

Hey. How are we? If you have your Bibles, let's go to Nehemiah, chapter 1. If you don't have a Bible with you, there should be a hardback black one somewhere around you. If you don't own a Bible, that one you find is our gift to you. I want to try to explain why I want us to do Nehemiah and then give you a little bit of background on the book, and then we'll get going. I won't go terribly long this morning. Notice I just said *terribly* long, not, "I won't go long." Just not *terribly* long.

In the end, you and I are in an environment that actually works the opposite direction of the direction in the Scripture of God when it comes to human flourishing. So you and I have kind of two strikes against us in God's view of human flourishing versus kind of our opinion about humans flourishing. Here's what those two strikes are.

One, all of us (you, me, every one of us) by our birth are born with a sinful iniquity in our hearts that would set us up as uppermost in our own affections and would have us believe really we are the center of the universe, and everyone around us and everything around us should serve us and make us happy and do what we want it to do. We almost all are born with that on our hearts. You try to discipline your kids out of it, but even adults still operate by this default that the world is really about us.

It's why we get frustrated like we do. It's why we lose patience like we do, because it really is about us, and we wish our spouse and kids could just get that. We wish our coworkers would understand that. We wish the guy driving so slow in front of us could comprehend that. On and on I could go. So that's the default position of the human heart. That's all humans everywhere, but that's not the only strike we have against us.

On top of that, you and I were born in a part of the world that has exalted a type of radical individualization that undermines God's picture of human flourishing. So on top of our spiritual bent to believe we are uppermost in our own affections, to believe we are really, in function, our own deity, on top of that, our culture celebrates the individual at the cost of the whole constantly. Some of you are like, "You socialist." Calm down. We're not taking an offering here. Just ease up. I want to try to unpack this a little bit.

See, God's picture of human flourishing in the Scripture flies in the face of radical individualism. It dismantles it, if you will. It dismantles it by really making and laying upon you and me really two foundational ideas the book of Nehemiah assaults head-on. Here's what those two ideas are. God's picture

of human flourishing starts when your preference and my preference become secondary to God's will and how God has revealed himself in his Word.

So it's not that our preference isn't *important*, it's that it's not *primary*. It becomes secondary to the will of God so we are in glad submission to the will of God over and beyond our preference. That's the first thing. Then the second thing is when all is said and done, we are men and women who pursue as primary our *joy* and secondarily pursue our *happiness*.

Now that is not the mantra of our age, and every commercial you watch tonight as San Francisco handles business will... Hey, easy. I'm just making a prophetic utterance, all right? In the end, every commercial is going to what? Exalt you, tell you what you're worth, tell you what you're worthy of. It's the air we breathe, but God's picture of human flourishing is your pursuit should not be happiness because happiness is cheap, and it betrays you. Your pursuit should be joy, because joy is unshakeable and transcends your circumstances.

On Thursday I got to do a funeral for one of our family members here at The Village Church. Diane Nichols was a covenant member of this church. Her funeral was a good/bad funeral. I don't know if that will make sense to you. If you have a background in ministry, maybe it will. There are good funerals. If you're 96 years old and you have great-grandchildren who all love Jesus and everybody is there to celebrate how well you've lived life, that's a good funeral.

There are not a lot of tears there as much as there's a lot a celebration. There might be a tear here or there, but everybody is just kind of glad the body that's been betraying you for the last 10-15 years has finally gone on to that new state where you're not suffering like you were. So that's a good kind of funeral. Then there are hard funerals. Most of the funerals we do here are hard funerals. What I mean by that is because of the age and demographic of our church, most funerals are people under the age of 50.

Diane was 49. She lost a long battle with cancer last Tuesday. As I sat on the front row getting ready to do my part of the funeral... Diane had such unique components of her life, ones that made me jealous for how God had graced her. She met her husband, Todd, in high school. She married her high school sweetheart. This group of six women stood up and gave a testimony. Their testimony was they had met Diane in ninth grade.

Over the last 30 years, those girls who met as freshmen in high school went to college, got married. Once they got married, for the last three decades they've set up this one night out a month where they'd all get together. Listen. As a husband, we know what you guys are going. We know you're complaining about us.

Let's not veil that you guys are... "Does yours put the lid down?" "Well, mine can't aim worth anything." We know what's happening in that deal.

Then from there, they all had kids about the same time. Then from there, they've been raising those kids. There was this profound testimony of how they had done life together well and how they had hurt together through this, and how they had prayed and walked with her. There were tears and snot and loss and a palatable, tangible joy in the room. It wasn't a happy day, but it was a day filled with joy.

