

CHAPTER 13

Nehemiah, having finished what he undertook for the fencing and filling of the holy city, returned to the king his master, who was not willing to be long without him, as appears (v. 6). But, after some time, he obtained leave to come back again to Jerusalem, to redress grievances, and purge out some corruptions which had crept in in his absence; and very active he was in reforming several abuses, which here we have an account of.

I. He turned out from Israel the mixed multitude, the Moabites and Ammonites especially (v. 1-3). With a particular indignation, he expelled Tobiah out of the lodgings he had got in the court of the temple (v. 4-9).

II. He secured the maintenance of the priests and Levites to them more firmly than it had been (v. 10-14).

III. He restrained the profanation of the sabbath day, and provided for the due sanctification of it (v. 15-22).

IV. He checked the growing mischief of marrying strange wives (v. 23-31).

<1633> NEHEMIAH 13:1-9

THE PEOPLE'S ATTENTION TO THEIR DUTY

It was the honour of Israel, and the greatest preservation of their holiness, that they were a peculiar people, and were so to keep themselves, and not to mingle with the nations, nor suffer any of them to incorporate with them. Now here we have,

I. The law to this purport, which happened to be read *on that day, in the audience of the people* (v. 1), on the day of the dedication of the wall, as it should seem, for with their prayers and praises they joined the reading of the word; and though it was long after that the other grievances, here mentioned, were redressed by Nehemiah's power, yet this of the mixed multitude might be redressed then by the people's own act, for so it seems to be, v. 3. Or, perhaps, it was on the anniversary commemoration of that

day, some years after, and therefore said to be *on that day*. They found a law, that the Ammonites and Moabites should not be naturalized, should not settle among them, nor unite with them, v. 1. The reason given is because they had been injurious and ill-natured to the Israel of God (v. 2), had not shown them common civility, but sought their ruin, though they not only did them no harm, but were expressly forbidden to do them any. This law we have, with this reason, ^{<1623>}Deuteronomy 23:3-5.

II. The people's ready compliance with this law, v. 3. See the benefit of the public reading of the word of God; when it is duly attended to it discovers to us sin and duty, good and evil, and shows us wherein we have erred. Then we profit by the discovery when by it we are wrought upon to separate ourselves from all that evil to which we had addicted ourselves. They *separated from Israel all the mixed multitude*, which had of old been a snare to them, for the *mixed multitude fell a lusting*, ^{<1410>}Numbers 11:4. These inmates they expelled, as usurpers and dangerous.

III. The particular case of Tobiah, who was an Ammonite, and to whom, it is likely, the historian had an eye in the recital of the law (v. 1), and the reason of it, v. 2. For he had the same enmity to Israel that his ancestors had, the spirit of an Ammonite, witness his indignation at Nehemiah (^{<1620>}Nehemiah 2:10) and the opposition he had given to his undertakings, ^{<1617>}Nehemiah 4:7, 8. Observe,

1. How basely Eliashib the chief priest took this Tobiah in to be a lodger even in the courts of the temple.

(1.) He was allied to Tobiah (v. 4), by marriage first and then by friendship. His grandson had married Sanballat's daughter, v. 28. Probably some other of his family had married Tobiah's, and (would you think it?) the high priest thought the alliance an honour to his family, and was very proud of it, though really it was his greatest disgrace, and what he had reason to be ashamed of. It was expressly provided by the law that the high priest should marry *one of his own people*, else he *profanes his seed among his people*, ^{<16214>}Leviticus 21:14, 15. And for Eliashib to contract an alliance with an Ammonite, a *servant* (for so he is called) and to value himself upon it, probably because he has a wit and a beau, and cried up for a fine gentleman (^{<16169>}Nehemiah 6:19), was such a contempt of the crown of his consecration as one would not wish should be told in Gath or published in the streets of Ashkelon.

(2.) Being allied to him, he must be acquainted with him. Tobiah, being a man of business, has often occasion to be at Jerusalem, I doubt upon no good design. Eliashib is fond of his new kinsman, pleased with his company, and must have him as near him as he can. He has not a room for him stately enough in his own apartment, in the courts of the temple; therefore, out of several little chambers which had been used for store-chambers, by taking down the partitions, he contrived to make one great chamber, a state-room for Tobiah, v. 5. A wretched thing it was,

[1.] That Tobiah the Ammonite should be entertained with respect in Israel, and have a magnificent reception.

