

I'm not sure whether you can relate to this, but I am not a great person for reading. I never have been, and yet in the role that I play, reading is important. However when it comes to instruction manuals to build things, in my view it has to be done by the book. You can't skip any steps or guess, you've got to be obedient to the instructions. The other day I was helping a family build some beds and I was very conscious that we needed to follow the instructions. Our warden David Wilson was with me and some of the family were stepping ahead of the instructions, and for David and I they knew that we had to follow what the book said. Ultimately following the instructions ensures that the end product can be used. There's no point in just putting some things together but you then can't use it. Neither is it of any use if you read all the instructions but never put everything together. The proof of the pudding is getting a job done and then using it. And actually we had to build many beds, so after the first one it definitely became easier.

The message today of our passage from Nehemiah is taking what has been read and putting it into action. Where we last left our series, we saw the people gathering in the town square to hear God's word proclaimed and they then rejoiced, but now as a result of hearing God's word the people respond to the word. In other words, doing God's word, and not merely hearing it, is a central characteristic of the kind of gospel culture that we want to strengthen here in the United Parish. A number of years back we read the Book of James, and in Chapter 1 he says *"²² Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. ²³ Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror ²⁴ and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. ²⁵ But whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues in it—not forgetting what they have heard, but doing it—they will be blessed in what they do."*

And so we see today that whilst the people came to hear the word of God proclaimed on the first day, we now see in verse 13 that the head of each family came back on the second day. It was not enough to simply be there one day if they didn't know what to do with the word they had heard. And so today I want us to think a little bit more about being doers of the word that we hear.

Because we've got to (a) Study it carefully, (b) Respond immediately to it and (c) We have to celebrate how it shapes us.

STUDY IT CAREFULLY

So we know that on the second day it says the heads of the families along with the priests and Levites gathered around Ezra and it says that they gave attention to God's word. So the priests and Levites were set apart to study God's word so that they in turn could teach the people and lead them in worship. That's essentially what you have selected me to be for you. So we see the heads of each home gathering – there were too many people for the Levites and priests to look after, and so they bring together the dads so that they can study the word carefully, and that through them they are entrusted with teaching their family the plans of God from generation to generation.

I can remember being in the car and taking the boys to an event in Belfast. I thought I knew where I was going, and so when I turned up at the place there were no other children there. I had went the wrong way. And so I'm leading my children in the wrong direction. And it's the same for us, before we can be doers of God's word we need to understand what God's word says and means. How can we ever tell others if we don't know it ourselves.

I want to speak for a minute to all dads or grandparents or men who aspire to be dads. In the New Testament, in Ephesians 6:4 it says that dads have been given the primary, not the only, but the primary responsibility of teaching the next generation to love and know the Lord. It says, *“Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.”* So Christian dads aren’t to be harsh, insensitive, or nagging toward our children, because such behaviour gives them the wrong impression of what God is like and what it means to do his word. Of course, we all fail in many ways as dad’s, but the most important thing is to be guided in your parenting through the word. Don’t expect to teach your children correctly if you yourself are not taking the time to be taught. So very practically, for all of us, make every effort and take every opportunity you can to study God’s word carefully. Make a point of having your bible devotions every day, whether using the UCB notes at the back or having another Bible devotion. Join a small group – it’s so important for your families. When God’s word is in your heart, it will naturally seep out from you around your children and grandchildren.

Now I know that some of you feel inadequate for this and others too busy for this. Let me encourage you. More than your family needs your income, they need you to be an encourager and a doer in God’s word. And if you don’t know where to start, then speak with me about resources that I can put in your hands for your own growth – or age appropriate material that you can go through with your family before they go to school or just before they go to bed. For example I saw a great resource for Advent called *The light before Christmas* by Marty Machowski.

Now, the vast majority of you are not heads of families, but this part of our passage is most certainly for you and we know that’s the case because of what the Apostle Paul writes to everyone in the church at Rome. Romans 15:14: *“I myself am satisfied about you, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge and able to instruct one another.”* So in the church family, we all, not just dads, have the awesome joy of instructing one another. Sometimes we do that formally in teaching, and then sometimes we do it informally in conversations to build one another up.

We study carefully not just for ourselves, but for everyone we’ll have the privilege of influencing to be a doer of God’s word. Rebuilding requires being doers of God’s word, which begins with studying God’s word carefully. The word is spiritual food, so let’s all feast on it – we don’t want to starve. Remember also today as we have thought about the persecuted church, we are in a privileged position where other Christians in the world cannot share God’s word. Don’t take the most important gift you have for granted.

So the second way our passage teaches us to be doers of the word is to...

RESPOND TO IT IMMEDIATELY [NIKE]

Remember that a gospel culture is not just a people who hear God’s word, but they have to people who do God’s word. Do what it says (NIKE). So in verse 13 the priests, Levites, Ezra and the dads are essentially having a bible study. But then in verse 14 it says *“They found written in the Law, which the Lord had commanded through Moses, that the Israelites were to live in temporary shelters during the festival of the seventh month”*

So we know from this that they are reading Leviticus 23, and as they read it a massive lightbulb goes off in their heads. They realise that they are in the seventh month and they are meant to be celebrating the feast of booths. And none of them have ever done it. God’s word says they should be doing it right now. The feast of booths was a period where God’s people celebrated annually God’s faithfulness, when God faithfully brought his people out of

slavery in Egypt, preserving them as they journeyed for 40 years in the wilderness. During these years they didn't have a permanent place to live so they lived in booths or shelters. And so God's people were meant to celebrate for 7 days every year and live in temporary shelters and celebrate all of God's previous goodness to them. So these dads read these words, and and realise that they have to immediately respond to it. So what would you do if you were them? If we're honest, most of us would probably delay obedience. We'd say, "Ok, that's good to know, but we have been crazy busy building the walls, we don't have enough time to prepare for this festival and we've neglected our farms for months to rebuild this wall, we'll do the feast of booths next year."

