every. Single. Day. We are taking in five times as much data as we were just 30 years ago. Because we are taking in so much data, our mind filters almost all of it out, and it doesn't enter long term memory. Every once in a while we'll see something or hear something and think, "Oh, that's really important. I actually need to do something about it." But more often than not, unless we are really deliberate and write it down and send ourselves a reminder, we end up forgetting that, too.

That's how our minds have been trained to process information. And most of the time that serves us well, but what about when we come to the Word of God? What about when it comes to Scripture? How do we make sure that when God speaks, when we hear his words, it doesn't just get lumped in with the rest of the data we are processing any given day and end up brushed aside and forgotten? I've told you this story about a year and a half ago, but when my life group first started meeting (we go over the weekend sermon), we were three or four weeks in, I was asking questions about the message, and about Matthew 12, which is what the sermon was on, and no one had any responses. I paused and said, "Be honest...how many of you haven't had a single thought about Matthew 12 or the sermon from Sunday since you left church three days ago?" Every person raised their hand. We had to learn how to engage with the Word of God. Now, our discussion is rich and deep. Many people listen to the sermon twice, take notes, come ready to engage and challenge and pray over what we heard.

We are in our 7th week in this Nehemiah series. In the first six weeks we've seen that Nehemiah was used by God to help rebuild the city of Jerusalem. Last week we saw that once the project was finished, 50,000 people joined together to worship and read the Word of God. There was a spiritual renewal that took place. And that's why they rebuilt the city in the first place, so that God could eventually rebuild them. That rebuilding work, that renewal work is happening. And many of us find ourselves in a very similar place, don't we? We want God to bring renewal in our lives. We've made a mess of things, and we want God to rebuild us from the ground up.

What we are going to see is that as God does his renewal work, he always uses his work as a guide in our lives. Here's the key takeaway for us today: **Reading God's Word should change**

God's people. When I say God's Word I'm talking about the Bible, and when I say God's people, I'm talking about those who call themselves believers, followers of Jesus. It is not our job to go to people who are not believers and use the Bible to tell them how to live. This is what the Bible says about finances. This is what the Bible says about relationships. This is what the Bible says about ethics. The bible was NEVER intended to be used to police the behavior of non-believers. It was given to believers. So instead of asking or expecting those who aren't believers to do what we see in here, we want to focus instead on making sure we are doing what's in here.

James 1:22 **Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.** The word for **listen** is the same word we use to get "auditing a class." We know what it means to audit a class, right? You show up, listen to the lectures, learn what we can, but you don't have to read any of the books. You don't have to do any of the homework, write any of the papers, take any of tests. You pick and choose what you want, with no accountability. The truth is that if we aren't intentional and diligent, we can do that with the Word, can't we? We can just pick and choose what we want. We can approach the Word like a buffet line: "Lots to choose from...I like this so I'll go in for a double portion...That stuff over there...that's not really what I'm looking for. I'll leave that for someone else." The Bible is not like a buffet table come and go as you like; pick and choose whatever you want. It's like one of those restaurants where a master chef prepares the meal. You come, sit down, and because you trust the chef, you partake of whatever he sets before you.

Listen to what Eugene Peterson says about this: **"Christians don't simply learn or study or use Scripture; we assimilate it, take it into our lives in such a way that it gets metabolized into acts of love, cups of cold water, missions into all the world, healing and evangelism and justice in Jesus' name, hands raised in adoration of the Father, feet washed in company with the Son."** Scripture gets metabolized into a life of worship.

That's what happened in this passage. Let's take a look **8:13 On the second day of the month, the heads of all the families, along with the priests and the Levites, gathered around Ezra the teacher to give attention to the words of the Law.** Now the wide-spread worship and revival that we learned about last week, when did that happen? On the first day of the month? If you look at 8:1, it happened on the first day of the month. When was this? The **second day of the month!** They didn't wait a few weeks or a few months to do something about it: they got right to business. And who is there? Yes, we see the priests and the Levites, the clergy of their society, but look at this, we also see **the heads of the all the families!** All the husbands, all the fathers, all the grandfathers - it's the leaders of the families who want to know what God's word has to say. Why? Because as the leaders of their families, they are taking ownership and responsibility for the spiritual climate of their household.

