

Title: Agreements are Made to be Kept  
Date: November 12, 2023  
Subject: Taking positive steps to obey God.  
Scripture: Nehemiah 9:38 – 10:39

The Philadelphia summer of 1776 was hot. The delegates to the Continental Congress meeting in Independence Hall added more fire and heat as they debated ideas, principles, the value of creating a new country and the cost that would be involved. They finally hammered out The Declaration of Independence.

It begins: “The unanimous Declaration of the thirteen united States of America, When in the Course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”

It ends with this pledge: “And for the support of this Declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor.”

The first person to sign was John Hancock. His signature is big, bold and easy to read. He said he wanted to make sure British King George could read it without needing glasses. The 56 signers demonstrated their commitment by placing their “John Hancocks” on the document.

October 30, 444 BC was a decision point for the people of Nehemiah’s day. They had gathered to hear the word of God. They responded by worshipping and confessing - admitting and repenting – of the nation’s sins and theirs. This included being arrogant, stiff-necked, not obeying God's commands, not remembering the miracles he performed, rebellious and committing awful blasphemies.

They turned back to God, recognizing him as the one true God who is a forgiving God, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love. He is patient, gracious and merciful. They expressed their dependence upon him and prayed he wouldn’t ignore them amid all the current hardships they were facing.

The day wasn’t over. There was more to their response. The second part comes in Nehemiah 9:38.

Read Nehemiah 9:38.

An agreement with God. The people entered into a commitment of what they’d do. It wasn't enough that they admitted they’d done wrong by sinning and felt bad and sad. That's where a lot of people stop. “I'm just so sorry God. I'm glad to get it off my chest. See you later.” They may shed a few tears, may tell somebody about what they’ve done. They feel better and are anxious to get on their merry way without changing.

That approach makes for repeated defeat in the spiritual life. The reason is the issue isn't fully settled and the person isn't interested in moving forward.

The people wanted to move forward. They made a binding agreement with God. They gave their word in the form of a promise. It wasn't just “cross my heart, hope to die, you can spit in my eye” kind of promise. They put it in writing and placed their personal seals on it.

Putting it in writing was for themselves. There's something about putting pen to paper that makes it more real. At our governing board on Monday we were talking about where in the Bible we've been reading. Jim Berg said he's been reading through Matthew and writing it out. There were good-natured comments about him making an improved version. He's doing it to imprint God's word on his mind. Great approach.

There's another purpose for the people writing out their binding agreement. They were putting themselves on the line, and even more so as the leaders put their names on the document.

What if the delegates to the Continental Congress decided they weren't going to put their names on the Declaration and would send the anonymous document to King George? That would really tell him off. Or if they had used disappearing ink so bystanders would get the idea they were serious but they couldn't be accused of being traitors because their names weren't there. It would just be a big show. Anonymous documents don't carry much weight.

84 people in Nehemiah's day signed their declaration of dependence. Their names are recorded in vv. 1 - 27. It begins with Nehemiah the governor and includes the priests, Levites and leaders of the people. They didn't use disappearing ink or pretend to sign so people would think well of them. They committed themselves to the binding agreement with their lives, maybe their fortunes, and certainly their sacred honor.

They were joined by the rest of the people who committed themselves to God.

Read 10:28.

We can see the seriousness of what the whole group did by looking at the next verse.

Read 10:29.

That's a strong position to take. Joining together and binding themselves with a curse and an oath: “If we disobey, may horrible, terrible things happen to us because we deserve it.”

The agreement included the promise to obey carefully and completely all the commands, regulations and decrees of the Lord our Lord. The word used for “agreement” is similar to “Amen.” There was force and conviction to it. Jesus spoke this way when he said, “I tell you the truth” and “truly, truly.” It's like a witness in court promising to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.

Take an 8 year old boy who crafts a homemade birthday card for his mom. On the front, in big red letters, he slowly and carefully prints “To the bestest mom in the whole world.” On the inside is a heart with the words “I love you, mommy!” In smaller print he adds “and I'll obey you.” The mom is deeply touched.

