

People of the Covenant

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[0 : 00] I just have to say, I love seeing God's people just use their gifts and serve one another and being led in worship by you.

And I'm just, I'm sitting here, we're singing a refrain that Michael composed during the psalm. And then, and then Kyla Snow, my goodness, Nehemiah 10, praise God, that was amazing. Whenever there's a reading like that that comes up in our lectionary, we have to give it to the professionals. You should not let me. Yeah. Kyla, man, you rocked it. That was amazing. What is going on in Nehemiah 10? Nehemiah loves his lists. He loves his, he's a very detail-oriented person. And some of us are like that. But what's going on in this chapter? Imagine if you had the responsibility to rebuild society from the ground up. Imagine the slate is wiped clean, no founding documents.

[1 : 00] How would you start? Where would you begin? I mean, how would you build a society where everyone can live in relative peace and freedom? How would you build a society where everyone has what they need in order to flourish?

What kind of founding documents would you create to sustain not only your generation but future generations? In the book of Nehemiah, where we are now, God's people are doing that very thing. They've returned from exile. They have successfully rebuilt at least the wall of the city. And now they have to rebuild their society. They have to figure out how to do life together.

And so they spend days reading and studying God's word. We heard Jeff preach an excellent sermon on that last week. And as they do this, they begin to learn the history of their own ancestors, which at this point they may not have even known very well.

They're looking at the history of their forefathers, the people of Israel. And they begin to realize some things as they learn this history. They realize that there are certain times in Israel's history where they were flourishing and things were going well.

[2 : 14] They lived in relative peace. And then there are other times when they are withering on the vine. They're collapsing into faithlessness and into spiritual decay. And they realize that the times of flourishing are marked by certain characteristics.

During those times, God's people were living lives that were marked by certain characteristics that seemed to contribute to the flourishing of society as a whole.

And so all of the leaders of all of the families get together, and they decide to dedicate themselves to living lives marked by these characteristics that lead to flourishing.

So that's what we're going to look at this morning in Nehemiah chapter 10, four things, four characteristics that lead to spiritual flourishing, that lead to flourishing not only of individuals but of societies as a whole.

Now, some of these things don't translate directly because this is 2,400 years ago. So we're going to be asking, what does this look like in our context? What would these things look like applied to us today?

[3 : 21] Now, obviously, we're not in a position to rebuild society. I mean, maybe some of you are. Most of us are certainly not in that position. But we're all responsible for building our own lives.

Right? We're all responsible for deciding what kind of life we want to live. And if we want to live with any degree of intentionality, that requires forethought. It requires vision.

It requires charting a course for yourself. Some of us are responsible for building families. So how do we do that? What's our vision for our family? Some of us are responsible for leading institutions, organizations.

What kind of culture are we building there? So that's what we're going to look at, four characteristics. This is by no means an exhaustive list, but it is kind of a roadmap to flourishing. And

while it's not an exhaustive list, I would suggest that each of these things belongs on everybody's list.

So let's pray, and then we're going to open God's word together. Lord, we thank you for your word, and we thank you that it's always enlivened by your Holy Spirit.

[4 : 23] When we open your word, this is a way that you speak to us. And we need to hear your word this morning. We need to hear your voice. And so we pray that that would happen, Lord, that you would open our hearts, that we hear what you have to say to us this morning, wherever we find ourselves.

We pray that we would be brought to life by your word. And we pray that through your written word, we would encounter your living word, Jesus Christ. And it's in his name that we pray. Amen. So here are the characteristics that we want to focus on this morning.

The first is this. As we look at what they're doing here, we need to have a willingness in our own lives to have a public faith, to be public and open about our faith.

All of the people here in this chapter, including the most prominent and influential leaders in the community, publicly commit themselves to God. They write out a covenant, and then they all sign their names to it so that everybody knows that they've made this commitment.

Now, why would that kind of thing matter? A couple of reasons. First of all, God's people are called to be a missionary people. We're called to put God's heart on display.

[5 : 40] Jerusalem is meant to be a city that puts the heart of God on display. It's meant to be the place that all of the nations look at and come and inquire about the God of that city.

And it's hard to be a missionary people if people don't even know that we are Christians. That's the first thing. The second thing is equally important, and that is this. As they read the history of Israel, they begin to see another pattern.

