

Sanctifying the Sabbath

Neh 13:15-22

SS Lesson for 08/25/2013

Devotional Scripture: Mark 2:23-27

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Introduction

Overview and Approach to Lesson

The lesson teaches how God people should continue to **Sanctify the Sabbath**. The **study's aim** is to see whether there is a parallel in our experience today where the same Sabbath principle could apply. The **study's application** is to govern our lives by whatever we can establish as the "Christian Sabbath".

Key Verse: Neh 12:22

22 And I commanded the Levites that they should cleanse themselves, and that they should go and guard the gates, to sanctify the Sabbath day. Remember me, O my God, concerning this also, and spare me according to the greatness of Your mercy!

Commentary from the Bible Knowledge Commentary

Again Nehemiah met the problem with a rebuke and action (cf. vv. 11-13). In rebuking their Sabbath desecration (calling it a wicked thing; cf. v. 7), he referred to a similar sin in Jeremiah's day (cf. Jer. 17:19-27) which God punished by the Exile (calamity). Nehemiah had the city doors... shut on the Sabbath, beginning on Friday evening, with guards posted to see that merchandise was not brought in. Even so, some merchants stayed all night outside the walls, perhaps hoping people would slip outside in the darkness to purchase their goods. When Nehemiah heard of this, he threatened to use force against them. Then he told the Levites (cf. Neh. 13:30) to help guard the gates (cf. 7:1; 11:19). Again (cf. 13:14) he asked God to help in this problem, showing mercy to him out of His great love (hesed, "loyal love").

Commentary from the Bible Expositor and Illuminator Commentary

The Sabbath had always been an integral part of worship to the Israelites; it was to be the most important commandment next to the one to love and honor God (cf. Exod. 20:1-8). God used more words to explain the significance of the Sabbath observance in the lives of His people than He did in the commandments not to kill and not to steal. The commandment regarding the Sabbath was not a new commandment but one that had been given after God had finished His work of creation. "On the seventh day God ended his work which he had made; and he rested on the seventh day from all his work which he had made. And God blessed the seventh day, and sanctified it: because that in it he had rested from all his work which God created and made" (Gen. 2:2-3). Nehemiah knew that the violation of the Sabbath—whether it was of the land or the people—had brought them into bondage. Because of it, they had suffered by the hands of their enemies for seventy years. "[They were taken captive] to fulfil the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah, until the land had enjoyed her sabbaths: for as long as she lay desolate she kept sabbath, to fulfill threescore and ten years" (II Chron. 36:21). The Sabbath was given to remind us that God is the Creator. He alone is the Architect of the universe. His design in creation became a reality for all time and will never change unless He changes it. "All things were made by him; and without him was not anything made that was made" (John 1:3). God has used tangible signs to remind future generations of a particular event that should never be forgotten or changed. Another instance is the rainbow, which was to be a perpetual reminder of the Flood that brought judgment on the world because of sin. "The bow shall be in the cloud; and I will look upon it, that I may remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is upon the earth" (Gen. 9:16). Of course we, as Christians, have a symbol that will never change—the cross of Christ. God's symbols were never put in place as items to be worshipped. They are a reminder of the event and its purpose. God never intended for us to just wear a metal cross around our necks; rather, we should carry its meaning in our hearts. The cross, in its origin, was not a pleasant thing. It represented the mark of a convicted criminal, one whose deeds condemned him to a horrible death. More important, it reveals God's perfect love as He took upon Himself our judgment and penalty. "For scarcely for a righteous man will one die: yet peradventure for a good man some would even dare to die. But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:7-8). How can we not be obedient to such a law of love? Just as Israel found

that disobedience to God would only result in pain, so we must be careful lest we neglect and fail to honor the Word of God. "How shall we escape, if we neglect so great salvation" (Heb. 2:3)?

