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Title: Repentance – Getting Right with God

Text: Nehemiah 9:1-38

Wherein we finished the series in Nehemiah on leadership, I did say don't be surprised if we aren't finished with Nehemiah. This morning we want to look primarily at Nehemiah chapter 9. I've entitled this morning's message, "Repentance – Getting Right with God." It is always to our advantage to be RIGHT WITH GOD.

ILLUSTRATION: Tennis pro David Wheaton should have been on top of the world. 15 years ago (in 1991) David Wheaton made it to the Wimbledon semifinals. He was ranked number 12 internationally, and he won the \$2 million Grand Slam Cup. However, in the midst of this success, he realized there was something missing. Though outwardly he was phenomenally successful, his inner life was a vacuum. He wasn't right with God. He finally found what he was looking for when he committed his life to Christ. Most of us have heard stories of people who plunge to rock bottom before turning to Christ. It is not uncommon for people who have achieved success like David Wheaton to suddenly realize that success simply isn't enough. They see themselves as out of fellowship with God. They discover there must be something more. In fact, without Christ there really isn't much difference in success and failure: both can leave you empty, unfulfilled, and wanting more. That's pretty much what happened to the Israelites. After they had finished building the wall, they realized that there is more to life than bricks and mortar, and there was a real turning of their hearts toward God. Prior to this 9th chapter of Nehemiah, the Israelites asked Ezra to read to them from the Law of God, and revival broke out throughout Jerusalem. This morning we want to examine the process of setting things straight with God.

- 1. The first step is to . . . LOOK INWARD (vs. 1-2).** *¹“Now on the twenty-fourth day of this month (the seventh month) the children of Israel were assembled with fasting, in sackcloth, and with dust on their heads. ²Then those of Israelite lineage separated themselves from all foreigners; and they stood and confessed their sins and the iniquities of their fathers.”* In chapter 8 we see the power of the Word. It pointed to their sin (8:9). It led them to worship (8:12, 14). It gave them great joy (8:17). When sin was confessed and God was given His rightful place, great JOY followed. Much of this world's unhappiness has to do with sin and the need for repentance. Nehemiah and the Israelites have completed the wall and have been spiritually renewed. They are celebrating with worship and festivities. What is spoken of in chapter 9 took place on the 24th day of the seventh month. The Feast of Tabernacles concluded on the 22nd day of the month. They celebrated from the 15th to the 22nd day of the 7th month. After a one-day interval, the 23rd, the people assembled on the 24th. The Israelites examined their lives as they listened to the Law, and they realized how far they had drifted from God. For about three hours they stood while the Law was read. For another 3 hours they confessed their sin and worshipped the Lord. And as an entire nation they turned their hearts toward God. Oh, what I wouldn't give to see that? They weren't asking for vengeance, or freedom, or victory. There's nothing selfish here. The Israelites recognized what they needed, more than anything else in the world, was to BE RIGHT WITH GOD – to be forgiven and cleansed from their sin. For the next part of the day, they confessed and worshipped the Lord their God. I think it would be very informative to have a recording of your last prayer, to see what it consisted of. A pie chart or graph might help. What percent of your prayer was REQUEST TIME? What percent was CONFESSION OF SIN? What percent was THANKSGIVING and WORSHIP? ILLUSTRATION: I read the story of a woman who once said that she doesn't commit sin. She was asked, "You mean to say you never sin?" She said, "Never. But, occasionally I do make mistakes." Many have a tendency to whitewash sin. We call it a mistake, or sickness, or an accident, or a negative experience, or any other euphemism we can dream up to AVOID calling sin what it really is – DISOBEDIENCE TO GOD – often HOSTILE disobedience to God. It is my understanding that President Eisenhower made history in 1953 by being the last President to refer publicly to the need for our nation to confess and repent of our sins in order to receive mercy and pardon. Even though many presidents have used religious terms and imagery in their speeches, perhaps none since Eisenhower have addressed the crux of the problem of American society and called for national repentance. Can you imagine the backlash such a statement would create today? Getting right with God means that we take a look inward and admit the truth about ourselves. We have SINNED. We need FORGIVENESS. That's the truth about who we are. The action of the Israelites were signs of deep humility and repentance. If we are going to maintain spiritual renewal, we must approach God humbly. James 4:10 – *“Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He shall lift you up.”*

