

Sometimes I don't read all the names in a list.

But sometimes we need to make sure to read them.

After all, this is the Word of God!

And *all scripture* is inspired by God, (as 2 Tim 3:16 says)

“and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction,

and for training in righteousness,

that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work.”

So hear now the Word of the Lord!

1. The Names on the Seals (v1-27)

“On the seals are the names of^[b] Nehemiah the governor, the son of Hacaliah, Zedekiah,
² Seraiah, Azariah, Jeremiah, ³ Pashhur, Amariah, Malchijah, ⁴ Hattush, Shebaniah, Malluch,
⁵ Harim, Meremoth, Obadiah, ⁶ Daniel, Ginnethon, Baruch, ⁷ Meshullam, Abijah, Mijamin,
⁸ Maaziah, Bilgai, Shemaiah; these are the priests. ⁹ And the Levites: Jeshua the son of Azaniah,
Binnui of the sons of Henadad, Kadmiel; ¹⁰ and their brothers, Shebaniah, Hodiah, Kelita,
Pelaiah, Hanan, ¹¹ Mica, Rehob, Hashabiah, ¹² Zaccur, Sherebiah, Shebaniah, ¹³ Hodiah, Bani,
Beninu. ¹⁴ The chiefs of the people: Parosh, Pahath-moab, Elam, Zattu, Bani, ¹⁵ Bunni, Azgad,
Bebai, ¹⁶ Adonijah, Bigvai, Adin, ¹⁷ Ater, Hezekiah, Azzur, ¹⁸ Hodiah, Hashum, Bezai, ¹⁹ Hariph,
Anathoth, Nebai, ²⁰ Magpiash, Meshullam, Hezir, ²¹ Meshezabel, Zadok, Jaddua, ²² Pelatiah,
Hanan, Anaiah, ²³ Hoshea, Hananiah, Hasshub, ²⁴ Hallohesh, Pilha, Shobek, ²⁵ Rehum,
Hashabnah, Maaseiah, ²⁶ Ahiah, Hanan, Anan, ²⁷ Malluch, Harim, Baanah.

How is this list of names *profitable* for teaching?

These men were willing to go on the record – for all time –
that they were committed to living God's way.

They covenanted together to deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow Jesus –
whatever the cost!

If you listen carefully to these names,

you will find 22 priests, 17 Levites, and 44 other chiefs of the people.

Some of the names of the chiefs seem like family names (verse 14, in particular),
while others are names of individuals who appear throughout Ezra-Nehemiah
(many of the Levites we heard of last week –

and some of the tribal leaders who had come 15 years earlier with Ezra).

While other names are those who returned with Zerubbabel nearly a century before
(but it may now be a grandson who shares the same name –

or perhaps the family continued to use the seal of that grandfather,
as a token of their fidelity to grandpa's faith).

So for the purpose of teaching, these verses show us what covenant loyalty looks like!
These weren't "special" people with a special call.
They were ordinary people living ordinary lives –
seeking to walk in the faith of their fathers.

But all scripture is also profitable for reproof and correction.
For those of you who have been raised in a Christian home –
have *you* been faithful to the faith of your fathers?
That doesn't mean that your parents are always right!
You should never perpetuate the *errors* of your fathers!
Indeed, last week we saw how Ezra led the people of God
in *repenting* of the sins of their fathers!
If we would be faithful to the faith of our fathers –
then we *need* to repent of their sins – to turn away from their errors –
and follow their God *more faithfully* than they did!

Nehemiah 10:1-27 reproves us for our slackness in *owning* the covenant –
in taking God's word seriously!
Are you willing to put your name – your reputation – on the line
in denying yourself, taking up your cross, and following Jesus?

Our Psalm of response comes from Psalm 119 – verses 105-112, (TPH 119N)
a song where we vow before God to walk in his path –
and where we confess that God's word is what illumine our path.