Commentary from NIV Standard Lesson Commentary

Nehemiah now applies a permanent solution to “the merchant problem”: he orders the Levites to purify themselves in order to guard the city gates on the Sabbath (compare 1 Chronicles 26:12-19). Jerusalem is “the holy city” (see Nehemiah 11:18; Isaiah 52:1). From this point on, no one will sell or buy on the Sabbath. Nehemiah is determined that the remnant of exiles become God’s renewed people and that the Sabbath be sanctified as a sign of the covenant. Otherwise, history will repeat itself! The latter part of this verse is the ninth of 11 prayers mentioned in this book; the other 10 are noted in Nehemiah 1:5-11; 2:4b; 4:4, 5; 4:9; 5:19; 6:9b; 6:14; 13:14; 13:29; and 13:31b. Remember is a key word in several of these prayers. Nehemiah may be thinking of a “scroll of remembrance” such as we see mentioned in Malachi 3:16 (compare Exodus 32:32; Psalm 139:16). This idea is strengthened by Nehemiah’s request that God “remember me... and do not blot out what I have so faithfully done” in Nehemiah 13:14.

Approach to the Major Outlines in Lesson

The concept of the outline of the lesson was adapted from the Bible Expositor and Illuminator Commentary and from the points revealed by the study of the Scriptural text.

Verse	Phrase	Commentary
15	In those days I saw people in Judah treading wine presses on the Sabbath	Recognizing the Problem
17	Then I contended with the nobles of Judah	Changing Actions
22	And I commanded the Levites that they should cleanse themselves, and that they should go and guard the gates, to sanctify the Sabbath day	On-Going Sanctification

Lesson Introduction and Background

From the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary

I am old enough to remember “blue laws,” which restricted commerce on Sundays. Most businesses in my hometown did not open on that day so employees and patrons would be free to attend worship services and otherwise have a day of rest. Some adults in my small church spoke of the need to honor Sunday as “the Christian Sabbath.” Others argued that the biblical Sabbath had nothing to do with the Christian’s day of worship, Sunday (the Lord’s Day). This difference in interpretation confused some of us. Fifty years after my time as a teenager, most “blue laws” have been repealed or simply ignored. Sunday has become just another strong commercial day in the life of the average American. Many Christians think nothing of eating at a restaurant after worship on Sunday morning. Many of us find Sunday afternoon to be a convenient time to shop. With few exceptions, stores will be open for business on the Sundays of the year 2013. Were “blue laws” ever appropriate? Is Sunday really “the Christian Sabbath”? Is the Jewish Sabbath still in force for Christians in some way? Such questions are important. But before they can be answered, we must understand the significance of the Sabbath as originally intended and ideally practiced in Old Testament times. That is one focus of today’s lesson. Nehemiah 12:44–13:31 is a unit devoted to telling how Nehemiah dealt with various problems among postexilic Jews after the dedication of Jerusalem’s rebuilt walls (last week’s lesson). First, Nehemiah 12:44-47 notes that provisions for priests and Levites had been put in place. The resources to do so came from the tithes, redemption of the firstborn, and firstfruits of the people (see Nehemiah 10:35-39;

compare 2 Chronicles 31:19). Providing such support was not a new thing to the postexilic Jews; the reestablishment of such provisioning dated back to “the days of Zerubbabel” (Nehemiah 12:47), when the rebuilt temple was dedicated in 515 bc (Ezra 6:15-18). Second, the people had been convicted by the Law of Moses regarding the need to separate themselves from foreigners. Ammonites and Moabites were of particular concern in this regard (Nehemiah 13:1-3; compare Deuteronomy 23:3-5). But then Nehemiah took a leave of absence from Jerusalem to report back personally to King Artaxerxes in Babylon. The time indicators in Nehemiah 13:6 compute to about 433 bc as the year of Nehemiah’s return to Jerusalem after 12 years away (compare Nehemiah 2:1; 5:14). On his return, he did not find things as he had left them! The issue of Sabbath-keeping is an important issue in today’s text, so a bit of background on this issue is called for. The word Sabbath means “ceasing,” and the first references to this day as a day of rest (ceasing from labor) for the people are in Exodus 16:23-30. The basis for this “cease day” is Genesis 1:1–2:3. In imitation of their Creator, the ancient Israelites were to work six days but cease from their labors on the seventh day (Exodus 20:8-11). This requirement extended to foreigners residing among God’s people and even to animals. This was part of a covenant sign (Exodus 31:13-17; Ezekiel 20:12). Deuteronomy 5:12-14 repeats this requirement but adds another rationale: Israel’s deliverance from the slavery of Egypt by the mighty hand of God (5:15). The people were no longer to work as they had in slavery; rather, they were to work only six days and cease all labor on the seventh day as a free people. Violating this law carried dire consequences (see Exodus 31:14, 15; Leviticus 26:2, 14-35; Ezekiel 20:13-24). Nehemiah knew all this.