[2.] That the high priest, who should have taught the people the law and set them a good example, should, contrary to the law, give him entertainment, and make use of the power he had, as overseer of the chambers of the temple, for that purpose.

[3.] That he should lodge him in the courts of God's house, as if to confront God himself; this was next to setting up an idol there, as the wicked kings of old had done. An Ammonite must not *come into the congregation*; and shall one of the worst and vilest of the Ammonites be courted into the temple itself, and caressed there?

[4.] That he should throw out the stores of the temple, to make room for him, and so expose them to be lost, wasted, and embezzled, though they were the *portions of the priests*, merely to gratify Tobiah. Thus did he *corrupt the covenant of Levi*, as Malachi complained at this time, ~~<1618>~~Nehemiah 2:8. Well might Nehemiah add (v. 6), *But all this time was not I at Jerusalem*. If he had been there, the high priest durst not have done such a thing. The envious one, who sows tares in God's field, knows how to take an opportunity to do it when the *servants sleep* or are absent, ~~<1625>~~Matthew 13:25. The golden calf was made when Moses was in the mount.

2. How bravely Nehemiah, the chief governor, threw him out, and all that belonged to him, and restored the chambers to their proper use. When he came to Jerusalem, and was informed by the good people who were troubled at it what an intimacy had grown between their chief priest and their chief enemy, it *grieve him sorely* (v. 7, 8) that God's house should be so profaned, his enemies so caressed and trusted, and his cause betrayed by him that should have been its protector and patron. Nothing grieves a good

man, a good magistrate, more than to see the ministers of God's house do any wicked thing. Nehemiah has power and he will use it for God.

(1.) Tobiah shall be expelled. He fears not disobliging him, fears not his resentments, or Eliashib's, nor excuses himself from interposing in an affair that lay within the jurisdiction of the high priest; but, like one zealously affected in a good thing, he expels the intruder, by casting forth all his household stuff. He did not seize it for his own use, but cast it out, that Tobiah, who it is probable was now absent, when he came again, might have no conveniences for his reception there. Our Saviour thus *cleansed the temple*, that the *house of prayer* might not be a *den of thieves*. And thus those that would expel sin out of their hearts, those living temples, must throw out its household stuff and all the provision made for it, strip it, starve it, and take away all those things that are the food and fuel of lust; this is, in effect, to mortify it.

(2.) The temple stores shall be brought in again, and the *vessels of the house of God put in their places*; but the chambers must first be sprinkled with the water of purification, and so cleansed, because they had been profaned. Thus, when sin is cast out of the heart by repentance, let the blood of Christ be applied to it by faith, and then let it be furnished with the graces of God's Spirit for every good work.

NEHEMIAH 13:10-14

ABUSES RECTIFIED

Here is another grievance redressed by Nehemiah.

I. The Levites had been wronged. This was the grievance: their *portions had not been given them*, v. 10. Perhaps Tobiah, when he took possession of the store-chambers, seized the stores too, and, by the connivance of Eliashib, converted them to his own use. The complaint is not that they were not collected from the people, but that they were not given to the Levites, and the Levites were so modest as not to sue for them; *for the Levites and singers fled every one to his field*. This comes in as a reason either,

(1.) Why their payments were withheld. The Levites were non-residents: when they should have been doing their work about the temple, they were at their farms in the country; and therefore the people were little inclined to give them their maintenance. If ministers have not the encouragement they should have, let them consider whether they themselves be not accessory to the contempt they are under, by the neglect of their business. Or rather,

(2.) It is the reason why Nehemiah soon perceived that their dues had been denied them, because he missed them from their posts. “Where are the singers” (said Nehemiah); “why do not they attend according to their office, to praise God?” “Why, truly, they have gone every one to his country seat, to get a livelihood for themselves and their families out of their grounds; for their profession would not maintain them.” A scandalous maintenance makes a scandalous ministry. The work is neglected because the workmen are. It was not long since the payment of the salaries appointed for the singers was put into a very good method (^{<161247>}Nehemiah 12:47); and yet how soon did it fail for want of being looked after!

