

Intro: We all have *personal habits or mannerisms*. Twirling your hair or tucking hair behind your ear is common for those with longer hair. Cracking knuckles or biting fingernails are also common. How about jiggling the leg up and down or tapping a foot? Yep, we've all seen – and in many cases have done – these things. And *usually it's no big deal*.

But *sometimes habits of people really bother others*. Slurping food, talking in movie theaters, misuse of smart phones and texting while walking or driving, sharing *everything* on Facebook, leaving shopping carts in the middle of a parking space – you know the list could go on and on.

And if you are a Christian, you should be aware of a habit that really bothers a lot of people in our culture. It has to do with our use of the Bible as the greatest authority in our lives. We have a lot of trouble separating the authority of God himself and that of the Bible because we are convinced that the Bible is his book, written by people moved to do so by the Holy Spirit and resulting in a Book that is 100% accurate, truthful, and trustworthy. But *to others this is a form of superstition – or of blindly following “tradition” that no longer deserves to be followed.* Right now personal freedom and personal choices mean everything – and that includes the right and freedom to choose whatever makes a person feel good – regardless of any other authority. *The US Supreme Court decisions for the last decade-plus have made this very clear.* So it makes sense that people are uncomfortable when Christians point to the Bible, quote the Bible or in any way mention the Bible as *the* source and standard of truth and what is right and good and wise. There is an inevitable tension or fundamental disagreement when one group says, “I feel I enjoy this and I want this, so let me freely choose what I want to be or say or do and the other group says, “The Bible tells us what is good and proper and in our best interests, so we submit personal likes and dislikes to what God tells us.” *We are historically known as “People of the Book” and that is not always a compliment.* (Islam and Judaism as well as Christianity are also known as “people of the book,” by the way, even though the “books” and writings each considers central and authoritative are different.) People of the Book are frustrating to people who don't respect or submit to the Book.

This is nothing new. Today's chapter from the OT book of Nehemiah shows this. The tension – the friction – between the Lord's people and others was there over 400 years before Christ came to earth to accomplish the work of our salvation. Today we continue our sermon series that takes us through the book of Nehemiah. Today's focus is Nehemiah chapter 8. *The building project that had been undertaken is actually finished* – the broken down wall of Jerusalem has been rebuilt and made strong again, much to the displeasure of enemies around them. Here is what we were told in chapter 6:

Nehemiah 6:15-16, The wall was completed on the twenty-fifth of Elul (the 6th month). When all our enemies heard about this, all the surrounding nations were afraid and lost their self-confidence, because they realized that this work had been done with the help of our God.

Those who had opposed the efforts of Nehemiah and the believers in Jerusalem (remember *Sanballet of Samaria, Tobiah the Ammonite, and Geshem the Arab?*) were quite frustrated and knew that they were at least temporarily defeated. But both Bible and secular history tells us they never stopped trying to turn the tables and defeat or frustrate the plans of the Lord's people. The

truth remains the same today – *whenever and wherever God builds a church the devil builds a chapel next door*. At present VOTL is rejoicing that we are seeing our first ministry center being built just down the road on Loomis. But it is foolishness to think that everyone in Franklin is happy about this or that Satan has given up attempts to undermine our faith-life and attempts to serve souls in our area. *Chapter 8 tells us how Nehemiah and his coworkers reacted to their situation*. It must have exasperated their enemies and invited ridicule from many of their neighbors.

We now read the first 6 verses of Nehemiah chapter 8:

Nehemiah 6:1-6 ¹When the seventh month came and the Israelites had settled in their towns, all the people assembled as one man in the square before the Water Gate. They told Ezra the scribe to bring out the Book of the Law of Moses, which the LORD had commanded for Israel.

² So on the first day of the seventh month Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, which was made up of men and women and all who were able to understand. ³ He read it aloud from daybreak till noon as he faced the square before the Water Gate in the presence of the men, women and others who could understand. And all the people listened attentively to the Book of the Law.

⁴ Ezra the scribe stood on a high wooden platform built for the occasion. Beside him on his right stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiah and Maaseiah; and on his left were Pedaiiah, Mishael, Malkijah, Hashum, Hashbaddanah, Zechariah and Meshullam.

⁵ Ezra opened the book. All the people could see him because he was standing above them; and as he opened it, the people all stood up. ⁶ Ezra praised the LORD, the great God; and all the people lifted their hands and responded, “Amen! Amen!” Then they bowed down and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground.

