

“IT’S TIME TO REBUILD THE WALLS!”

by Rom A. Pegram (3/4/18)

Gordon Dahl once said: “We tend to *worship* our work, *work* at our play, and *play* at our worship.” Does that describe the world we live in today? Well, it’s a lot closer to the world we live in *today* ... than the world some of us grew up in. It’s not that I’m suggesting we reinstate a ‘blue law’ back into society. (Our car dealers keep that law alive and well!) But, I am saying is that *when it comes to being more than survivors today, we have done our part in making that a very difficult thing ... by not taking worship and the day that goes with it very seriously...*

It’s time, folks, we went back to Exodus, Chapter 20, for a little review. There are 10 Commandments there that have come to be looked on more as *suggestions* ... and *that’s just an example of why it’s become hard to survive in this world. **We have truly fallen away from the word of God—from living the word of God!*** Oh, we take some of the Commandments seriously ... like “Do not commit murder” ... “Do not commit murder” ... well, #6 is still taken pretty seriously, but the rest of them are up for grabs, aren’t they? Go back and review them. See what *you* think! In all fairness, there are some who know that Sunday (Sabbath) is supposed to be special, but really don’t know why ...

A friend of W.C. Fields once walked into his dressing room unannounced and caught him reading the Bible. Knowing Field’s cynical attitude toward religion, he was surprised. Fields himself seemed embarrassed and quickly shut the book, stating, “Just looking for loopholes.”

And that captures the attitude many Christians I know have about the whole idea of Sabbath—looking for loopholes. They know it’s special, and to be observed, but they don’t really know why or how to go about it...

Nehemiah’s our biblical teacher for today ... his time, historically, coming after the time that Esther was a queen in Persia. Having been exiled for several years now, Nehemiah continued hearing from many Jewish travelers of the horrible state that Jerusalem—the Holy City—was in. Yes, he could have stayed in his comfortable position, as a high-ranking official of King Artaxerxes. But, he saw the condition of those city walls as a ‘soul alert opportunity.’ He went to the king, after much prayer and planning, and asked for permission to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the walls. Not *only* did he ask for permission to go, he asked for supplies too, because he was that close to the king. The king agreed ... and Nehemiah traveled to Jerusalem. Listen carefully now to what he observed (Nehemiah 2:11-18; 13:15-22, NLT)...

So I arrived in Jerusalem. Three days later, ¹² I slipped out during the night, taking only a few others with me. I had not told anyone about the plans God had put in my heart for Jerusalem. We took no pack animals with us except the donkey I was riding. ¹³ After dark I went out through the Valley Gate, past the Jackal’s Well, and over to the Dung Gate to inspect the broken walls and burned gates. ¹⁴ Then I went to the Fountain Gate and to the King’s Pool, but my donkey couldn’t get through the rubble. ¹⁵ So, though it

was still dark, I went up the Kidron Valley instead, inspecting the wall before I turned back and entered again at the Valley Gate.

¹⁶ The city officials did not know I had been out there or what I was doing, for I had not yet said anything to anyone about my plans. I had not yet spoken to the Jewish leaders—the priests, the nobles, the officials, or anyone else in the administration. ¹⁷ But now I said to them, “You know very well what trouble we are in. Jerusalem lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire. Let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem and end this disgrace!” ¹⁸ Then I told them about how the gracious hand of God had been on me, and about my conversation with the king.

They replied at once, “Yes, let’s rebuild the wall!” So they began the good work....

In those days I saw men of Judah treading out their winepresses on the Sabbath. They were also bringing in grain, loading it on donkeys, and bringing their wine, grapes, figs, and all sorts of produce to Jerusalem to sell on the Sabbath. So I rebuked them for selling their produce on that day. ¹⁶ Some men from Tyre, who lived in Jerusalem, were bringing in fish and all kinds of merchandise. They were selling it on the Sabbath to the people of Judah—and in Jerusalem at that!

