

A Spirit of Holiness

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[0 : 00] All right. How's everybody doing? Good morning to you. My name is Elliot. I'm one of the pastors here. So good to be together with you today. And this morning, we're going to be continuing in our series through Nehemiah.

So Nehemiah is this Old Testament book that is just a really beautiful picture of God's mercy towards a broken and sinful people and his renewal of their city.

And today, we're going to be in Nehemiah chapter 10, if you're following along. And if you've been with us, then you remember the context. So this has actually been a pretty incredible season for this people of God.

After living in exile for a really long time, God has brought them back to Jerusalem, to the place they came from. He has helped them rebuild the walls around the city.

And in the last few chapters, we've really started to get this sense that the rebuilding of this wall has a larger purpose than just peace and prosperity for the city.

[1 : 04] Like it really is opening a door to reinvigorate their relationship with God. Because we've been talking about renewal. And at the end of the day, renewal isn't just about the mending of broken things.

It's actually about drawing near to God. And so we've seen that they begin to read Scripture again. And as they do, they're confronted with this merciful God.

And they begin to weep and remember their history and confess their sin and repent. And that's where we pick up the story today. In Nehemiah chapter 9, verse 38.

So last week we went through all of this confession and repentance. And then we get to their response. It says this, Because of all of this, we, meaning all the people who have repented, make a firm covenant in writing.

On the sealed document are the names of our princes, our Levites, and our priests. Now flipping over to chapter 10. On the seals are the names of Nehemiah the governor, son of Hakaliah, Zedekiah, Sariah, Azariah, Jeremiah.

[2 : 13] And there are 27 more verses of names that for my sake and yours, we're not going to read. But if you'll remember, even though we're skipping them, the names do have significance.

And if nothing else, I would say this to you. When you see names in the Bible, that tells you something about God, that he remembered their name. And that means he remembers your name too. Individuals by name.

And so we get through this list of names, all these people from different segments of society. And then in chapter 10, verse 28, it says, The rest of the people, the priests, the Levites, the gatekeepers, the singers, the temple servants, and all who had separated themselves from the peoples of the land to the law of God, their wives, their sons, their daughters, and all who have knowledge and understanding, join with their brothers, the nobles, and enter into a curse and an oath to walk in God's law that was given by Moses, the servant of God, and to observe and to do all the commandments of the Lord our God, his rules and his statutes.

We will not give our daughters to the peoples of the land, or will we take daughters for our sons? 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, and we will forego the crops of the seventh year and the exaction of every debt.

This is God's word to us. Let's pause and pray for a moment. God, we thank you for your word, and I pray that you give us the grace to read it and to understand it and to let it do its work in our heart rightly.

[4 : 02] We ask in Jesus' name. Amen. So this passage comes on the heels of a pretty dramatic season. So they've gone from despair to hope with the building of this wall.

They've remembered who God is and all his mercy towards them, and they've had this season of confession and repentance and also like feasting and fellowship. It's been a national time of celebration.

But like all big seasons in life, it eventually comes to an end, and you kind of have to get back to the business of living everyday life, right? Like the holidays are over, time to go on a diet, right? You've got to move on. And so as they start to move towards that, they start in a really interesting place. They make a covenant. And that's interesting because it tells us they've been reminded of something.

They've been reminded that a faithful God desires a covenantal people. Now God has been so good to them.

[5 : 07] Remember, this was an impossible dream to be brought back to this place, for this wall to be restored. And in response to that, their natural response is to make a covenant.

Now what is a covenant? I mean, at its most basic level, a covenant is really just an oath-bound relationship between two people. Like in our modern context, the thing we think of probably most often is the covenant of marriage between one man and one woman who covenant to each other. In the Bible, though, we also see God making these divine covenants with his chosen people. And in it, what God is doing is he is binding himself by his word to his people.

But it's also not a one-way relationship because God's not a one-way God. He's a personal God. He's a relational God who wants to have a relationship with his people.

And that's really the idea under the covenant. God wants to be in relation with his people. And so the people wanting to move into that make this covenant.

[6 : 11] And notice they do something concrete. They write it down. Right? I mean, even in our day, it means a little more when you put it in writing. Like if you've ever been in sales, you really don't want the handshake deal.

You want that thing in writing. Right? Like if you've been offered a job or a contract for a new position, it ain't done until it's in writing. Right? And so it's just a concrete way that they put down on paper to remember their commitment.

And all this is really good stuff. Right? Like God loves us. We want a covenant and be in relationship with him. So we commit to it. But there's a problem.

