



“Guard”  
Nehemiah 13

**Idea:** There is within every Christ-follower the propensity to stray away from the faith.

**Intro:** A young couple bought their first house, moved in, and began some remodeling projects. In the course of their work, they spotted a couple of ants in their basement. A few days later they found one in their bedroom. It didn’t seem like much of a problem, so they set out some “ant hotels” to trap them. But they never could totally eradicate the ants. Then one day as they were installing new windows, they noticed some sawdust on a windowsill. With a sense of dread, they wondered if perhaps they had termites.

They arranged for a pest inspection. An exterminator came out and inspected their home. He discovered that their problem was not termites but carpenter ants. These pests can be more destructive than termites. They destroy anything wooden in order to keep the queen alive. Find the queen, and you destroy the colony. In the meantime, if you have no idea where that queen resides, your house is slowly eaten out from under you. Quite literally, it could collapse from the inside.

On occasion the greatest dangers we face are not from without but from within. Billy Graham once said, “Sometimes I wonder who is going to win the battle first, the barbarians beating at our gates from without, or the termites of immorality from within.”

We must be on guard against the casual drift in our lives. If you are the person who likes to get out in the water when you are at the beach, then you understand this. When you are out swimming or floating in the surf, it doesn't take long to drift down the beach. The same is true of our Christian lives. There is within every Christ-follower the propensity to stray away from the faith. For that reason, there is a great need in each of our lives to both be aware of this danger and to combat it. If you are not constantly guarding against the drift in your life, then you are giving ground to destructive forces within you. The Christian life is one to be lived on guard against those forces. We find in the final chapter of Nehemiah what happens when the guard is removed.

**Inquiry:** Under Nehemiah's leadership, the people of Judah had rebuilt Jerusalem's wall; they had reestablished the city's defenses and reaffirmed the people's sense of identity. With the work done, Nehemiah returned to the court of King Artaxerxes. However, whether because of unsettling reports or personal curiosity, Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem.

Upon his arrival he found neglect of the law and abuses among the priests and Levites. The wall surrounding Jerusalem still stood, but within its protection destructive behaviors and attitudes were spreading. These may have appeared small on the surface and rather nonthreatening, but Nehemiah perceived the implications of compromise. It probably didn't happen suddenly or even dramatically. Gradually, though, people started to do things without asking whether God's Word had anything to say on the subject. Therefore, in an effort to eradicate spiritual sloth and negligence, Nehemiah instituted specific reforms.

Like the Jews in Jerusalem, we too as Christ-followers can drift in our commitment and convictions to Jesus and His Word. If we are not careful to guard against this drift, it won't take long before we are way down the beach and our lives look nothing like Jesus. Therefore, we must be on guard. I want you to see four things we must guard in our lives.

## **1. Guard the gospel.**

Read Neh 13:4-9.

Certain accommodations in the temple were set-aside for the priests, gatekeepers, and singers who ministered (10:39). Many of them lived outside Jerusalem but regularly visited the city and the temple for work assigned to them at different times during the year. In order to provide room for Tobiah, the Bible tells us that Eliashib repurposed those quarters. By doing so, those essential services were no longer available to the ones who officiated in God's house.

When Nehemiah arrived in Jerusalem, he quickly saw the "evil" Eliashib had done (vs. 7). Why was it evil for Tobiah to dwell within the temple? First, he was an Ammonite. He was an idolater. Second, he was an outspoken enemy of God's people (4:3). He had diligently worked to thwart the rebuilding of the wall. It was ludicrous that he had been allowed to enter the temple, much less live there. But because of some sort of close relationship that Eliashib had with Tobiah, he was granted access and membership.

By preparing a chamber for Tobiah in the temple, Eliashib was sending a message that he was in good standing with God...that he was accepted by God. This, however, was the furthest thing from the truth. Tobiah was not in relationship with God. He was an enemy, but not because God wanted to be his enemy. Tobiah had willfully chosen to stand against God and

His activity through Nehemiah. Tobiah is the one who worked against the Lord. His actions revealed his sinfulness and rejection of God. Forgiveness and redemption, however, were available to Tobiah if he would come to God through faith and repentance. They weren't available to him by simply being connected to the temple anymore than they are to someone who thinks that about church membership.

Becoming a member of a church won't save you. Being religious won't save you. Doing good things won't save you. The Bible teaches that there is nothing you can do to make yourself acceptable to God. There is no religious hoop to jump through to earn your way into relationship with God. Instead, the Bible teaches that you are accepted only when you place your faith in Jesus Christ and what He accomplished for you on the cross.

*"I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."* – John 14:6

A relationship with God comes exclusively to those who have put their faith in Jesus. This gospel message, however, while exclusive is also inclusive. God desires for all peoples to come to Him. *"It is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek"* (Rom 1:16).

