

# Taboo Ambition

*Taboo*

By Dr. Jeff Meyers

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**Bible Text:** Nehemiah 9:21-27  
**Preached on:** Sunday, May 6, 2012

I do want to encourage you this morning to open your Bible to the book of Nehemiah chapter nine. If you are a regular attender or a member here at First Baptist that should be one of those places in the Bible that at least as of late when you just kind of set it open, it just falls to Nehemiah chapter nine. We have been in there several weeks. We are going to be there for a couple of more. In Nehemiah chapter nine, if you are a first time guest or visitor with us, we continue today in a message series from the longest prayer recorded in the Bible, the longest prayer recorded in Scripture. Just to give you a brief historical context here, the people of God, the Israelites, and the Jewish people had been taken into captivity some 70 years before. The Babylonians had come and ransacked the city, torn down the temple. They found themselves in a situation that was less than admirable. The Babylonians got tossed over by the Persians. They came in and eventually a man by the name of Nehemiah and a remnant of the people of God go back to Jerusalem. They rebuild the wall. They eventually will rebuild the temple. The whole prayer chapter nine is a prayer of confession. It is a prayer saying our forefathers have sinned against God. Our fathers have sinned against God. We have sinned against God. Lord, from this day forward we desire to reclaim the identity you gave us, the purpose you gave us and the vision that you gave us. And that is where we are working through this text these last couple of weeks. What is it? What has God called the people of God, the 21<sup>st</sup> century Church of Jesus Christ; it is time that we reclaim our identity. It is time to reclaim the life he called us to live and it is time, listen, to reclaim the victory he promises us when we walk in his steps, his commandments and his precepts.

So all that being said, if you are a first time guest or visitor you might be wondering: So why did they name the series "*Taboo*?" Why would you name it that which is to be prohibited, that which is to be kept at least at arm's length? Because as we are seeing in the book of Nehemiah chapter nine, all of the issues, all of the things that are being confessed are issues that decades ago and maybe even a half a century ago, the Christian community considered to be taboo. But today they have become a part of our culture. They are not only embraced and promoted in the secular world, but unfortunately the church has linked arms with the world and said, "This is okay and this is satisfactory and we will allow it and we will permit it." But what we are doing these last couple of weeks is saying in these areas we are not to side with the world. We are to side with the Word of God.

We dealt with conformity. We have dealt with what do we desire. Do we desire to draw our own pattern of life or do we let God... do we trust him that he really knows how to live this thing called life?

Last week we dealt with power. How do we respond to authority? How do we respond to leadership in the world? Today we come to a word, ambition. Now I know what you may be thinking. Ambition that is not a bad word. I mean, after all, Jeff, aren't you a pretty ambitious person? Yes. But understand. Every one of these words has kind of got a subtitle to it. And today it is dealing with ambition for our own gain or success versus ambition for what God desires out of our life. If I named it what I wanted to name it none of you would have showed up today. It is called greed. It is the holding on to whatever we can hold on and not letting God have anything of our lives so that he can prosper our lives that he can use us as his ladies, as his men, as his boys and his girls, as his hands and his feet and become his ministers. Literally, all over the world so that the world will be changed starting right here.

Now, as we come to Nehemiah nine let me give you a little bit of warning. We are going to read this passage beginning in verse 21. And it is going to look like a celebration. It is going to look kind of like a commendation of the greatness of God, which it is. We are going to read about the Israelites being in the wilderness for 40 years. Their shoes did not wear out, sorry ladies. Their clothes did not wear out, sorry ladies. They had to move around in tents all the days, sorry guys. For 40 years and we celebrate, wasn't God good to them? Absolutely, but let us never forget what got them into the wilderness. It was the rebellion. It was the rejection of the things of God that took them there. So even though we celebrate God's goodness, we are going to look at this passage in the context of what got them in the wilderness to begin with.

Beginning in verse 21 the confessional prayer continues by the people of God.

