

Nehemiah 5:1-8 | Righteous Anger

Hey King's Hill family. I'll tell you this. It's not the same speaking into a camera. I love having the opportunity to see your faces and shepherd you in person. We're continuing to go through Nehemiah. And here's what we've learned. Nehemiah and the other Israelites have a great work they've been called to pursue together. The hand of God has given them great favor to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem to restore a sense of safety and security to the city.

Now the people of God—the church—we haven't been tasked to build any walls. But Jesus has given a task to us. This task is about building a people. If someone were to ask, "What is this work that all Christians are called to?" that answer would be in Matthew 28:19-20

My work is to teach you the ways of our King and then exhort, encourage, correct, and guide you to live those out. And your work is to teach others the ways of our King and then exhort, encourage, correct, and guide them to live those out. You put that together—this is *our* work. The Israelites had a task. The people of God—the church—have a task. And our vocation may change or cease or pause—many of us are experiencing that right now—but *this* work we're called to as believers is never on break. In fact, perhaps in seasons like these, God is setting up his church to step into newfound success in this work. We talk a lot about seeing God's kingdom advance and grow. And here's what we mean by that: The kingdom of God grows when one person sees the beauty of Jesus, learns his ways, and follows him. It grows by one disciple at a time. So, we aren't building walls, but this work of making disciples is growing a kingdom. And if you remember from Chapter 3, you see everyone chipping in to help. You might remember what we asked from that passage:

We asked a couple weeks back, "What could God do if our all-out pursuit was making disciples and everyone was all-in for the task?"

But the Israelites hit a bump in the road in Chapter 4. As the Israelites come together for this work, they experience a great deal of opposition, mainly from the outside. You have these bully figures like Sanballat and Tobiah and the Arabs and the Ammonites and the Ashdodites. They're all monitoring the work of the Jews and hoping they fail. They've launched verbal attacks and even plotted physical harm. So, this is no joke!

Now I'm going to invite you to take a look at Chapter 5, verses 1-9. I'll give you a moment to pull it up on your phone. On the livestream feed, there is a tab that lists the Bible. You can pull up the ESV translation and click on Nehemiah 5. Although I do want to encourage you to take a moment, and go grab a paper or hardback Bible.

Here's the question for us this morning: How should God's people respond to the brokenness around us and inside of us? Let's read the chapter together.

Now listen, I know the average time people spend watching online sermons. I've done my very best to make this shorter than normal. Don't expect this when we come back together in

person. But I realize now adjustments are helpful, so I only have 1 point for you, and we're going to see it in just a moment.

Here's the background we're seeing surface in Chapter 5. Whereas Nehemiah faced opposition from the *outside* in regards to rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem, now he's facing opposition from within. The situation comes up in the first five verses. You can see the situation...

In verse 2, you see a people crying out. Why? Because there is a shortage of food.

In verse 3, people are protesting. Why? Because as a result of this famine, the owners of the fields and the vineyards and the houses are having to mortgage off their fields.

The worst of what's going on comes in verses 4 and 5. You have God's people borrowing money so they can pay all the taxes to keep their lives afloat. But the interest to the loan is too burdensome for the borrowers. So, in an effort to relieve this burden, you see sons and daughters being sold into slavery.

Those who are asking for the loan, they're Jews. What's tragic is that those who are charging high interest rates are also Jews. This is the brokenness we are alarmed to in this chapter. There is famine. That's bad enough. But in trying times, you have people turning against their own. The actions of the nobles and the officials are marked by greediness, selfishness, and exploitation. The loan givers are looking out for themselves at the expense of others. It's terrible! Understand 2020 is not all that different than Nehemiah's world. There is great oppression happening around us. There is great exploitation and selfishness happening around us. But as we talk about that, know this: there is great exploitation and selfishness happening within us, too. How do we respond?

We grow righteously angry towards sin around us, and especially inside us.

Look with me at verses 6-7. We're going to camp out here. That's really all we have time for this morning, and we'll come back to this question and this chapter next week. But see what Nehemiah's response is to the injustice.

I was very angry when I heard their outcry and these words. I took counsel with myself, and I brought charges against the nobles and officials."

Not just angry but very angry. He sees oppression. He sees selfishness. He sees exploitation. And he gets red hot. He's mad and upset. Does that sound godly? Is anger an appropriate emotion when following Jesus? On one hand, James 1:19-20 says, "Let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger, for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God." James seems to be straightforward. If you want to grow in godliness, anger won't get you there. Yet Paul in Ephesians 4:26 writes, "Be angry and do not sin." In Paul's mind, there is a category in which one can be angry but yet not sin. Adding to all of this, God is described as

getting angry. He grows angry towards Israel, to nations, to individuals. What are we to make of this?

