

If you follow the news, you likely heard of another heartbreaking story involving the Church this week. Over the past 20 years, there have been hundreds of cases of abuse within the Southern Baptist Convention, some of which have been covered up, with many of the perpetrators being shuffled to other churches, all at the expense of the victims. A people who are called to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God again failed at that mission, and what should be the safest place with the safest people on earth, the church, became a source of great pain for many. Additionally, two Texas newspapers splashed around the sordid details and the world was, again, left to question if followers of Jesus are any different than the rest of the world.

When the people of God are perpetrators and enablers of abuse and injustice, we eliminate our witness, compromise our ability to positively impact the world, and invalidate the work God has called us to. **We cannot engage our divine discontent when we are disobeying the divine.** So how do things like this happen? I believe it begins with how seriously we take God, how consciously aware we are of his holiness and his glorious standards. I believe it begins when we stop fearing God.

**“When men no longer fear God, they transgress His laws without hesitation. The fear of consequences is no deterrent when the fear of God is gone.” -A.W. Tozer**

The degree to which we fear God inevitably influences the direction of our devotion and how we live inward, outward, and upward, through our relationships internally with the people of God, externally with the world, and spiritually with God. As fear diminishes, our devotion is turned towards ourselves. As fear increases, our devotion is turned back to God.

This is not an isolated incident for the people of God, though. In recent history, many in the German church capitulated to Nazism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the American church, many endorsed slavery in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. And this morning, we are going to see another example of it in Nehemiah 5, a passage that highlights the centrality of the fear of God. Many of the Jewish people are perpetrating cruelty and injustice against their own, while Nehemiah stands apart as an example of one who is fearful and faithful. There are two verses that give us an idea of how and why each party is acting the way they are.

**[Nehemiah 5:9a] <sup>9</sup> So I said, “The thing that you are doing is not good. Ought you not to walk in the fear of our God?”**

**[Nehemiah 5:15b] But I did not do so, because of the fear of God.**

The fear of God is not something we talk about regularly but, in the case of this week's revelations and this week's passage, it would be a good time to spend the morning talking about it. Oftentimes, I believe the permanence of our salvation, freedom from condemnation and the glory of grace can cause us to begin to approach and think about God casually. A casual approach leads to a casual attitude, and a casual attitude can lead to casual obedience. To fear God is not to be afraid of him, but to be in awe of him and marvel at his majesty. It is a sober recognition of who he is, and we would all do well to remember that he is bigger than we can conceive, more powerful than we can imagine, and insistent on being obeyed. He is not to be trifled with, and while he eagerly allows us to approach him freely, the price of admission was

nothing short of the shed blood of his Son. God is holy, he is completely other, and he is to be feared.

And so, this morning, I have no interest in railing against the SBC. In fact, we need to be praying for them. Instead, my prayer is that we learn how the presence and practice, or lack thereof, of the fear of God directly impacts how we live our life with and for God.

**The degree to which you fear God will cause you to satisfy self or sacrifice for others.** How we fear God directly impacts how we treat one another. It determines if we will live for ourselves or live for them.

**[Nehemiah 5:1-5] Now there arose a great outcry of the people and of their wives against their Jewish brothers. <sup>2</sup> For there were those who said, "With our sons and our daughters, we are many. So let us get grain, that we may eat and keep alive." <sup>3</sup> There were also those who said, "We are mortgaging our fields, our vineyards, and our houses to get grain because of the famine." <sup>4</sup> And there were those who said, "We have borrowed money for the king's tax on our fields and our vineyards. <sup>5</sup> Now our flesh is as the flesh of our brothers, our children are as their children. Yet we are forcing our sons and our daughters to be slaves, and some of our daughters have already been enslaved, but it is not in our power to help it, for other men have our fields and our vineyards."**

The situation for the Jews is desperate and there was a great outcry. This situation likely goes beyond the time of the completion of the wall. There are some with no food, some with not enough money to buy food, and some so deep in debt, they were having to sell their children into servitude to pay it off. But they weren't at the mercy of some external power in the region. It was to their very own Jewish brethren. A people freed by the Persian king to come home are all of a sudden under the burden and bondage of their own people.