From the Bible Expositor and Illuminator

The commercialization of our society takes many forms. The advertising industry thrives by convincing people that they simply must have certain goods. Religious holidays become nothing more than lucrative seasons for increasing profits. And Sunday, no longer a day of worship, has become the primary shopping day for many. In His dealings with Old Testament Israel, God incorporated the Sabbath principle to remind His people that work and accumulation are not the most important pursuits in life. The weekly Sabbath, the Sabbath Year, and the Year of Jubilee all taught them that, in the midst of needed rest and restoration, God would continue to supply their needs. Sadly, greed often led Israel to ignore the Sabbath. This week’s lesson finds Nehemiah having to deal with this perennial problem. Now that the Israelites were no longer slaves and were free to pursue life as they wished, they were not observing the Sabbath. They were working, buying, and selling in violation of the Sabbath rules. Israel had gone into captivity because they did not let the land observe the Sabbaths established for it, and now the people were violating the Sabbath again. There is often a consequence for sin in this life, as Scripture says, “because of our iniquities” (Isa. 64:7). Nehemiah the administrator was upset and took action. Part of God’s plan for Israel was to observe the Sabbath. Maybe they could not do so while in a foreign land; but now that they had returned to the Promised Land, they were in control of their situation. The Sabbath Day of rest was to remind the people that God was their Creator and that He had created the world in six days and rested on the seventh. This was to be a memorial forever. Their failure to observe the Sabbath went deeper than not resting on that day. It meant they were also not honoring the Lord as they should. They were ignoring Him and His commandment in this regard.

Major Theme Analysis

(Scriptural Text from the New King James Version; cross-references from the NIV)

Recognizing the Problem (Neh 13:15-16)

15 In those days I saw people in Judah treading wine presses on the Sabbath, and bringing in sheaves, and loading donkeys with wine, grapes, figs, and all kinds of burdens, which they brought into Jerusalem on the Sabbath day. And I warned them about the day on which they were selling provisions.

16 Men of Tyre dwelt there also, who brought in fish and all kinds of goods, and sold them on the Sabbath to the children of Judah, and in Jerusalem.

Conviction (15)

Conviction through God's Word so that we will not sin (Ps 119:11)

11 I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you.

Conviction that should make one ashamed (Ezek 16:63)

63 Then, when I make atonement for you for all you have done, you will remember and be ashamed and never again open your mouth because of your humiliation, declares the Sovereign Lord."

Conviction that should make one repent (Rev 2:5)

5 Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place.

Conviction that may hurt temporarily, but it leads to what God intended (2 Cor 7:8-9)

8 Even if I caused you sorrow by my letter, I do not regret it. Though I did regret it — I see that my letter hurt you, but only for a little while— 9 yet now I am happy, not because you were made sorry, but because your sorrow led you to repentance. For you became sorrowful as God intended and so were not harmed in any way by us.

Conviction that should teaches that we must be careful of standing firm in our own power (1 Cor 10:12-13)

12 So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall! 13 No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.

Convictions through God's truth and power (1 John 3:19-20)

19 This then is how we know that we belong to the truth, and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence 20 whenever our hearts condemn us. For God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything.

Convictions through God's word written in our heart (Rom 2:14-15)

14 (Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law, 15 since they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them.)

Convictions through the conscience remembering that God will judge (1 Cor 4:4)

4 My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me.

Evil associations (16)

Mingling too long with the wicked can cause one to adopt some of it (Ps 106:35-36)

35 but they mingled with the nations and adopted their customs. 36 They worshiped their idols, which became a snare to them.