Yea, forty years didst thou sustain them in the wilderness, so that they lacked nothing; their clothes waxed not old, and their feet swelled not. Moreover thou gavest them kingdoms and nations, and didst divide them into corners: so they possessed the land of Sihon, and the land of the king of Heshbon, and the land of Og king of Bashan. Their children also multipliedst thou as the stars of heaven, and broughtest them into the land, concerning which thou hadst promised to their fathers, that they should go in to possess it. So the children went in and possessed the land, and thou subduedst before them the inhabitants of the land, the Canaanites, and gavest them into their hands, with their kings, and the people of the land, that they might do with them as they would. And they took strong cities, and a fat land, and possessed houses full of all goods, wells digged, vineyards, and oliveyards, and fruit trees in abundance: so they did eat, and were filled, and became fat, and delighted themselves in thy great goodness. Nevertheless they were disobedient, and rebelled against thee, and cast thy law behind their backs, and slew thy prophets which testified against them to turn them to thee, and they wrought great provocations. Therefore thou deliveredst them into the hand of their enemies, who vexed them: and in the time of their trouble, when they cried unto thee, thou

heardest them from heaven; and according to thy manifold mercies thou gavest them saviours, who saved them out of the hand of their enemies.<sup>1</sup>

In the context of this portion of the prayer, we find a microcosm of what I would like to maybe call the cycle of sin or the cycle of rebellion. Here were the people of God and we celebrate the fact that their shoes did not wear out. Their clothes did not wear out. That is just one or two small little verses. Then they were allowed to go into the Promised Land and it was everything they could imagine, all the food they could eat. All the resources they could have. They didn't even have to fight the battles. The Lord did it for them. What happened? They got fat and they got lazy and they lost it all again.

You say, "Again? They lost it all again?"

I want you to open back up to Nehemiah chapter nine. I want to show you something in verse 18. "...they had made them a molten calf [of gold]."<sup>2</sup>

Jeff, I thought you said they only had one pair of shoes. I thought you said they only had one pair of clothes. Where did all that gold come from?

Do you realize when God delivered them out of Egypt and they were delivered through the Red Sea the Egyptians literally were giving them their gold, giving them their jewels saying, "Please get out of here. It is all yours." They left wealthy. They left rich. They had everything. You know, they dwelt in tents and tabernacles and had one pair of shoes. Why? Because they had a lot and their ambition was to use it for their own selfish desires and motives. They didn't give it to God. They didn't use it to reach the world. They said, "We want to make an image, an idol. And we want to dance and sing and talk about how good we are and how much we deserve."

Forty years in the wilderness. They go into the Promised Land. Same song second verse. It could be better, but it is going to be worse, because it happens again.

And what I want to do today is what we have been doing for weeks in Nehemiah chapter nine. I want to make a parallel to you. I do not believe the Church of Jesus Christ in any way shape or form has replaced the nation or the people of Israel. We have not replaced, but we can at least see some parallels in how they followed and how they listened to God or how they rejected God and how we need to follow and not reject.

And so I want to draw some parallels today to Nehemiah nine and the context here in our lives today. And the first parallel is this. That you and I are living in very prosperous times and we are very prosperous people.

Now I am not getting personal, but we are fat and happy. We are living well. And some of you are going, "But I am not living well. The times are tough."

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<sup>1</sup> Nehemiah 9:21-27.

<sup>2</sup> Nehemiah 9:18.

I want to introduce you, your life, better known today as being a blue dot. If you do not know, in recent days the world's population has exceeded seven billion people. That is a lot of folks. The problem is of those seven billion people, our way; our economic means is very different. Roughly five billion people on this planet live on an annual income in US dollars of fewer than \$4000 a year. If you make, if you have access to, whether you earn it or it is given to you, over \$12,000 a year per family, not per person, you are in the world's wealthy elite.

I have a feeling I am talking to a lot of blue dots today. We are a culture very parallel to the Israelites in prosperity. When you look at the world economy and you realize that a billion people, three times the population of this country, live on less than \$1000 a year, let me ask you a question. What do you have to gripe about?