When we stand before a holy, awesome God, we must admit, “I don’t measure up. I have sinned.” We live in a culture that has declared war on guilt. Guilt is almost a dirty word. It is considered destructive to our self-image. The tragedy is that when there is NO GUILT there is NO REPENTANCE, and thus NO HUMILITY before God. When renewal comes, the first evidence is expressed in a profound awareness of our sin and repentance for it. True confession of sin means we confess them one by one. I don’t know that a blanket prayer of confession is really good enough. Could a blanket prayer be a sign that we aren’t truly repentant? Could it just be a prayer said to ease our conscience? We can pray or say “O Lord, forgive me of all my sin...” without any real reflection or repentance of the sins of the day. How much more effective to pray, “Lord, forgive me of my attitude toward Bill. Forgive me of the harsh words I spoke to Mary. Forgive me of the trash I watched today. Forgive me for the coarse joke I told. Wouldn’t it do us more good to confess our sins specifically and completely. Jesus prayed, “...forgive us our sins, our debts, our trespasses.” He prayed that in response to His disciples’ request to teach them to pray. Jesus was without sin, BUT Jesus knew His disciples had great need to pray for the forgiveness of sin. He prayed that prayer to teach His disciples and for our example. If the Lord prayed in that manner, how much more so ought we to pray for the forgiveness of our sins, and to do so specifically. The Israelites recognized this about themselves, and it was the first step toward getting straight with God. They LOOKED INWARD.

2. **The second step is to . . . LOOK UPWARD.** Nehemiah 9 might contain the longest prayer of the Bible. It begins with the Levites saying... ⁵*“Blessed be your glorious name, and may it be exalted above all blessing and praise. You alone are the Lord. You made the heavens, even the highest heavens, and all their starry host, the earth and all that is in it, the seas and all that is in them. You give life to everything, and the multitudes of heaven worship you.”* The Israelites were aware of their sin. They confessed their sin and MOVED ON. They shifted their focus away from themselves to the goodness and wonder of God. This is the difference between conviction and “feeling guilty.” When we feel guilty about ourselves, we tend to let it keep us from going to church, or reading our Bible, or spending time in prayer. We think, “I’m such a bad person, why should I even bother?” That’s guilt. Some express the thought that if the preacher just preached better there would be more in church. On the other hand, if the preacher preaches good and hard there are those who don’t come because it invokes guilt. So you may see people absent from church because the preacher preached the Word. Repentance, though, should never drive us AWAY from God; its purpose is to drive us TO God. Feeling guilty isn’t the same as repentance. Repentance draws us into the presence of God. Sin separates man and God. Repentance brings man and God together. If we truly repented, our response would be like that of the Israelites – praise and worship. Getting RIGHT with God means getting your eyes off of yourself, and turning them to Jesus. You’ve heard the chorus: “Turn your eyes upon Jesus. Look full in His wonderful face – and the things of earth will grow strangely dim in the light of His glory and grace.” LOOK UPWARD!
3. **The third step is to . . . LOOK BACKWARD.** The prayer in Nehemiah 9 summarized the history of the Jewish people, and acknowledges that God has been involved with them from the very beginning. In this prayer they acknowledge God as the Creator, Covenant Maker, Covenant Keeper, Deliverer, Law Giver, and Provider. The prayer also acknowledges that the Jewish people had NOT always been faithful to God. They had a long history of falling into sin and begging God to bail them out, only to fall back into sin. Man still has that same problem. A SMART man learns from OTHERS mistakes. A NOT SO SMART man DOESN’T learn from others mistakes. A not so smart man makes HIS OWN mistakes. The DUMBEST man DOESN’T even learn from HIS OWN mistakes. The Israelites in Nehemiah’s day were painfully aware of this inclination to fall into sin and begging God to bail them out, only to fall into sin again, and they wanted to do what they could to prevent it from happening again. There’s a saying, “Those who forget the past are condemned to repeat it.” If we don’t take a long, healthy look backward from time to time, we are likely to make the same mistakes – and commit the same sins – again and again. I’m afraid America is making the same mistakes that other countries have made before us. In addition, we are revisiting some of the sins of our past. Of course, there’s a difference between learning from the past and living in the past. In Christ we have been set free from the past. It no longer holds any power over us. We don’t have to feel guilty about what happened long ago. But we cannot IGNORE the past, or else we end up REPEATING the past. Some people never learn. Don’t be one of those. Be smarter than that. ILLUSTRATION: A man hired a pilot to take him caribou hunting in Canada. He asked the pilot to land in a remote place. The pilot said, “There aren’t any caribou in this area.” The hunter said, “There were last year. I hunted here and I know what I’m talking about.” Sure enough, in a few hours the hunter returned, dragging two caribou. As he got ready to load the plane, the pilot said, “You can’t load two caribou on this plane. The plane can’t bear the