Now last week I spoke a direct word of encouragement and challenge to the men in our church and called us to step out of our comfort and our personality into a more engaged posture during worship. I got to tell you, I've had so many men come up to me and say, "Thank you for challenging me. It wasn't comfortable, but I needed to hear it. Don't stop challenging us. Keep bringing it." So, given that we see this as clear as day right in the text, I want to speak another word specifically to the men in our church who are leaders in their families: to any fathers in the room, to any husbands in the room—I want to remind you that you set the tone for your family. You set the culture and the atmosphere for your household. The responsibility for the spiritual

vitality of your family should not rest on your wife. It shouldn't rest on your in-laws or grandparents. It shouldn't rest on a pastor. God designed the family. He intended it to rest on you. And it is such a weighty responsibility.

And it can be intimidating to think of ourselves as the spiritual leader of the household. How am I supposed to do that? Look what they did: They joined together **to give attention to the words of the Law**. One of the most important things that any man in this room can do is get together with other men and give attention to God's word.

I was talking to one of my buddies last week and he told me he started using this app that tracks his screen usage on his phone. At the end of last week he was checking it, six hours on twitter. Scrolling down, Scrolling down. His Bible app wasn't even on the top 20. Realtor.com got more screen time than the Bible app, which is only funny because he's not a realtor and he's not in the market to buy or sell a house. But you know what I love? He recognized it was a problem, shared it, told his friends about it, and now do you know what he's doing with a guy in his life group who sits next to him at church on Sundays? He shows him his Screen Time use for accountability, and he's working on getting that Bible App up the list. Most of us guys, we aren't there yet. We have a lot of room to grow. If we want to grow as the spiritual leaders of our families, it begins by getting into the Word.

And let me take just a moment to speak a word to the single moms who are with us. If you are a single mom, I want you to know that we know that you have the hardest job in the world. You are probably working at least one full time job, with some extra projects on the side. You are trying to raise your kids, take care of your home, do the laundry, get your kids to school, get your kids home from school, take them to practice, take them to their friend's house, take them to church...and you're just trying not to drown. There were quite a few years of my childhood when my parents were separated. For those years when my dad wasn't around, my mom took care of five of us kids by herself. I remember those days vividly. It was hard for my mom. To the single moms who are with us I want to say three things: I want you to hear three things from me today: (1) We honor you. We admire you and look up to you. And as a church, we want to do everything we can to come alongside you and support your family. (2) There is light at the end of the tunnel. You are going to make it! You may not feel like it. But you are going to. One day at a time. (3) You find yourself in a role you didn't plan do be in. You've become the spiritual leader of your family, not by choice, but by default. From a son who grew up in a home like that, the most important thing my mother ever did was read the Bible and love the Bible, and in the midst of a very imperfect family situation, she taught us to read the Bible and love the Bible as well. We're here to help (ministries with small groups...leaders who will do whatever they can to pour into the life of your kid).

We began the message by saying **Reading God's Word should change God's people**. As we continue reading in Nehemiah, we are going to add more color to that simple truth. Let's expand it and say: **Reading God's Word changed their worship, their calendars, their relationships, and their finances**. Let's jump right in to 8:14-15 to see the first aspect of this, how it changed their **worship**:

14 They found written in the Law, which the Lord had commanded through Moses, that the Israelites were to live in temporary shelters during the festival of the seventh month 15 and that they should proclaim this word and spread it throughout their towns and in

Jerusalem: “Go out into the hill country and bring back branches from olive and wild olive trees, and from myrtles, palms and shade trees, to make temporary shelters”—as it is written.

