

Second Sunday after Trinity

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[0 : 0 0] Consistency is a hard thing. It is hard to be consistent in life, in just about every aspect of life. It is hard to be consistent. It's hard to be consistently patient with children.

On this Father's Day, I feel that all the more, acutely. I love my children, but I am a broken man that has great aspirations to be a patient, wise sage of a father and how quickly it can descend into not that.

New Year's resolutions obviously come and go. Consistency seems to be the hardest thing to see out.

It's hard to be consistent. It's very, very difficult. It also means that we can be awfully inconsistent in our spiritual lives.

It is hard to maintain a spiritual life on the best of days, let alone in a time when distractions are plenty, when interests are divided, when goals can be conflicting.

[1 : 1 4] How can we remain consistent as spiritual people that believe in the one true triune God? We're in our second last week in Nehemiah.

Israel is finally being built up into a godly community once again. They're finally understanding that rebuilding of the wall, in many respects, is actually rebuilding of this covenant community, this people, this nation of Israel.

Last week in Nehemiah chapter 8, we read that the people, as they were consulting the scriptures, they realized that there was this wonderful holiday that they haven't been keeping, this holy week called the Festival of Booths or Sukkot.

This holy day, if you remember, holy week marked, it commemorated God's provision in the desert when Israel was rescued from Egypt on their way to the Promised Land, and God provided for them shelter and food and clothes and everything that they needed while they were wandering.

It was also, if you remember, a holiday that proclaimed this transient life, and it ultimately pointed to the eternal life to come.

[2 : 3 1] Suffice it to say, the people have had a wonderful week with God. It's been a fantastic spiritual experience. They're feeling like they are back in God's will.

They are riding high after 70 plus years of being in exile. Things are starting to look up. The people have enjoyed God's presence and each other.

They are starting to look like rebuilt people. Will they be consistent, though? The history of Israel, and we'll see this, although we won't read every last verse, it's a long chapter.

The history of Israel is, we are a part of God's family. We're doing great. Those other nations look kind of good. I think we're going to go over to those other nations and fraternize.

You know, I think their God is actually better than our God. Or maybe we'll adopt their God along with our God, and eventually they forget their God completely, and they're into all sorts of evil and idolatry, and the community gets broken, and then they cry out to God for salvation, and God hears them, and then they get re-established with God, wash, rinse, repeat.

- [3 : 45] It's a pattern. It's a cyclical brokenness that the people are falling into. Will they remain consistent? They've had this great experience. Can they keep the good times going?
- It's also a big question for us. As Christians, or as those that identify as Christians, we may have had a spiritual experience, confessed our faith before God, been on an awesome retreat 25 years ago, had an awesome season of university or college where our faith was strengthened, or maybe we've come back to the faith, and the consistency that comes afterwards is elusive.
- It is really hard to be consistent with our faith, with this spiritual life. So, the question I put forward to you, and I think that this text will help us to answer, here's the question.
- How can God's people live a consistent, God-enjoying, God-glorifying life all their days? How? I think it's a really important question, if you are to take your faith seriously.
- So, Nehemiah chapter 9, hopefully we'll answer this question, and we'll look at three, really four aspects, but three big aspects of it, that the text will help us to answer that question.
- [5 : 09] Nehemiah chapter 9 will help us to see the importance of habitual and honest confession as a key aspect of consistent spiritual life. habitual and honest confession.
- The second is worship of the wise and wonderful God, the God whose glory abounds, who is eternal, who is also unique. And then the last one, this chapter 9, will help us to reflect upon the past as a means for security in the present and hope for the future.
- And that's specifically, that past is how God has interacted with his people. Really, it's understanding the biblical story, the story of redemption. That's key in all of this.
- Finally, and we'll touch on it at the end, this faithful, we'll see in Nehemiah chapter 9, that there is a faithful commitment to follow after the Lord as the only true way.
- And we'll see that at the very last verse, in verse 38. So why don't we jump into it? If you have a Bible, please follow along. There should be some Bibles at the back welcome table. Feel free to grab one at any time and follow along.
- [6 : 25] So, Nehemiah chapter 9, starting in verse 1. This is what it says. Now, on the 24th day of this month, the people of Israel were assembled with fasting and in sackcloth and with earth on their heads.
- And the Israelites separated themselves from all foreigners and stood and confessed their sins and the iniquities of their father. And they stood up in their place and read from the book of the law of the Lord their God for a quarter of the day, for another quarter of it, they made confession and worshipped the Lord their God.
- The people finished their feasting on the 22nd of the month in chapter 8. This is happening on the 24th. So maybe the 23rd, I don't know, they were taking down their makeshift huts because that was part of the celebration of the Feast of Booths.
- But all that to say is what's happening here is on the heels of that holiday. It's coming immediately after. The 22nd it ends, the 23rd clean up, the 24th, I'm presuming it's clean up, the 24th is what we see in chapter 9.
- Right away sackcloth, dirt on the head. There's a mourning that is happening. And it's interesting because if you remember at the beginning of chapter 8, the people have read the word of God and they are cut to the heart, they are convicted of sin, they are mourning.
- [7 : 50] And the Levites say, listen, no, no, no, no, it's time actually for feasting. This isn't the time to fast and to mourn. Except now, this is the appropriate time after the holiday.
- We can note three important aspects of this confession. And it's a very important kind of paradigm for us, a structure for us to understand confession.