Whenever God's people are devoted to worshiping Him and prioritizing Him above everything else, they tend to live in relative freedom. But whenever they start worshiping idols, in other words, whenever they start worshiping anything other than God, they become ensnared by those idols. That's the word that is used very often. They're ensnared. They're held captive by those idols. And that's how idolatry works. Whatever it is that we live for, whatever we can't imagine living without, chances are that's an idol.

And almost anything can become an idol. It's often good things like comfort or safety or success or approval, but they just become more and more important until they become things that we can't imagine living without.

[6 : 52] And they see this pattern, and they realize that whenever God's people allow things to become that important, more important than God, those things end up controlling them and defining them and ensnaring them.

Now, for us as Christians, we believe that Jesus came to set us free. When we put our faith in Jesus, when we ask forgiveness on the basis of His sacrifice for us, we are set free from the penalty of sin.

We're set free from the consequences of that in our lives eternally. But idols still have power in our lives. They still exert tremendous power over our souls, over our hearts.

So when we become Christians by faith, we gain the capacity for spiritual freedom, but it's not automatic. It's not automatic. It's not automatic. If we want to be truly and really spiritually free, where we actually experience it, that actually requires a very high degree of intentionality and commitment.

There are many people who have considered themselves Christians for a long time, but there has been little to no change in their lives. You know, some of us, maybe we've been Christians since we were young children, but it's never really changed us.

[8 : 12] It's never really impacted us, how we live. And one of the reasons for that is that even though a lot of people claim to be Christian, for some of those people, their faith remains compartmentalized, and it remains private.

It's a small part of their life. It's a mode that they enter into some of the time. But they easily shift out of that mode when it makes life easier.

And the point that we see here is that in order for us to experience any degree of real spiritual freedom and growth and change, we have to be all in. We have to own our faith.

And it's almost impossible to own your faith and to be all in on your faith if you compartmentalize it and you keep it private. If there are large swaths of people in your life who have no idea where you are spiritually.

Right? If we live like that, it is so easy for us to remain noncommittal, to remain fair-weather Christians, to sort of claim Christianity while in reality serving idols.

[9 : 20] It's one of the reasons why in our church and in churches like ours, we encourage people to go through something called confirmation. Confirmation. Because one of the things that we do in confirmation is we publicly confess our faith.

We stand up in front of the community. And we say, I believe this. And then we have that faith recognized and affirmed by the church community. And the point is, the more we're willing to be open about our faith, the more it kind of creates a healthy accountability that we need.

It makes it a lot harder to compartmentalize and compromise in our faith when everybody in our lives knows what we believe.

Because we naturally want to live lives that are consistent with what we say we believe. And if we have everybody around us who they know what we claim to believe, it's going to be a lot harder for us to compromise.

You see a very similar dynamic in the addiction recovery world. Some of you have come out of addiction recovery, and you know what I'm talking about. In the culture of groups like AA, people are strongly encouraged to be rigorously open and honest about their struggle with addiction.

[10 : 30] You know, a dear friend of mine has been a slave to alcohol for over 20 years. For the last year and a half, he has gotten sober. And he is very involved in AA.

And he's working the steps. Some of you know what that means. And I would say the single defining characteristic, at least from my experience, in what I have seen change in this man, is that he is rigorously honest about his journey out of addiction.

Everybody he meets, it's one of the first things he tells them. I'm a recovering alcoholic. And he's rigorously honest. And a big part of the reason for that is because he knows how tempting it is to slip back into denial, to slip back into compartmentalizing that part of his life, into minimizing it. And he knows how easily addiction thrives in secrecy. And so he's constantly talking about it to people and being open about it to keep it in the light. Right?

Now, you may not struggle with alcohol addiction, but the Bible says we all have spiritual addictions. That's what idolatry is. We're all recovering spiritual addicts, idol addicts.

[11 : 45] And so when we're honest about our commitment to find freedom in Jesus, it makes it a lot harder for us to slip back in denial. So the first characteristic that I would put forward to you is to be willing to have a public faith, to be open and honest with everyone in your life about what you believe.

The number two thing we see here, characteristic that leads to flourishing for individuals and societies, is to put God first in your marriage.

to have a marriage and a family centered on the worship and obedience to the Lord God. Verse 30 says, We will not give our daughters to the peoples of the land or take their daughters for our sons. Now, this has nothing to do with interracial marriage. It's been mishandled that way. It has nothing to do with interracial marriage. It's about interfaith marriage. It's about interfaith marriage.