I wonder does that ring any bells? How many times have we said to ourselves, "ok, I hear you God, and I will get to this when I get on top of my work, and things settle down at home, but just at present I'm just a bit tied up with other priorities" Or, I know there are ministries that need my support around the church, but I don't have time.

Here's how they respond. Nehemiah 8:16, *'So the people went out and brought back branches and built themselves temporary shelters on their own roofs, in their courtyards, in the courts of the house of God and in the square by the Water Gate and the one by the Gate of Ephraim'*. You see that - they drop everything, set aside every other responsibility and concern, and they obey God's word immediately. You see a gospel culture is a church where we love God and trust his goodness so much, that when he calls us to do something, we don't say later, we just say yes.

RESETTING our church and REBUILDING requires doing the word by obeying it immediately because we trust the God who gives us his word. So I wonder where have you been delaying obedience. Where have you been hearing the still small voice of God but delaying what you are hearing? Where have you got other priorities – work, family, other interests and as a result you are delaying the word of God in your life?

Here's my encouragement to you – the next time you feel that in your heart – the conviction – do what God says and do it immediately. Don't allow the other things that come into your mind to take hold. Remember that Satan wants to distract you away from serving God.

Jesus was rather blunt to people when it came to delaying a response to him. In Matthew 8 when a man wanted to wait with his family to see his dying father buried, he told him "Follow me , and let the dead bur their own dead". Hard words to hear, but Jesus knew the cost of delaying a response. And then in Luke 9 he said that "if anyone would [follow him] he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow [him]". In other words nothing, no other priority, should get in the way of following after him.

Folks, right now we have many areas of service within the church family that need your attention to serve. We need faithful adults to support the youth on Sunday evenings, we need people to help with the sound and screens at the back of our churches, we need people to help in Sunday school, we need people to be a part of our mission partnership groups. The list goes on. But if I was a betting man, right now in your head you are thinking about the other priorities in your own lives that prevent you from giving the time. A gospel culture in our church is a culture full of people who love God's word , but we trust God so much that we respond to his word immediately.

Let's look to the final way to be doers of God's word and that is to do it joyfully.

CELEBRATION

Let's look at what happened as a result of the people responding. Verse 17, *'The whole company that had returned from exile built temporary shelters and lived in them. From the days of Joshua son of Nun until that day, the Israelites had not celebrated it like this. And their joy was very great.'*

In the feast of booths, the people looked backwards to his faithfulness and forward to his promises. It was all about remembering how God faithfully provided for his people in the wilderness for forty years, during which they had to live in temporary shelters, before bringing them into the Promised Land. At the heart of the feast of booths was a water drawing ceremony. During the water drawing ceremony, one priest would lead a parade of God's people to the temple, holding two golden cups, one full of wine and one full of water. When they arrived at the temple, the priest approached two large, empty bowls on the altar. He poured the golden cup of wine into one of the bowls as a drink offering to the Lord and the golden cup of water into the other. You may be wondering, "why water? What's the big deal with water?" Well, water was scarce in the wilderness when God miraculously provided it for his people in the wilderness, for one thing. But there's a deeper reason. Listen to the way the prophet Ezekiel uses water as a symbol of salvation and cleansing from sins. Ezekiel 36:25-26, *"²⁵ I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. ²⁶ I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh"*.

So the water wasn't just about looking back at God's provision, but actually the Lord himself would pour out the water of the Holy Spirit, cleansing his people from their sins, and put his law in our hearts so that we never have to thirst again. That's what the feast of booths was all about. And so as we move on in time to John 7, we see Jesus himself celebrating in the same feast.

And here's what he said... On the last day of the feast, the great day, Jesus stood up and cried out, "If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink". Remember that Ezekiel said God would pour clean water and cleanse people from their sins – that's Jesus coming. And so now Jesus is saying that He is the Lord who has come to fulfill what Ezekiel promised. All who come to him with the burden of their sin and rest in him will be washed clean and have the springs of eternal life flowing in their heart through the Holy Spirit. Now if that's not a cause for celebration what is.

The people who restored the walls of Jerusalem celebrated knowing God's faithfulness as they served him and listened to his word in their lives. Similarly for us today, I don't think there is a greater joy than knowing as we read God's word, and as we respond to what he says in our lives, that we have the joy of knowing his faithfulness as we obey him.

As we continue to think about how we RESET our priorities as a church, more focused on the devotion of the Lord, then let's remember that reading God's word is not a passive thing – it requires action. Remember James 1:25, *"But whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues in it—not forgetting what they have heard, but doing it—they will be blessed in what they do"*. We can't simply read God's word and set it down without any response. We have the promise of knowing that God in his mercy sent His Son who lived, died, and rose to pour out the water of God's Spirit to forgive your sins, refresh you forever, quench your parched soul, and strengthen you to do God's word. Remember again today that we should not take for granted our freedom to go from this place to serve him, unlike our brothers and sisters incarcerated for their faith. I believe God will look on us more harshly when we have so many opportunities to serve him but delay due to what we think are our priorities in our lives. Don't leave here without considering how you will respond to his Word today.