

Work with Integrity

Nehemiah 6

Minister Theo Ma

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Today in Nehemiah we will look at the importance of integrity, the glue that holds faith and work together. In seminary I was taught the importance of integrity for pastors, in how they live and handle God's word, because the congregation looks to them for guidance and as examples. When pastors are compromised, it damages the entire congregation. But integrity is also important for all Christians. Our faith and work stands or falls based on our integrity because we are marked people, set apart from the world to represent Christ to the world. In whatever we say or do in our families, in church, or out in the world, we must walk in integrity and display Jesus' character.

Recall that in Nehemiah, Israel is surrounded by enemies who opposed the rebuilding of Jerusalem's walls. And in 6:16-19 we see that these enemies, specifically Tobiah, have compromised some of the nobility in Jerusalem through intermarriage, which Israelites were not supposed to do. Tobiah got the nobles to try to convince Nehemiah of how great Tobiah was, while simultaneously sending threats to Nehemiah. And these nobles told Tobiah of all Nehemiah's plans, as well as his words and actions. So we see here that Nehemiah is marked. All eyes are on him within Jerusalem and among his enemies.

In this context, Nehemiah shows us 3 ways to walk with integrity. The first is that integrity endures with right conviction. In vv. 1-4, after Israel's enemies failed to stop the wall from being built, they desperately sent letters four times to convince Nehemiah to meet with them outside of Judea (under the pretext of diplomacy) so they could harm him. This was their only option since they knew the king of Persia wasn't on their side. But Nehemiah doesn't warn them about reprisal from the Israelites or leverage the new found strength of Israel at the completion of the wall, but instead only responds that he is busy doing God's work, which is most important. This is the first time Nehemiah personally is threatened with death from these outsiders, yet he endures with conviction that he must continue God's work. To clarify, conviction isn't whatever we feel strongly about, but it's in whatever we can be sure that God feels strongly about. People often use conviction as an excuse to do what they want, even so far as getting divorced. God clearly speaks against divorce and doesn't contradict Himself. Right conviction is aligned with God's word. But in some areas God isn't clear. Conviction isn't a

license for stubbornness or to judge those whose preferences differ. In the Bible there are only some things that are black and white, the most important of which is the gospel. Conviction in the gospel gives us strength to endure. We can be convicted in how Scripture teaches us to live out the gospel, in love, mercy, and compassion. But it isn't clear how we apply that in our lives, which often isn't black and white. This is where we need wisdom.

The second aspect is that integrity speaks through good reputation. It's important that our reputation reflects and stems from our integrity. In vv. 5-9 Sanballat and Geshem blackmail Nehemiah with the threat of false charges of rebellion, which they know the king of Persia is sensitive to, given Israel's history of insurrection. Nehemiah simply responds that these rumors are false and fabricated by his enemies. This is the end of the matter, and these enemies don't pursue these charges further. We can infer that this is because Nehemiah's reputation is so strong, especially with the king, that the rumors wouldn't have stood up. Likewise as Christians, we must also be above reproach. Our reputation often reveals faults hidden to us. In college my reputation as the guy surrounded by girls revealed that I cared too much about being liked by girls. Even now my slight reputation for dropping the ball on things at work reflects the times when I failed to keep my word. It's hard, but we must be accurately regarded as people who live according to the truth we proclaim, especially in the age where our actions can spread all over social media. Christians should be known for their love and integrity, not as compromised hypocrites.

Finally, integrity refuses to do wrong. In vv. 10-14 Tobiah and Sanballat convince Shemaiah to tell Nehemiah to hide in the Temple to escape assassination. As Nehemiah served in the royal court, he probably was a eunuch, and it was not lawful for eunuchs to enter the Temple. So Nehemiah refuses to compromise and sin in this cowardly way. In v. 11 and 13 we see his reputation is on the line. He couldn't let God's work be discredited among the Israelites or the nations. We also must refuse to sin, being beyond reproach in our family lives as well as with our non-Christian friends. We must hold to God's standard, while not being judgmental. We must lovingly acknowledge sin for what it is and be an example for them. We must live according to the gospel, pursuing God, and thereby show people that a life of self-indulgence is empty, but that the gospel produces true joy and satisfaction. Don't live just like the world. Firmly walk in God's light for His glory so that all will see His excellence.