Playing with the fire of sin, can lead to being burned (Prov 6:27-28)

27 Can a man scoop fire into his lap without his clothes being burned? 28 Can a man walk on hot coals without his feet being scorched?

Do not be yoked together with sin or wickedness (2 Cor 6:14-15)

14 Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? 15 What harmony is there between Christ and Belial? What does a believer have in common with an unbeliever?

Pray for God's purification of things that contaminates the body and spirit (2 Cor 7:1)

7 Since we have these promises, dear friends, let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God.

Don't let others entice to sin (Deut 13:6-8)

6 If your very own brother, or your son or daughter, or the wife you love, or your closest friend secretly entices you, saying, "Let us go and worship other gods" (gods that neither you nor your fathers have known, 7 gods of the peoples around you, whether near or far, from one end of the land to the other), 8 do not yield to him or listen to him. Show him no pity. Do not spare him or shield him.

Bad company can lead to evil actions (1 Cor 15:33)

33 Do not be misled: "Bad company corrupts good character."

Changing Actions (Neh 13:17-19)

17 Then I contended with the nobles of Judah, and said to them, "What evil thing is this that you do, by which you profane the Sabbath day?

18 Did not your fathers do thus, and did not our God bring all this disaster on us and on this city? Yet you bring added wrath on Israel by profaning the Sabbath."

19 So it was, at the gates of Jerusalem, as it began to be dark before the Sabbath, that I commanded the gates to be shut, and charged that they must not be opened till after the Sabbath. Then I posted some of my servants at the gates, so that no burdens would be brought in on the Sabbath day.

Rebuke (17)

Rebuke of discipline (Heb 12:7-11)

7 Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father? 8 If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline), then you are illegitimate children and not true sons. 9 Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of our spirits and live! 10 Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. 11 No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.

Rebuke that does not lead to death (Ps 118:18)

18 The Lord has chastened me severely, but he has not given me over to death.

Rebuke to learn lessons (Ps 119:71)

71 It was good for me to be afflicted so that I might learn your decrees.

Rebuke to show relationship (Luke 15:25-32)

25 "Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. 26 So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. 27 'Your brother has come,' he replied, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.'

28 "The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. 29

But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. 30 But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!' 31 "'My son,' the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. 32 But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.'"

The Bible teaches that rebuke is good for the wise man (Prov 9:8-9)

8 Do not rebuke a mocker or he will hate you; rebuke a wise man and he will love you. 9 Instruct a wise man and he will be wiser still; teach a righteous man and he will add to his learning.

Rebuke is needed so that others will be warned (1 Tim 5:20)

20 Those who sin are to be rebuked publicly, so that the others may take warning.

When God rebukes, it is a testimony of His love (Rev 3:19)

19 Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest, and repent.

Past examples (18)

Past examples that should be passed on to the next generation (Ps 78:1-6)

78 O my people, hear my teaching; listen to the words of my mouth. 2 I will open my mouth in parables, I will utter hidden things, things from of old — 3 what we have heard and known, what our fathers have told us. 4 We will not hide them from their children; we will tell the next generation the praiseworthy deeds of the Lord, his power, and the wonders he has done. 5 He decreed statutes for Jacob and established the law in Israel, which he commanded our forefathers to teach their children, 6 so the next generation would know them, even the children yet to be born, and they in turn would tell their children.

Past examples that teach us hope (Rom 15:4)

4 For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.

Past examples that help us run the race with perseverance (Heb 12:1)

12 Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. NIV

Past examples that should be followed (Acts 3:22-24)

22 For Moses said, 'The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you must listen to everything he tells you. 23 Anyone who does not listen to him will be completely cut off from among his people.' 24 "Indeed, all the prophets from Samuel on, as many as have spoken, have foretold these days.

Past examples that teach us to follow the correct Way and the way of hope (Acts 24:14-15)

14 However, I admit that I worship the God of our fathers as a follower of the Way, which they call a sect. I believe everything that agrees with the Law and that is written in the Prophets, 15 and I have the same hope in God as these men, that there will be a resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked.

