

Text: Nehemiah 13
Date: March 24, 2019
Title: Holy Reminder
DT: **Everybody needs accountability.**

How many of you work for a company where you have a performance review once or twice a year? Most of us do. When we work, there are requirements and expectations. And once in a while, our leader sits down and talks with us about how we're doing. How many of you dread your annual evaluation? You're getting sweaty right now just thinking about it! On that note, here are direct quotations taken from annual review of government employees last year: Employee has set very low personal standards, and consistently fails to meet them. Employee has worked around glue too much. Employee needs two hours to watch 60 minutes. Most reviews aren't that bad, but it can still be kind of intimidating to sit down with someone and talk about our performance.

Today, as we are in our final week on the book of Nehemiah, we are going to see a kind of evaluation that Nehemiah does for the people of Israel. If you have your Bibles, turn with me to chapter 13. We have called this series Holy Ambition, and as you are turning to chapter 13, let me remind you of some of the key things we have learned in this series together.

We began by talking about what it means to have a **holy burden**, where we see a need in the world and we are stirred deep down in our heart, knowing God wants to use us to address that need. Then we talked about **holy preparation**. Once we know how God wants to use us, we don't just snap our fingers and magically see everything accomplished. Like Nehemiah we might have to spend months or years preparing. It might come at great cost, but it's worth the price. Next we see **holy progress**. We said in order for God to accomplish something great through our lives, we have to work together, stay focused, and finish strong. Gary preached on chapter 5 about **holy conflict** and taught us what to do if we are working on a project with other people and they aren't holding up their end of the bargain. We have honest discussion and come to agreement. Then we talked about **holy focus**. Right before they were about to finish, what happened? Incessant distractions. The same happens in our life. We want to accomplish what God has called us to, so we have to overcome the distractions of promising opportunities, malicious criticism, fear and insecurity. After they finished the rebuilding of the city in 52 days there was a **holy revival**. God's people worshipped him like they hadn't in hundreds of years. That's why they rebuilt the city in the first place, so that ultimately, God could rebuild them. And in that section we said, "Lord, that is what we want you to do in our lives! We want you to rebuild us. We want you to send revival. We want to see your presence and power in our midst as never before." They spent the entire day reading the Bible (take a **look at this video...chinese Christians getting their first**) After holy revival comes **holy obedience**. After spending all day reading God's Word, all the leaders of the families continued to study it and promised to live by it. They actually got out their signet rings, wrote up a contract, and stamped it saying, "We are going to obey God's Word." Last week we saw that holy obedience led to **holy celebration**. They were so thankful for all God had done. They paraded through the streets with music and singing and dancing, and then they decided to make celebration a way of life.

After all this has taken place, Nehemiah becomes their governor. He is the leader of the city, and under his leadership, the city flourishes. The society is strong and stable and centered around God. And things go great for over a decade. For 12 whole years. But then Nehemiah has to leave town for a while. In 13:6 he says: **I was not in Jerusalem, for in the thirty-second year of**

Artaxerxes king of Babylon I had returned to the king. Remember, that's the man Nehemiah worked for, that man gave him an extended leave of absence, allowed him to go to Jerusalem in the first place, that's the man that financed the rebuilding of the wall. He's got to go back and check in with him and report how things are going. But he didn't want to stay in the capital for long. His heart was with his people... **Some time later I asked his permission and came back to Jerusalem.** King, thanks for having me back to the palace, thanks for taking an interest in how we're doing, but I gotta get home. When he returns home, Nehemiah is shocked and discouraged at what he finds. The city had fallen into disarray. So Nehemiah sits these people down and reminds them of the commitments they made. He reminds them that back in 9:38 all of the leaders said, **"We are making a binding agreement, putting it in writing, and our leaders, our Levites, and our priests are affixing their seals to it."** In this chapter, is **Holy accountability.** He's reminding these people of what they committed to! And it's like he's saying, "Look, I'm not holding you accountable to to some arbitrary list of rules that I invented, not to my own preferences and expectations...I'm holding you accountable to what you yourselves promised to do! Look, it's here in black and white. That's your signature."