Sing Psalm 119N
Read 1 Corinthians 9:1-18

Let me start by saying that you are one of the most generous congregations in St. Joe County.
I have been preaching for 17 years that tithing is not required by the Word of God –
and yet, if anything, your giving has increased!

Paul helps us think about how to understand the relationship between OT church finance
and NT church finance.

He uses two illustrations from the Law.
First, "you shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain."
It might seem odd that Paul says that God speaks *entirely* for our sake.
But Paul's point is that God is not speaking to oxen.
He is speaking *to us*.
Sure, *we* should be concerned with how we treat our animals –
but *God's* concern is not for the animal –

God's concern is for how *humans* treat animals (and one another).
Indeed, Paul says that "not muzzling an ox when it treads out the grain"
applies to paying those who preach the gospel.

And second, Paul says that the provision for the Priests and Levites in the OT
also applies to the way that the church should provide for pastors.
"Those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel."

Paul himself refused to make use of that right –
but he made it clear that this is what the Lord commands.

Notice that Paul does not take a woodenly literal approach to the OT.
He takes the *principles* of the OT and applies them in a New Covenant context.

He doesn't appeal to the exact letter of the Law –
but then again, neither did Nehemiah.

Look at Nehemiah 10, verses 32-34.

There is nothing in the Law that requires a third of a shekel
be given for the service of the house of God.
Likewise, there is no such thing as a "wood offering" in the Pentateuch.

Today we are looking at two things:
Holiness in daily life (verses 28-31),
And holiness in church finance (verses 32-39)

2. "To Walk in God's Law": Holiness in Daily Life (v28-31)

To be holy means to be separate – to be distinct.

In verses 28-29,
we hear that the people of God separated themselves from the peoples of the land.

a. "A Curse and an Oath" – God's Covenant and Your Place in It (v28-29)

²⁸ "The rest of the people, the priests, the Levites, the gatekeepers, the singers, the temple servants, and all who have separated themselves from the peoples of the lands to the Law of God, their wives, their sons, their daughters, all who have knowledge and understanding, ²⁹ join with their brothers, their nobles, and enter into a curse and an oath to walk in God's Law that was given by Moses the servant of God, and to observe and do all the commandments of the LORD our Lord and his rules and his statutes.

But notice what it means to be distinct:

"all who have separated themselves from the peoples of the land *to the Law of God.*"

Why are we different from our culture?

Because we seek to walk in God's Law –

“to observe and do all the commandments of the LORD our Lord” –
or as Jesus says in the Great Commission:

“teach them to observe everything that I have commanded you.”

But verse 29 says it in a curious way:

“join with their brothers, their nobles,
and enter into a curse and an oath to walk in God's Law...”

Why do they enter a curse and an oath?

In one sense, *as the people of God*, they are already under the “curse of the law.”
Both in Leviticus and in Deuteronomy there are curses proclaimed on Israel
if they fail to keep God's law!

But all through the OT it is clear that being descended from Abraham
does not guarantee God's blessing.

It's not enough to be “part of the chosen people” –
you have to *live* like the chosen people!

The Puritans used to call this “owning the covenant.”

By virtue of your baptism you became part of God's people.

And that's true – no matter how old you were when you were baptized!

If you think about it – most of the people signing the covenant
(or now joining themselves in entering the curse and the oath) –
were already believers.

Their solemn oath and covenant is not their initial “conversion.”

Their solemn oath and covenant is their ongoing *commitment*
to deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow Jesus.

In the same way,

all of us as Christians need to commit ourselves – today –
to being serious in our pursuit of following Christ!

And this fleshes itself out in several practical ways (in verses 30-31).

First:

b. We Will Not Intermarry with Unbelievers (v30)

³⁰ *We will not give our daughters to the peoples of the land or take their daughters for our sons.*

We've seen before in Ezra-Nehemiah that the concern is *not* that they are “foreigners.”

The concern is that they do not worship Israel's God.
(they are unbelievers).

God's name is holy – and so those who bear his name are holy!
To intermarry with unbelievers is to pollute God's holy name!

