

## “NEHEMIAH 10: PATTERNS OF RENEWAL III – Doers of the Word”

by the Rev. Canon Dr. Duke Vipperman  
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The sermon began with a brief video...

<https://www.facebook.com/video.php?v=1020149400777254&set=vb.116613175028420&type=2&theater>

A Korean boy bringing a Cambodian girl clean water. *If anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones who is my disciple, said Jesus he will certainly not lose his reward.*

(Matthew 10:42) What if that was not just a one-time gift. Imagine if he did that all the time, maybe three times a week: brought water to the thirsty. Small things done with great love.

Today we end our summer series on Nehemiah. On Labour Day Sunday it would also be nice to hear some habits that might refresh you and your world.

*Arise and Build*, he said (Nehemiah 2:17) Nehemiah built their confidence, they rebuilt the city walls, Ezra the priest rebuilt their faith. They listened, they confessed and vowed *to follow the Law of God given through Moses the servant of God and obey carefully all the commands, regulations and decrees of the LORD our Lord* (Nehemiah 10:29). Ezra's crowning achievement

was placing the written law in the centre of community. (Throntveit, Mark A. (2012-09-03). *Ezra-Nehemiah: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching & Preaching) (p. 110). Westminster John Knox Press. Kindle Edition. ).

Ezra was a second Moses, starting habits we still keep. We read the scripture, we seek understanding, then we go and put it into practice. We owe that practice to Ezra the priest.

Here they promise to keep the laws about who they marry, when they rest and how they support God's house. We follow those habits, too.

In marriage we develop habits of faithfulness which speak of God's faithfulness. Their concern is not simply ethnic purity. Marrying outside their people had led to disaster and a traumatic exile. Back in the day conversion to a religion you were not born into was rare. The gods of your birth defined your life and your family. A break from the gods was a break with your family and your heritage. That is still true around the world today. A pagan wife carried her household gods across the threshold. If you married an idolater your children were raised as idolaters. King Solomon had 700 wives and 300 concubines, many from peoples God said don't marry. Each brought their gods with them and so in time the memory of the God who saved them was diluted at best.

They had also lost the habit of weekly rest: the seven day rhythm of rest and forgiveness. Observing the Sabbath was supposed to be a defining characteristic for Jews. The Sabbath says life does not depend on your work but on God. Take a break. God can sustain you. To not take time off is a blasphemous claim to be greater than God since even God rested. Back then people married to other gods worked constantly and so felt little need of time consuming Temple spirituality. There is wisdom in what they vowed.

In the habit of worship you remember who you are. If people can exchange false gods for the true God, if they can take off one out of seven, if they can be reminded of who they are and who God is, all well and good.

But there were unintended consequences. Pharisaic Judaism devolved into obsessing about ethnic purity, obsessing not about resting and healing and renewing life but on rules for Sabbath-keeping, so obsessed about supporting God's house Jesus had to clear the temple courts of the money changers.

But they got this much right. *We must be doers of the word* said James *not hearers only* (James 1:22' cf Matthew 7:21-29). Who you spend your life with: still important. When you rest: still important. That we worship together: still important.

But what other habits might God be calling you to, us calling us to keep in these days? Jesus is Lord even of our habits. Its one of the first Christian messages I heard. I told my conversion story here seven years ago. Could you bear it once more?

Life was unraveling during my senior year at university when I heard a preacher John Guest saying *"You may feel like you are drowning. You need Christ to be your Saviour, to be a life preserver thrown to you. But to be pulled out of the water, you must hold on to that life preserver and let it take you to safety. For Jesus to be your Saviour you must take him as your Lord. Give him the say in your life."* Later I sat in a stairwell and prayed for God to clean up my life like the janitor sweeping the floor below me. God became my janitor sweeping up the detritus of my bad decisions. Four years later I started ministry in an Anglican church – as God would have it as a janitor in John Guest church. In time they sent me on mission to Quebec where I met Deborah who later bravely married me. There I worked for David Whitehouse who became rector here. David asked me to follow him here as rector. I did and the rest is history. If you want Jesus to be your Saviour, make it your practice to follow him as Lord.

One of the key questions we ask all applicants for staff of both our Julie's, and the director of youth ministry is this: what spiritual practices, what holy habits, what rhythms of life sustain you?

Whatever the specifics, we are called first to be. Doing flows from being, from cultivating a relationship with God, being aware of the reality of God and including your friends in that conversation. Children are happy just to love God and get on with it. We need to be like that.