And now some of you are thinking, \$12,000 a year. That is not rich. Maybe not in your subdivision, maybe not here in Atlanta, Georgia, but globally speaking we are wealthy people. Let me show you how this works out geographically speaking. Let me show you a map of the world according to economics. Do you notice where the blue dots are? Now there is a blue dot on all continents. And if you want to take this map and you were to truly examine it and kind of get really down into the nitty gritty, you will see there is a lot of blue dots. There are places, particularly in the oil rich countries and there are places even in horrific dictatorships where there are individuals with lots and lots of money in concentrated areas. However, though, if you will notice, the overwhelming majority of the blue dots are found in what we know as Europe and the United States of America and just a little slice of eastern Asia.

What I want to share with you from the very beginning and then we are going to dig more into this passage is this. What this means, because we are the blue dots, we have incredible potential to allow God to do some incredible things in our life. Who has the ability to see some things change? The blue dots do. We have the resources. We have the means and we have the resources. Speaking of that, this prosperity that we have has allowed us to have some possessions.

I want to talk about some stuff that we have and I am not picking on rich people today. I am only picking on people who make more than \$12,000 a year. So if you are under that, you just sit back and go to sleep. You are good.

Let's talk about cell phones. They are at times an absolute nuisance. I understand that. But they give us a way of communicating. They give us a way of when we are in trouble crying out, when we are lost being found. My cell phone can find me when I don't even know where I am.

I want you to look at that data. By the way I am going to refer to us as blue dots. For every 100 blue dots, there are 106 cell phones. That means there are more cell phones than people in our culture. That doesn't even include the land lines. It is a possession that can help us in all kinds of issues. But let's talk about another possession that so many of us access to, a personal computer. We live in an internet age. We live in a data age, a

computer technology based age. And if you are a blue dot, for every 100 of you there are 60 computers.

Now I know what you may be thinking. Well, that is not a big deal. That is just, you know, just slightly less than two thirds.

I want to testify. My house has five people, two computers. It is per person not per family. This isn't 60 out of 100 homes have a computer. This is every 60 out of 100 people have access to a computer in their home. Let me tell you what this number says. That almost every single person who is a blue dot doesn't have to go to the library to get a computer, doesn't have to go to school. All they have to do is wake up, get a cup of coffee and go in their living room or their bedroom. We have access to this thing called the internet.

And you say, "Well, why is the internet a possession that is so important?"

Because it is knowledge. It allows us to have access to information that is happening. That which used to take days to cross the wires to hit the front page of the paper, now we have instantaneously. I literally can watch a ball game on my phone while driving, while doing different things in life. Hey, man, when you live here and you follow the Baylor Bears you have got to follow them however you can follow them. That is all I got to say.

Internet access. Out of every 100 people in our culture, the blue dots, 68 of them have access to the internet in their home. Now you may be thinking to yourself, well, that doesn't seem like as much as I thought it would get. At the same time, you do realize there is a lot of our culture who did not grow up with technology and they don't want technology. And so this is an incredible thing which leads to the last possession, a car.

Well, there is something about a car, isn't it? And kids wait to turn 16. They salivate to get to 16. We have great movies like *American Graffiti* and others that talk about this independence that a car brings. This next data is out of every 1000 people, if you are a blue dot, there are 435 cars. Now let me boil that down. That means there is a car for every two of us.

You say, "Well, what does all that mean?"

When you have access to a car, a cell phone, a computer and an internet, your wife, speaking personally, can break down on the side of the road, call from her cell phone. I can make an appointment on my laptop with the nearest repair shop while picking her up and getting her there. It is a creature comfort, is it not? We have incredible possessions. We have access to so much that the world would long to have. We are the blue dots.

But then there are the privileges that brings us, the privileges of life. And this is one of those things that when you are a blue dot you don't think about these things very often, because as a blue dot, this is just a part of life as you know it. How about this first one? Life. We are all living here today, right? We have got that part taken care of. But if you

are a blue dot and you are a man, your average lifespan will be 77 years. As a woman it will be 83 years. Some of you are living on grace. I will let you all decide who you are. But nonetheless, this is for those making over \$12,000 a year. The higher the concentration of wealth, i.e. the United States of America, the greater the life expectancy is. Why? Because our cars can take us to health care. Our internet can get us medication shipped to our door. My dad appreciates you all for doing that. We thank you. It is a privilege that a lot of people in the world don't have access to. The life expectancy in the rest of the world is slim compared to ours.