Last week I was at the store to pick up a few things for dinner, Keren sent me with a list. I got everything, and as I was on the way to check out I passed by the candy aisle. Every man has a weakness. Candy is one of mine. I decided to get a couple packages of **Butterfingers.** I get home, eat one, and think, "Oh, this is horrible." What's happened? I bet I got an expired pack. I go back, look at the wrapper, but instead of finding an expiration date, guess what I found? This statement, "Improved Recipe." I thought to myself, "How do you improve upon perfection?" I took another bite. "Sure enough, they messed this up." Do you know what I did? I called Butterfinger. I'm talking to one of their representatives, and do you know what they did not say? "Mr. Hamel, thank you for calling in. We are so sorry we disappointed you. Based upon your request, we are going to revert back to the original recipe." No, they did not say that! Why not? Because though I used to be their customer, they are not accountable to me. They never said that their goal was to make me happy.

When Nehemiah meets with the people, he says that they have regressed in three key areas. **They've regressed in their leadership, their worship, and their relationships.** Take a look at how they regressed in their **leadership:** 13:4-5 **Eliashib the priest had been put in charge of the storerooms of the house of our God. He was closely associated with Tobiah,** (Do you remember him? He's the guy who had been actively opposing the rebuilding of the city years ago) **and Eliashib had provided Tobiah with a large room formerly used to store the grain offerings and incense and temple articles, and also the tithes of grain, new wine and olive oil prescribed for the Levites, musicians and gatekeepers, as well as the contributions for the priests.** Do you see what's happening here? With Nehemiah gone, this guy who was in charge of the temple took the rooms that were supposed to be used for ministry purposes and gave them to Tobiah to live in. The temple is supposed to be the house of God; Tobiah turned it into his personal residence. Corruption in spiritual leadership. What does Nehemiah do? I love this...13:7-9 **I learned about the evil thing Eliashib had done in providing Tobiah a room in the courts of the house of God. 8 I was greatly displeased and threw all Tobiah's household goods out of the room. 9 I gave orders to purify the rooms, and then I put back into them the equipment of the house of God, with the grain offerings and the incense.** He takes immediate action. There's no 30-day eviction notice. There's no 3-months severance package. Nehemiah just kicks him and all of his belongings to the curb. And then he repurposes those rooms for ministry, so that God can be worshipped and people can be served.

If I could take just a short break, we live in a cultural moment where the church has seen a lot of corruption at the leadership level. Every other week there are new allegations of a spiritual leader who has created a culture of fear and intimidation, a leader who has embezzled funds, and worst of all, a leader who has committed sexual misconduct, sometimes against children. That is reprehensible, despicable and vile, and evil without excuse. But what has brought the church the greatest shame is not simply that it happened, but that upon discovering it, other spiritual leaders in the church covered it up. Instead of holding people accountable and protecting the innocent, they protected themselves and their own reputations. That's why people are so outraged. And they have every right to be. God is outraged when that happens! What I love about Nehemiah is that the second he finds out about corrupt spiritual leadership, he addressed it immediately!

Next he turns his attention to regression in **worship**. **15 In those days I saw people in Judah treading wine presses on the Sabbath and bringing in grain and loading it on donkeys, together with wine, grapes, figs and all other kinds of loads. And they were bringing all this into Jerusalem on the Sabbath. Therefore I warned them against selling food on that day. 16 People from Tyre who lived in Jerusalem were bringing in fish and all kinds of merchandise and selling them in Jerusalem on the Sabbath to the people of Judah. 17 I rebuked the nobles of Judah and said to them, "What is this wicked thing you are doing—desecrating the Sabbath day?** Nehemiah is reminding them that they had six days to work, six days to buy and sell, but on the Sabbath, they are to rest and worship. The entire community committed to keeping the Sabbath day holy. But they forgot. Nehemiah had to remind them what they committed to. He actually had to shut stores and vendors down. **20 Once or twice the merchants and sellers of all kinds of goods spent the night outside Jerusalem.** They are thinking, "Hey, if we can't sell our goods inside the city walls, we'll just do it outside the city walls. Work the system, find a loophole!" Take a look at Nehemiah's response: **21-22 I warned them and said, "Why do you spend the night by the wall? If you do this again, I will arrest you."** From that time on they no longer came on the Sabbath. **22 Then I commanded the Levites to purify themselves and go and guard the gates in order to keep the Sabbath day holy.** This was not a day for buying and selling, but for worship and rest. And sometimes we need accountability in this area, too. Don't we? Are you working so hard that you are not making time for your family? Are you working so hard you are on the verge of burnout? Is your life out of balance that instead of coming to church once a week, it's become more like once a month? Nehemiah holds them accountable in their worship!