Or maybe not a problem as much as a challenge. The covenant relationship comes with some expectations. And they are not trivial expectations.

A covenantal relationship with God requires holiness. Now we say that word in church a lot. We say that God is holy.

[7 : 12] So you actually may be really familiar with the word. But I honestly think this is one of the most difficult attributes about God to grasp. Because it's so different than anything we know in our daily life.

Like if I ask you what holy means, honestly I think I would get a lot of responses. And some of them actually look more just like a vibe or an aesthetic. Or maybe you just connect holy with anything that's like quiet or connected to church.

But what the word holy really means is set apart. Or when you talk about the holiness of God, what it's really saying is he is completely other.

Like something different. Incomparable. Like his name is I am. And so all those things that when we think about God are kind of too big for your mind to grasp are wrapped up in that.

Right? Like the fact that God was eternal. He never not was. That concept makes no sense to a person who had a beginning and an end in this world. Right? He's everywhere all at once.

[8 : 22] Like how is that possible? You can only exist in one place at once. That's a concept you can say. But it's hard to grasp. And maybe most relevant to us today. He is completely and utterly righteous and perfect and loving all the time in every circumstance.

In everything he does. Those are all wrapped up in the idea of being holy. And honestly God's holiness isn't just an interesting fact. It is a real challenge and a real problem for us.

Because one of the things we see over and over in the Old Testament is that unholy things can't come close to holy things. As in it's lethal.

Unholiness cannot exist in the same place that holiness is. And it actually explains a little bit about why you see the things of how God interacts with people in the Old Testament.

A few examples. So in 2 Samuel there's this story of after David is made king. And they're bringing the Ark of the Covenant into Jerusalem. The Ark represents God's very presence with his people.

[9 : 30] And because it is holy you are not allowed to touch it. And as they're bringing this thing in the ox that are carrying it stumble. And the Ark begins to fall.

And this one man named Uzzah reaches out just to steady it because he doesn't want the Ark to fall. And as he touches it God kills him. On the spot.

You see this reflected in the temple in the Old Testament. Like the center of that is this place called the Holy of Holies. That's where the Ark was and that's where God resided with his people. Which again is this awesome thing that God's with us.

But you can't actually go in. Like only one person the high priest could go in once a year. And only after he made atonement. Like to make atonement for the people.

If you go in before that you die. You can't come close to God. And over and over you see this in the Old Testament. When people encounter God there's always like he covers them.

[10 : 27] Or he shrouds himself. Or he obscures himself. Donnie talked about this last week. When Isaiah the prophet runs into an image of God. His first inclination is I am a man of unclean lips.

I am unholy. That's what he's struck by. And I know like this image of God is not really the one that kind of gives us the warm fuzzies.

Right? But it's a really important thing. Because what all these stories are trying to convey to you is that God is holy. And you can't approach him without holiness.

And so because of that. The law that God gives to his people reflects this reality. God's law requires that his people live distinct from the world.

So we see that after they seal this covenant. They make some promises as a people. Again in verse 30.

[11 : 24] We will not give our daughters to the peoples of the land. Or take their daughters for our sons. And the peoples of the land bring in goods or grain on the Sabbath to sell. We will not buy from them on the Sabbath or on a holy day.

And we will forego all the crops of the seventh year. And the exaction of every debt. And all requirements of the law. God's law required that people should live differently.

And I mean there's a lot to that. You could spend a long time studying like why God's law is what it is. But part of it is remember he's re-revealing himself to a world that has forgotten him.

And part of the way he does that is to give laws that give his chosen people a distinct way of living. That's meant to be both a blessing to those who followed it.

And an invitation and a beacon to those who didn't. A faithful God wants all of us to live in such a way that we are a blessing.

[12 : 24] And that we are distinct from the corruption and sin of the world. And we're going to lean into that today. But before we move on. I think there is a little bit of tension in these specific verses for us.

And I think we need to run to that before we move on. Because I don't want to get stuck there. And it's important to hit it. Because at first blush when we read those restrictions. And maybe not just these. Some of the other stuff in the Old Testament law.

They seem to us both overly restrictive or maybe even offensive. The first thing that is mentioned is do not get married to the non-Israelites around you.

And you can't really run around it. Because all of this Ezra, Nehemiah kind of single book. And really throughout the Old Testament. There's this major theme of laws that prohibit intermarriage.

And I think it's impossible in our current time and context. And our frankly not too distant history. To put that in our thoughts. And to look at a verse like this to say.

[13 : 27] Man that really seems at best just overly restrictive. Like telling me who and where and when I can marry. And at worst really just racist. So like a lot of scripture.