That's why, friend, we pursue joy and not happiness, because happiness betrays us. In fact, everyone in this room would have a testimony of something you thought would make you happy only to finally get it and find out it betrayed you. It only made you happy for a second or two. Joy doesn't work that way. God's picture of human flourishing says, "You're not uppermost. I am. Your preferences are secondary to my will, and your happiness is subservient to the pursuit of joy."

So that really is God's picture of human flourishing, and that flies in the face of radical individualism. Nehemiah is going to attack that. Let me catch you up on Nehemiah. I don't know how well you know your Old Testament, so I'm going to catch you up. Don't worry. I told you I wasn't going *terribly* long, so I'm not going to start in Genesis. I'm going to start in Exodus.

God calls the nation of Israel out from under the tyranny of Egypt, leads them up to the border of the Promised Land, the land flowing with milk and honey. There the people of Israel doubted the goodness of God, doubted the grace of God, doubted the power of God. So God allowed them to wander in the wilderness for 40 years while he killed off that generation who refused to put their trust in him.

Then under Joshua (not under Moses), God leads the people of Israel into the Promised Land. He drives out the Canaanites, and they are established as a nation. They began to look around, and they want a king. God gives them the desire of their heart, which was a king. He gets a man's man. Saul, according to the Bible, was a foot taller than any other man in Israel, the best hunter, had muscles coming out of his turtleneck, just hair everywhere. Just a man's man. Men wanted to be him; ladies loved him.

Saul, like our brothers and sisters in the wilderness who doubted the goodness of God and doubted the provision of God, doubted God and offered sacrifices that were unacceptable to God and was removed as king and replaced by David, who was a shepherd boy who played the harp. So we went from a foot taller than everyone else...

In fact, when the prophet came to anoint the new king, David's dad Jesse had forgotten about him in the field. He presented all his sons, and the prophet literally said, "Hey, God is telling me you have another

kid." Jesse is going, "Oh yeah, David. I just didn't think you would want David at all." Now David is a boss. He killed a bear with his own hands. That's better than what you've done. I know how we hunt now. You kind of just feed it for like a year, and then one day perched above it, it comes back to get that corn you've been putting out, and you kill it. Then that somehow makes you a man.

No. If you can kill it with your bare hands, I'll grant you a man card. If you're feeding it all year then cap it, I don't even know what that is. Unfair? So David is made king, and under David's kingship, Israel flourishes. In fact, all the threats against the nation of Israel are in many ways crushed under the reign of David. He goes to war against the Philistines. He goes to war against anyone who threatens the borders of Israel. Man, he wrecks shop. In my head, I can't get my mind around why the Philistines kept going, "Let's try that again!"

Then when David dies, he turns the kingdom over to his son Solomon. Solomon builds the temple to the Lord, and peace and that reign of David continue to happen. Israel becomes a regional power, no real threats to its border, and it is flourishing. You begin to see some concern on Solomon's part about what would come after him if you pay attention while you're reading the book of Ecclesiastes when he says, "What good is wealth and power if your kids are idiots? You're just going to pass that wealth and power on to morons."

Now that's a paraphrase. It's not going to read exactly like that in Ecclesiastes, but that was his point. Sure enough, right after Solomon, you see the nation of Israel that was a regional power fracture into two kingdoms: the northern kingdom and the southern kingdom. It's what would have happened in the United States had the Confederate States won. You would have had a Northern United States and the Confederate States of America in the South.

The northern kingdom was called Israel, and the southern kingdom was called Judah. The northern kingdom did not fare well at all. They had wicked king after wicked king after wicked king after wicked king. Finally in 722 BC, the Assyrians laid siege to the northern empire and deported and really spread across the ancient empire the Israelites in the northern kingdom of Israel. Judah fared a bit better. They had a Southern king. There's something about those Southern states. They were able to hang in here a bit longer, and they had godly king and wicked king, godly king and wicked king, godly king and wicked king.

But 136 years after the northern kingdom is conquered and the people are deported and exiled, the southern kingdom of Judah falls, not by the Assyrians but now the Babylonians, who are the reigning, ruling country, empire, in the world at that time. So then the Babylonians export and deport the Israelites in the southern kingdom and spread them across the ancient world as slaves and servants to the reigning Babylonian Empire.