We can notice three important things. The first is that they confessed humbly and honestly together. There are times that you cannot do this Christian thing by yourself and you are supported by those around you.

And that's just, that's the reality of it. You're going to have really low times and difficult times and dry seasons. That's not the time to pull away, but to push forward, trusting that we are a part of something bigger than ourselves.

And there is, of course, an individuality to our spirituality. But there is also a corporate nature. And here we are seeing the people coming together as one to confess their sins to one another.

[9 : 01] And they're being humble about it. We see that with the sackcloth, with what they're wearing as something that professes, so to speak, their attitude, that expresses their reverence and dedication to God.

And they are honest with their confession. I mean, it says right here that they are being real about their sins and also the state of their nation that has led up to this point.

And we'll see that in the verses to come. They're being honest. They're not trying to hide their sins from Almighty God. You know, half the time on Sunday mornings we do something called morning prayer.

Morning prayer is a prayer service that's in the Book of Common Prayer. And we've adopted it partly because two weeks out of four we share this space and we have like ten-ish minutes to set up.

And it's a bit of a scramble. But morning prayer is a beautiful thing because it helps us to come before God in a very proper way. In the opening bits of morning prayer it says this, Dearly beloved, the scripture moves us in many different places to acknowledge and confess our many sins and wickedness.

[10 : 14] and that, and here's, I have it bolded on my paper here, and that we should not disassemble nor cloak them before the face of Almighty God our Heavenly Father. In other words, may we be honest with you about who we are.

To not give an excuse for what we've done as we confess our sins to God. To not try to take the edge off as if we could fool God or do a partial confession and He wouldn't know.

God knows everything. I was talking to my dad, my stepdad, but I called my dad yesterday about the judgment of God.

I don't know how we got into this on a Saturday morning. But we're talking about the judgment of God and how we will stand before God and we will confess, we will be without excuse, there will be no appeal process, there will be no nuance, there will be no, hey listen, there are these circumstances, you know, you don't really understand, but it was a tough time in my life.

There will be no excuses because God is all-knowing but also completely just. So when we confess our sins, who are we confessing to?

[11 : 29] The God who knows all, but the God who is also perfectly just. And this is what's happening here in our text. They have a heart that is reflecting their inner life and right now this inner life is just desperate to be connected to God.

They're taking this humble approach, they're being honest with their confession. Notice though, there's this aspect that might seem a bit uncomfortable for us in verse 2, and the Israelites separated themselves from all foreigners.

Now listen, we live in a very tolerant society, more or less. The idea of outsiders and insiders isn't something we, by and large, we don't really enjoy to talk about.

What's happening here, I'll just say, isn't an example of Jewish supremacy. It's not as though the Israelites are, they're discriminating the other nations around them.

But really what we see here is that they're separating themselves from foreigners as, again, an expression of their desire for purity before the Lord. So much of Israel's history has been connecting with other nations and not influencing them to follow the Lord, but being influenced by them.

[12 : 49] And here, it is a symbolic act, in a sense, of saying that we do not want the ways of the other nations, their gods, their idols, their goals, their philosophies.

We want you. We can say that because God's heart is actually not just for the Israelites, but it's for all people. And it's not like there's second-class human beings, especially when we understand that all are made in the image of God.

But here, we have something, a symbolic act of just declaring their complete desire for connection and dedication and purity towards Almighty God.

you're starting to see, again, a people that are being rebuilt. Their motives are starting to become pure. Notice also that their confession is deeply connected to God's Word.

We see that as they, sorry, I just lost my spot. We see that as their confession is a byproduct of them opening up the law of the Lord.

[13 : 58] We see that in verse 3. And they stood up in their place and read from the book of the law of the Lord their God for a quarter of the day. I'll pause really quickly there. Confession is an important aspect of the Christian life as we encounter God's Word.