¹⁷ So I confronted the nobles of Judah. “Why are you profaning the Sabbath in this evil way?” I asked. ¹⁸ “Wasn’t it just this sort of thing that your ancestors did that caused our God to bring all this trouble upon us and our city? Now you are bringing even more wrath upon Israel by permitting the Sabbath to be desecrated in this way!”

¹⁹ Then I commanded that the gates of Jerusalem should be shut as darkness fell every Friday evening, not to be opened until the Sabbath ended. I sent some of my own servants to guard the gates so that no merchandise could be brought in on the Sabbath day. ²⁰ The merchants and tradesmen with a variety of wares camped outside Jerusalem once or twice. ²¹ But I spoke sharply to them and said, “What are you doing out here, camping around the wall? If you do this again, I will arrest you!” And that was the last time they came on the Sabbath. ²² Then I commanded the Levites to purify themselves and to guard the gates in order to preserve the holiness of the Sabbath.

Remember this good deed also, O my God! Have compassion on me according to your great and unfailing love.

Jerusalem’s badly damaged walls were the cause of some serious grief. When Nehemiah first received word about the sad state of his beloved hometown, he wept. And, they weren’t just sentimental tears either. For, Nehemiah knew what this meant; he knew what was at stake here. You see, *in the ancient world, walls were necessary in order to provide protection from one’s enemies.* The walls of Jerusalem had to be repaired. *The identity of the people of God had become fuzzy/unclear ... and needed to be restored.* And that was the point...

Even though we are centuries removed from the Jerusalem of Nehemiah’s day, we again find ourselves in need of walls—walls of protection that will keep us walking with God, in spite of the world that we live in. We need protection from the Enemy; the influence of contemporary society has successfully blurred the distinctions that for decades helped define what was sacred ... from what was secular. The walls that

separate a weekly Sabbath from the rest of the week have eroded and fallen; Christians are no longer characterized by the unique way they spend *the first day of the week!*

Now, again, I'm not suggesting we reinstatement the 'blue law' across the board. *I'm not as concerned with outside actions ... as I am with inside attitudes!* That's where it has to begin. **If we're to be more than survivors in this world, we need to remember to set aside a time for Sabbath—a time of the week dedicated to the worship of God and to the corporate hearing of God's word.** Doing that is building (or rebuilding) walls of protection around us that we need ... to be more than survivors in this world we live in. So, what do we learn from Nehemiah about how to have this kind of protection in our day?

WE HAVE TO REBUILD WALLS THAT ARE DOWN! Nehemiah 2:17 says, "But now I said to them, 'You know very well what trouble we are in. Jerusalem lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire. Let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem and end this disgrace!'"

Let me ask you a question this morning: Are you happy with changes you've seen take place in our society over the past 40 years or so (and I'm not speaking technologically either)? Do you believe that walls of morality ... and walls of respect for God (and for the 4th Commandment) have been torn down? There are *reasons* why...

- ... commercials on television look different today than they did 40 years ago!
- ... magazine ads look different today than they did 40 years ago!
- ... children are disciplined in school for much more serious things than just chewing gum in class!

Nehemiah would be the first to say to us, "Let's rebuild these walls of protection and put an end to our disgrace!"

Tim Dearborn says *the Sabbath is God's gift to God's people to protect us against trusting our own effort as they key to present survival and future provision.* In other words, the Sabbath centers our trust in God, rather than in our predictably insufficient efforts to manage time and deal with life issues...

It's time to rebuild the walls that are down, folks. And, we need to be in agreement ... and we all need to do our part (4:6). It *is* a matter of survival; it's definitely an issue in being 'more than survivors.' And I believe the late Francis Schaeffer was correct in saying that the United States of America will never be defeated from the outside, but it will crumble from the inside out ... if it doesn't change its ways. Folks, it's time to rebuild the walls that are down. Nehemiah also wants us to know this about the reality of 'rebuilding walls'...

WE WILL MEET OPPOSITION WHEN WE BEGIN TO REBUILD. Nehemiah 4:17b-18a shares, "The laborers carried on their work with one hand supporting their load and one hand holding a weapon. ¹⁸ All the builders had a sword belted to their side."