Now just to catch you up on history, Persia shows up and decides they're going to run the world. So the Persians now conquer the Babylonians who had conquered the Assyrians. Now the Persian Empire has taken root in the ancient world. Then in 2 Chronicles... I feel like I don't even need to mention 2 Chronicles so many of you probably have that book memorized. At the end of 2 Chronicles, the Holy Spirit hard presses Cyrus, the king of Persia, that the Jews should be released to go back (or at least a portion of the Jews) to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple.

That's where we get the book of Ezra. Now here's something interesting. The book of Ezra and the book of Nehemiah are happening simultaneously in history. In fact, in some ancient manuscripts, Ezra and Nehemiah are one book, not two. They're one book, not two. So that's where we are in history. Now let's pick it up in Nehemiah 1, starting in verse 1.

"The words of Nehemiah the son of Hacaliah. Now it happened in the month of Chislev [that's going to be November or December], in the twentieth year, as I was in Susa the citadel, that Hanani, one of my brothers, came with certain men from Judah. And I asked them concerning the Jews who escaped, who had survived the exile, and concerning Jerusalem. And they said to me, 'The remnant there in the province who had survived the exile is in great trouble and shame. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates are destroyed by fire.'"

Now I want to stop there. We have to do a little bit of work with this, because we are not a people who now depend on gates and walls for our protection, but in this period of human history, gates and walls are as important, if not *more* important, than a city's army. See, without walls, a city could not control its own affairs, and they would really be dictated by outside forces what occurred in their own city, in their own province.

See, without walls and without gates, a city would be at the mercy of any band of marauders, any group who was coming through. Any violent outside force could just kind of come in and take what it wanted, and there would be no way to funnel that enemy or directionally challenge that enemy. This is why Proverbs 25:28 says, **"A man without self-control is like a city broken into and left without walls."** So the Bible says like a man with no self-control is a city with no walls.

They can't control their own affairs. They are left, unfortunately, to other devices. A picture that might help you with this is I've been, for the last year, president of the Acts 29 church-planting network. We've planted churches all over the world. We plant churches that plant churches. So we're not just interested in taking a young man who wants to plant a church and planting him. What we want to do is take a guy who wants to

plant churches that, in turn, plant churches. Then we want to plant that guy who, from day one, in his DNA is already planning on planting another church almost before he has his feet under his own church.

So one of our partner churches here at The Village (that means we're in the trenches with them) is Epiphany Fellowship in Philadelphia. Dr. Eric Mason was just here last month bringing the heat. He is just a tremendous man of God there in a very difficult part of Philadelphia, which is why for us they are one of our partner churches. We are learning from them; they are learning from us. They are a line item on our budget. You and I, we as The Village Church, give to them thousands and thousands of dollars a year as a means of partnering with them in gospel ministry.

Now a little over a year ago, they planted Epiphany Fellowship in Camden, New Jersey. Now let me talk to you about Camden, New Jersey, because you're not going to vacation there. Camden, New Jersey, has 79,000 residents, most of who are below the poverty line. So impoverished is Camden, New Jersey, that the entire police force (that's not just boots on the ground; that's those who are working desk jobs; that's those who are answering the 911 calls) totals 40.

Forty police officers and support team for a city of 79,000 people. To give you a bit of a compare and contrast, the city of Flower Mound that has 60,000, nearly 20,000 people less than that and far less dangerous...*far* less dangerous...has 125 members of its police force, with 86 of those being boots on the ground, officers with weapons. Camden, New Jersey, is a city without walls. When a city doesn't have walls, when there is no effective police force, when there is no one to call...

In fact, talking and praying with Doug... Really the officers are just so outgunned and so outmanned that it's almost anarchy in Camden right now. He told me one story where somebody had their house broken into, and it was ransacked. They called the police, and the police asked them to take pictures and email it in. I mean, can you get your head around that? I can't get my head around that.

"911."

"Somebody broke into my house, man. They just ransacked it."

"Are they still there?"

"No."

"Okay, can you take a picture of what got ransacked and send it into us? Here's my email address." That's a city with broken walls.

Now here's my question. What flourishes in an environment where there are broken walls? Anarchy does. Violence does. That default position of the human heart that would see one's self as uppermost, that would see one's self as the kingpin. That begins to work itself out in violence. That begins to work itself out in all sorts of horrific situations and scenarios. This is a city with broken walls. That would be a modern example.