A few days later, the boy's dad asks the little guy how he's doing in keeping his promise. The kiddo scrunches up his face in deep thought: “Well, pretty good, I think.”

The dad, “Have you emptied your garbage? Did you put your dirty clothes in the hamper?”

If the answer was “yes,” then the boy had done a good job. If no, then not so much.

It's easier to claim general statements have been achieved. Specific ones? They hold our toes to the fires. The Israelites listed several specifics where they were going to obey the Lord. These were areas where they had been lax.

Read V. 30

The first area was faithfulness in marriage relationships. They were guilty of mixed marriages. The Lord had chosen the Jewish people from all the peoples of the earth to be set apart for him in a sacred relationship and to be totally dedicated to him. They were prohibited from intermarrying with the surrounding nations as intermarriage would almost assuredly lead to the worship of false gods. God wanted his people to stand out from the immoral behavior of the nations that surrounded them.

Commentator William Barclay provides historical background on the passage where Jesus speaks of importance of marriage (Matthew 19:11-12): "In theory nothing could be higher than the Jewish ideal of marriage. Chastity was held to be the greatest of all the virtues." He notes their viewpoint: "We find that God is long-suffering to every sin except the sin of unchastity. Unchastity causes the glory of God to depart. Every Jew must surrender his life rather than commit idolatry, murder or adultery. The very altar sheds tears when a man divorces the wife of his youth." Quite the declarations.

Sadly, their practice often didn't match their words. The most glaring example was King Solomon, the wisest man in the world. He had several problems but the worst was having 1000 wives and concubines. These foreign wives led his heart away from devotion to God.

Followers of Christ are to uphold the biblical view of marriage. It was instituted by God as a building block of society. Often, when people think of "institution," it conjures images of a drab, sterile building or organization. That's not what the Lord has in mind. Marriage is a living, vibrant organism into which the Lord has breathed his life.

Author David Augsburger asks, "Is marriage a private action of two persons in love or a public act of two pledging a contract? Neither. It is something other, very much other. Basically, the Christian view of marriage is not that it is primarily or essentially a binding contract. The Christian understands marriage as a covenant made under God and in the presence of fellow members of the Christian family. Such a pledge endures, not because of the force of law or fear of its sanctions, but because an unconditional covenant has been made. A covenant more solemn, more binding, more permanent than any legal contract."

God's standard is monogamy, permanency, an indissoluble union. Divorce is permitted but not commanded for marital unfaithfulness. There are other options for abusive situations.

The concern about mixed marriage isn't about people from different ethnicities but about marriage between a person who has placed trust in Jesus Christ as Savior and a nonbeliever. God instituted marriage as a sacred relationship bringing together two people who are in a right relationship with him. Marriage should be two believers or two unbelievers.

The best solution is to not get into a relationship with a person who isn't a Christian. The heart can do funny things, become attached and feelings override the mind. There've been many stories of a young Christian woman finding an unsaved man, or a young Christian man finding an unsaved woman, who get far enough into their relationship where it seems marriage is the natural outcome. The Christian thinks and hopes the person would place their trust in Christ after they get married. It might happen but it's extremely rare. People should be on the same spiritual wavelength before marriage as it's probably unlikely to change afterwards.

There are times when one person of an unsaved married couple commits their life to Christ and the other doesn't. This doesn't grant the believer the right to get out of the relationship because they've found themselves in a mixed marriage. The believer is to stay with the unbeliever, let his or her light shine hoping the unsaved person will turn their life over to Christ.

The second specific was faithfulness in relationship between business and worship.

Read v. 31. Jews were commanded to work six days and rest on the seventh - the Sabbath. There are two reasons. The Lord performed the work of creation for six days and on the seventh he rested (Exodus 20:8-11; Dt 5:12-15). Second, the Lord brought the people out of slavery in Egypt and gave them rest in the promised land. Sabbath was a sign to the people and the surrounding peoples of the covenant God had made with Israel.

