

REPLACEMENTS

BEGINNING

"Be careful the friends you choose for you will become like them." W. Clement Stone

Illustration: I think my parents were firm believers in W. Clement Stone's philosophy regarding friendships. My parents always gave my brother and me the 5th degree when it came to us going to meet up with some friends. Who are they – how old are they – where do they live – do we know their parents – where are you going – what are you gonna be doing – how long are you gonna be gone for...?

Were your parents at all like that?

Why did our parents worry so much about who we hung around with? Because they knew that:

Here's the Thought:

The stronger the connection we have with others, the more our behavior is influenced by them.

Transition: *Our heavenly Father, as a concerned Parent (capital "P"), cautions us the same way our earthly parents did. He knows we wind up being influenced by those we bond with.*

As a Christian, how many of us can relate to hanging around the “wrong crowd” at some point in our lives and then having their influence ruin our walk with God?

Most of us at one time or another can probably remember when we went with the flow of the crowd we were hanging with rather than doing what we knew God wanted us to do.

And then we wound up paying the price of those choices.

- We forfeited our closeness to God.
- We missed out on His blessings and protection.
- We completely misrepresented Him to the rest of the world.
- And as a result, we had a negative effect on drawing others to Christ which is the thing that brings lasting fulfillment in life.

All of this just from getting too close to people we shouldn't have.

So here's the Question We Need to Answer Today:

What are Christians supposed to do about the connections they have with unbelievers?

Transition: *The concept of being influenced by those we spend time with is not a new concept. The Jews in Nehemiah's day chose a course of action for themselves that we have to consider for ourselves today.*

Turn to Nehemiah chapter 10. Nehemiah 10:28-31.

Story Background

Nehemiah chapter 9 records the continuing revival of the Jews in Jerusalem. The Jews continued to take the necessary steps to restore their closeness to God. They fasted, humbled themselves before God, separated themselves from the practices of unbelievers, confessed their sins, read God's Word, and worshipped the LORD. They even went as far as renewing their commitment to the Covenant agreement that governed their relationship with God. And they **put it in ink** showing their seriousness to stay close to Yahweh.

This week we will watch the Jews with Nehemiah as they acted on their recommitment and see the choices they made which were in alignment with the verbal commitments they had claimed.

Text: Nehemiah 10:28-31

10:28 And the rest of the people, the priests, the Levites, the porters, the singers, the Nethinims [*temple servants*], and all they that had separated themselves from the people of the lands unto the law of God, their wives, their sons, and their daughters, every one having knowledge, and having understanding;

- **Why did the Jews separate themselves from the people of the lands?** Because their ways differed from what the Law of God taught.
- **Whenever you remove something from your life, what is left?** A void that needs to be filled.
- **How did the Jews fill the void of the broken ties with unbelievers?** The answer is in the next verse, verse 29.

10:29 They clave [*bonded*] to their brethren [*kindred*], their nobles [*leaders*], and entered into a curse, and into an oath, to walk in God's law, which was given by Moses the servant of God, and to observe and do all the commandments of the LORD our Lord, and his judgments and his statutes;

- **How did the Jews fill the void of the broken ties with unbelievers?** The Jews separated themselves from unbelievers around them and then bonded with fellow believers of like mind. They *tightly joined together* with believers who wanted to honor the agreement under Moses which protected their closeness with God.

10:30 And that we would not give our daughters unto the people of the land, nor take their daughters for our sons:

- **What was the purpose in prohibiting mixed marriages?** It was practiced so that closeness to God could be preserved. The unbelieving people in that culture had many differing belief systems which conflicted with being in a relationship with the One, True God, Yahweh.

10:31 And if the people of the land bring ware or any victuals on the sabbath day to sell, that we would not buy it of them on the sabbath, or on the holy day: and that we would leave the seventh year, and the exaction of every debt.

- **Did the Jews cut off all ties with the unbelievers around them?** No. They still associated with unbelievers. But they did not permit the practices of the unbelievers to alter the practices the Jews were instructed to follow according to God's Word.
- **What's the problem with extended, complete isolation from the unbelieving world?** There is no opportunity to influence others toward a relationship with God which is a job that has been assigned by Christ to all believers. If unbelievers never hear about what God has done and is doing in our lives and if they never get to see the difference His presence makes in our lives, then they are definitely not going to be drawn to Him.

- How about our culture today, we disappear behind our garage doors and many times don't even know who are neighbors are, are we TOO separated from the world? Yes.
- How do we balance isolation from the unbelieving world with reaching the world for Christ? We have to strategically seek people out – intentionally enter into non-binding relationships to be able to have the opportunity to speak into their lives about the God who loves them and wants to be as close to them as He is to us.

Summary of the Bible Passage

In order to protect their intimacy with God, the Jews **replaced** close connections they had to unbelievers with close connections to believers who were also **pursuing** closeness with God.

***Transition:** Even though Christians are under a New Agreement or Covenant called grace, the influence of relationships in our lives is the same today as it was in the believers' lives in Nehemiah's time.*

APPLYING

Here's the Main Idea for the Lesson

Separating from unbelievers and **bonding** with Christians who are pursuing closeness with Christ protects an individual Christian's closeness with God.

So WHAT do Christians need to do?

Christians must **replace** their close connections to unbelievers with close connections to believers who are also **pursuing** closeness with Christ.

WHY do believers need to **replace** their close ties with unbelievers?

We can't have close ties to unbelievers and closeness with Christ at the same **time**. And only by staying **close** to Christ can our lives be fulfilled by producing the fruit which glorifies God.

HOW can believers make changes in their earthly relationships to preserve closeness with Christ?

1. Believers seeking closeness with Christ must start by **asking God** which relationships with unbelievers need to **end**. (If a relationship with an unbeliever can not be practiced without the Christian participating in some sinful activity, then the relationship needs to end.)
2. The voids that are left as a result of breaking off close ties with unbelievers must be replaced by **tight bonds** with growing believers. (Pursue the development of long term relationships with believers who also want to get closer to Jesus Christ. Tight bonds with other maturing believers is a vital missing ingredient in many church cultures today.)
3. To prevent being isolated from the world and not reaching the lost, growing Christians must **intentionally** seek to develop *non-binding relationships* with unbelievers in order to share Christ with them.

INSPIRING

Revival swept through Jerusalem as the believers with Nehemiah made and acted on difficult choices. These choices showed the Jews' commitment to staying close to God and caused them to shine again to the lost people around them. We can do this today. It starts with a choice to separate from worldly relationships and bond with other believers. The resulting closeness with Christ will shine to those around us in our community. What are we waiting for?

Remember:

Bonding with other Christians who are pursuing closeness with Christ protects an individual Christian's closeness with Christ.