V7 tells us it was specifically the nobles and officials who were perpetrating these injustices. These men of power, influence, and means leveraged their position to take advantage of the desperation of their people and enrich themselves at their expense. They were accumulating wealth by charging exorbitant interest and accumulating labor by indenturing the children of Judah. Both of these acts were in violation of the Law, particularly Exodus 22:25 and Leviticus 25:35-38, **which references a fear of God as motivation to follow the Law.** Clearly these men don't, and their actions not only oppress their people, it invalidates the progress Israel has made in being reestablished, and it prevents them from being the people God has called them to be.

The wall is meaningless if the behavior of the people within it is wicked. The purpose of Jerusalem and the purpose of the Jews is compromised if they are not living in accordance with the God they are called to represent. It is the same thing for the Church. Pursuing our divine discontent is meaningless if we are rotten from within. We could have all kinds of success in the ministry we are doing, but if we don't fear God and, instead, allow injustice to reign in our midst, it will all be for naught.

Nehemiah fears God and acts in a completely opposite way. It is a harder path because of the risks and costs associated with it. The first thing he does is to confront these men. **"<sup>6</sup> I was very angry when I heard their outcry and these words. <sup>7</sup> I took counsel with myself, and I brought**

**charges against the nobles and the officials.”** Now, “taking counsel with one self” before acting in anger is a sermon all by itself. Just ask the traffic control I dealt with at DFW this past week! But, after a time of reflection, Nehemiah takes the sacrificial action of confronting these men. There is a risk because Nehemiah could lose his popularity very quickly. They are influential within Jewish society and, as we’ll see, many have ties to Sanballat and Tobiah. Nehemiah is making himself vulnerable. However, his faithful and sacrificial gesture pays off. Not only do the nobles agree to cease these practices, but a large assembly of people all gathered in agreement and in praise of the Lord. What was broken, disunified, and fearless before the Lord was restored, culminating in the fearful act of worship.

It is a risky time to take a stand against injustice these days. But if our divine discontent is God stirring our hearts to address things that just aren’t the way they are supposed to be, many of us may find ourselves in that position; defending the unborn, addressing racial injustice, feeding the hungry. The world, though, seems eager to see where someone stands on one issue so that they can dismiss their stance on all the rest. But that’s the call on the people of God. We worship a just God who calls us to be a just people to do justice in this world, even at the risk of public rebuke and persecution. That’s what Nehemiah did. That’s what Jesus did. That’s what the Church is called to do.

Nehemiah does not stop there, though. He not only confronts this evil but also lives as an example of one who fears God.

**[Nehemiah 5:14-15, 18] <sup>14</sup> Moreover, from the time that I was appointed to be their governor in the land of Judah, from the twentieth year to the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes the king, twelve years, neither I nor my brothers ate the food allowance of the governor. <sup>15</sup> The 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...<sup>18</sup> Now what was prepared at my expense for each day was one ox and six choice sheep and birds, and every ten days all kinds of wine in abundance. Yet for all this I did not demand the food allowance of the governor, because the service was too heavy on this people.”**

Nehemiah was also in a position of power, ultimately being appointed governor of Judah. He could have abused his power for the satisfaction of himself, but he also had every legal right to accept the governor’s allowance of food and silver. He opted not to. Why? Because he feared God, and through that fear, he recognized that, even though legal, it would have put too heavy of a burden on the people, the people God was working to restore as his people. He, instead, lived a life of generosity and hospitable care, sharing his abundance with those in his midst.

We can hold onto our rights so tightly, we can demand what is coming to us, that we lose sight of the needs right before our eyes. But a fear of God will remind us that he did not hold tightly to his rights. Jesus did not count equality with God as something to be held onto, even though it was his right as a member of the Trinity. Instead, he relinquished his rights, was born of a woman, and suffered an unjust death on the cross. Fearing God reminds us that he who is holy and perfect is also selfless and sacrificial, and it reminds us to live that way ourselves.

So Nehemiah uses his position of power not for himself, but for his people. He sacrifices by confronting the powers that be, by relinquishing his rights to lift a burden from the people, and also by his hospitable care and sharing of his resources.