Church membership, then, is reserved exclusively for those in relationship with Jesus. The Bible teaches what we call "regenerate church membership." That means church membership is for those who have been born again in Christ. We must never place our hope and trust in the fact that our names are recorded on the membership ledgers of the church. As Christ-followers, we place our hope in the reality that our names are written in the Book of Life. There is an

eternal difference between being close to Christ and being in Christ. (Matt 7:21-23)

We guard the gospel in our lives and in our church because there is a natural tendency for us to drift away from the source of life.

## **2. Guard your worship.**

Read Neh 13:10-14.

The description we find here is in stark contrast to the commitments the Jews had made to the Lord in chapter 10. They had promised to bring grain, wine, oil, and everything that was to be tithed to the temple in order for the priests and Levites to have all that was needed for the worship of God. They had promised to not neglect the house of God (10:39). In chapter 13, however, the house of God was being neglected. The Levites and singers no longer had the support needed to sustain their ministry, so they were forced to provide for the livelihood of their families themselves. As a result, the worship of God was neglected.

The Jews failed to honor God with their tithes and offerings, which resulted in the spiritual leaders not having what was needed for worship. This tragedy, though, was most likely precipitated by the spiritual leaders and their poor leadership. Men like Eliashib and others began to compromise the teaching of the Word of God. They syncretized it with other belief systems, which resulted in a people who didn't worship anything but themselves and their pocket book.

How easy it is for our worship of God to slip into the margins of our lives. We must guard against this. We must strive to follow God's Word. We must preach the whole Word. We must live out the whole Word in every facet of our lives. Only then will we be able to

worship God in spirit and truth. You must guard your worship because there is a natural tendency for you to drift away from it.

### **3. Guard your faith.**

Read Neh 13:15-22.

The Sabbath was a day of rest, but it was more than that. The Sabbath was intended to be a protected space in which Israel could meditate on the Bible and rehearse the mercies of God. The Sabbath was for worship. It was to be hallowed, made holy, so that people could enjoy their God. This concern for the Sabbath, therefore, is not legalistic. This concern for the Sabbath, rather, is for the good of the people. The concern for the Sabbath is for the people to know God.

We learned in chapter 10 that we are no longer bound to the keeping of the law of the Sabbath. With that said, I do think there is a principle here that is valuable for us. We find the principle of having boundaries around our time so that we can read the Bible, study the Bible, and worship with others. We need and thus ought to have a set time each week whereby we gather with other believers to worship God and hear from His Word. We need to be reminded that He is holy, good, and faithful.

By forsaking the Sabbath, the Jews showed they no longer regarded God as holy. Their hearts drifted from God, so they no longer trusted Him.

Faith is a powerful thing in the life of the believer. Jesus said that if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you could say to the mountain, "Move from here to there, and it will move" (Matt 17:20). It is powerful; nothing is impossible when you have faith. At the same time, faith is fragile. It is easily undermined and

maligned. When we forget and neglect God's Word, our faith is damaged. Therefore, we must guard our faith by listening to and obeying God's Word (Rom 10:17). You must guard your faith because there is a natural tendency for you to drift away from it.

#### **4. Guard your heart.**

Read Neh 13:23-27.

The men in Jerusalem and Judah had repeated the foolish sins of Solomon. They had married foreign women who had not come to saving faith in the God of Israel. As a result they were raising children who couldn't speak the language of Judah...the language of God's Word.

We find here a strong lesson that we must learn. The enemy has more than one way of establishing a beachhead into the life of God's people. An Ammonite man may have been evicted from the temple, but there were plenty of Ammonite women now living at the heart of Israel's spiritual and moral life, the family. They have been excluded from the temple, but they have gained a foothold in the home.

We must guard our hearts from anything and everything that would draw them away from the God. We must be careful to not allow anything in that would compromise our affection for and commitment to the Lord. This includes whom we date and marry.

*Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? Or what fellowship has light with darkness? – 2 Cor 6:14*

Paul's concern had nothing to do with race or ethnicity. Christians are free to marry from any ethnicity. Christians, however, are not free to marry outside the

church of Jesus Christ. And the reason is because the believer will most likely be the one that is led astray. Therefore, missionary dating is always a bad idea. I would even go so far as to say that dating and subsequently marrying outside of your denomination is problematic. It forces at least one spouse to compromise his or her convictions. Many times it leads both spouses, because they can't agree, to stay out of church altogether. And it is always confusing to their children.

We must be careful to not allow anything to divide our affection for God. We must guard our hearts because there is a natural tendency for you and I to drift away from our love for God.

**Conclusion:** The tendency to drift is real. If you are not careful...if you do not pay attention to your walk with Christ, you will stray away from the faith. A little sin will be allowed to get a foothold in your life. Little by little it will gain ground and divide your affections until it becomes a stronghold in your life.

How should you respond when the drift is noticed? You do what Nehemiah did.

- Identify the sin. (vs. 7)  
Call it what it is... "evil."
- Eradicate the sin. (vs. 8, 28)  
Throw out "all" things associated with the sin.
- Replace the sin. (vs. 9)  
Put the worship of God and service to Him in its proper place.

There is within every Christ-follower the propensity to stray away from the faith. So we must be on guard against it.