II. Nehemiah laid the fault upon the rulers, who should have taken care that the Levites minded their business and had all due encouragement therein. This is required from Christian magistrates, that they use their power to oblige ministers to do their duty, and people to do theirs. Nehemiah began with the rulers, and called them to an account: “*Why is the house of God forsaken?* v. 11. Why are the Levites starved out of it? Why did not you take notice of this and prevent it?” The people *forsook the Levites*, which was expressly forbidden (^{<151219>}Deuteronomy 12:19; 14:27); and then the Levites forsook their post in the house of God. Both ministers and people who forsake religion and the services of it, and magistrates too who do not what they can to keep them to it, will have a great deal to answer for.

III. He delayed not to bring the dispersed Levites to *their places* again, and set them in *their stations* (as the word is), v. 11. A Levite in his field (*clericus in foro* — *a minister keeping the market*) is out of his station. God's house is his place, and there let him be found. Many that are careless would do much better than they do if they were but called upon. *Say to Archippus, Take heed to thy ministry.*

IV. He obliged the people to bring in their tithes, v. 12. His zeal provoked theirs; and, when they saw the Levites at their work, they could not for

shame withhold their wages any longer, but honestly and cheerfully brought them in. The better church-work is done the better will church-dues be paid.

V. He provided that just and prompt payment should be made of the Levites' stipends. Commissioners were appointed to see to this (v. 13), and they were such as *were accounted faithful*, that is, had approved themselves so in other trusts committed to them, and so had *purchased to themselves this good degree*, ^{<5418>}1 Timothy 3:13. Let men be tried first and then trusted, tried in the less and then trusted with more. Their office was to receive and pay, to distribute to their brethren in due season and due proportions.

VI. Having no recompence (it is a question whether he had thanks) from those for whom he did these good services, he looks up to God as his paymaster (v. 14): *Remember me, O my God! concerning this*. Nehemiah was a man much in pious ejaculations; on every occasion he looked up to God, and committed himself and his affairs to him.

1. He here reflects with comfort and much satisfaction upon what he had done for the house of God and the offices thereof; it pleased him to think that he had been any way instrumental to revive and support religion in his country and to reform what was amiss. What kindness any show to God's ministers, thus shall it be returned into their own bosoms, in the secret joy they shall have there, not only in having done well, but in having done good, good to many, good to souls.

2. He here refers it to God to consider him for it, not in pride, or as boasting of what he had done, much less depending upon it as his righteousness, or as if he thought he had made God a debtor to him, but in a humble appeal to him concerning his integrity and honest intention in what he had done, and a believing expectation that he would not be unrighteous to *forget his work and labour of love*, ^{<5860>}Hebrews 6:10. Observe how modest he is in his requests. He only prays, *Remember me*, not *Reward me* — *Wipe not out my good deeds*, not *Publish them*, *Record them*. Yet he was rewarded and his good deeds were recorded; for God does more than we are able to ask. Note, Deeds done *for the house of God and the offices of it*, for the support of religion and the encouragement of it, are good deeds. There is both righteousness and godliness in them, and

God will certainly remember them, and not wipe them out; they shall in no wise lose their reward.

<1635> NEHEMIAH 13:15-22

THE CHARGE RESPECTING THE SABBATH

Here is another instance of that blessed reformation in which Nehemiah was so active. He revived sabbath-sanctification, and maintained the authority of the fourth commandment; and a very good deed this was for the house of God and the offices thereof, for, where holy time is overlooked and made nothing of, it is not strange if all holy duties be neglected. Here is,

I. A remonstrance of the abuse. The law of the sabbath was very strict and much insisted one, and with good reason, for religion is never in the throne while sabbaths are trodden under foot. But Nehemiah discovered even in Judah, among those to whom sabbaths were given for a sign, this law wretchedly violated. His own eyes were his informers. Magistrates who are in care to discharge their duty aright will as much as may be *see with their own eyes*, and *accomplish a diligent search* to find out that which is evil. To his great grief it appeared that there was a general profanation of the sabbath, that holy day, even in Jerusalem, that holy city, which was so lately dedicated to God.

1. The husbandmen trod their wine-presses and brought home their corn on that day (v. 15), through there was an express command that *in earing-time, and in harvest-time, they should rest* on the sabbaths (<10321>Exodus 34:21), because then they might be tempted to take a greater liberty, and to fancy that God would indulge them in it.