And God's Word shows us areas of our lives where sin is abounding. So that grace can abound all the more. Romans 7, the Apostle Paul says, What then shall we say?

That the law is sin? By no means. He's giving a whole treatise on the law. Yet, if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin for I would have not known what it is to covet if the law had said you shall not covet.

As we encounter God's Word, we spend our lives looking at it, hearing it, reading it, studying it, meditating on it. It will start to form us and shape us. We will see areas in our lives that do not align with God and as we are wishing to delight in Him because He has delighted in us, we will see that there's opportunities for change.

By His strength, we will change. But it's by God's Word. I have a buddy who we were in university together and he was atrocious at studying for midterms and finals and he had a final the night before but we wanted to go to the pub the night before his final or his midterm and we had another friend who was nursing a cold and he said, listen, just cough in my face.

[15 : 31] Like, cough in my face because if I get sick, I'll go to Appletree, I'll get a doctor's note and it'll be legit because I'm actually sick and he did it.

I couldn't believe it. He did it. He went to Appletree, got the doctor's note, got his exam deferred and he came back very like a peacock, like he gamed the system and then our other friend said, like, you deceiving liar just calls him out in the biggest kind of way.

He goes, what are you talking about? He goes, this is, your heart is not towards the Lord. It's finding a loophole. What you've done is wrong and my buddy pushed back a ton but went to God's Word and in fact, it's true.

He tried to deceive and he took an L on that midterm and failed the course but he did what was right. He confessed. I mean, there's consequences to sin. It's not like if we confess, there's no consequences but his conscience was clean.

God's Word does that. It gets you, in some ways, it doesn't get you off the hook but it allows you to connect with the Lord because the Lord is holy and we are not and we look to him and we confess our sins and we repent and we start to walk in holiness.

[16 : 50] It's a beautiful thing. I believe I said this last week but I'll say it again. God's Word both diagnoses the sickness and treats the ailments. It leads to health and wholeness and this is precisely what is happening with the Israelites and what is that key marker of spiritual health?

It's worship and this is where we'll transition into the next point but before we do that, look in verse 3 again with me and notice this deep connection between repentance and worship.

And they stood up in their place and read from the book of the law and the book of the law of the Lord, their God, for a quarter of the day. For another quarter of it, they made confession and worshiped the Lord, their God.

Confession must lead to worship. We are getting right before the Lord and the highest expression of human life is worshiping the one true God.

It's to understand our deep need for Him and then be connected to Him. This is what we were made for. So again, how can God's people live a consistent, God-enjoying, God-glorifying life all of their days?

[18 : 00] It's confession but it's also worship. So look with me, verses 3 to 5. We read verse 3 so why don't we start in verse 4. And the stairs of the Levites stood, the Levites, I'm not going to try to do what Will did just moments ago, stood the Levites and they cried with a loud voice to the Lord, their God.

Then some other Levites said, stand up and bless the Lord, your God, from everlasting to everlasting. Blessed be your glorious name which is exalted above all blessing and praise.

The people are instructed by the Levites, the spiritual leaders of their community to bless the Lord. It's an interesting question. I mean, when the Lord blesses us it's because there's a lack.

There is something that we are lacking that God gives us. It is a blessing from Him. If I see a brother or sister in need and I give them money, I'm helping to reduce the burden.

I'm taking away from their lack. I'm giving to them. But if God lacks nothing, how can we possibly bless God? It's an interesting question.

[19 : 10] It's all throughout the Bible that we are called to bless the Lord. Are we lessening a burden that God might have? The answer is no. Rather, to bless the Lord is an expression of thankfulness and awe towards Him.

What He has done, who He is, it is humbly recognizing God as the creating, covenant-making, covenant-keeping, just, merciful, and loving God. In short, to bless God is to rightly worship Him.

Two things stand out about this blessing of God. That is, the first thing is that He is everlasting. It says right in verse 5, blessed be your glorious name, which is, sorry, a bit before.

Stand up and bless the Lord your God from everlasting to everlasting, that God is eternal. And the people here, they have a big vision of God. God is not small. And I'll put forward to you that as much as we are serious about our condition, where we are broken and bent and sinful people, and as much as we confess our sins and throw ourselves at the mercy of God, we'll be in direct relation to how big we see Him.

We will understand that, my goodness, I have no ability to wash myself, to clean myself, to atone for the wrongs I have done. But God can?

[20 : 37] He must be huge. He must be greater than I could ever imagine, and all of a sudden, in a sense, as we decrease, He increases. We can have a bigger vision of God.

But there's something else. There's also this uniqueness about God. It says it at the latter part of verse 5, Blessed be your glorious name, which is exalted above all blessing and praise.