But this next privilege is the one that ought to just rent your gut, because there are those times even among the blue dots where we have to deal with probably one of the most gut wrenching one of the most emotional things that I can't even imagine a family dealing with. It is the loss of a child. Any time there is a service for a child that has past it is gut wrenching at best. It is heart breaking at the least. And I think every one of us has known somebody at some point who has had to go through that horrific process. But when you are a blue dot, it only happens to seven out of 1000 people, seven times too many, yes.

But what if you make less than \$1000 a year? It happens to one out of every 10. Seven out of 1000 compared to one out of every 10. In the majority of the world the passing of a child is not an anomaly. It is common place. We have things called NICUs where babies can go and they can be sustained, wonderfully being touched by their parents and fed. Most of the world doesn't have access to that. It is a privilege. We have a privilege to long life. If you will just let me say, we have the privilege of being able to avoid death at a very easy manner.

And then there is another thing that we have privilege to and you may not have thought about this, but I think about it a lot, sanitation. Yes, the bathroom. Thank you, I did get an amen. Because often times the difference between life and death is how clean your life is physically.

You know, people talk about their homes. Let me tell you how I judge a home. You all may think I am weird, but, you know, we judge a home by square footage, by bedrooms. Let me tell you how I judge a home. I judge a home by toilets. Here is why. If you have a 4000 square foot home with only two bathrooms in it, you can shut off the spare bedroom and a month later everything is fine. If you neglect a toilet for a month, you have got issues. And so what I say is it doesn't matter how big the house is, that is a five toilet house. That is a four toilet house. That is a six toilet. Some of you all have got some serious toilets. You know, one of the greatest compliments that I get on this church campus from visitors? They go, "Man, I have never seen so many toilets in one church in all my life." Amen. Thank you. Sanitation.

Do you realize that 99 percent of the blue dots do not have to worry about waste? They don't have to worry about clean water. They don't have to worry about parasites in their food. Most of the world literally prays over their food and they mean it.

Lord... hey, I have been in a third world country. Do you know how I have prayed in a third world country? Lord, I don't know what it is. I don't know what it is going to taste like. Please don't let it kill me. I don't pray that when Baby cooks, because it is good. And we have a sanitary environment and I have seen how she has prepared it.

Then last, but not least, when it comes to our privileges, what about the fact that you actually can open up your Bible or turn to your phone and read today? Ninety-eight percent of the blue dots can read and write which means that keeps us out of trouble. We can actually read the fine print on a document. We know if we are being taken advantage of. We know that says, "Danger, don't go there."

You know, in the rest of the world it is a privilege. That is why a lot of our missionaries, their first step in the culture that they step into are to teach them to read so they can know what the Word of God says.

Would you testify to me? We have got a lot of possessions and we have got a lot of privileges. So let me combine those together. Let me narrow some of the focus here today. How does this relate to the people of God in Nehemiah nine? How does this relate to our lives today?

I want to use a word that we talk about a lot, but it is rarely realized. It is the word potential. Let me tell you what the definition of potential is. We ain't done it yet. But when you have got potential, you have got the opportunity to do it.

Do you all remember the map of the blue dots? Do you all remember that? If you were to take all of the born-again Bible-believing Christians in the entire world and you were to put us all in one room, 80 percent of the money, 80 percent of the wealth would be among the blue dots. That is you and I. That means of all the Christians in the world, our being the blue dots, eight out of every 10 dollars, 80 out of every 100 dollars is in our possession. We have access to it. It is already in the pocket. It is not hoped for. It is not we desire to get. It is already there. Yet among what we know as the Christian community in the United States of America, we only give about two and a half percent to God.

Now do you notice a parallel with what happened in the Israelites in Nehemiah nine? When they said, "God, it is all ours." He said, "Yeah, it is about to be all yours." Do you know what happened to that gold? Moses melted it and then drank it and it came out in the sanitation department. Read the book of Exodus, folks. I am not making that stuff up. That is exactly what happened. Yet only two and a half percent of what we know as the Christian community in the United States of America gives or we give about two and a half percent.