2. The carriers *loaded their asses with all manner of burdens*, and made no scruple of it, though there was a particular proviso in the law for the cattle resting (<18514>Deuteronomy 5:14) and that they should *bear no burden on the sabbath day*, <34721>Jeremiah 17:21.

3. The hawkers, and pedlars, and petty chapmen, that were men of Tyre, that famous trading city, *sold all manner of wares* on the sabbath day (v. 16); and the children of Judah and Jerusalem had so little grace as to buy of

them, and so encourage them in making our Father's day a day of merchandise, contrary to the law of the fourth commandment, which forbids the *doing any manner of work*. No wonder there was a general decay of religion and corruption of manners among this people when they *forsook the sanctuary and profaned the sabbath*.

II. The reformation of it. Those that are jealous for the honour of God cannot bear to see his sabbath profaned. Observe in what method this good man proceeded in his zeal for the sabbath.

1. *He testified against those who profaned it, v. 15, and again 5:21.* He not only expressed his own dislike of it, but endeavoured to convince them that it was a great sin, and showed them the testimony of the word of God against it. He would not punish it till he had laid open the evil of it.

2. He reasoned with the rulers concerning it, took the nobles of Judah to task, and contended with them, v. 17. The greatest of men are not too high to be told of their faults by those whose proper office it is to reprove them; nay, great men should be, as here, contended with in the first place, because of the influence they have upon others.

(1.) He charges them with it: *You do it*. They did not carry corn, nor sell fish, but,

[1.] They connived at those that did, and did not use their power to restrain them, and so made themselves guilty, as those magistrates do who bear the sword in vain.

[2.] They set a bad example in other things. If the nobles allowed themselves in sports and recreations, in idle visits and idle talk, on the sabbath day, the men of business, both in city and country, would profane it by their worldly employments, as more justifiable. We must be responsible for the sins which others are led to commit by our example.

(2.) He charges it upon them as an evil thing, for so it is, proceeding from a great contempt of God and our own souls.

(3.) He reasons the case with them (v. 18), and shows them that sabbath breaking was one of the sins for which God had brought judgments upon them, and that if they did not take warning, but returned to the same sins again, they had reason to expect further judgments: *You bring more wrath upon Israel by profaning the sabbath*. Thus Ezra concluded, *If we again*

break thy commandments, wilt not thou be angry with us till thou hast consumed us? ^{אִיִּי}Ezra 9:14.

3. He took care to prevent the profanation of the sabbath, as one that aimed only at reformation. If he could reform them, he would not punish them, and, if he should punish them, it was but that he might reform them. This is an example to magistrates to be heirs of restraint, and prudently to use the bit and bridle, that there may be no occasion for the lash.

(1.) He ordered the gates of Jerusalem to be kept shut from the evening before the sabbath to the morning after, and set his own servants (whose care, courage and honesty, he could confide in) to watch them, that no burdens should be brought in on the sabbath day, nor late the night before, nor early in the morning after, lest sabbath time should be encroached upon, v. 19. Those that came in to worship in the courts of the temple were no doubt admitted to pass and repass, but none that came to sell goods; *they were forced to lodge without the city* (v. 20), where no doubt they wished the sabbath were gone, that they might sell corn.

(2.) He threatened those who came with goods to the gates, who pressed hard for entrance, telling them that, if they came again, he would certainly lay hands on them (v. 21), and this deterred them from coming any more. Note, If reformers will but put on resolution, more may be done towards the breaking of bad customs than they can imagine. Vice connived at is indeed a daring thing, and will bid defiance to counsel and reproof; but it may be made cowardly, and will be so when magistrates make themselves a terror to it. *The king that sits on the throne of judgment scatters away all evil with his eyes.*

(3.) He charged the Levites to take care about the due sanctifying of the sabbath, that they should cleanse themselves in the first place, and so give a good example to the people, and *that they should some of them come and keep the gates*, v. 22. Because he and his servants must shortly return to court, he would leave this charge with some that might abide by it, that not only when he was present, but in his absence, the sabbath might be sanctified. Then there is likely to be a reformation, in this and other respects, when magistrates and ministers join their forces. The courage, zeal, and prudence of Nehemiah in this matter, are here recorded for our imitation; and we have reason to think that the cure he wrought was lasting; for, in our Saviour's time, we find the Jews in the other extreme, over-scrupulous in the ceremonial part of sabbath-sanctification.