Context is really important here. So I'd give you a couple things to keep in mind. So first of all. The law strongly prohibits outside marriage. Not because of any of the reasons we would think about today.

Or that we've encountered in our culture. So this is not a law that prohibits marriage based on something trivial like skin color. Or it's not a law that prohibits marriage because of like differences

in cultural proclivities.

This was a prohibition based on one singular danger. Religious idolatry. Walking away from God. Because again God has called his people to be separate.

It's part of what he's doing in his plan. And what's in view here is not trying to maintain some type of ethnic purity. It's really just to remain free from the abominations and the false religious beliefs around them.

[14:36] I think it's really hard in our day in our culture to imagine. In a culture where we kind of take on or put on and take off beliefs at a whim. Right? We believe something one day and don't the next day.

Whatever feels good to us. But it's really hard to get into our minds how tied to a person's family and their culture, their religion was. And so when they invited people in and the Old Testament is really replete with these stories.

Basically time after time you see a great man, a great woman of faith pulled away from the father. Because they get romantically entangled with someone who worships idols.

And then they are drawn towards those idols. They're drawn away from God. I think it's also really instructive if you're still concerned about this. That this prohibition against intermarriage is never repeated in the New Testament.

But it is kind of mirrored in the idea of not being unequally yoked. If you've ever heard that. So like Paul when he's talking about how believers should move forward and join with people in marriage.

[15:41] He gives us a boundary but the boundary isn't ethnic. It's faith in Christ. It gives this image of like you know being yoked together. Like you know animals, oxen in a yoke together.

And the idea is if you get in a yoke with somebody that's pulling in a completely different direction than you. There's going to be turmoil and trouble for both of you. Still the same for us today.

Now let me pause here. There's grace in that. Okay. So you know if you have been or you find yourself in a marriage to someone who doesn't follow Jesus.

The same Paul who writes about this boundary gives you. You know those texts are replete with the hope of what Jesus and what God can do in your life and their life.

There is grace for you. But to kind of pull us back to the mainstream of this text about the law and marriage and Sabbath. Again they're really all just testifying to this idea that God wanted his people to live different.

[16:43] You know even this thing of Sabbath which I'm sure you know as we move forward in the year we'll talk more about as a church. And I highly encourage you to study and ponder that. Particularly in a culture like ours where it's always like more more more go go go can't stop.

Like those Sabbath laws declared to the world around them that Israel could take its rest in a covenant God. That their trust was not in their efforts but in a God who provided for them.

That was a testament. And these laws along with the Old Testament again are testifying the same thing. And God's people are to be distinct and separate and holy because he is.

As a matter of fact if you even want to go to like some of the things you'll read in Leviticus that make less sense to you. Think about this. In Leviticus in one verse you see a prohibition to like don't breed your cattle with different kinds of cattle.

Don't sow two types of seed in the same field. And don't make a garment out of two different types of fabric. Now that seems really arbitrary and fickle to our ears.

[17:50] But what do each one of those things say? Don't mix holy and unholy. That's what he's trying to teach. God's people can't be in a covenant with him and not be holy as he is holy.

And that's where we come to the real rub. Because what we see over and over in scripture is this cycle of repent, commit, fail.

Repent, commit, fail. And God in his mercy strives with his people over and over through their failures and through their judgments. And they come back and they commit and there's a season of rejoicing.

And they always fail again. And that leads us to a really somber truth. Holiness is impossible for fallen people.

I mean the thing that's really crushing about holiness is that you can't just be a little unholy. Like there aren't degrees. You are either holy or you're not.

[18:57] And that rubs against every instinct we have of how we measure ourselves as people. Because that's how we do it, right? Like we look on the scale of humanity and over somewhere and

here's like Adolf Hitler.

And we're like I got to stay away from that, right? And over here's whoever's the best person you can think of. And we just put ourselves on that scale. It's inevitable. We want to judge ourselves against the others around us.

And this really subtly seeks in. I think it's one of the most dangerous things we do. Because it is really easy to quietly start to base our confidence in our relationship with God in our own goodness. Like if I were to ask you. And again I preface this. I don't think this is how it's going to go down, right? Like I don't think you're going to get to heaven and like Peter's going to be standing there. And they're going to go why should we let you in or something like that, right? But there is kind of an idea if you're thinking about like coming near a holy God or existing with him forever.

Like on what basis can you do that? And I think all too often the first thing that might jump to our mind is I'm a pretty good father to my kids.

[20 : 09] I'm a loving mother. I'm a good wife. I help the people around me. When I see people are hurting I help them. I may not be perfect but at least I'm not in jail.