According to the website entitled "Generous Giving" born-again Bible-believing Christians in the United States of America, only nine percent of us, are classified as, "tithers," that is 10 percent. And I know people want to argue and gripe and whine and fuss about this whole idea of tithing. Can I just summarize this real quick? Before the

law of tithing ever came in, Abraham gave it and he never griped. While the law of tithing was very legalistic in the Old Testament we don't find anybody griping about it. But now that we have freedom in Jesus Christ, we want to gripe about it. And I am thinking to myself, why should we have a problem if Jesus gave us everything, why can't we give him a tenth? If Jesus shed all of his blood, why can't I... I don't get the problem, just to be honest with you. But I think a lot of us do. And I think what we are missing out on is not the, oh, you are going to be cursed. Oh, your life is going to stink. No, that is not the message today. The message today is simply this. Do you realize what could happen in our world if all of the sudden we started trusting God and quit trusting ourselves, if we started realizing, God, you can do more with our little than we could ever do with our lot.

Did you know the United States of America there giving level is on the fact that we are, "tithing" on an annual income of \$6931 per year. So the blue dots give like the orange dots in America. So what does this mean? Let's just take America. What does this mean? How can this change the world?

Nehemiah 9, these were the people of God. They weren't upset with the Persians. They weren't upset with the Babylonians. They said, "God, this is our job." It is us, the people of God, those who realize we are sinners in need of a Savior and Jesus is that Savior. If we had gone from two and a half to 10 percent tithing, if we had gone from nine percent tithing to 100 percent tithing we would have had an extra \$164 billion to do ministry with. Folks that is a lot of missionaries being supported. That is a lot of meals being served. That is a lot of clothes on peoples' back. That is a lot of houses being built. That is a lot of a lot, \$164 billion.

You say, "How would that change the world?"

I want to introduce you to the Borgen Project. The Borgen Project is a group of people a lot smarter than me. Here is what they discovered, that by the year 2015 if we dedicated—and we means anybody—\$19 billion a year for the next three years, we could solve what we know as starvation and malnutrition in the world. If we had \$12 billion per year for the next three years, we could educate every child, man and woman who needs an education. And if we had \$15 billion a year, we could get clean water and sanitation to everybody in the world that needs it.

Let me do the math for you. Over the next three years the only amount of resources needed to solve three of the biggest of the world's problems is one fourth of the resources that we should have made available.

So you say, "Well, where is the problem?"

Look in the mirror. Where is this struggle? That is why this passage in Nehemiah nine is so important, because it is the people of God not blaming the government. It is the people of God not blaming their lost neighbor. It is the people of God saying, "You commissioned us to do this."

So that is changing the world. How about starting here? Now for some of you that is where I am fixing to get to meddling and for that I apologize. But I am lying. I am not really apologizing. Last year First Baptist Church of Conyers, Georgia we allocated 2.67 million dollars to do ministry. This does not include the amount of the money that we gave over and above that to the Global One Mission Offering, Lottie Moon, Annie Armstrong, build houses in Nicaragua, all those huge mission dollars that we bring in and thank you and thank you. This is just ministry that would be facilitated through this body through this congregation. Yet we did this thing called project freedom a couple of years ago and a guy some of you all know by the name of Dave Ramsey.

He did a study of us. And he didn't know names and he doesn't know incomes, but he knows addresses and he knows zip codes and they have this huge US census backed program where they stuck your address and they stuck my address in and they said in this area this is the average income and they did all that math. And basically if we, this one single congregation were faithful just in the basics of giving our resources to God, it would be about 7.25 million dollars. Do you see a discrepancy here of about four to five million dollars a year for stuff that we already have too much of and that breaks and that we give away and sell at garage sales and give to Goodwill?

So let me ask you a question. What would happen here if we decided it is time to change the rules starting right here. Let's get serious about what the Israelites took advantage of. And instead of putting the gold into a calf that is going to be burned up in the fire what if we said, "Ok, God, let's change the world starting right here."