But then in verse 31:

c. We Will Not Do Business on the Sabbath (v31a)

³¹ And if the peoples of the land bring in goods or any grain on the Sabbath day to sell, we will not buy from them on the Sabbath or on a holy day.

In Jeremiah 17, God had said:

²⁴ “But if you listen to me, declares the LORD, and bring in no burden by the gates of this city on the Sabbath day, but keep the Sabbath day holy and do no work on it, ²⁵ then there shall enter by the gates of this city kings and princes who sit on the throne of David, riding in chariots and on horses, they and their officials, the men of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem. And this city shall be inhabited forever.”

The coming of God's kingdom – the coming of eternal salvation –
is connected to keeping the Sabbath day holy.

Do you want to see God's kingdom come? God's will be done?
Then start by living the way that he calls us to live!

God designed us to work for six days and rest on the seventh.

Sometimes people have treated the Sabbath more like a burden than a gift!

But the Sabbath was a gift.

God knew that some of us would tend to be workaholics –

so he gave us one day a week where we have to turn everything off
and rest.

He also knew that some of us would be lazy,

so he also commanded us to *work* for six days!

Just remember that “work” is not limited to the things you do for money –

your work includes all of your “creational labors” –
all of the ordinary things you do in life).

The Sabbath day is supposed to be a day of rest,
where we set aside the ordinary stuff of life,
and turn our focus to Christ.

But it is also a day for giving rest to others.

Indeed, that's at the heart of verse 31.

When the peoples of the land bring in goods or grain on the Sabbath day to sell,
we will not buy from them,
because we want to give them rest.

Some people say that in the NT, the Lord's Day is fundamentally different from the Sabbath.

It's certainly true that in the early church they didn't say that the Lord's Day was the "Christian Sabbath" –
but that's because in Hebrew the word "Sabbath" simply means "Seventh Day."
And the Lord's Day is not the Christian "Seventh Day" –
the Lord's Day is emphatically the *Eighth Day* –
the First Day of the New Creation!

But in the early church they did call the Lord's Day the "Christian feast day."
And in the Roman world, a feast day was a day when the courts were closed –
no one did their ordinary business –
and everyone gave their servants and slaves the day off.
In other words, a Roman feast day looked an awful lot like a Jewish Sabbath.
The difference was that Romans did it on an irregular schedule,
whereas the Jews did it every seven days!

All of humanity – throughout all of history – has recognized that we *need* regular days of rest.
Most of humanity – throughout all of history –
has recognized that we should have regular days of worship.
The principles *behind* the Sabbath commandment are universal to humanity.

The only thing that is unique to it is in establishing a *seven-day* week
(based on God's pattern in creation).

I know that some people try to say "so long as you make sure that you rest one day a week
it doesn't matter which one!"
But you know as well as I do, that it doesn't work that way!
We are communal creatures.
If everyone else around me is working, playing, doing stuff –
then I am not going to rest!

The Sabbath command is a gift from God
to give you rest –
in order that you might then give rest to others as well.

And then the end of verse 31 applies the sabbath principle a step further:

d. We Will Honor the Sabbatical Year (v31b)

And we will forego the crops of the seventh year and the exaction of every debt.

The Law of Moses required Israel to leave the land fallow in the seventh year,
and simply to eat whatever grew of its own accord that year –
with the promise that God would provide sufficient harvests in the 6th year
to feed Israel for the following year as well.

The Seventh Year – the sabbatical year – was to be a year of giving rest.
You would not have your regular farm duties.
You were also required to forgive debts in the seventh year.
This was the ancient version of “bankruptcy.”
The idea was to prevent the cycle of indebtedness from destroying the poor.

Of course, it is worth pointing out that back then there were no 30-year mortgages
or student-loan debt – or any of the modern practices of institutionalized debt!

We saw the situation a few weeks ago (in Nehemiah 5)
where people were forced to borrow in order to pay their taxes –
and as collateral, they had to surrender their land –
and so had no means to repay the loan –
so they had to sell their children into slavery in order to pay their debts.