I've seen this happen time after time after time, *when people of God followed God and others just didn't understand!* As this church begins to grow—God's way, there will be people in this community who just will not understand what is going on at 300 Church Street! One reason may be because there are many who really don't know God's word—how God desires to work in the lives of those truly open to what *God* wants for his kingdom! Another reason may be there are many who *don't want to understand* because they're too busy worshipping what they want to worship [tradition] and what makes them *comfortable* ... to realize God wants to do a new thing! Isaiah was up against the same thing when God gave him a word for his people: "Do not cling to events of the past or dwell on what happened long ago. Watch for the new thing I am going to do. It is happening already—you can see it now" (Isaiah 43:18-19a, TEV)!

There's a pastor friend of mine, who's retired now, who used to say, "If you want to be like Christ, you'd better look good on wood!" In other words, if you—like Jesus—are sold out to follow what God wants you to do no matter what, there is a good chance that you too will be crucified ... or the attempt might be made...

Folks, we're *going to* meet opposition here when we begin to rebuild, as God wants us to rebuild. But regardless of the opposition, we need to be rebuilding the walls of protection around our Sabbath (Sundays) here at Trinity United Methodist Church ... and we'll probably meet some opposition along the way, but that can't stop us. And once the walls are up, and we are in agreement about the importance of being a people of God who worships ... and that's a priority, then ...

WE NEED TO PROTECT WHAT GOD HAS HELPED US TO REBUILD. In Nehemiah 13:15-22, he observed what was taking place on the Sabbath at that time, how it had changed over the years, and how the people were making the Sabbath unholy (not set apart for God and God's purposes). He then ordered the city gates to be shut at the beginning of the Sabbath and tells us (22a): "Then I commanded the Levites to purify themselves and to guard the gates in order to preserve the holiness of the Sabbath." Folks, are we going to be good stewards of all God has entrusted to us ... including the days God asked us to set aside for worship & rest?

So, what about the walls around God's Sabbath principle (Commandment #4)? Like Nehemiah, I find myself almost moved to tears of frustration that it stands in disrepair. *And, I call those who aspire to be more than spiritual survivors to join me in a holy endeavor, today...* Consider the importance of restoring this sacred "wall in time" that uniquely marks the people of God. Like a modern-day Levite, I accept *my* assignment to stand guard at the gate to keep sacred what God has commanded ... and I ask that (starting this week) you join me in the building of this wall for the protection of our souls. Many 'situations' that I deal with each and every week, I believe, could be avoided if people would take God's commandment of Sabbath seriously ... and take time—weekly—for God! For I know that regularly connecting with God (having that kind of relationship) is what leads to a winning attitude—a 'more than a survivor' attitude toward life itself...

Raymond B. Buker, Sr.—a now elderly athlete, reminisced about days gone by. He says, “A deafening roar filled the stadium, an unnatural sound like nothing I had ever heard before...

‘What is it? What is it?’ I asked the other runners in the dressing room. ‘It’s Eric Liddell. He’s broken the world’s record in the 400 meters!’

I remember that moment in the 1924 Olympics as if it were yesterday. Eric had refused to run in the 100 meters ... because the race was scheduled on Sunday. ... I don’t know how many others in the stadium understood the kind of Christian conviction that had caused Eric to forfeit his earlier race. ... But / understood instinctively, for I shared Eric’s beliefs.

In fact, my brother and I had made the same decision in 1920 ... in the Olympic trials. The meet was on a Sunday, and we decided the Lord wouldn’t be pleased if we broke the Sabbath day’s rest, so we declined. ... For Eric—and for my brother and me—it was much more than following a simple belief: It was a conviction that ... *our running was for one purpose only—to give glory to God.*”

So ... what’s the purpose of your life? What does it stand for? And take a good look—inwardly—at your attitude toward ‘keeping the Sabbath holy.’ What does it say about the ‘wall of protection’ God gave us as a gift to keep us walking with him every day—keeping our lives on track? Have we appreciated the gift ... or not? And, if not, what are we going to do about it ... to be ‘more than survivors’ in our world today?