God is the only God. And He's the greatest. He is the King of the cosmos. He is the King of earth. Everything, throughout the Psalter, we'll spend some time in the Psalter this summer, we will see that God, everything, that has breath, belongs to Him.

There is no King better than Him. Artaxerxes, great King, not God. Caesar, who will come? Great Caesar, not God.

Successive governments here in Canada, depending on where you fall in the political spectrum, great leaders, not God. There's our friends that worship other gods or subscribe to other philosophies.

[21 : 52] They might be really nice people and maybe a part of their faith helps inform that aspect. But there's one God and it's not their God. And all of a sudden, this aspect of worshipping God, specifically His uniqueness, might feel uncomfortable for us.

It's easier to affirm in a pew on a Sunday that God is the only God. God, it's easier to affirm in a pew on a Sunday than it is on a team's call on a Tuesday or on a Thursday after a busy week at playgroup at the library or with an adult child who is spiritual and not religious.

It is easier on Sunday than in those situations or whatever situations that you might be going through to affirm the uniqueness and exclusivity of the God of the Bible.

Now, this is a tough one, but it's a wonderful truth and a necessary one, even though it is controversial for secular people or people of different faiths or even ourselves.

But again, if God's Word doesn't just diagnose the problem but gives the solution for the ailments, then we need to remember that God's truth is the only truth.

[23 : 15] And in a pluralistic society like ours, our city Ottawa is very pluralistic, the truth is bound to cause offense because of its audaciousness, because of its bold affirmation.

But we proclaim truth not because we are mean people but because truth will always lead to life, lies will always lead to death.

It's an uncomfortable reality, but it's true. Pluralism cannot hold up under the weight of an eternal hope because all roads do not lead to the same destination because they do not lead to the same God.

to proclaim this truth, friends, is an act of mercy to those around us, to our family, to our friends.

Again, there's ways to be winsome about it. You're not going in there on a soapbox screaming at people. There's ways to be winsome, but it's still an act of mercy to proclaim the uniqueness and exclusivity of God.

[24 : 21] It also helps us to remember, too, that God is over everything, which means He's also over all of my troubles and all of the difficulties I go through, all of my disappointments.

And because He's also eternal, it means that all of the problems that I have are temporal, and they might feel like they're eternal, but they're temporal. And that this eternal God who is over everything, He has promised that if I am in Him, that blessings are mine forevermore.

Disappointments that I have will not last, and ailments that I feel are just fleeting. It's a wonderful truth. And this is what they're worshipping God for.

They're proclaiming His goodness. The God who extends mercy and grace time and again to wayward people is the God we serve, and there's no other God that could do it apart from Him.

So the Israelites confess their sins, they worship the Lord, and then they reflect on their history, which is to say they reflect on God's Word, God's redemption throughout all of Scripture.

[25 : 34] In a sense, it's to meditate on and to consider and to reflect upon the biblical story. This is another key aspect of what it means to live a consistent God-enjoying and God-glorifying life.

Knowledge of God's Word. I mean, turn with me verses 6 to 37. We won't be reading the whole thing. I have it marked out on a page here a number of key points I want to draw to your attention.

But if you were to read through all of this, from verses 6 on, we have a rehearsal of all of redemptive history from God creating everything, heaven and earth, to their current moment, from Abraham to Egypt to their wanderings in the desert to their time in the promised land, but playing around with idols and their exile.

And throughout all of it, the key bits that I commend to you when you go home or later on today, is to see how many times within verses 6 to 37 God is described as a merciful God or a steadfast God or a loving God or a God that hears.

And then consider how many times throughout verses 6 to 37 Israel are wandering, how they've left God, how they've forsaken God, how they have given themselves over to idolatry, how they have left God.

[27 : 03] And time and again, time and again, it is the reality of God's people to drift, to be inconsistent. We can look at Israel, the history of Israel, and we can think, man, stiff-necked people, but friends, we are God's people too.

And we, on one hand, have been given the Holy Spirit if we have put our faith and trust in Jesus so that we can say no to sin, but the flesh and the world and the devil still rage against our desire to do good.

And we find ourselves being identified with the people of Israel as well. But back to God's mercy. God is extending mercy time and again, time and again, time and again, time and again.

You read enough of the Old Testament and you even go through these 31, 32 verses and you think, at what point do people exhaust the mercy of God? Like, at what point is enough enough?

How long is this going to go on for? It's exhausting. You read it, it's exhausting. Do they not know the history of their people? And yet, the mercy of God is never exhaustive.

[28 : 17] And in fact, it continues on and on and on until it finds its fulfillment, the mercy of God in Christ. Where God gives himself, the eternal God, the unique God, the God who created heaven and earth, all things in it, who has existed for all time, he takes on human flesh and pays the penalty that we could never pay.