The idea of the Sabbatical Year was to prevent that situation from happening in the first place!
Every seventh year, all debts were to be forgiven.
So let’s say 2020 was the Seventh Year.
That means that on January 1, 2020, all your debts will be wiped out!
You could never get more than six years into debt.

If debts are wiped clean every seven years –
then no one will be able to accumulate massive debt –
and no one will be able to leverage their lending to acquire massive wealth –
and so there will be greater income equality in the land.

It’s quite remarkable.
Legal history is chock full of cases where laws were created to benefit the rich.
The Law of Moses is a rare example of a system of law
designed to benefit the whole community.

We see the sabbath year principle at work in the modern idea of bankruptcy –
whereby debts can be forgiven –
and also in crop rotation – letting the land lie fallow.
But also you see it in the practice of the “sabbatical” –
where a professor (or a pastor, or any other profession, for that matter!)
takes time off from their regular duties to recharge.

The last section of chapter 10 then focuses on “holiness in church finance.”

- 3. “We Will Not Neglect the House of Our God”: Holiness in Church Finance (v32-39)**
 - a. A Temple Tax for the Regular Offerings (v32-33)**

³² “We also take on ourselves the obligation to give yearly a third part of a shekel^[c] for the service of the house of our God: ³³ for the showbread, the regular grain offering, the regular burnt offering, the Sabbaths, the new moons, the appointed feasts, the holy things, and the sin offerings to make atonement for Israel, and for all the work of the house of our God.

We have seen that Ezra came to Jerusalem 15 years earlier to study, to do, and to teach the Law of God.

So what on earth is going on in verses 32-34?!

There is *nothing* in the Law of God about a “wood offering” – or, for that matter, a “temple tax” of a third of a shekel!

Part of the reason for this is that the Law of God was written before there was a temple! Ezra and Nehemiah are not literalists when it comes to the interpretation of the Law!

They understand that the Law was written for the Tabernacle of Moses.

It didn’t quite work the same when they had the Temple of Solomon.

(If you think about it,

the Davidic Covenant was the “new covenant” in it’s day!

How do you apply the Law of Moses to the new covenant context?)

And of course, for Ezra and Nehemiah, they live after the promise of Jeremiah 31 – that God is making a *new covenant* with his people –

one in which the covenant will be written on the hearts of God’s people.

They still have all of the offerings that Moses did –

“the showbread, the regular grain offering, the regular burnt offering, the Sabbaths, the new moons, the appointed feasts, the holy things, and the sin offerings to make atonement for Israel...”

but Moses had not stated *how* those costs should be paid.

So Nehemiah takes the principles of the law and applies them to their situation.

If we, the leaders of Judah, takes on ourselves the obligation of paying this temple tax, then the temple will have sufficient funds to obtain all that is needed.

And if we divide by lot the need for wood among the whole people, then they will never run out of wood for the altar.

What was *written* in the Law was the requirement to burn offerings on the altar.

There was no “thus saith the LORD” for how to do this – so they came up with a plan for how to do it well.

b. A Wood Offering for the Altar (v34)

³⁴ *We, the priests, the Levites, and the people, have likewise cast lots for the wood offering, to bring it into the house of our God, according to our fathers' houses, at times appointed, year by year, to burn on the altar of the LORD our God, as it is written in the Law.*

In verses 35-39 we hear about two basic principles of giving.
The firstfruits and the tithe.

Let me start by saying that because we live in a very different economy
it would be impossible to apply this literally today.
If you think about what Nehemiah is doing here –
the firstfruits and the tithe are only applicable to landowners.
What would a day laborer have to bring?
A day laborer owns no land –
and therefore has no produce!
You might say, ‘But he has his wages’!
Yes, but his wages would largely consist in produce –
produce that had already been tithed and firstfruted!