As they read the story of their ancestors, another thing they realize is that every time God's people marry into people of other religions, it leads to disaster. Over and over and over again in Israel's history, the same thing happens.

[12 : 58] Now, why would that be? Well, because next to our commitment to God, next to your commitment to God, the next most important commitment in your life is the one that you make to your spouse.

If you're both committed to putting God first, if you're both committed to putting God before the marriage, before your spouse, before anything else, then that relationship becomes mutually reinforcing, right?

You're both able to encourage and reinforce and strengthen one another in your shared commitment to the same God. If that's not the case in your marriage, then you will always have divided loyalties.

You'll have competing allegiances. You'll have priorities that diverge. And that's going to impact every area of your life. It impacts the way you spend your time and the way you spend your money

and the way you handle conflict and the way you raise your kids.

You know, I grew up in a house as a product of an interfaith marriage. And to save time, I'll just tell you this. I wouldn't recommend it.

[14:07] I wouldn't recommend it. Marriage is hard enough on its own. But an interfaith marriage, I would say, is next to impossible. That, you know, according to one study, you're three times more likely to end in divorce than marriages between people of the same faith.

There are couples who stay together, but often they do it at the expense of their faith, right? The believer in the relationship ends up having to make serious compromises in their commitment to God in order to make the marriage work.

And you're in that awful position of having to choose between God and your spouse. So this applies differently to different ones of us, right? So if you're still single, it's not worth it.

I'll just tell you right now, if you're dating somebody, if you're seriously dating somebody, and that person does not share your commitment to the Lord, I would say end that relationship.

I remember talking to a woman one time who had been single for a long time. She ended up deciding to marry a man who was not a Christian. Not long after, she said to me in private, she said, you know, I thought I was lonely when I was single.

[15:16] There's nothing compared to the loneliness I feel being married to somebody who doesn't share my faith. Now, some of us are in interfaith marriages. And if that is you, maybe you've experienced some of this.

There's encouragement here for you. Number one, God sees you. God loves you. And God is always at work. God is always at work. You know, both Peter and Paul in the New Testament talk about ways that God works through believing spouses in the lives of unbelieving spouses.

And they give hope of those unbelieving spouses coming to faith. So that's something that we should always be praying for. Never stop praying. Never stop praying for that.

You know, Paul says, you know, God can bring that unbelieving spouse to salvation through the faith of the believer. So he says in that case, if the unbelieving spouse wants to stay in the marriage, you should stay in the marriage.

You should pray for your spouse every day. You should also make sure you have a strong network of Christian friends, people who can support you in your faith. And I just want you to know, if this describes you in any way, shape, or form, we as a church, we are here for you.

[16:27] And if you need more support, please let us know. For those of us who are married to other Christians, obviously that doesn't solve all our problems. Just because you're both Christians doesn't mean you actually put God first in your marriage on a functional level.

Right? The best thing that you can do for your marriage is to put God before your spouse. Is to put God before your spouse. God before your spouse. To love and to respect and to serve your spouse.

Not based on whether or not you think they deserve it in the moment. But based on the fact that Jesus deserves your love and respect and service.

And it makes it very clear in Scripture that when we love and support and give ourselves to building up our spouse, that we're really and truly serving and honoring Jesus.

So we should put Christ first in our marriages. So they're very clear on this. They make a very solemn commitment. We're going to make sure that our love and worship of God is at the center of our marriage and family life in this new society that we're building.

[17:34] It goes better for individuals. It goes better for families. And whatever works for families is going to work for society. It results in a stronger society. Number three. Internalize the values of the Sabbath.

Internalize the values of the Sabbath. Verse 31. They commit themselves to living out the principles and regulations of the Sabbath. In order to understand this, you have to understand something about the Sabbath.

The Sabbath is not just about taking a day off. The Sabbath represents an entire way of life. It's an entire vision for how human beings live and how society functions.

In practice, some of this is going to look different today than it did 2,400 years ago. But the same values would still apply to us in the same way.

Because these values reflect the heart of God for his people. So what are these values? Well, here's some of them. Sabbath value number one. Living within a rhythm of work and rest.

[18 : 39] Now that's the one that most of us would hopefully be familiar with. God created us to work. So part of what it means to be human according to how God created us is to work.