Or if you've been with us to Sudan to do the work over there... If you look up on our government's website about Southern Sudan, it will say (first sentence), "No effective police force." Translation: You get in trouble, there's no one to call. There is no 911. That's a city without walls. See, it's hard for us to comprehend. Definitely here in Dallas that's hard for us to comprehend. Definitely in the suburbs of Dallas, it's even harder to comprehend. The police in Highland Village will sometimes knock on my door to let me know my garage door is open.

[Knock, knock, knock] "Yeah?"

"Did you know your garage door was open?"

"Yeah."

"Well, something could get stolen. We just wanted to let you know."

"Okay, thank you. I appreciate that, Officer."

Right? That's where I live. So, I'm trying to get my head around, "911." "Hey, someone has robbed my house." "Well take a picture and email it." It's hard for me to get my mind around that, but that's a city with broken walls. So with that established, I want you to see Nehemiah's response to this.

By the way, when Hanani tells Nehemiah the people are in great danger and in shame... Listen. If you enter into an environment with an unbelievable amount of poverty and violence, there's a type of fog that sets in on that community, a type of fog where it feels like you can't get out, a type of fog where you give in to things you probably hate in order to survive. There is an air of shame that dictates the lives of people. Let's look at Nehemiah's response in verse 4.

"As soon as I heard these words I sat down and wept and mourned for days, and I continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven." Now let me tell you why this is an odd verse. Nehemiah hears from Hanani that Jerusalem's walls are down and its gates have been burned. It knocks his knees out from

under him. He sits down and for days weeps about the walls not being there and the gates being burned down.

Now let me tell you why that's odd. Nehemiah is the cupbearer of the king of Persia. He lives in a palace 800 miles away from Jerusalem. What reason would he have to be empathetic? His role as cupbearer is to sample the wine and the food of the king to make sure it's not poisoned, among other roles. He is in a palace living in luxury, drinking the best wine on earth. Not that little box of blush that you have in your refrigerator. I'm talking like some Silver Oak '05, some Opus One. I mean, this guy is drinking it!

Eating food, luxury, safe, no real threat to the Persian Empire at this point. In a couple of hundred years, a little start-up called Rome is going to show up, and some things are going to change, but at this point in history, no threats, living a life of lavish luxury. Eight hundred miles away, with no television to update him, with no Twitter feed for him to watch pictures of his people suffering. Yet at the news of the state of his people, most of whom he had never met, it knocked his knees out from under him. His guts turned, and he wept before the Lord and began to fast and ask God to act.

When I'm reading this, here was my first thought six or seven months ago: *Is this prescriptive, or is this descriptive?* Is this historical? Is God just telling me this is what happened? Is this kind of like when Paul tells a dead guy he is not allowed to be dead? That's descriptive, not prescriptive. God is not telling me to go to the morgue and try to get everybody not to be dead. He is kind of letting me know in history, "Here's what happened."

So I look at this, and I'm going, "Okay, is this compassion and empathy that's burning in the heart of Nehemiah prescriptive or descriptive? Is God just telling me this is what Nehemiah felt, or is he setting before me what he wants my heart to look like? I'm here to tell you, whether you're going to enjoy this or not, it is very much prescriptive and not descriptive. If you look at the Bible's expectation on us as believers in Christ concerning, in particular, other believers in Christ, we are to feel and be bothered like our man Nehemiah is.

Let me read you some of this. I said earlier God's view of human flourishing flies in the face of radical individualism. You'll see that getting wrung out in the verses that follow. Deuteronomy 16:17: **"Every man shall give as he is able, according to the blessing of the Lord your God that he has given you."** So that seems like a simple verse but this, once again, flies in the face of radical individualism.

What I mean by that is what the Bible just said is when God blesses, our response to the blessing of God is not to hoard those blessings and, as the Bible would later say, build bigger barns and continue to upgrade and upgrade and upgrade as we are able but rather to receive and enjoy the blessings of God, but

understand in all things it's not 10 percent that God owns but 100 percent that God owns. We are called to be stewards of the blessings of God. Those blessings are not meant to terminate on us but rather...

Listen. Enjoy God's blessings on your life. It's not a bad thing to have nice things. What is a bad thing is a failure to understand and see all you have has been given to you by God, blessings by God, and not just to terminate on you but rather to flow out of you toward the purposes of God. This is preferences being secondary to the will of God. This is our understanding that God has been unbelievably gracious to us, and that should free up our hands to be unbelievably gracious to others.