Past examples that reveals the mystery of Christ (Eph 3:4-6)

4 In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, 5 which was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy

apostles and prophets. 6 This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus.

Past examples that teach us patience (James 5:10)

10 Brothers, as an example of patience in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord.

Repentance (19)

Repentance by turning away from sin (Ezek 18:21-23)

21 "But if a wicked man turns away from all the sins he has committed and keeps all my decrees and does what is just and right, he will surely live; he will not die. 22 None of the offenses he has committed will be remembered against him. Because of the righteous things he has done, he will live. 23 Do I take any pleasure in the death of the wicked? declares the Sovereign Lord. Rather, am I not pleased when they turn from their ways and live?"

Repentance through humility and prayer (2 Chron 7:14)

14 if my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land.

Repentance for the forgiveness of sin (Acts 2:38-39)

38 Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. 39 The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off — for all whom the Lord our God will call."

Repentance by turning to God (Acts 3:19)

19 Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord,

Repentance that God commands (Acts 17:30)

30 In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent.

Repentance that comes from the kindness of God (Rom 2:4)

4 Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, tolerance and patience, not realizing that God's kindness leads you toward repentance?"

Repentance that comes from godly sorrow (2 Cor 7:10-11)

10 Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death. 11 See what this godly sorrow has produced in you: what earnestness, what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what alarm, what longing, what concern, what readiness to see justice done. At every point you have proved yourselves to be innocent in this matter.

On-Going Sanctification (Neh 13:20-22)

20 Now the merchants and sellers of all kinds of wares lodged outside Jerusalem once or twice.

21 Then I warned them, and said to them, "Why do you spend the night around the wall? If you do so again, I will lay hands on you!" From that time on they came no more on the Sabbath.

22 And I commanded the Levites that they should cleanse themselves, and that they should go and guard the gates, to sanctify the Sabbath day. Remember me, O my God, concerning this also, and spare me according to the greatness of Your mercy!

Temptations (20)

Temptations from own lust (Rom 6:12)

12 Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires.

Temptations from sin (Col 3:5-6)

5 Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. 6 Because of these, the wrath of God is coming.

Temptations that come during testing (Luke 8:13)

13 Those on the rock are the ones who receive the word with joy when they hear it, but they have no root. They believe for a while, but in the time of testing they fall away.

Temptations due to false pride (1 Cor 10:12-13)

12 So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall! 13 No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.

Temptations that come from my own evil desires (James 1:14)

14 but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed.

Resisting the temptations (21)

Resist temptations by not giving it a foothold (Eph 4:27)

27 and do not give the devil a foothold.

Resist temptations by putting on the full armor of God (Eph 6:11-13)

11 Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. 12 For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. 13 Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand.

Resist temptations by submitting to God (James 4:7)

7 Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.

Resist temptations by worshiping and serving God only (Matt 4:8-11)

8 Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. 9 "All this I will give you," he said, "if you will bow down and worship me." 10 Jesus said to him, "Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.'" 11 Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him.

Resist temptations by standing firm in the faith (1 Peter 5:8-9)

8 Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. 9 Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that your brothers throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of sufferings.

Separation from the temptations (22)

Separation from temptations by turning from evil and doing good (Ps 37:27)

27 Turn from evil and do good; then you will dwell in the land forever.

Separation from temptations by purifying self from everything that contaminates (2 Cor 7:1)

7 Since we have these promises, dear friends, let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God.

Separation from temptations by putting off the old self (Eph 4:21-24)

21 Surely you heard of him and were taught in him in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus. 22 You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; 23 to be made new in the attitude of your minds; 24 and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.

Separation from temptations by not allowing even a hint of sin in life (Eph 5:3)

3 But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God's holy people.

Separation from temptations by putting to death ungodliness (Col 3:5-6)

5 Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. 6 Because of these, the wrath of God is coming.

Separation from temptations by not conforming to evil desires (1 Peter 1:14-16)

14 As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. 15 But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; 16 for it is written: "Be holy, because I am holy."