It doesn't have to be a paying job or career. But productivity, creativity, making something out of what God has made. That is a good and beautiful thing. It's part of what it means to be human. But he didn't create us to work all the time. And that's the difference. We also need rest and renewal. So one day a week, turn off the devices, close the laptop, put your away message up on email, and do things that revitalize you and reconnect you to God and other people. You know, Monday is my Sabbath, and I don't keep it faithfully every week. I do a pretty decent job most of the time. But we're all works in progress.

But when I'm able to keep Sabbath, I typically like to take a long walk or a hike. That's a great time for me to think and pray, work through things. I just feel more connected to God.

[19 : 45] I have a much easier time praying when I'm walking than I do just kind of sitting in a room. So I walk and pray a lot of the time. I usually spend some time reading.

And I love to incorporate fiction and poetry into that just to get my brain in a different mode. I often spend the afternoon and evening cooking while listening to music.

I kind of go into a zone. And I love doing that. I try to make something that my family likes. So it doesn't have to be a big deal. You don't have to have a big kind of rigorous routine.

But all those things, I do them simply because they're things that result in me feeling more grounded, more connected with myself, more connected with God. Sabbath. Sabbath. That's the first thing, living by rhythms of work and rest.

Number two, prioritizing relationships over productivity. A Sabbath lifestyle prioritizes relationships over productivity. In fact, the Sabbath is a slap in the face to the idol of productivity.

[20 : 45] And let's face it, if you live in D.C., you probably are at least adjacent to the idol of productivity. Or you feel very guilty for not worshiping the idol of productivity.

You feel like you should, right? It's a slap in the face to that. The Sabbath reminds us of what is most important in life. It's relationships. It's not how much we get done in a day or a week.

It's not how many boxes we check off. It's okay to leave a few boxes unchecked if it means you're prioritizing another human being in your life.

Now, you're going to question me on that later. Some of you will. Some of you were horrified that I just said that. You can leave those boxes unchecked. Another aspect of the Sabbath lifestyle that we see all through the Old Testament is a commitment to social justice.

The Sabbath regulations include provisions meant to prevent things like generational poverty, debt slavery. So, a modern embrace of Sabbath values should include opposition to all forms of slavery and exploitation, fair labor practices, including regular time off and fair wages and anti-discrimination, humane working conditions.

[22 : 01] Right? A Christian should be fighting for things like debt relief and economic fairness, advocating for financial systems that don't burden people with unpayable debts and that offer opportunities for economic renewal.

A big part of the Sabbath was regular opportunities to sort of reset so that you didn't have people after several generations who were just buried in debt in ways they could never climb out of.

It should include advocating to ensure that there's equal treatment of all people, ensuring that everyone, regardless of their status, has access to the resources they need to flourish.

This is all part of a Sabbath lifestyle. Fourth thing we see in the Sabbath regulations, the kind of Sabbath values, is environmental stewardship.

The Sabbath regulations extended even to animals and to the land itself. Right? You were supposed to let your animals rest.

[23 : 01] You were supposed to, every so often, let the land rest so that you weren't overusing it, stripping it of all of its resources. Right? So, a Sabbath worldview means advocating for the humane treatment of animals in farming and industry, a commitment to environmental conservation and sustainability, recognizing that we're here in part to protect and care for the natural world that God has made.

Right? So, the Sabbath is not just taking a day off. It's an entire outlook. It's an entire way of life. And this is not something we have to do.

It's something that we are invited to do. It's an invitation into a way of life. Jesus made it clear the Sabbath was never meant to be a legalistic straitjacket. He says, you know, man wasn't made for

Sabbath.

Sabbath was made for man. What does that mean? Well, he's saying this. The Sabbath is a blessing. It's meant to be a pathway into flourishing for individuals and society as a whole.

That's the third thing. Internalize the values of the Sabbath. The fourth and final characteristic we see is this. Prioritize involvement in a local church. Verses 32 to 39, the largest chunk of text in the description of the covenant, describes their commitment to the temple.

[24 : 19] And it's summarized at the end by these words. We will not neglect the house of our God. Now, in Nehemiah's day, the temple was the absolute center of spiritual life.

You know, kingdom work was all focused on the temple. In our day, we have lots of missionaries and Christian nonprofit organizations and all of that. So it looks very, the map is very different, lots of denominations.

But at the heart of it, what the temple represented for them, right? In the New Testament, Jesus says, I am the temple. You no longer need a temple because Jesus says, I am the temple.