Zechariah 7:8-10: **"And the word of the Lord came to Zechariah, saying, 'Thus says the Lord of hosts, 'Render true judgments, show kindness and mercy to one another, do not oppress the widow, the fatherless, the sojourner, or the poor, and let none of you devise evil against another in your heart.'"** So as God is painting this picture of human flourishing, he has us focused outward, not inward. He has us focused on loving one another, serving one another, not oppressing other people, of caring deeply for the fatherless, having us care deeply for the refugee, the alien, the stranger, the impoverished.

Engaged outwardly, not just inwardly. See, I find so often for evangelicals, really where our head is where we are spiritually. How are we with the Lord? How are we doing? Are we holy? Are we not holy? Are we struggling? Are we not struggling? "You know, I wish our church would do this differently. I wish we would sing a special or something. I wish we didn't have to stand so much." Right? Really the attention of the saint in the Scriptures is not inward but rather outward. It's rather outward.

Let me give you a couple more, although you might think that's plenty. Matthew 7, verse 12. We've kind of distilled it down to the Golden Rule, but here's what it says. **"So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets."** So if there's a greater verse to prove we are radically individualized, it's a verse like, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." We kind of twist that, and instead of it pushing us outward...

So this verse means we should think... If I was in Camden, New Jersey, if I was in Iran, if I was in the situations some of my brothers and sisters are in, what would I want someone to do for me? How would I want them to interact with me? How would I want them to love me? Then to do it. Then to do it! Two more. Colossians 3:12: **"Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience..."** What should we be marked by? Compassionate hearts.

One more. Galatians 6:2: **"Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ."** Are you your brother's keeper? Yes, you are. So what God has called you and me to as the people of God is a type of radical compassion and empathy, in particular to the people of God (our brothers and sisters in Christ). So

as the community of faith, we model to the world outside of us what it looks like to be the people of God and to walk in the type of flourishing God would have us walk in.

It is being mindful of the hurts and hang-ups of others and entering into that in some very simple ways and some very complex ways and being the picture of Christ's love and compassion for his church in our presence and in our interaction with those around us. I think in some ways we do this really well as a church, and in other ways, I think we could do better as a church.

If I consider single parents, I just think single parents should just be walking around with like a championship belt on. We have three kids. I have no idea how one parent does that. Lauren and I run a high-low zone, and they still get open all the time. Oh, that we might love and care for our single moms and our single dads, that we might be there for those who are struggling with sickness.

On Friday night, I was at Texas A&M doing a men's conference called Relentless. One of the things the Ags boast of, as cultish as they are... Now I'm a fan. Don't get me wrong, but it gets scary in there. It gets scary. I don't drink Kool-Aid. If they have maroon Kool-Aid, I'm not drinking it. There they boast of the Aggie network. Here's what they boast of: If an Ag loses his job or gets hurts, the network, the alumni base is... "We share a Border Collie and a football team in common, so we're going to come together, and we're going to support our own." The Ag family.

How much more then should the body of Christ love our brothers and sisters than those who would rally around school colors and a location in which they were educated? Should we not as the people of God say, "There's a network within The Village Church that cares deeply enough for its own that we'll sacrifice, we'll give way to personal preference, we'll find jobs for them, and we'll care deeply for them. We'll walk in the long haul with men and women"? Yeah, there absolutely should be.

Okay, so I want to kind of answer this question in closing out. On top of us loving one another like this, what you see happening is that love for one another spills over the walls (once our walls are repaired) into the world around us. So I think of Free City's work among the refugees down in Dallas. I think of Champions of Hope. I think of the Chin refugees.

I think of all these areas of ministry that hadn't been organizationally built up by the church, but just as you've been loved, as you've grown in the faith, you've begun to interact. You've begun to do these things, and God is really pushing back what's dark and repairing walls in other broken places that have nothing to do with The Village except that you as a member of the covenant community at The Village are there as a light of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

So how do we grow in this kind of compassion? Because, the truth is, we can't just flip that switch to feel deeply, to be moved forward, to make our preference secondary to the will of God. That's not an easy thing to do. So how do we do that? Look with me in Nehemiah 1:5-7. There are two things here, and these are the two things that are going to be necessary for us to grow in empathy. Verse 5 says:

"And I said, 'O Lord God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, let your ear be attentive and your eyes open, to hear the prayer of your servant that I now pray before you day and night for the people of Israel your servants...'"

Here's what he is doing. **"...confessing the sins of the people of Israel, which we have sinned against you. Even I and my father's house have sinned. We have acted very corruptly against you and have not kept the commandments, the statutes, and the rules that you commanded your servant Moses."** Now if we want to grow in compassion and we want to grow in empathy for one another and for the world around us, there are two pieces that are imperative for that growth.