*(adapted from Celtic Daily Prayer Finan Readings for August 28-30)*

*[the next six paragraphs either quote paraphrase or summarize The 5 Habits of Highly Missional People: Taking the BELLS Challenge to Fulfill the Mission of God: Michael Frost, Distributed via Exponential Resources. 2014.]*

Jesus fully integrated faith and action. They cannot be separated. *"Show me your faith without deeds,* said The Apostle James *and I will show you my faith by my deeds"* (James 2:18). What you do expresses who you are. But your actions also shape your faith. *"We are what we repeatedly do.* said Aristotle. Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit." Faith is not an act, adds Michael Frost, a single choice, or even a belief system; Faith is a habit. Your life practices, your

habits, your rhythms shape how you believe. I wonder what you find to refresh and give life to you and those near you.

Frost recommends five habits he finds among highly missional people: his challenge to us to fulfill the mission of God. In this challenge there's no ice involved simply weekly habits that

can unite us as followers of Jesus and propel us into other's lives, practices that don't deplete your energy, but re-energize, replenishing your reserves and connecting you more deeply to Jesus. These first letter of these five habits spell the word BELLS. B-E-L-L-S

Read them with me. You are not promising to do them but I'd like us to feel what they sound like if we say them.

*BLESS - I will bless three people this week,  
at least one of whom is not a member of our church.*

*EAT - I will eat with three people this week,  
at least one of whom is not a member of our church.*

*LISTEN - I will spend at least one period of the week listening for the Spirit.*

*LEARN - I will spend at least one period of the week learning of Jesus.*

*SENT I will journal throughout the week all the ways I alerted others  
in word and action to the universal reign of God through Jesus.*

Each habit is designed to release a certain value. If you bless people all the time, you'll be a generous person. If you eat with others often, you'll have greater capacity for hospitality. If you foster the habit of listening to the Spirit, you'll be more sensitive when the spirit moves. If you're learning about and following Jesus you might become more like him. If you're journaling the myriad ways you've been sent into your world, you'll see yourself more and more as someone sent to your own neighborhood. Each habit shapes a value in you: Generosity, Hospitality, Spirituality, Following Jesus, Joining God in his mission to the world.

For example, to "bless", says Frost, mainly means to confer prosperity or happiness. Blessing someone who has sneezed is an expression of goodwill and a desire for their health. *I've (Frost) heard that part of the etymology of the term is "to add strength to another's arm."* Anything that relieves someone's burden in life, anything that helps them breathe more easily, anything small or large that lifts their spirit or alleviates their distress: an encouraging word, a kind deed a gift – that can add strength to someone's arm.

In a doctoral study called "Blessers versus Converters." two teams of short-term missionaries to Thailand were compared. Each had distinctly different missional strategies. "Blessers" went hoping simply to be a blessing. They spoke kindly to whoever came their way, or did something good, or gave just out of the kindness of their heart. "Converters" went to evangelize - winning people with the gospel. 'Blessers' had much greater social impact than 'converters': society seemed better to those who they blessed.' But get this 'blessers' had about 50 times as many conversions as 'converters!' 'Blessers' were 50 times more successful helping people find their way back to God!"

[the last six paragraph either quote or summarize portions of *The 5 Habits of Highly Missional People*: available free at <http://www.eglises-baptistes.fr/medias/fichiers/services/5/405/fivehabits-V1.pdf>.

You can change your world one drink of water at a time.

Remember the habits the people promised to keep?

No intermarrying with prohibited foreigners. Keep the Sabbath. Support the Temple.

*Nehemiah slips off for a quick visit to Babylon, and, as Phil Campbell put it, by the time Nehemiah gets back, the temple is neglected with a room rented out to one of his enemies, the Sabbath is ignored, and intermarriage is rife.* (Nehemiah - Diary of a disaster [PHIL CAMPBELL Perspective Vo2 No1](#) ©Perspective 1999)

Old habits die hard.

The covenant they made was not worth the paper it was written on.

The sins of Solomon had returned to haunt them.

Nehemiah the book concludes with him deeply saddened and pleading for mercy from God: he's done the best he can but he feels like an abject failure.

How will it be for us?

Will we fail in helping our children, youth and neighbours follow Jesus throughout their whole lives?

It may be the habits each of you personally keep that will make all the difference to them.

No pressure.

Will the BELLS challenge of Blessing, Eating, Listening, Learning and Sending ring out for our families and neighbours? Or will the bells be silenced like our own church bell which merely clangs with a dull thud? Only God knows.

There's no better way to conclude than by joining Nehemiah in four ever-so-brief prayers found in Nehemiah 13.

*Remember me my God, and do not blot out what I have so faithfully done for the house of God and its services.*

*Remember me, my God, and show mercy to me according to your great love.*

*Remember those, my God, who defile the covenant.*

*Remember me with favour, my God. Amen.*