Conclusion and Other Thoughts

Concluding Thoughts from Steven Cole

Even though the people had agreed in their covenant with God to keep the Sabbath holy (10:31), they quickly fell into doing business on that day, even in Jerusalem (13:15). Some merchants from Tyre, who had no scruples about the Sabbath, were doing a brisk business selling imported fish and merchandise in the city on that day. No doubt the Jews had excuses (they would have called them "reasons") for violating the Sabbath. "If I don't tread my grapes that day, they will rot!" "Everyone else is doing business then. I can't compete if I close up shop!" "All those imported fish will just rot and go to waste if we don't buy them! It wouldn't be right, to waste all that good food." Again, we are not under the strict Sabbath laws of Israel. But like these religious Jews, it is easy to make up excuses for why we put business and our pursuit of pleasure ahead of worship. "I'd like to spend time alone with God every day, but I've got to work long hours. When I get home, I'm exhausted and need some down time in front of the tube to relax." "I'd like to go to church more often, but Sunday is my only day to sack in, eat a leisurely breakfast, and read the paper." Spiritual permissiveness always affects how we spend our time. Some criticize Nehemiah for not being more tactful and polite, but when God's people are being poisoned by permissiveness, politeness may not be best. If I saw you about to drink what I knew to be deadly poison, you wouldn't want me politely to smile and think to myself, "I wouldn't drink that, but I don't want to impose my views on him. Each person has a right to his own opinions." You'd want me to shout, "Wait! That will kill you!" And if need be, you'd want me forcibly to knock it from your hand. That's what Nehemiah did. He didn't worry about being polite or about what people would think of him. I'm sure that he made many enemies by what he did here, but I'm also sure that he was God's friend. Many no doubt grumbled about what an unloving, harsh man he was. But Nehemiah describes

what he did with the Hebrew word *hesed* (13:14, translated “loyal deeds”), which is the word used in 13:22 (and throughout the OT) for God’s loyal love for His people. It is far more loving rudely to knock the poison out of a person’s hand than it is to smile politely and watch him drink it. In each of these situations, Nehemiah dealt with the problem head on. There are four aspects to what he did: (1) He discovered the problem, (2) He got upset, (3) He took strong, unmistakable action, and He was accountable to God and aware of His presence in every situation. It’s easy to see the faults of others but to be blind to our own permissiveness. I encourage you to begin with yourself. As you read God’s Word, ask yourself where you may have slipped into the ways of our godless culture. After you deal with yourself, I encourage husbands and fathers to give godly leadership and correction when needed to your families. Spiritual permissiveness is a perpetual problem. Like Nehemiah, we must detect it by God’s Word and strongly confront it if we want to hear our Lord’s “Well done!” when we stand before Him.

(Adapted from Sermon notes by Pastor Steven J. Cole, Flagstaff Christian Fellowship www.fcfonline.org)

Concluding Thoughts from the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary

Nehemiah’s reforms honored the Sabbath as a sign of the covenant with God. The basis of Sabbath-keeping is that God rested on the seventh day of creation. Today we celebrate the new creation in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17). We “serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code” (Romans 7:6); those in Christ “are not under the law, but under grace” (6:14). To be under grace is not a license for lawlessness (Romans 6:1, 2; 2 Peter 3:17; Jude 4), but certain requirements of the Old Testament law no longer apply. These include Sabbath-keeping (see Colossians 2:16). Even so, the principle of resting at least one day a week is good and humanitarian. Also, our Christian liberty requires that we be tolerant of those who honor certain days above others (see Romans 14:5, 6). We also keep in mind that the ultimate Sabbath-rest awaits us at Jesus’ return.

Practical Points from the Bible Expositor and Illuminator

1. The Lord's Day is a special gift from God, and we should honor it as such (Neh. 13:15)
2. Our choices on the Lord's Day may indicate our real priorities (vs. 16)
3. God wants us to have a day of rest and worship; we neglect it at our own peril (vs. 17-18)
4. Properly setting apart the Lord's Day may require some practical limitations for ourselves and others (vs. 19)
5. Serving God fully may sometimes require drastic measures (Neh. 13:20-21; cf. I Tim. 6:11)
6. Choose to do right, and God will care for the details (Neh. 13:22)