This is part of the reason why Jesus and the apostles do not make a big deal about “tithing.”
Yes, both Jesus and the apostles use various OT economic principles –
but rarely in a woodenly literal way.
Instead, they encourage us to think about the principles!

c. The Firstfruits (v35-37a)

³⁵ We obligate ourselves to bring the firstfruits of our ground and the firstfruits of all fruit of every tree, year by year, to the house of the LORD; ³⁶ also to bring to the house of our God, to the priests who minister in the house of our God, the firstborn of our sons and of our cattle, as it is written in the Law, and the firstborn of our herds and of our flocks; ³⁷ and to bring the first of our dough, and our contributions, the fruit of every tree, the wine and the oil, to the priests, to the chambers of the house of our God;

The Law *did* require all Israelites to bring the firstfruits to the house of the LORD.
Exodus 23 and 34, Numb 18, and Dt 26 all laid out this requirement.

The firstborn of every clean animal had to be sacrificed.
The firstborn son had to be redeemed by an offering
(and likewise the firstborn of unclean animals had to be redeemed).
The firstfruits of the harvest had to be offered to the LORD each year,
along with the first part of all the produce of the land –
and for that matter, even the first part of your dough
(think of a sourdough starter),
along with the first part of your wine and your oil
(both processed and unprocessed goods).

The basic principle of the firstfruits is expressed in Deuteronomy 26:8-11:

⁸ And the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great deeds of terror, with signs and wonders. ⁹ And he brought us into this place and gave us this

land, a land flowing with milk and honey. ¹⁰ And behold, now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground, which you, O LORD, have given me.’ And you shall set it down before the LORD your God and worship before the LORD your God. ¹¹ And you shall rejoice in all the good that the LORD your God has given to you and to your house, you, and the Levite, and the sojourner who is among you.

The principle of firstfruits is that God has given us everything:

“the fruit of the ground, which you, O LORD, have given me”

And so we give back to God *the first* of that fruit.

We don’t wait to see whether we have enough for ourselves!

We give the *firstfruits* to God because we are grateful for what he has done for us.

d. The Tithes for the Levites – and the Tithes of the Tithes for the Priest (v37b-39)
and to bring to the Levites the tithes from our ground, for it is the Levites who collect the tithes in all our towns where we labor. ³⁸ And the priest, the son of Aaron, shall be with the Levites when the Levites receive the tithes. And the Levites shall bring up the tithe of the tithes to the house of our God, to the chambers of the storehouse.

Likewise, the tithe was collected by the Levites in all the towns.

90% of the tithe went to the Levites – but the “tithe of the tithe” – 10% of the tithe – was brought to the temple for the priests.

Deuteronomy 14 speaks of how Israel was supposed to use the tithe.

For two years out of three they were to take the tithe to the temple
and then use it to feast together with all God’s people –
including the Levite and the poor.

Then in the third year and the sixth year,
the tithe was supposed to be stored up in the storehouses –
in order to make sure that there was sufficient food
for the Levite, the sojourner and the fatherless.

(Then the seventh year was the year of release – the sabbatical year –
as we saw earlier).

So the tithe is taken from the fruit of the land –
just like the firstfruits.

This reminds us that the faithful Israelite had a number of economic obligations.

Yes there was the tithe – ten per cent of the increase of crops and flocks and herds.

There was also the firstfruits – and the firstborn of every mother.

And there were the burnt offerings, grain offerings, peace offerings, etc.
that you would bring for the feasts.

And there were the gleanings that you were to leave in the fields for the poor.

In other words, the average faithful Israelite would probably give around 15-20% of his increase in his various religious obligations.

At least the average faithful Israelite *landowner*.

But if you are a poor day-laborer or craftsman – and you own no land –
then you pay nothing (except a couple birds when your wife gives birth to her firstborn –
think of Joseph, the carpenter, when he redeemed Mary’s firstborn, Jesus).

And, for that matter, if you are a wealthy merchant – and you own no land –
then you also pay nothing!

The system of tithes and firstfruits is a system that is designed around an agricultural society.
It assumes that everyone (except the priests) is engaged in agrarian pursuits,
and allows for an equitable distribution
of the cost of maintaining the religious life of the community.