So as they are reading the Word of God, they come across this command that they had entirely forgotten. God’s word required the Jewish people, once a year, to build **temporary shelters**, or tents, and for eight straight days, to sleep outside. They didn’t have to go off into the wilderness. They could build the tent on their roof or in their front yard. It was kind of like the ancient equivalent of glamping, but they had to sleep outside as a reminder to them that for 40 years God brought his people through the wilderness where they had no homes, and he was always faithful to provide for them. God’s Word requires them to do this. It requires it as clear as day in Exodus 34 and Leviticus 23. But because God’s people went a long time without reading the word while they were in exile, they forgot about it. Here, they are all reading the word again, they rediscover what they are supposed to be doing, and what to they do? They go get ready to build tents! Take a look at the next verse: **16 So the people went out and brought back branches and built themselves temporary shelters on their own roofs, in their courtyards, in the courts of the house of God and in the square by the Water Gate and the one by the Gate of Ephraim. 17 The whole company that had returned from exile built temporary shelters and lived in them.**

I love this. They discover in the Word what they are supposed to do, and they don’t spend weeks and weeks debating it. They don’t assign a task force to study it and write a book on it, they don’t memorize it and recite it three times a day...they just obey it! Let me ask you: if you discovered today that God wanted you to sleep in your backyard for eight nights in a row like these people, would you do it? Some of you are thinking - it depends on how cold it is! For them, it was in the fall...perfect camping weather. They read it in the word; then they did it; and they did it with all their hearts. Look at what we read: 8:17 **From the days of Joshua son of Nun until that day, the Israelites had not celebrated it like this.** They celebrated this festival like hadn’t been done in nearly 1,000 years. And as they implemented what they read in the Word, what happened??? 8:17 **And their joy was very great.**

When God’s people read his word, and obey his word, it always leads to **joy!** If I were to ask you, “Would you like more joy in your life?” Every single person in this room would say yes. Sorrow or joy? Joy. Anxiety or joy? Joy! Depression or joy? Joy! Melancholy or joy? Joy! Everyone wants joy! The unexpected and counterintuitive path to joy??? Obeying the word of God!

Reading God’s Word changed their worship, their calendars, their relationships, and their finances. Look at what we read in 10:31. All the people make a commitment, and they say: **“When the neighboring peoples bring merchandise or grain to sell on the Sabbath, we will not buy from them on the Sabbath or on any holy day. Every seventh year we will forgo working the land and will cancel all debts.”** As they read the Word, they were reminded of God’s command to practice the **Sabbath**. You remember the Ten Commandments? Don’t murder anyone. Don’t commit adultery. Don’t lie. Don’t steal. Don’t make any idols....Remember the Sabbath and keep it holy. Work six days, rest on the 7th. They were also told to work the land six years, let it rest the 7th year. They had forgotten this. The Bible says this is actually one of the reasons God allowed them to be defeated by the enemies and sent into

exile...because they refused to honor the Sabbath. As they read the Word, they are reminded of the Sabbath and they commit to actually obeying it!

I want us to recognize that when these people decided not to work on one of the seven days a week, when they decided not to cultivate the land all seven years, it was costly. It was sacrificial. It was extremely inconvenient. But here's the thing. It honored God. I think about a modern-day example: Take a look at the **10 most successful fast food restaurants in America**. They all make a lot of money. The average Subway does about a half million dollars of business per a year. Starbucks and Dunkin Donuts do roughly 1 million per year in sales. Taco Bell, Burger King and Wendy's do about 1.5 million. McDonalds does a little over 2.5 million. The average Chick-fil-a does well over four million. Far and away more than anyone else...over three times the average! And they do it six days a week. When their founder shared his business plan of closing on Sundays business strategist, and other restaurant owners told him he had lost his mind. "There's no way you can afford to be closed for an entire day...especially not on a Sunday." His response? I can't afford not to. He went to the Word. He saw what it said, and he did what he believed before God to be right. And he's making way more money than everyone who is doing it the way of the world. Just talking about it, how many of you are craving Chick-fil-a right now? Can't have it. They're closed!