This is a very profound theological question. Are you ready for this? What would happen if we actually put this in practice? Are you ready for this very formal theological answer? Here it is. God only knows. Only God knows. Why? Because when the Israelites went into Egypt they didn't know what the buildings were going to look like. They didn't know what the fields were going to look like. Only God knew. They didn't know. By the way, they did not know that they were going to get the gold on the way out. They didn't know. The Lord didn't say, "Hey, if you go to Goshen and do all this stuff, boy, do I have some stuff laid up for you." They didn't know. They just did what God asked them to do and God said, "Oh, by the way. Here is this. Go and enjoy it and remember where it came from." It took them 11 days to forget, which is where the final proverbial hammer hits the nail. We live in a culture where we love to point fingers. We live in a culture where we have got some ... if you don't know this yet; we have got some serious issues in our society and our culture. We have got people, believe it or not, yes, even in our city and our town; we have got people who are homeless. We have got families with kids that aren't eating. We have got people without shelter. We have got people that are living in cars. We have got what we call charitable organizations that are absolutely tapped out. The government, they have been broke for a lot longer than they are going to admit.

And you say, "Everybody gets mad. Well, what about this program and what about this?"

Can I be absolutely honest? I am just going to be hard honest with you all. Everything that we gripe about, okay, everything, special services, food, diapers for babies, clean

water, resources for widows whose husbands have died, that is not the government's job. The government's job is not to take care of widows. Whose job is it to take care of widows? The Church. It is not the government's job to make sure that people eat at night. It is the church's job. It is not the government's job to make sure that people are housed. It is our job. But here is the problem. We said we are going to keep the money for us. You all do the work and we are going to gripe about it. Do you know what that is called? That is called taxation without representation. That is exactly what that is called, because we have said, "It is your fault."

When I point one finger I got three looking right back at me. Let me tell you something. Change the world starts here. Let me give you a selfish ministry motivation. This is what gets me up in the morning and drives me to do what I do. It is the last thing I say, I promise, because I could go a long time. I long for the day and I know it probably won't be tomorrow, but some of you all could make it happen. If you do make it happen, God bless you. One day there is going to be a county commissioner here. It may be a man or it may be a woman. I don't know, because we are talking about the future. One day I dream of going into that individual's office and having this conversation:

You know all those resources you set aside for sanitation, all those resources you set aside for this, all those resources you set aside to clothe people and to feed people in an emergency. That is our job. It was never yours to begin with.

Because here is the problem, when the government gives somebody a meal, they don't give them the gospel, folks. When the government says, "Here is a place to stay tonight," they don't tell them about Jesus. The God of this Bible gave us, the Church, the responsibility to do these things because Jesus said in Matthew 25, "When you give them a cup of cold water not in the government's name, but in my name..." He has commissioned us to give the water. He has commissioned us to help the widows. He has commissioned us to provide for the orphans. That is our job. Change the world starts here.

You say, "That is so huge."

It is already there, guys. We don't have to come up with a way to raise funding for this and that. It is already there. Eighty percent of it, we have it. It is concentrated. There shouldn't be a single family in our community that goes without a home, without a meal, but they do.

Nehemiah chapter nine, the people of God came together and said, "Lord, you sustained our shoes and you sustained our clothes. But when we look back, it was really our fault."

As I close we are not going to pass the plate. This isn't a guilt giving message. I don't want the plate to be passed. What I want is I want our lives to be changed. I want us to change the golden calves for ministry. I want us to change the ambition for more and more of what the world offers that rusts and fades away for more and more people hearing the gospel through the hands and the feet of Jesus Christ his Church. This isn't

about can we fill the plate up more and more. This is about how can we change the world starting right here?

Change of Voice:

The message you heard today originated in the pulpit of the First Baptist Church of Conyers where Dr. Jeff Meyers serves as senior pastor. First Baptist Conyers is located at 2100 Highway 138 NE in Conyers, Georgia. For more resources from Dr. Meyers and First Baptist Conyers, check us out online at [www.firstconyers.com](http://www.firstconyers.com) or call 770-483-8700.

If you don't have a church home and you live in the east metro Atlanta area, we hope that you will drop by one Sunday morning at 9:30 or 11 AM for one of our two dynamic worship services.