weight.” The hunter said, “I did last year. Same size plane. Same size caribou. I know what I’m talking about because I did it last year.” The pilot finally agreed, and they took off. The plane, however, couldn’t carry the load, and crashed into the side of a mountain. The pilot got angry at the hunter and said, “I can’t believe I let you talk me into this. I knew this plane couldn’t carry two caribou. Now we’re STRANDED on this mountain and NO ONE will ever find us.” The hunter said, “Don’t worry, the rescue squad will find us here in no time. We’re right by where they found us when we crashed last year.” Looking backward helps us – at least, it should help us – NOT TO REPEAT the mistakes of the past.

4. **The fourth step . . . LOOK FORWARD.** ³⁸*“In view of all this, we are making a binding agreement, putting it in writing, and our leaders, our Levites and our priests are affixing their seals to it.”* The Israelites decided to give serious consideration to their spiritual, social, economic and political goals – and they went so far as to put their goals in writing. Getting straight with God means thinking about where you’re going and what you’re accomplishing with your life. A great life doesn’t just happen by accident. Neither does a great church. It requires that we look ahead, and make plans. Chuck Swindoll, in his book, *Hand Me Another Brick*, reminds us that Nehemiah didn’t bring a group of people into Jerusalem and immediately have them start to stack up bricks and erect a wall. He spent four months in deep thought. He came to live with the vision before he ever shared it with anyone else. It was only after he poured over it in thought before God, that he came into the city and began to build the wall. The wall didn’t just happen. He thought about what they were to do and how they were to accomplish it. Jesus spoke of the wisdom of thinking and planning ahead this way: *“For which one of you, when he wants to build a tower, does not first sit down and calculate the cost, to see if he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation, and is not able to finish, all who observe it begin to ridicule him, saying, ‘This man began to build and was not able to finish.’ Or what king, when he sets out to meet another king in battle, will not first sit down and take counsel whether he is strong enough with ten thousand men to encounter the one coming against him with twenty thousand?”* (Luke 14:28-31). JESUS lived His life with PURPOSE and DIRECTION. He knew where He was going, and from the very beginning He knew the price He would have to pay. EVERYTHING He did moved Him toward His purpose in life. What was His purpose? He said... *“For the Son of Man came to seek and save what was lost”* (Luke 19:10). Each person, each church, each family, each business, each nation must ask themselves: “Is what I’m doing today taking me to where I NEED to be?”
5. **Conclusion.** A business consultant said, “There are two things that are the most difficult to get people to do: to think and to do things in the order of their importance.” Getting straight with God REQUIRES that we THINK. We think about OURSELVES. We think about GOD. We think about the PAST. We think about the FUTURE. Serious thought precedes any significant change. You never change areas of your life that have not been given serious thought. We need to schedule some quiet times in our lives, times for thinking and reflection. Ours should not be a haphazard, helter-skelter existence. We MUST be focused. Written plans confirm right priorities. Do you want to do things in order of their importance? Do you really want to maintain right priorities? Write them down. A journal would be helpful. You may have some ideas floating around in your head, but they need to be nailed down. Your “putting first things first” will much more likely take place if you write them out – word for word. Getting straight with God means that we do things in order of their importance. We confess. We worship. We move forward with our lives. Getting straight with God means that we take a LONG look at ourselves, and it means that we take an EVEN LONGER look at God, and HIS WILL for our lives.