Well, we need to have categories for anger. There is a selfish anger and there is a righteous anger. What are characteristics of each one?

Most anger we experience personally in our hearts is sinful. We have the anger because something doesn't go our way, so we grow upset about it. Someone wrongs us and there is anger at how their injustice affects us and these impulses of anger are directed towards revenge. Selfish anger has much more to do with our pride being slighted than God's glory being marred. You might remember the story of Jonah. The prophet had preached judgment to Nineveh and then walks up a hill to see what will happen. Would God punish the evil or will he relent and show them mercy because the city repented? While he waits, God grows a tree for Jonah to sit under the shade, but it doesn't take long before God sends a worm to destroy this tree and the shade. Jonah grows so angry that he wants to die. Instead of desiring the welfare for the city of Nineveh, he throws a temper tantrum because God removed his source of comfort during the heat. Selfish anger has no redemptive quality to it. It leaves the soul empty. The effects of selfish anger would be irritability, rudeness, and bitterness.

But there is another kind of anger, a righteous anger. This kind of anger is born out of a *hatred for sin*. You know, we often talk about sin in a passive way, something in the past we've done that is an offense against God. We've missed the mark. We've fallen short of God's glory. We've trespassed against his design and his will. And we stand condemned and guilty before God, except Jesus has embraced the penalty for our guilt and sin. For those who believe in Him as their Savior and follow him as their Lord have their guilt cleansed and now are clothed in Jesus' righteousness. Now, we would not be wrong talking about sin as an act we've committed that rebels against God. It would just be incomplete. Now, I want you to hang with me for a second, because there's a phrase we need to know. Sin is not just a wrong we've committed. Sin is also an enormous power with massive influence. Paul puts it like this. He calls it the "law of sin." Turn over to Romans 7:18-23.

Listen in to what Paul says, "For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. So I find it to be a law that when I want do right, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, but I see my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members"

We all know the law of gravity. What comes up, must come _____. Now I didn't hear you if you said it, but I'm guessing everyone got it right. The reason we are not floating right now like we would in space is because there is an active force exerting its influence on the planet. But like gravity, sin is exerting an influence around us and in us. I have a sin nature that is at work in me that opposes God. That's true if I don't believe in Jesus, and that's true if I do believe in Jesus. The incredible news is that when I believe in Jesus, he gives me the Holy Spirit—a Helper that gives me strength to overcome its power. But here's the thing about sin—whether you talk

about in a passive way or talk about in an active way—it brings about destruction. It produces great harm. And it causes great hurt.

You have been deeply affected by someone's sin—a parent who up and left, a spouse that said, "It's no longer worth it." And you have hurt people because of your sin. People you probably don't even know you hurt. Sin produces great harm and causes great hurt. Nehemiah in this chapter sees sin at work—this harm and this hurt—and he's angry at the sin. This is righteous anger. Righteous anger is what you feel over evil. It's not anger at God. It's anger *with* God. But this righteous anger is accompanied by grief. A sadness because there is a departure from how things should be. Righteous anger stems from love. When you really love God and his glory and his name and you really love people and want to see them flourish and whole, sin ruins all of that. So yes, there is cause to be angry.

Fast forward into Jesus' day and you see the same reaction as you do in Nehemiah. In John 2, Jesus walks into a Temple in Jerusalem. And what does he find? He sees oxen and sheep and pigeons being sold. Jesus is furious. The temple is supposed to be a place of worship, not commerce. They're taking advantage of visitors coming into the Temple. And Jesus makes a whip of chords and drives out everyone. He overturns the temple tables and the money spills everywhere. What's going on? He hates the selfishness and greed and exploitation that he sees. He hates how the money-changers have put money above God. Instead of promoting reverence, they're promoting commerce. He sees sin at work, and he hates it. There is a righteous anger. And it's what Nehemiah feels. *Feels*. I want to highlight that word.

It's important for us to stop and ponder, "Do I feel rightly? Do my emotions correspond appropriately to the truths I know? Do my feelings align with God's?" We don't talk about this a lot, and we need to—the emotional life of the believer. Because our emotions are a big part of what needs to be brought under Jesus' Lordship. You might have once had the bracelet, "What Would Jesus Do," but what about "What Would Jesus Feel?" I dare you to study the emotional responses of Jesus and the why's behind them in the Gospels.

In light of God's holiness and love for people, Nehemiah gets angry at the brokenness he sees. Here in Chapter 5, anger is an appropriate response when he sees sin at work.