Reading God's word changed their worship, their calendars, their relationships, and their finances. Look at what we see in Nehemiah 10:30 **"We promise not to give our daughters in marriage to the peoples around us or take their daughters for our sons."** God had called his people not to intermarry with the neighboring nations around them. God knew that if his people exchanged their sons and daughters in marriage, they would, in very short order, exchange their gods and goddesses, their morals, convictions and ethical standards. God didn't want them to look like the rest of the world. He wanted them to be different. As they read the Word and were reminded of this, they actually made a change. They said, "We aren't going to do that any longer."

This shows incredible maturity because this specific discussion combines two issues that are very sensitive for people, the sort of issues that have a very high likelihood of offending people. As a pastor, when someone asks me to come alongside and speak into their life, we talk about all sorts of things. I've spoken to people about every issue under the sun - drug use, alcohol addiction, pornography, adultery, prostitution, even murder with three different people. Do you want to know what two issues people are by far and away more sensitive about than any other? The two issues that cause them to push back and tell you to mind your own business more than anything else?? (1) How they raise their kids. (2) Whom they date. There is just something intensely personal about these subject matters. And this passage deals with them both at the same time. How they are parenting AND whom they are dating! But instead of doing the instinctive thing...and being proud and stubborn and defensive and refusing to budge, "Mind your own business, I'm going to do my own thing. I know best." They were humble and open and say, "We'll make a change." The word of God changed their relationships.

One more thing...**Reading God's Word changed their worship, their calendars, their relationships, and their finances.** Take a look at what the people said in 10:32 **"We assume the responsibility for carrying out the commands to give a third of a shekel each year for the service of the house of our God."** The ministry of the temple needed to be cared for. They didn't have the funds for it, so what did they say? Not, "It doesn't matter...let it fall into

disrepair.” Not, “Let someone else pay for it.” No, “They said, “**We assume responsibility.**” That required them to make sacrifices in their lives. They had to make changes to their budgets. It wasn’t easy. But they said, “This matters to us. We are all going to give more. We are all going to be generous, open-handed, willing to share, and support the work of God.”

And if you have been with us the last couple of months you know that we have talked about what it would look like for our church to assume greater responsibility for work of God through our church. We feel like we have an incredible opportunity to reach young people in our community, to reach people who are far from God in our community, and to serve people around the world who are in great need. We want to be able to do that in greater ways than we have ever done. As of the end of last year, we also had 3.5 million dollars of debt. And we came to the church in January and said, “What would it look like if we all gave a little more in order to meet all of these needs, starting with paying off our debt? And instead of saying, “No, we’re not going to do it.” Or “That’s a good thing, let someone else pay for it.” You said, “Yes, we are excited. We are committed. We are going to assume that responsibility.” So many of you have given so generously! Just last month giving was **\$75,000 above the needs of our budget.** Which means that this week we got to call the bank and make a \$75,000 payment toward our principle. Our debt is now under three million for the first time in 17 years. We are making incredible headway. I want to say, “Well done!” We are going to accomplish this together!

For review: here’s the truth we’ve seen over and over again today: **Reading God’s Word changed their worship, their calendars, their relationships, and their finances.** Here’s the challenge; here’s our goal and hope and prayer: What if we got to the place where we can change the pronouns in this sentence and say: **Reading God’s Word changed our worship, our calendars, our relationships, and our finances.** Remember what we read in James 1:22 - Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Don’t just audit the class. Do what it says. We can’t do this on our own. We need help from God. As we come to the table, let’s ask Jesus, the one who fulfilled the law perfectly, to show us how to live like him and to give us strength to follow his example. Ask him what in our lives he wants to see changed, and to give us the strength to trust him with our lives.