You know I'm not I didn't do that. I'm not on the news. I didn't embezzle. I'm definitely not the worst. I may not be Billy Graham or Mother Teresa but again I'm not Hitler so. And if I could just impress one thing on you today.

Like really if you didn't hear anything else today I would say this to you. Please don't let your plan to come before a holy God be based in some vague sense of your own goodness.

To say it another way God is not impressed with your resume. And it's really dangerous because the truth is you may be right.

Like you might actually be a pretty good person. Like you do nice things and you love your family and like everybody would say that's a pretty good dude. Like that's a really nice lady.

[21 : 17] You give some. You get along with your neighbors. You serve. You may be by like every standard. Every reasonable standard of our society and every society that's ever existed.

You might be a really good person. I'm not trying to trivialize that. You might be a really good person. What you are not is holy. And that's what's required.

Two of the strongest words I know of in the Bible are used in the context of people trying to hold up righteous acts to God as the reason he should accept them.

One of them is in the book of Isaiah where he's talking about a people whose hearts and minds are far from God. But they're doing righteous acts like they're actually doing some of the stuff the law requires and holding it up as our hearts are far from God.

But we're doing the thing God so you should accept us. And God says that stuff is like filthy rags to me. Paul does the same thing in Philippians.

[22 : 27] He kind of has this list of where he talks about. It's effectively a treatise where he says I just want you to know I'm better at religion than you. I do the thing better than you do.

Like if you think you're a better Jew, a better law follower than me, you're wrong. And when he gets to the end of that he gives all the things he's done, all the righteous acts he's accomplished.

And he says but now I count them all as rubbish. And both of those words, filthy rags, rubbish are like lost in our English a little bit. Because we kind of like can think of like rubbish in a can or you know some oily rags in the corner.

And I'll spare you like maybe the actual translation in polite company. If you want to go read it, read it for yourself. But I'll tell you both of those actually carry the imagery that has sort of a gag reflex to it.

Like if you open a trash can and there's something foul in there and you're like oh, oh, oh, you know. Like that sort of thing. That's the imagery that's brought up. If you want to come to God and put up I'm righteous because I did these righteous things.

[23 : 29] The Bible is communicating. It's like a stench. And so if that's what we have, we're not going to make it.

Like we need to be close to God. We need to be close to God and we can't get there. And we try and we can't get there. But the beauty is that fact isn't really a reason to despair.

As a matter of fact, the Bible says that feeling is exactly the reason the law was given. Our lack of holiness isn't intended to make us despair.

Our lack of holiness is intended to make us cry out for a Savior. God wants to be in this covenant with us.

But the old covenant, the one we see in Nehemiah, is a heavy weight. And no one proves able to bear it. We see in Nehemiah this glorious time of coming back to God and they make this covenant with him.

[24 : 39] But spoiler alert, they fail too. And so in the end, we need to be holy and we try and we fail.

And we're always grasping. But we can't try harder to get there. And again, we're tempted to just try even harder or to despair.

But what the Bible tells us is we're not supposed to do either of those. This fact is supposed to make us cry out, Who will save me? Because I can't save myself.

And it is for that very reason that Jesus leaves all the glory of heaven. And he comes to walk with us. Jesus' name in Hebrew means God saves.

We have the answer that those in Nehemiah and ultimately all of us were looking for. So over the years, I've often heard people ask some variant of this question.

[25 : 46] I think it's an important question. They'll say, you know, I don't understand this. Why does Jesus have to die for me to be forgiven? Right?

I mean, like, why does there have to be this gruesome sacrifice? Why can't God, if he's a loving God, just forgive me? Like, I forgive all the time. People do something to me and I decide to forgive them and it's done.

Like, why does Jesus have to die? Why does God have to exact this cruel punishment? It is an important question. One of the things I would say to you, I would offer to you, is that I would say forgiveness actually always does have a cost to it.

And we don't really have enough time to fully explore that today. Tim Keller's actually done some really great work on that. I can commend to you if you want to see it. But the other thing I really want to focus in today is, hopefully what we've seen is, it's not just forgiveness we need to be with God.

Like, it's not just that you need your debt canceled. You do need that. But the other thing you need is holiness. And you can't ever get there.

[26 : 58] So if you're ever going to have a shot at that righteousness, at that holiness, you're going to need someone to give it to you. And the Bible tells us that's exactly what God did.

In Romans 3 verses 19 to 24 it says this, Now we know that whatever the law says, it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God.

For by the works of the law, no human being will be justified in his sight. No one will be declared holy by following the law.