So there was regression in their leadership, their worship, and finally in their **relationships**. Take a look: **13:23-25 In those days I saw men of Judah who had married women from Ashdod, Ammon and Moab. 24 Half of their children spoke the language of Ashdod or the language of one of the other peoples, and did not know how to speak the language of Judah. 25 I rebuked them and called curses down on them. I beat some of the men and pulled out their hair. I made them take an oath in God's name and said: "You are not to give your daughters in marriage to their sons, nor are you to take their daughters in marriage for your sons or for yourselves."** So the Jewish people were marrying people from other tribes. I want to be very clear on what this is not talking about. This is not talking about the modern day decision that people make to marry someone from a different race, someone with a different skin color, or from a different country. There is absolutely nothing in the Bible that would restrict a black person or a white person or an Asian person or a Latino person from marrying anyone from a different race. Sometimes passages like these are connivingly used to promote bigotry and racism, and that is just outright wrong. **The Biblical restrictions for marriage are centered around faith, not race.**

The reason why the Jewish people weren't allowed to marry people from other tribes is because, when they did, they pretty quickly began worshipping the gods and goddesses of those other tribes. God wanted the Jewish people to be set apart, and to worship him, and him alone.

So Nehemiah confronted them. He said: **“I beat some of the men and pulled out their hair.”** Nehemiah 13:25. Remember, he's not some rogue vigilante doling out violence. He is their governor. He has the official, state-sanctioned responsibility to carry out punishment, and that's exactly what he does. Pulling out their hair obviously caused pain, but it was far more about shame. The hair he pulled out would have been their beards. This was a way of saying, “You boast about being manly men. You are still acting like little boys. Grow your honor back.”

When you mess with someone's hair, it can get pretty serious. I don't know if you have seen my son recently, he just turned three months old, and the kid has some hair. Take a look at **this picture** from a couple of weeks ago. Hair everywhere! Last week, Keren posted **this picture online of our son**, (Can you see him there?) and she captioned it, “Baby shark.” Everywhere I go, all around town, people are always saying, “I love your kid's hair!” They're singing the baby shark song to me! I mentioned to Keren the other day that it might be time to give him a haircut. She made it clear she didn't like that idea. So I kind of playfully said, “What if I do it when you're not home?” She said, “I'll kill you.” I don't think she was joking!

Nehemiah got intense in this passage. He was pulling out hair, kicking leaders to the curb, threatening to arrest people. He wasn't messing around. Maybe you are thinking, “Come on, Nehemiah, calm down. Chill out a little bit. What's the big deal!” Here's what you have to remember: If you go back 150 years, it was specifically because of regression and corruption in these areas that God caused their ancestors to be defeated by their enemies, for their city to be burned to the ground, and for the people to be taken captive and live in exile. So it's been 150 years! Several generations. God's people have finally returned to the Promised Land; they have finally rebuilt the city; they have committed themselves to God. And then guess what happens?!?! They go right back to their same old ways. They do the exact same things that caused this to happen in the first place. As **Proverbs 26:11** says, **As a dog returns to its vomit, so fools repeat their folly.** And Nehemiah is saying: Wake up!!! These people needed **Holy accountability!** They knew what God wanted them to do. They promised to do it. And they needed someone to hold them accountable. *And so do we.*

I know I've been there before. And my best guess is that you have, too. At some point or another, we've all made commitments that we promised to keep. Commitments about the kind of husband or wife you are going to be. You've made commitments about the parent you are going to be. You've made commitments about the kind of words you are not going to say, about the alcohol you are not going to drink, about the websites you are not going to visit, about the hook-ups you are not going to have - we've all made commitments. For the most part, most of the time, we know what we are supposed to do. We've made promises to ourselves, to others, and to God about what we're going to do. But sometimes, just like them, instead of taking steps forward, we take steps backward. And that's why, just like them, we need accountability. Just like them, we need someone who loves us enough, cares about us enough and who is wise enough, to have a conversation with us where we take an honest assessment of our life, and see if any changes need to be made.