4. He concludes this passage with a prayer (v. 22), in which observe,

(1.) The petitions: *Remember me* (as the thief on the cross, *Lord, remember me*); that is enough. God's thoughts to us ward are very precious, ^{<1915>}Psalm 40:5. He adds, *Spare me*. So far is he from thinking that what he had done did properly merit a reward in strict justice that he cries earnestly to God to *spare him*, as Jeremiah (^{<24515>}Jeremiah 15:15), *Take me not away in thy long-suffering* (^{<24104>}Jeremiah 10:24), *Correct me not in anger*, and (^{<24171>}Jeremiah 17:17), *Be not a terror to me*. Note, The best saints, even when they do the best actions, stand in need of *sparing mercy*; for *there is not a just man that doeth good and sinneth not*.

(2.) The plea: *According to the greatness* (or multitude) *of thy mercies*. Note, God's mercy is what we must depend upon, and not any merit of our own, when we appear before God.

^{<16122>}NEHEMIAH 13:23-31

THE DISMISSAL OF STRANGE WIVES

We have here one instance more of Nehemiah's pious zeal for the purifying of his countrymen as a peculiar people to God; that was the thing he aimed at in the use of his power, not the enriching of himself. See here,

I. How they had corrupted themselves by marrying strange wives. This was complained of in Ezra's time, and much done towards a reformation, Ezra 9 and 10. But, when the unclean spirit is cast out, if a watchful eye be not kept upon him, he will re-enter; so he did here. Though in Ezra's time those that had married strange wives were forced to put them away, which could not but occasion trouble and confusion in families, yet others would not take warning. *Nitimur in vetitum* — *we still lean towards what is forbidden*. Nehemiah, like a good governor, enquired into the state of the families of those that were under his charge, that he might reform what was amiss in them, and so heal the streams by healing the springs.

1. He enquired whence they had their wives, and found that many of the Jews had *married wives of Ashdod, of Ammon, and of Moab* (v. 23), either because they were fond of what was far-fetched or because they hoped by these alliances to strengthen and enrich themselves. See how God by the

prophet reproves this, ^{<BIB>}Malachi 2:11. *Judah has dealt treacherously, and broken covenant with God, the covenant made in Ezra's time with reference to this very thing; he has profaned the holiness of the Lord by marrying the daughter (that is, the worshipper) of a strange god.*

2. He talked with the children, and found they were *children of strangers*, for their *speech betrayed them*. The children were bred up with their mothers, and learned of them and their nurses and servants to speak, so that they could not speak the Jews' language, could not speak it at all, or not readily, or not purely, but *half in the speech of Ashdod*, or Ammon, or Moab, according as the country was which the mother was a native of. Observe,

(1.) Children, in their childhood, learn much of their mothers. *Partus sequitur ventrem* — they are prone to imitate their mothers.

(2.) If either side be bad, the corrupt nature will incline the children to take after that, which is a good reason why Christians should not be unequally yoked.

(3.) In the education of children great care should be taken about the government of their tongues, that they learn not the language of Ashdod, any impious or impure talk, any corrupt communication.

II. What course Nehemiah took to purge out this corruption, when he discovered how much it had prevailed.

1. He showed them the evil of it, and the obligation he lay under to witness against it. He did not seek an occasion against them, but this was an iniquity to be punished by the judge, and which he must by no means connive at (v. 27): “*Shall we hearken to you, who endeavour to palliate and excuse it? No, it is an evil, a great evil, it is a transgression against our God, to marry strange wives, and we must do our utmost to put a stop to it. You beg that they may not be divorced from you, but we cannot hearken to you, for there is no other remedy to clear us from the guilt and prevent infection.*”

(1.) He quotes a precept, to prove that it was in itself a great sin; and makes them swear to that precept: *You shall not give your daughters unto their sons*, etc., which is taken from ^{<BIB>}Deuteronomy 7:3. When we would reclaim people from sin we must show them the sinfulness of it in the glass of the commandment.