But it doesn’t translate neatly into other economic models.

The early church – being largely urban at first –
didn't talk about tithing much!

But as the gospel spread,
it made sense to adopt the tithing model
so long as Christian Europe remained largely agrarian.

But as the mercantile economy developed,
many objected that merchants and craftsmen were paying nothing,
while the whole burden of supporting the church
fell to the landowners.

Think about what happens, though,
when you apply the OT tithing model to a modern economy!

Who gets hit the hardest?

The poor.

If they had lived in the OT, they would have contributed to the tithe
through their labor in the fields of the landowners!

As they thresh their employer’s grain, that grain will be tithed –
therefore *their labor* contributes to the support of the priests!

But now, if everyone tithes in the modern economy,
not only does their labor contribute (through their employer’s tithe),
but also they must contribute through their own tithe!

You may be wondering –
what does this mean for *me*?

Let's go back to first principles.

The *principle* of the firstfruits is that *all the harvest belongs to God* –
and so I should give to God the *first* part of the harvest
as a testimony that all that I have and all that I am belongs to him.

So I would encourage you: don't just give "what's left" at the end of the month.
When talking about the offering for the saints in Jerusalem,
Paul encourages the Corinthians
to put something aside on the first day of every week...
"so that there will be no collecting when I come." (16:2)

The *principle* of the tithe is that the whole people of God should be engaged
in supporting the ministry of the gospel –
the point that we read earlier in 1 Cor 9.

Sure – 10% is a useful number.

It's the percentage that Abraham gave to Melchizedek in Gen 14.
But given that the average faithful Israelite landowner
probably gave 15-20% of his increase –
for a Christian to say "I gave my 10%!" –
is hardly the right sort of attitude!

After all, here in Nehemiah 10,
the people of God are realizing
that *more* is needed than what was required in the Law of Moses.
And so they cheerfully and willingly set up a temple tax and a wood offering
in order to make sure that the temple – and its ministers – are provided for.

They're not just trying to fulfill some legalistic obligation!
Their concern is: "thy kingdom come, thy will be done"!
They are willing to deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow Jesus.

Notice how this is expressed in verse 39:

³⁹ For the people of Israel and the sons of Levi shall bring the contribution of grain, wine, and oil to the chambers, where the vessels of the sanctuary are, as well as the priests who minister, and the gatekeepers and the singers. We will not neglect the house of our God."

Today the church building plays a much smaller role in the equation.
Buildings are useful for the way that they serve to bring people together
to worship God and build each other up.
But the *house of our God* is not this structure.

The *house of our God* is one another.

Bernard of Clairvaux dealt with this in the 12th century!

He objected to the lavishness of the churches and monasteries of his day.

“Isn't greed, a form of idolatry, responsible for all this?

Aren't we seeking contributions rather than spiritual profit?...

Money is scattered about in such a way that it will multiply.

It is spent so that it will increase.

Pouring it out produces more of it.

Faced with expensive but marvelous vanities,

people are inspired to contribute rather than to pray.

Thus riches attract riches and money produces more money.

I don't know why, but the wealthier a place, the readier people are to contribute to it.

Just feast their eyes on gold-covered relics and their purses will open.

Just show them a beautiful picture of some saint.

The brighter the colors, the saintlier he'll appear to them...

There is more admiration for beauty than veneration for sanctity...

Oh vanity of vanities, yet no more vain than insane!

The church is resplendent in her walls and wanting in her poor.

She dresses her stones in gold and lets her sons go naked.

The eyes of the rich are fed at the expense of the indigent.

The curious find something to amuse them and the needy find nothing to sustain them...

Good Lord! If we aren't embarrassed by the silliness of it all,

shouldn't we at least be disgusted by the expense?"

<https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/source/bernard1.asp>

If we would not *neglect the house of our God* –

then we should make sure that our financial dealings

are designed to build up God's people.

PHSS 219 “My Father Was a Wanderer”