Here's the major take away today. **Everybody needs accountability.** 2X. Say that with me. Everybody needs accountability. Everybody means everybody. I need it; you need it. Your boss needs it; your employees need it. Police officers need it. The media needs it. Congress needs it. The president needs it. Everybody needs accountability. But here's the reality: Accountability is hard. Accountability makes us uncomfortable. In a study involving over 7,000 **medical professionals in America**, when doctors and nurses observe someone in the operating room making a mistake, how likely do you think they are to speak up and say something? It's a numerical percentage. Take a guess. 8%. Doesn't make you very comfortable for your next surgery, does it!? Everybody needs accountability.

When we fail to have people speak into our lives and point out potential mistakes, it's like removing the guardrails from a windy mountain road. If everything goes perfectly, no big deal. But if we make one mistake, with no protection, what happens? We're flying off a cliff. In his best selling book, **Outliers**, Malcolm Gladwell talks about cultural norms in Korea, and how an unwillingness to ask challenging questions of others that could cause them to feel uncomfortable has led to many airline accidents, including this one: **Korean Air Flight 801**. This flight went down on August 6, 1997, killing 228 of the 254 people on board. The heartbreaking thing? The crash was entirely avoidable. But when the pilot made the mistake, no one was willing to question or challenge his decision. This is what Gladwell says about the culture **"In that culture, you are obliged to be deferential toward your elders and superiors... That's dangerous when it comes to modern airplanes which are designed to be piloted by a crew that works together as a team of equals, remaining unafraid to point out mistakes or disagree with a captain."** Do you realize how many parallels there are between this story and the lives we live every day?

Please hear me on this. This is so important! If you do not create an environment where the people around you can ask you tough questions, where they can ask you what you are doing, why you are doing it and with whom you're doing it, if you don't allow for real accountability, your life might end up looking like that plane. A lack of accountability almost always leads to collateral damage. There will be heartache and devastation. Some of us who are here today know that all too well from personal experience.

Everybody needs accountability. I can tell you what this looks like for me, every single week since I was 16 years old. So for more than half of my life, I have met with other men where we hold each other accountable. This is not a group where people share struggles and everyone kind of chuckles and says, "Oh, we've all been there. Try better next time." These have been the sort of groups where we have exceptionally high expectations for ourselves and for one another. We want to be challenged. We want to be honest, and we want to grow because too much is on the line. Not every group has been identical, but these are the sorts of questions we ask each other:

What has your time in God's Word and prayer been like this week?

Have you consistently reflected the love of Christ to your wife?

Have you consistently reflected the love of our Heavenly Father to your children?

Have you shared your faith with people who don't know Jesus?

Are you investing into younger people and making disciples?

Whom have you served this week?

Have your words reflected the character and kindness of God?

Have you been generous with your finances, giving away more than 10%?

Have you handled any sexual temptation with integrity?

**Have you been disciplined with eating, drinking, and exercise?
Is there any area where you feel prone to temptation?
Have you been 100% honest with us?**

Everybody needs accountability. Your questions don't need to be the same as my questions, but we need people in our lives who are asking us questions. They are not holding us accountable to an arbitrary list of expectations, or to their standards, but they are holding us accountable to what we ourselves have said we want to do.

Listen to what best-selling author Kelly Patterson has said: **“Twenty years of research involving more than 100,000 people reveals that *the* key skill of effective leaders, teammates, parents, and loved ones is the capacity to skillfully address risky issues.”** Accountability is not easy. It's hard. But if we want our companies to flourish, if we want our relationships to flourish, if we want our families to flourish, if we want this church to flourish, we have to address the risky issues. We have to have accountability. **Accountability is not a sign of weakness; it's a sign of wisdom.** Inviting accountability into your life means that you are smart enough to know that you are better with the help of others than you can be on your own. That's wisdom.

That's why we want everyone in this church to be in a Life Group. Yes, we want you to have great friends in this church, and share meals with one another and talk about what God is teaching you and how you are growing; but more than just friendships and meals, laughter and memories, we want you to have accountability with other people you are sharing life with, who speak into your world as you speak into theirs, so that we can all consistently grow in our faith. That's the real goal. We began by saying, **Everybody needs accountability**, and now we can add the why: **so we can all look more like Jesus.** Just like in Nehemiah, God is doing a great work in us, building something incredible here, we get to be a part of it. He is drawing so many of us to Christ! But if we want this to last and not just be a flash in the pan, we have to hold each other accountable. Porch. Communion. (Jesus calls us out on our sin; then he pays the price for our sins!)