The seventh year was created to be a Sabbath year in which the land wasn't worked so it could be at rest (Leviticus 25:1-7). God would provide a bigger harvest leading up to it so people wouldn't have to worry about where they were going to get food. It was also a time to forgive debts.

The people had found a work around. They were doing more than the necessary labor such as milking cows or goats. The people were conducting business as usual, buying and selling like it was just any other day. While they may not have worked, they depended upon their non-Jewish neighbors who worked to provide the stuff they wanted to buy on the Sabbath.

Part of the reason the Lord allowed Israel to be taken into exile was they hadn't observed the Sabbath year (2 Chronicles 36:20, 21; Jeremiah 25:8-12). The exile was judgment by God on the people but also provided the opportunity for the land to rest. It was purified so when the people returned from captivity they'd have a new beginning (Leviticus 26:40-45; Jeremiah 27:22, 29:10).

We need rest. People weren't created to work 24/7 seven days a week, not even for 6 days. We need daily rest, better known as sleep, but we also need weekly time when we're not devoted to and engaged in the stuff of earning a living. Our bodies can't handle it. Our minds can't handle it. Our psyches can't handle it. Our spiritual lives can't handle it. We don't want to do business like the world.

A major part of the Sabbath for Israel was to take time to worship God. As Christians, we worship on the Lord's Day because Jesus rose from the dead on the first day of the week and other factors. It's the time when we gather with like-minded believers to worship God. We direct our thoughts and attention to our Creator, our Savior our Provider. We sing his praises. We look into his word to find who he is, what he has

done and is doing, and how we're to respond. We're told to not forsake the assembling of ourselves together especially as we see the end draw near (Hebrews 10:25).

The third specific takes up the majority of the binding agreement – faithfulness in financial stewardship - specifically in providing for the House of God. This comes in vv. 32-39.

The people committed themselves to the financial responsibility of supporting the temple, its work and workers. All males 20 and over were required to pay a temple tax (vv. 32, 33; Exodus 30:11 - 16). People were to provide wood for the altar fire (v. 34; Lev 6:12, 13), donate the first fruits of the harvest (v. 35; Exodus 13:13), redeem first born child and animals (v. 36) and provide food for the priests (Numbers 18:26-29).

The required tithes and offerings were a whole lot more than 10%. It was more like 25 or 30%. All of it had to do with providing for the place of worship and the people who led worship. “The House of our God/Lord” is used nine times in Nehemiah 10. The people had failed in their support of God's house. The concluding statement of the chapter is “We will not neglect the House of our God.”

When the phrase “House of God” is used, we may think of a place like this. It's accurate because this is our place of worship where we gather with God's people to worship God. We shouldn't neglect God's house. Neglect is shown by not showing up, not participating in ministering to others, or not contributing to the work done in and through the house of God. A good place for our giving to start is the 10% and increase it as God supplies the ability and our desire to give.

There's a second way to understand “House of God.” Scripture tells us: “Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; You were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body” (1 Corinthians 6:19, 20). Church father Augustine wrote about a time he was tempted to give in to the behavior of the old pre-Christian life. He said, “You fool, do you not know that you are carrying our God around with you?” God's house is each individual believer. We are to take care of this “House of God.” The immediate context was fleeing from sexual immorality. We can additionally think of caring for the body in terms of what we feed it spiritually and how we treat it physically.

These are three specific areas where the people of Jerusalem said they were going to obey. They may connect with you. There may be other things that come to your mind.

The question is: what renewed commitment is the Lord asking us to make? It doesn't have to be the result of coming out of an experience where we've confessed our sins to God and repented of them. It may be just because it's a new day.

Is it some godly attitude or habit you need to incorporate into your life – kind words, more prayer? Some attitude or habit you need to cut out of your life – stubbornness, gossip, laziness? You may want to write it down and sign your name as in a binding agreement. It makes it harder to forget and harder to break as well as more difficult to say the agreement was something else. Able to show to others so they can see our progress.

Agreements aren't made to be broken but to be kept.