These comments may be helpful:

- *These events took place at the start of the 7th month – less than a week after the Jerusalem walls were rebuilt*. There was no let-down or celebrating to the point of carelessness or forgetfulness about how they might best behave as God’s people.
- The first day of the 7th month is the start of their civil year – still observed today among Jews as *Rosh Hashanah and also called the Festival of Trumpets* since they sounded trumpets to announce the new moon and start of a new month and year.
- They celebrated the New Year differently than most would have in those days and than most people do today. Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the scribe, and the families in Jerusalem did things much differently. Notice these expressions from the verses we read a moment ago:

They told Ezra the scribe to bring out the Book of the Law of Moses . . . **He read it aloud from daybreak till noon** . . . in the presence of the men, women and others who could understand. And **all the people listened attentively to the Book of the Law**. . . . Ezra opened the book. All the people could see him because he was standing above them; and **as he opened it, the people all stood up**. Ezra praised the LORD, the great God; and **all the people lifted their hands and responded, “Amen! Amen!” Then they bowed down and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground**.

These people were not just going through motions or pretending to be interested in God's Word. For at least 5 hours they stood and listened attentively! They stood to show respect for the Lord's word. They worshiped and expressed humility before God in such a way that anyone who watched them would know what they were feeling.

But why? It doesn't seem natural or particularly smart for them to humble themselves before a book. ***It does make sense to humble ourselves in the presence of the Lord himself – but a piece of writing?*** There is a difference between the living Lord and a piece of literature. But to these believers it was not as simple as that. The living Lord himself had said, many times through many prophets, that his Word was different than other words and writings. Through the prophet Isaiah, for example, God had said, **Isaiah 55:11, "My word will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it."** This is the same kind of promise that the Lord Jesus gave to the people in John 6, talking with them right after he had miraculously fed 5,000 men, plus women and children, from 5 loaves of bread and 2 fish. He said, **John 6:63, "The words that I have spoken to you, they are spirit and life."** It was like saying, "You are impressed with the miracle of filling your stomachs by multiplying food to eat. But every time I open my mouth and give you my word, there is miraculous power that can accomplish more than fill your bodies with food. My words are the tools that I use to give life to people – spiritual life and eternal life." News articles may inform us. Novels may entertain us. Poetry may impress us. But only the living, active Word of God can transform us.

Mark Twain is recognized as one of the best writers that America has ever produced. One of the things he knew is that a writer has to search and find precisely the right word that he or she wants to make a point. To him it was important. He once said, ***"The difference between the right word and the almost right word is the difference between lightning and the lightning bug."*** To some people it may appear that there is little difference – but to someone who really knows what they are talking about, there is a great difference! And God himself delights to remind us that ***there is that kind of a difference between his Word and the words and writings of everyone else, including the world's best writers and masters of literature.*** Do you ever remember someone saying, "I used to be depressed a lot, and often felt that life simply wasn't worth living . . . until I read Shakespeare, and now I am a changed person!"? Or, "I knew what I was doing was wrong, but all my good intentions never kept me from my pet sins . . . until I read Ernest Hemingway (or John Steinbeck or Leo Tolstoy, or Mark Twain), and now I have joy and find the ability to live a new life!"? But millions upon millions of people through history have freely testified that they were slaves to sin, shackled by sorrow, disappointments to themselves and others as husbands, wives, employers, employees, citizens and neighbors – until they read the Bible. ***And God used his Word to change hearts, transform thoughts, and redirect destinies!***

The invisible, most gracious and all-powerful agent for this transformation is the Holy Spirit – the same Person of God who uses the Word with water in Baptism and the Word with bread and wine in the Lord's Supper to give or strengthen faith and spiritual life in Christ. Aside from historical information he uses laws and commands to impress on us our disobediences and failures. And he uses the Good News, the Gospel, of Christ's saving work as our Substitute to create trust in his promises and joy in the knowledge of salvation. ***But more than that! He penetrates our innermost being, our emotions, wills, and minds! He transforms them!*** That is more than "educating" or giving information. Mere education doesn't change hearts or value

systems (Cf. Teddy Roosevelt’s statement: A man who has never gone to school may steal from a freight car; but if he has a university education, he may steal the whole railroad.)