How do you *feel* about the sin you see around you? What is your emotional reaction towards them? Take racism for example. What is your feeling towards racism? Elevating one race over another. It breeds pride and contempt, not humility and love. Pornography—how do you feel towards it? Porn dehumanizes a woman. It diminishes her soul and heart while only elevating her body. And at the heart of the porn industry is money and indulgence. Love gives. Porn only takes. When you're looking at porn, you're not giving anything. How do you feel toward abortion? Abortion says, "I will kill my child to keep my life intact. I will end the child's life to save my own." It's so contrary to the Gospel. Jesus says the total opposite, "My life sacrificed to save yours." When you boil down the sin around us, you find the same things you find in Nehemiah 5: selfishness, greed, exploitation. The world of Nehemiah 5 is not much different than 2020.

How do you feel towards these sins? And if I may make it more personal, how do you feel about your own sin? It's easy for us to get up and arms about the sin around us, but there are levels of sin in our own lives we don't like to talk about. We cry, "Justice" for the world, but we forget that we are contributors to the injustice because of sin inside of us. This is why I asked the question from the start, "How should Christians respond to the brokenness around us, and especially, in us?" Until we grow in righteous anger toward sin at work in the world, we'll never be able to contribute to its restoration.

Nehemiah hates what he sees. He is right to feel this way. The emotion is fitting for the occasion. And I'm posing the question back again on us: Are our emotions fitting to the occasions we experience? Do we love what is lovely and hate what is ugly, and to the right proportions? This is a sign of emotional maturity. Do our hearts feel the correct weight to the realities we know and see and experience?

Let me throw out some illustrations to try to make the point. Imagine two situations—one is I walk into the grocery store and I find one of the last rolls of toilet paper and another situation is I'm a witness to the matrimony of two believers who have vowed to love one another through thick and thin and display the Gospel through their marriage—if finding the last roll of toilet paper is the thing that moves me to happy tears, something is seriously wrong. Imagine you get two calls back to back over the phone: one is a friend who is calling about a conversation they had with a person far from God. By the end of that conversation, the person far from God believed in Jesus as their Lord and Savior, and they're calling to tell you that. And imagine the second call is your sports buddy calling to tell you that your favorite team just won the national championship. What gets the hallelujah or the hands thrown in the hair or the pumped fist? Man, growing up in the South—it was amazing to watch people throw their hands up in such excitement when their football team scored a touchdown, but on Sundays, they had their hands in their pockets. Why? Because their hearts are not in tune with ultimate reality. They are responding in the wrong proportions to that which is lovely and that which is ugly.

Here's what I'm getting at: Feelings come out of what we value. Underneath love is something we have placed a lot of value to. Underneath anger is something we have valued and now is threatened. Underneath grief is something we have valued that is now lost. And emotional maturity means we have given things the right value and feel about them accordingly. Nehemiah's highest value is God's name and God's glory. This shows up time and time again in this chapter. In verse 9 Nehemiah writes, "The thing that you are doing is not good. Ought you not to walk in the fear of our God to prevent the taunts of the nations our enemies? In verse 15-16, "¹⁵The former governors who were before me laid heavy burdens on the people and took from them for their daily ration forty shekels of silver. Even their servants lorded it over the people. But I did not do so, because of the fear of God."¹⁶ Because Nehemiah's highest value is God and his name and his glory, the sin of greed, exploitation, and selfishness threatens to mar that, and that's why he's angry.

Is your highest value God? If you're saying yes, do your emotions testify to that? Does your heart absolutely love that which is ultimately lovely—namely, everything that points to the beauty of Jesus, and does your heart absolutely hate everything which is ultimately ugly—everything that attempts to mar and diminish who God is? Do you hate the sin you see in your own life, as Nehemiah hates the sin he sees?

I would imagine there are at least 3 responses to the sin we see around us, and in us. Test this and see if you would agree. One, you call evil good and you actually love the sin. You justify why the anger you feel or the lust you feel is normal or good. You make excuses for the pursuit of greed. You see, in this case, there is a love of the sin. Secondly, you could be apathetic. You know it's there, but you shrug your shoulders to it. You don't get serious about seeing that sin done away with. You're aware things need to change but there's no sense of urgency. Both of these are so dangerous. We've been deceived to the danger of sin. Our minds and hearts have been lulled to sleep. We don't heed the words of Hebrews in 12:14, "Make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord." To pursue holiness requires exertion, effort—of course, it's all done in the power of the Holy Spirit. But be alarmed if you're apathetic or in love with sin. The other response is a hatred towards it. You may fall under its influence or be tricked by it, but deep down, you hate it!