And then later, as the church is birthed, the church becomes the new temple. And Jesus says, the church is my body. If you want to be in the temple, if you want to be a part of the new temple that I've established, that happens in the church.

The kind of life that we are describing this morning, the kind of commitments that we are describing this morning are difficult. It's not easy to do the things that we've described.

[25 : 23] But I would say without the support of a local church, it's virtually impossible. It's virtually impossible. A solid, healthy local church makes it possible for us to live out the things that we've just discussed.

It's going to be a place where God's Word is held up as the highest authority. Where the worship of God, the sacraments, the commitment to spiritual formation, where those things are central.

It's going to be a place where your marriage is supported and strengthened. It's going to be a place that helps you raise your kids to love and to follow Jesus in their lives. It's going to ideally be a place where the values of the Sabbath, which are really things that God values, are front and center to the mission.

Right? No church is perfect. But hey, no offense, neither are you. And neither am I. We're not perfect either. And it's actually, I have found, being a part of the church for a few years now, I've found that it's actually in the imperfections of the church.

It's through all of the imperfections of the church where we really experience growth and grace. You know, it's in the conflict. It's in working through the hard stuff. It's in dealing with the disappointments and the disagreements.

[26 : 38] It's often in those times of imperfection when we most grow in grace and maturity. Right? That's where we see that, the words of the Apostle Paul playing out, that God's power is made perfect in and through weakness.

But when we talk about involvement in a local church, that doesn't just mean attending. Right? That's part of it. Right? Here, what we're doing now when we come to this table, this is the absolute center of our spiritual life.

Everything we're doing this morning is leading to this table. This is why we're here, to receive Christ. But it doesn't just mean attending. It means joining a small group. It means having people outside of Sunday who know you well enough that if you need something, you need support, if you go to the hospital, if you need prayer, if you're struggling in your marriage, those are the people that you can call who will step in and care for you in that immediate first responder level that we all need.

It means finding ways to serve and contribute. I mean, as I was saying just before the sermon, just seeing all of the people up here using all of their gifts and all of their willingness to show up and to put in the work to make church happen on Sundays.

It's amazing. It's this beautiful symphony that we get to see. So it means finding ways to serve and contribute. Now, we're probably going to have a hard time getting readers after today. But I would strongly encourage you to consider how do you get involved.

[27 : 57] It means giving to support the ministries of the church. It means membership where you become a stakeholder in the community. It means all of those things.

So let's pull all of this together. Here are some practices that I would suggest this chapter offers us that lead to flourishing for God's people.

And have done so throughout history. Number one, have a public faith. Let people know what you believe in your life. Put God first in your marriage.

And even if you're in an interfaith marriage, you can still choose to put God first in that marriage. Internalize the values of the Sabbath, as we've just discussed, and then prioritize involvement in a local church.

If you're young and you're trying to figure out what kind of life you want to have, or if you're older and maybe you've been spiritually stagnating and you're trying to figure out how to reset, consider writing out some resolutions.

[29 : 03] Take your journal or whatever you would write that kind of thing out and take this as grist for the mill and prayerfully write out a kind of mission statement or a series of resolutions for your life.

And consider signing your name to it. You know, there's a real power in actually writing something out and saying, I, so and so, commit to upholding these things in my life.

Because even if you fail to do it, even if you neglect it for a while, it's there in writing, there to remind you, you can always start back, right? For those of us who have families with kids, consider writing out a family mission statement.

Take these principles and apply them to creating a vision for your common life. If your kids are old enough, get them around the table and talk this through with them. What kind of life do we want to have as a family?

What are our priorities? How do we budget? How do we want to spend time? How do we want to observe Sabbath? What do we want to do on the weekends? How do we prioritize relationships, right? How can we get involved in some of these things as a family?

[30 : 07] How do we do life together? And all of this, all of this is obviously centered on the truth and the reality of Jesus Christ. Because what else does it mean to flourish if we don't understand that Jesus is at the very center of all that we do?

And flourishing really means participating and living life within the life of God, which is why Jesus came. Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for your word.

And as always, Lord, these are things that we can't do on our own. So as we, in a little while, go to our knees in prayer, and as we come around your table, Lord, we pray that you would be doing in us spiritually what only you can do.

Lord, that you would take what is true from your word, and you would push these things deeply into our hearts, Lord. And we pray that we would be people, that we would be a community that puts your heart on display for the city to see, Lord.

And we pray that our flourishing would be to that end, that your name would be glorified above all others. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.