Cheryl Read jokes with me every once in a while, by saying I have a magic wand that I get to wave when I want something done. The level of authority and influence I've been given is not lost on me, nor is the reality of how easy it would be to take advantage of that authority for the benefit myself. Just this week, another megachurch pastor was fired by his elder board because he abused his power. But instead of taking the opportunity to point fingers, I'm reminded how important it is for me to stay grounded in the Lord so that I properly exercise my authority for the betterment of our church and for the glory of God. The way to do that is to stay fearful.

There's a lot of talk about power these days, and many of you are in positions of great influence. I want to encourage you to stay on your face before God in humility and fear and trust that he has placed you there to leverage your influence for the sake and blessing of others and for his glory.

**Discredit our (His) reputation or demonstrate our (His) difference.** How we fear God has outward implications by affecting how we are perceived by others. I say "our" reputation and perception, but we are the people of God who are representatives of God. How the world views us is, to a great extent, how it will view our God.

**[Nehemiah 5:9,17] <sup>9</sup> So I said, "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?...<sup>17</sup> Moreover, there were at my table 150 men, Jews and officials, besides those who came to us from the nations that were around us.**

If Sanballat and Tobiah are working against Israel becoming the people God has called them to be, they would have been thrilled to see the Jews doing that for them. There is no need to come against a people if they are going to tear themselves apart. Not only are the Jews doing damage to their mission, they are doing damage to the reputation of their God. The nations that surround Israel likely see what is going on and laugh. A people who have just been freed by the Persian empire, who have returned to fortify their city, are instead exploiting each other and forcing each other back into bondage. If the taunts about the imperfect wall were bad, imagine what they were about a people who have turned on themselves.

But Nehemiah lives differently. He welcomes outsiders, gives them a seat at the table, and exposes them to the one true God and the way his followers are to live. He breaks down barriers as he breaks bread with these people. Yes, there are still those who are hostile all around Israel, but the impact Israel is called to have on her neighbors is beginning to be realized at Nehemiah's table.

That's why this week's scandal is so damaging. No one is concerned with the good the denomination's missions are doing, the way they are welcoming newcomers in their midst, loving their neighbors, or the way they are declaring the Gospel. The focus is only on the damage they have done. This revelation turns off those who are truly seeking and gives ammunition to those who are opposed to God. That's not the way it's supposed to be. The people

of God are supposed to stand out but stand out for the way we are blessing this world, not damaging it. That's why Scripture calls us to be salt and light, to be ambassadors for the Kingdom, to live a life so compelling that others ask us why we are so hopeful, and to love each other in such a way that we find favor with the world that notices. When we do that, we show that we are different. Really, though, we show that He is different.

**Sit in shame or soak in satisfaction.** How we fear God ultimately determines if we are going to live a life in opposition to and judgment from God, or if we will live a life pleasing to him.

**[Nehemiah 5:6-8, 19] <sup>6</sup>I was very angry when I heard their outcry and these words. <sup>7</sup>I took counsel with myself, and I brought charges against the nobles and the officials. I said to them, "You are exacting interest, each from his brother." And I held a great assembly against them <sup>8</sup>and said to them, "We, as far as we are able, have bought back our Jewish brothers who have been sold to the nations, but you even sell your brothers that they may be sold to us!" They were silent and could not find a word to say... <sup>19</sup>Remember for my good, O my God, all that I have done for this people.**

If you are a parent, you know that silence and guilt are often go together. Nehemiah confronts the leaders with charges of wrongdoing, an assembly of people, and will even bring the priests for them to make an oath and threaten them with a curse if they don't change their ways. They are, in a word, busted, and they have no grounds to defend themselves.

The conviction of sin is no fun, whether it's by the people of God having a hard conversation with you, or by the Holy Spirit making you aware, the goal is to bring you to a place of fear and repentance. We will all go through times like these, but they are supposed to be temporary and restorative. None of us wants to sit under the constant corrective discipline of God. A healthy fear of God will cause us to not want to be in that position and move us quickly to repentance when we are. God also doesn't want us to be in that position, so I want to close with this.

Nehemiah closes this chapter by asking God to remember him and his works. It may sound like a request for credit, but it's so much more. You see, a relationship with God based on the fear of God is one that abounds with love and is characterized by a desire to please him. Like any child who wants to please a loving father, when we approach God in fear, we want to please him, and we want to know that we have pleased him. **A fear of God isn't ultimately about good behavior, it's about an intimate relationship with our Lord and Savior.**