(2.) He quotes a precedent, to show the pernicious consequences of it, which made it necessary to be animadverted upon by the government (v. 26): *Did not Solomon king of Israel sin by these things?* The falls of great and good men are recorded in order that we may take warning by them to shun the temptations which they were overcome by. Solomon was famous for wisdom; there was no king like him for it; yet, when he married strange wives, his wisdom could not secure him from their snares, nay, it departed from him, and he did very foolishly. He was beloved of God, but his marrying strange wives threw him out of God's favour, and went near to extinguish the holy fire of grace in his soul: he was king over all Israel; but his doing this occasioned the loss of ten of his twelve tribes. You plead that you can marry strange wives and yet retain the purity of Israelites; but Solomon himself could not; even *him did outlandish women cause to sin*. Therefore let him that *thinks he stands take heed lest he fall* when he runs upon such a precipice.

2. He showed himself highly displeased at it, that he might awaken them to a due sense of the evil of it: *He contended with them*, v. 25. They offered to justify themselves in what they did, but he showed them how frivolous their excuses were, and argued it warmly with them. When he had silenced them he *cursed them*, that is, he denounced the judgments of God against them, and showed them what their sin deserved. He then picked out some of them that were more obstinate than the rest, and fit to be made examples, and *smote them* (that is, ordered them to be beaten by the proper officers according to the law, ^{<REV>}Deuteronomy 25:2, 3), to which he added this further mark of infamy that he *plucked off their hair*, or cut or shaved it off; for it may so be understood. Perhaps they had prided themselves in their hair, and therefore he took it off to deform and humble them, and put them to shame; it was, in effect, to stigmatize them, at least for a time. Ezra, in this case, had plucked off his own hair, in holy sorrow for the sin; Nehemiah plucked off their hair, in a holy indignation at the sinners. See the different tempers of wise, and good, and useful men, and the divers graces, as well as divers gifts, of the same Spirit.

3. He obliged them not to take any more such wives, and separated those whom they had taken: *He cleansed them from all strangers*, both men and women (v. 30), and made them promise with an oath that they would never do so again, v. 25. Thus did he try all ways and means to put a stop to this mischief and to prevent another relapse into this disease.

4. He took particular care of the priests' families, that they might not lie under this stain, this guilt. He found, upon enquiry, that a branch of the high priest's own family, one of his grandsons, had married a daughter of Sanballat, that notorious enemy of the Jews (^{<120>}Nehemiah 2:10; 4:1), and so had, in effect, twisted interests with the Samaritans, v. 28. How little love had that man either to God or his country who could make himself in duty and interest a friend to him that was a sworn enemy to both. It seems this young priest would not put away his wife, and therefore Nehemiah *chased him from him*, deprived him, degraded him, and made him for ever incapable of the priesthood. Josephus says that this expelled priest was Manasseh, and that when Nehemiah drove him away he went to his father-in-law Sanballat, who built him a temple upon Mount Gerazim, like that at Jerusalem, and promised him he should be high priest in it, and that then was laid the foundation of the Samaritans' pretensions, which continued warm to our Saviour's time. ^{<100>}John 4:20, *Our fathers worshipped in this mountain*. When Nehemiah had thus expelled one that had forfeited the honour of the priesthood he again posted the *priests and Levites every one in his business*, v. 30. It was no loss to them to part with one that was the scandal of their cloth; the work would be done better without him. When Judas had gone out Christ said, *Now is the Son of Man glorified*, ^{<130>}John 13:30, 31. Here are Nehemiah's prayers on this occasion.

(1.) He prays, *Remember them, O my God!* v. 29. "Lord, convince and convert them; put them in mind of what they should be and do, that they may come to themselves." Or, "Remember them to reckon with them for their sin; remember it against them." If we take it so, this prayer is a prophecy that God would remember it against them. Those that defile the priesthood despise God, and shall be lightly esteemed. Perhaps they were too many and too great for him to deal with. "Lord" (says he), "deal thou with them; take the work into thy own hands."

(2.) He prays, *Remember me, O my God!* v. 31. The best services done to the public have sometimes been forgotten by those for whom they were done (^{<205>}Ecclesiastes 9:15); therefore Nehemiah refers it to God to recompense him, takes him for his paymaster, and then doubts not but he shall be well paid. This may well be the summary of our petitions; we need no more to make us happy than this: *Remember me, O my God! for good!*