He conquers the enemy we can never conquer. So that we can know him and delight in him and to live a consistent God-delighting, God-fearing life with our God and it's an act of mercy.

It's the fulfillment of mercy and you start to see that verses 6 to 37, rehearsing this whole history, it puts in our hearts a longing for Christ, a longing for us to be done with sin and a longing for God's mercy to finally take root in our lives so that we know him and we walk with him in a consistent way because ultimately, living a life apart from God might feel good, might sound good, might do good for a season, but it will never last for eternity.

Talking to Christine about a bit of this last night, we think, I think, I should always say that because it's true, I think, you come to church, you get charged up for like wireless devices, we get charged up, we go on our week, analogies break down, but, you know, be with me here.

We get charged up and we go on our week and we have enough juice till next Sunday, another spiritual experience, another connecting with God's people, and it's great, but it's better to look at ourselves like we are wired devices.

[30 : 12] The second we unplug ourselves, we unplug ourselves from the source of love and light and life and we cannot exist apart from it because we are not made for that.

So to live a consistent life is to live a life of life, truly life, to live a life of love, true love, to live a life of light, true light, and that is what consistency will bring.

We can't do it ourselves, we just, we really can't. We need the Lord's help for that. So in verse 38, and this is where I'll end, another final key aspect to being a consistent people that enjoy God, glorify God all their days is something called covenant renewal.

Okay, stick with me here. Verse 38, and this is where we'll start to wrap things up. Verse 38 says this, Because all of this, we make a firm covenant in writing.

On the sealed document are the names of our princes, our Levites, and our priests. Chapter 10, we'll go into those names and the obligations of that covenant. But it's essentially a covenant renewal.

[31 : 26] God has made a covenant with his people. God always keeps his covenant. And what's remarkable of it is because his people never keep his covenant. But, when they come back to God and they make a covenant, they renew the covenant in the sense of just saying, we, you are our God, we are your people, we, to this day, this day and forever, they're going to fall in the future, but, but starting today, we are back.

Like, no more idolatry, no more sin, no more inconsistency. We're back. Please keep your end of the bargain like you've done in the past, your covenant.

We're going to do our best to keep our, our end. And how does that work out for us here? Covenant renewal is, is every Sunday as we gather as God's people, where we hear his word, where we confess our sins, where we worship him, we gather as a solemn assembly, we praise him for what he has done, what he will, what he has done, what he is doing, what he will do, and then we gather at his table.

Most weeks, we gather at his table, and it is a form of covenant renewal, where we once again remember what Christ has done on the cross, but we don't just remember, we taste what he has done.

We hear the cracking of the bread, symbolizing his body broken for us. We see the wine, it's red, our eyes are reminded that Jesus poured actual blood for us.

[33 : 00] And we come to him afresh every week, and we say, I covenant to be with you forever. I have been wayward, please forgive me of my sins, but it's me and you again.

It's us and you again. And that's what covenant renewal is. And it's a key aspect of a consistent Christian, God-enjoying, God-glorifying life for all your days.

Church doesn't save people. It certainly doesn't. Christ saves people. But to know Christ, to love him, to enjoy him, to receive the benefits of his death on the cross, his burial and his resurrection, we must gather together.

We must gather together and like the Israelites confess our sins, we must gather together like the Israelites and worship God for who he is and what he has done. We, like the Israelites, need to gather and rehearse our history to be students of God's word and then finally to gather together and as often as we gather together to renew the covenant that he has made that we will likely break later on today in some thought, word or deed but that when we come back together he is merciful, he is loving, he is kind, he is slow to anger, he is abounding in steadfast love.

That is our God. So friends, let's live out this consistent life together. Not by our own strength but by God's strength and by the strength he gives our community. Let's pray.

[34 : 40] Lord, we thank you for your people. Lord, we thank you that we aren't just called to salvation and then left as as independence but we instead are welcomed into a family where when one person suffers we actually all suffer whether we know it or not.

So Lord, let us be people that covenant together to go after you, to be consistent in our walk, to enjoy you, to fear you, to live a life that is worthy of our calling.

Lord, we ask for your strength. We are bound to break our covenant with you. We are bound to sin. But Lord, we don't put our hope in our keeping of the covenant.

You put our hope in your keeping of the covenant. Lord, that your mercy has been extended to us to the end that your son, God, the son of God died on our behalf.

If you didn't withhold your son, what else will you withhold? Nothing from us. So Lord, may we be people that go after you. Give us strength, we ask in Christ's name. Amen.

[35 : 52] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen.