

We are going to change gears a bit this morning. If you have been with us, you know we have been studying the book of Nehemiah and last week, in chapter 6, we saw the wall around Jerusalem finally rebuilt. But even though the task was completed, the work was far from over. A rebuilt wall does not necessarily mean a rebuilt people. If the broken-down wall was a picture of the spiritual reality of the people, the work done to rebuild it was a picture of the spiritual work needed to rebuild the people. And just as the wall needed a strong foundation physically, the people needed a strong foundation spiritually.

You and I can have all kinds of productivity in our lives, but if it's not built on the foundation of Christ, it will eventually crumble. **The God who stirs our heart with divine discontent must also be the ruler and keeper of that heart as we seek to live it out.** What can we do to make sure that is a reality? How can we live to ensure the productivity of our lives is of eternal value? The more deeply we know God, the more impactful our lives can be for him. And one of the primary ways for us to do that is through what I call divine disciplines.

Some of you cringe at the word discipline. I get it, but I want to encourage you to consider it this way. **Discipline is godly training to develop godly character and to deepen our relationship with God. They are spiritual practices intended not to change his view of us but to change our heart towards him.** So, over the next few weeks, we will read through the rest of the book of Nehemiah. While the physical restoration of Israel is complete, the spiritual one has just begun. We will see the divine disciplines essential to knowing God and fulfilling our divine discontent. My prayer is that we will learn and begin to engage regular and intentional moments of offering our hearts to God to make us into the person he wants us to be so that we can fulfill the work he's called us to do.

If you were going to start, or start over with God, where is the first place and practice you'd go to? This morning we begin with the centrality of God's Word. There are three "heart conditions" found in this passage that are characteristic of the discipline of engaging Scripture.

A heart prepared for God's Word. It's about to be spring, though you couldn't tell by the weather coming this week. That gets many of you excited because you get to work on your lawns and gardens. Most of that work will begin with some attention given to your soil, tilling it and watering it to make it ready and accessible to receive whatever you are about to plant so that it takes root, grows, and bears fruit. In the same way, our hearts need to be prepared to receive the seed of God's Word.

[Nehemiah 8:1-6] And all the people gathered as one man into the square before the Water Gate. And they told Ezra the scribe to bring the Book of the Law of Moses that the LORD had commanded Israel. ² So Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could understand what they heard, on the first day of the seventh month. ³ And he read from it facing the square before the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand. And the ears of all the people were attentive to the Book of the Law. ⁴ And Ezra the scribe stood on a wooden platform that they had made for the purpose. And beside him stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiah, and Maaseiah on his right hand, and Pedaiah, Mishael, Malchijah, Hashum, Hashbaddanah, Zechariah, and

Meshullam on his left hand. ⁵ And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was above all the people, and as he opened it all the people stood. ⁶ And Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God, and all the people answered, “Amen, Amen,” lifting up their hands. And they bowed their heads and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground.

The people of Israel have seen God’s hand in the rebuilding of the wall and, in response, return to him in unity. They request Ezra to read to them from the Law. This is significant. They are not doing it out of compulsion, because they are supposed to. They have a genuine desire to hear from God’s Word and even remain attentive throughout the day. They are not going through the motions. They are seeking their God.

When Ezra opened the book, the people stood out of respect and reverence. A reverence for God’s Word is really a reverence for God himself, because he is the author. There is nothing magical or sacred about the leather and paper and ink that makes up our Bible. But the words contained within these pages are the very words of our God who deeply desires for us to know him and who we are in him, and he has given us a permanent record for our reference and for us to return to time and again. This reverence is catalytic in preparation to hear God’s Word.

The Bible today is often dismissed as an old, outdated book, even in some churches! As reverence for God’s Word is diminished, so too is its relevance in our lives. Reverence will only come if we are clear about what the Bible is. So while doctrinal statements are not the most exciting things to read (unless you are a seminary student), I want to take a moment to tell you what we believe about God’s Word here at Fellowship.

We believe that the Old and New Testaments are verbally inspired by God without error in the original manuscripts. This process called “inspiration” took place as holy men of God “were moved by the Holy Spirit” to record the words of Scripture. We believe that the Bible is the final authority in all matters about which it speaks—historical, poetical, doctrinal, and prophetic—as appeared in the original manuscripts. We also believe that all the Scriptures were designed for our practical instruction, source of spiritual growth, and basis for personal and corporate conduct as the New Testament church. -Fellowship’s Doctrinal Statement on the Bible

If all that’s true, that the Bible is inspired, authoritative, and applicational, it should be revered because the God who gave it to us should be revered. It is the expression of his heart given to us to impact our hearts, and the greater our reverence, the more seriously we’ll take what’s written.

The Jews hearts were also prepared to hear God’s Word through worship. They blessed the Lord, raised their hands, and bowed with their faces to the ground. Their voices and posture expressed the greatness of God and who they are before him. That’s called humility. It is the posture of someone who knows they need to hear what they are about to hear.

What the Jews did sounds a lot like church! We begin by praising and worshipping the Lord through song, and many of you take a physical posture of humility and reverence, preparing your heart to hear his Word. That’s why I again encourage you to be in your seat when the service starts. Don’t wait until the third or fourth song to get here. If you do, God is deprived of the

praises of his people and you are deprived of the worshipful preparation of your heart. It may make a difference in your readiness to hear what God has to say on any given Sunday morning.

If you were to rate your desire to engage God's Word, what would it be? If it is low, let me encourage you to consider your view of the Scriptures and the substance of your worship. A change in one of those could increase your desire.

A heart pierced by God's Word. Once the soil of your heart is prepared, the Word of God can be planted.

[Nehemiah 8:7-8] ⁷ Also Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiah, the Levites, helped the people to understand the Law, while the people remained in their places. ⁸ They read from the book, from the Law of God, clearly, and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.

The reading of God's Word is accompanied by the teaching of it. You see in v.8 the word "clearly". That doesn't mean Ezra is annunciating well. It means he and the rest are presenting God's Word with interpretation in order to make it clear. Remember, these Jews didn't grow up in Israel. They just got back from exile. In a lot of ways, they are more Babylonian and Persian than they are Jewish. They likely spoke Aramaic, not Hebrew, and may be hearing some of these words for the very first time. They are taking their time to make sure everyone understands.

We don't read just to read. We read to understand what God is telling us. The people of God have relied on the Word of God to know the person of God for centuries. He gives us his Spirit and each other. That means the teaching of God's Word is a team sport. That means you have something to learn from someone and you have something to teach to another.

For some of you, maybe the most important thing you can hear this morning is that God's Word can be understood. You might have tried to read the Bible and became discouraged because you didn't completely understand. But you don't have to do it alone. Keep going and ask for help. God has something to show you, and he's given you his Church to help along the way. Ask me, visit one of our prayer rooms, find someone downstairs in the Hub. We want to help, because understanding is essential.

If worship prepares the soil of your heart to receive the Word, understanding allows the seed to penetrate the soil, sprout, and take root. With understanding comes impact, and the assembly that day was about to have their hearts pierced in two ways; with grief and with joy.

[Nehemiah 8:9-12] ⁹ And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, "This day is holy to the LORD your God; do not mourn or weep." For all the people wept as they heard the words of the Law. ¹⁰ Then he said to them, "Go your way. Eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions to anyone who has nothing ready, for this day is holy to our Lord. And do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength." ¹¹ So the Levites calmed all the people, saying, "Be quiet, for this day is holy; do not be grieved." ¹² And all the people went their

way to eat and drink and to send portions and to make great rejoicing, because they had understood the words that were declared to them.

As the Jews read the holy Law of God, they were confronted with their disobedience personally and nationally. **A heart prepared to hear God's Word is one that uses it as a mirror.** They individually were not living up to God's standards, and the recent history of their exiled nation was evidence they had failed in their call to be the people of God. Their hearts were punctured by truth contained in God's Word, and in the midst of that conviction, they mourned and wept.

And while this might seem like a reasonable response, Nehemiah, Ezra, and the Levites told the people to stop because this was a special day. It was a holy day, a day set apart to celebrate God's salvation. God did not leave them in their brokenness and exile but instead brought them back to their land and began to reestablish them as his people. It was a day not for grieving but for rejoicing, because God had fulfilled his promises to them.

Grief is an expression of our hopelessness. We have offended a holy God and can do nothing about it on our own. But grief is also a catalyst to throw ourselves on the mercy and grace of God. When we do, we will discover that he can and has done something about it, through Jesus Christ, who paid for what grieves us. He has satisfied our offense, and through it, offers us salvation if we only believe in him. **God tells us the bad news to make us desperate for the Good News.** Romans 6:23 tells us, "The wages of sin is death." That should grieve us all, and if the verse stopped there, our grief would have no answer. But it doesn't. The second half of the verse is "but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." And if you are in Christ Jesus because you've placed your trust in him and his promises, you should abound with joy.

Some of you are living far from God right now and you are afraid to read this book because you don't want to be confronted with what God has to say about it. But there is hope on the other side of that confrontation, because there is forgiveness for whatever you have done. The God who says, "you are falling short" is the same God who says, "but I got this." He has done for you what you can't do for yourself. And the grief you may initially feel when confronted with your standing before a holy God will ultimately give way to the joy of the Lord who has made you right. And while we should all grieve over our day-to-day struggle to remain obedient to God, there is to be no grieving over what has been forgiven. A person who has been saved by God's grace is a person whose heart has been pierced with joy.

A heart propelled through God's Word. Once God's Word had taken root in our hearts, it will change the trajectory of our lives and bear fruit for God.

[Nehemiah 8:13-14, 17] ¹³ On the second day the heads of fathers' houses of all the people, with the priests and the Levites, came together to Ezra the scribe in order to study the words of the Law. ¹⁴ And they found it written in the Law that the LORD had commanded by Moses that the people of Israel should dwell in booths during the feast of the seventh month...¹⁷ And all the assembly of those who had returned from the captivity made booths and lived in the booths, for from the days of Jeshua the son of Nun to that day the people of Israel had not done so. And there was very great rejoicing.

The fruit of **delight**: The very next day the heads of households returned to Ezra to hear more of what God's Word had to say. After such an extraordinary encounter with God's Word the day before, they woke up hungry for more. **What starts as duty becomes discipline, discipline becomes desire, and desire becomes delight.** It may not happen overnight like it did for these Jews. If you've ever tried to start a habit, you know it's most difficult in the beginning. But I believe that when we faithfully engage God through divine disciplines, he changes our heart and we desire to continue with them more and more. "Have to" becomes a "get to".

The fruit of **devotion**: They discover they are to celebrate the Feast of Booths or Tabernacles in the seventh month, as commanded in Leviticus 23. This commemorates God's care for them when they wandered in the wilderness for 40 years, sleeping in these booths. We're told they are celebrated it like Joshua and the Israelites celebrated it the first time they entered the Promised Land. One entered the land after captivity in Egypt, the other after captivity in Persia. God's salvation is always a cause for celebration.

Their preparation through worship, understanding of Scripture and impact on their hearts, now culminates with them being captivated by God's Word and eager to follow God's instructions. Their obedience is immediate. It is not a begrudging but is, instead, willing and joyful. You and I have a choice to look at the commands of God as a checklist of to-do's or the conditions of a loving relationship. We do not obey to earn the favor of God but because of the favor of God. His Word is good for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness. And when our heart is right, we will be eager to follow what it says because of our love for the God who said it.

I want to close with what I think is a great picture of how we should desire God's Word with the expectancy that it will have an impact on our lives. And then we will celebrate communion.

I don't know if you are capable of hitting that octave, but my prayer is that all of us, myself included, would be this excited and joyful to receive and engage God's Word. He has something to say to you. Open it up and see what it is.

Communion is also a time to receive the Word: Jesus Christ.