To draw a parallel: When we eat food, our bodies are receiving protein, carbohydrates, fats, vitamins, and minerals—but these components of nutrition wouldn’t do us much good were it not for the digestive enzymes, that silently yet powerfully break down the food and serve to help get what needs to get to all body parts. God’s word is different from other words because the Holy Spirit accompanies it and powerfully makes a difference inside us. So Bible reading is much more than exposing ourselves to information (although there’s a lot of that there) – it is putting ourselves in a position to receive the Spirit and be internally enriched and strengthened by God the Holy Spirit. So no wonder we say, “*Look to the Book! The Word Works!*”

Does it work? Returning to Nehemiah 8, what do we observe? Now let’s read the rest of the chapter: **Nehemiah 8:7-18**

⁷ **The Levites—Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan and Pelaiah—instructed the people in the Law while the people were standing there. ⁸ They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was being read.**

⁹ **Then Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who were instructing the people said to them all, “This day is sacred to the Lord your God. Do not mourn or weep.” For all the people had been weeping as they listened to the words of the Law.**

¹⁰ **Nehemiah said, “Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is sacred to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.”**

¹¹ **The Levites calmed all the people, saying, “Be still, for this is a sacred day. Do not grieve.”**

¹² **Then all the people went away to eat and drink, to send portions of food and to celebrate with great joy, because they now understood the words that had been made known to them.**

¹³ **On the second day of the month, the heads of all the families, along with the priests and the Levites, gathered around Ezra the scribe to give attention to the words of the Law. ¹⁴ They found written in the Law, which the Lord had commanded through Moses, that the Israelites were to live in booths during the feast of the seventh month ¹⁵ and that they should proclaim this word and spread it throughout their towns and in Jerusalem: “Go out into the hill country and bring back branches from olive and wild olive trees, and from myrtles, palms and shade trees, to make booths”—as it is written.**

¹⁶ **So the people went out and brought back branches and built themselves booths on their own roofs, in their courtyards, in the courts of the house of God and in the square by the Water Gate and the one by the Gate of Ephraim. ¹⁷ The whole company that had returned from exile built booths and lived in them. From the days of Joshua son of Nun until that day, the Israelites had not celebrated it like this. And their joy was very great.**

¹⁸ **Day after day, from the first day to the last, Ezra read from the Book of the Law of God. They celebrated the feast for seven days, and on the eighth day, in accordance with the regulation, there was an assembly.**

When we analyze key elements of what happened here, we see a pattern that is repeated many, many times throughout the history of God's people in Bible times and continuing up to our own lives. For example:

- There was careful instruction and diligent learning going on. **“The Levites instructed the people** in the Law while the people were standing there. They read from the Book of the Law of God, **making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was being read.**” Pretending to read the Bible but daydreaming, or taking a nap with the Bible in our laps or tucked under our pillows is not helpful. Whenever there is revival or renewal among people, real reading and instruction is a part of it.
- There was obedience on the part of the people. Attitudes were adjusted and the guidance of the Lord was respected and put into practice. They found written in the Law, which the Lord had commanded through Moses, that **the Israelites were to live in booths during the feast of the seventh month So the people went out and brought back branches and built themselves booths on their own roofs, in their courtyards, in the courts of the house of God**
- There was inner joy and a happy attitude – they did not obey the Lord grudgingly or in grumpiness. The Levites calmed all the people, saying, “Be still, **for this is a sacred day. Do not grieve.**”¹² Then all the people went away to eat and drink, to send portions of food and to **celebrate with great joy**, because they now understood the words that had been made known to them. . . . **And their joy was very great.**
- So what's the connection between “obeying” the Lord's will and “having very great joy”? A good starting point is to notice that the Lord's instructions (or commands, or marching orders) were really invitations to review his mighty, loving deeds on behalf of the people. The annual event, established and desired by God, was known as the Festival of Booths (or Tabernacles, or Shelters, or Sukkoth). For a full week the people were to move out of their regular homes and live in a shelter or hut made of tree and shrub branches and leaves. What's that all about? **It reminded them of key events at the start of their history as God's chosen people. It took them back to the deliverance from slavery in Egypt, the Exodus, the Crossing of the Red Sea and then the wandering in the wilderness prior to entering the Promised Land. It was all about being loved by God and preserved by his providence in situations where they could not preserve themselves. It was a celebration of good news, happy gospel of divine grace.** (It would be like God commanding us to commemorate Christmas, Good Friday or Easter. Burdensome? Hardly. Rather a review of God's love and mercy in Jesus Christ. We learn how happy he is to love and meet our needs.) It's like a “command” to choose an ice cream cone or look at the gift I am giving you! It's the story of God's joy in saving and preserving his people. And here's the connection, given in verse 10. Nehemiah 8:10, **“This day is sacred to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.”** The Lord's joy – his delighting in us, blessing us, forgiving us – feeds our strength, making us stronger as well as happier and more secure.