Since through the law comes the knowledge of sin, but now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the law and the prophets bear witness to it.

This righteousness of God through faith in Christ Jesus for all who believe. For there's no distinction. Everyone has sinned and falls short of the glory of God and are justified by his grace as a gift through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.

[28 : 08] The old covenant is sealed, we saw in this verse, with a promise and a curse. If you do these things, you will live.

If you will not, you do not, you will perish. But the new covenant, the covenant in Christ that we see proclaimed throughout the New Testament, the place that God was always planning to get to, is fulfilled in Christ.

He receives the curse, so you never have to. He provides the holiness because you can't attain it. And he gives it to you as a gift.

That's why we praise the name of Jesus. Because that's what he's done. And now, for people who are in Jesus, that actually brings us all the way back to the beginning of what we were talking about in this chapter.

Because now, Jesus has made it possible for us to live distinct lives. So just like in Nehemiah's time, we as God's people are still called to live distinct lives.

[29 : 21] God wants us to live holy. Or maybe to say it another way, there's no version of being a disciple of Jesus where you become a follower, a disciple of Jesus, and you just go on living the same way you were living.

Never see that in Scripture. We are still called to live in ways that reflect God to the world. Ways that are for his glory, and our good into the flourishing and healing of the nations.

But, because of Jesus, because of what he's done, the way we get to live those lives out is completely different. So first, we do still fail.

We do still sin. But we don't labor under the curse anymore. Our failures are consumed in the blood of Jesus Christ. He has taken that from us.

And so that fear, that shame, that motivating factor is gone. That's not why we move close. And so, when you fail, it's not the impending sword of judgment that hangs over you.

[30 : 25] But the other thing is, he's made it possible that we don't labor alone anymore. Because it says that now, we can have God's very spirit inside of us.

By the way, what do we call that spirit that God gives us? There you go. You know it. The Holy Spirit.

Did you catch that? The Holy Spirit. I mean, if you're ever tempted to kind of doubt or wonder how miraculous what Jesus has done is, think about this.

We just went from, you can't come close to God or you die. Like, you can't see God's face. You can't get within an inch of him without him covering himself up because it is certain death.

Like, that is how big the gap between unholy and holy is. And Jesus has taken us from that to the very Holy Spirit of God can exist within you.

[31 : 27] Can strive with you. It is a miracle that no tongue can tell. And now that that's the case that he's with us, we don't labor alone.

Like, it says his spirit is with us to help us in our weakness. To help us to know what to pray when we don't. To be with us every minute. To comfort us.

To know that God is close even when you don't feel like he should be close or can be close. He can always be close because of what Jesus has done. And then day by day, what that looks like for us is God makes us day by day into the holy kind of people he was always looking for because of his spirit living within us.

That's the life God's called us to. And that's really the message to us today. Is to be holy as he is holy. But do it in Jesus. Not in yourself.

As the band comes up. So if you're here today and you're not a follower of Jesus, again, I always like to commend you for coming. I know it's really hard to come into a church.

[32 : 39] It can be a really weird kind of thing if you're not used to it. And if you're not following Jesus, I mean, I guess I would just repeat kind of what we said earlier in the verse. Don't let your plan, if you want to come close to God, if there's any part of you that wants to do that, your goodness isn't going to be enough.

It's not going to tip the scale. Don't let that be your plan. Or maybe you're on the other half of that where like you are very aware you're not holy. And it's the thing that you're most aware of all the time.

That your sinfulness separates you from God. And it's hard to imagine knowing what you've done that God would ever bring you near. Jesus is the answer you're looking for.

Jesus makes it possible for you to be drawn near. Not your good works. Jesus. There'll be a prayer on the screen. Maybe that. Expresses the way you want to come near to God.

If you want to talk to a pastor we'll do that. I would just again cry out to Jesus. If you're here and you are a follower of Jesus I think this might be a morning to just remind yourself of what Jesus has done.

[33 : 57] Maybe what you need to hear is that your life is not under a curse and never can be. you have his Holy Spirit in you.

He delights in you because he delights in his son. Your destiny is no longer judgment it is mercy and goodness.

Maybe it's just a good time to say thank you to Jesus for that. Or maybe there are areas that you've recognized last week and this week where you just you aren't living distinct and you know it.

Like you know you aren't living holy. And the beauty of it is again we can now move towards him.

You don't have to wallow in shame or guilt.

You can come towards him as Jesse said when we did the confession or repentance like in full assurance of pardon. You can come near to him. Start again.

[34 : 55] He's here for us. Let's go ahead and stand. Amen.