1. *A right view of who God is.* Do you see what's happening here? There is no tangible evidence right now in this moment that God is faithful and God is keeping his promises. They are scattered like the wind all over the ancient world. They have lost that land flowing with milk and honey, but what's Nehemiah's prayer? "You are faithful. You are good. You are a covenant-keeping God. You have not abandoned us. You are here even in our hurt. You love us. You will keep your promise." That's also coupled by not just a right picture of God but...

2. *A right picture of us.* See, Nehemiah then begins to confess the sins of Israel. "We have not been faithful. We have not kept your commands. We have not lined ourselves up with how you've designed the universe to work." Then, look at me. Nehemiah knows it himself. "Even I and my father's house, we have sinned against you." See, the more you have an elevated view of yourself, the more it will be impossible for you to show compassion.

So look right at me. If your kids are godly because you're awesome and not because God is gracious, then you'll be hard pressed to show compassion for anybody who has a wayward child, because if they would have just done what you did in all your awesomeness, then they could have had a godly kid too. Why didn't they follow your protocol?

If you're financially set and that's not because God has been gracious to you but because you've worked and you've earned and you've set yourself off against somebody and not, instead, feel indebted to God for

his mercy and grace, how impossible will it be for you to show empathy toward someone who is impoverished?

See, the more you are the author and perfecter of all things, the more all the blessing on your life is because of you and not because of God that has put you, in turn, into his debt, the more it will be impossible to show empathy to others who are struggling. Why? Because you're freakin' awesome. They should have just done what you did. That will rot out the soul's ability to be compassionate and merciful. It will breed in us an indifference that is unacceptable before the Lord.

It will rot out the ability to walk in unity, love, and compassion with one another. It will create a judgmental harshness among us that God will have nothing to do with. So my prayer in this message and then moving forward into Nehemiah is that more and more and more we would feel small and see God as big and that in that, we might find our compassion for others growing. Let's pray together.

I want to just ask a couple of questions while we have a few minutes of quiet here. If you have found in yourself a growing indifference, a growing coldness... Maybe you've come into this place today, and that's what marks your life: a strong, judgmental attitude toward other people, well aware of other people's weaknesses, quick to justify your successes as belonging to you and other people's weaknesses as belonging to them.

I want you to ask the Holy Spirit would soften your heart today, that the Holy Spirit might, in mercy, grant you compassion and rescue you from the silliness that is you right now. I want to challenge you once again just as we begin to conclude our service that you not just attend here. That's not rebuilding the walls. That's not, when all is said and done, creating an environment where compassion can flourish. You have not been called to *attend* church; you have been called by God to *belong* to one.

There is no way for us to show one another compassion where we are not known. In order to be known, preferences have to become secondary, and happiness has to be subservient to joy. If you want preference and happiness, you will never let weaknesses be known by others. You will hide them and, in so doing, shrivel up the soul's capacity to walk in high levels of joy and compassion and empathy for others.

So really one of the litmus tests here can even be in our time together. Have you entered in to the covenant community of faith, or are you purposefully staying on the outskirts for one reason or another that is more than likely far easily tied to radical individualism as opposed to what God would have you put before your preference and ease and, instead, have you do the hard work of walking with others, loving them, serving them, encouraging them, and then being able to receive that in return?

Have you grown myopic in how you see the work of God in your life, in this church, and in the world around us? Let's confess and repent of that. We're going to end our service today by doing two things. Both are commanded by God in Scripture, and both are, when all is said and done, desperately needed by your soul and mine regardless of how we've come in.

One is we're going to rally around the motivating force for all of this. Our motivation for compassion and empathy can't be a drive-by guilt sermon. Our motivation for compassion, empathy, belonging, community, rebuilding walls, pouring ourselves out for others has to be the compassion we were shown in God rescuing us while we were sinners.

The motivating force of our spiritual journey is while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. While we were in the muck and the mire, God reached down with his holy, clean hands and pulled us out of the muck and the mire and set our feet on the rock. Our motivation must be the forgiving, saving work of Jesus Christ for those of us who are in him. So we celebrate that by coming to the Lord's Table, that place where there's room for all who would confess and put their hope in him.

We're going to pick up a piece of bread, and we're going to pick up some juice. We're going to celebrate the broken body and shed blood of Jesus Christ, his forgiveness, his compassion, his empathy, his love for us. Then, listen. We're going to sing to the Lord. I feel like we get confused about what singing is and why it matters. I want to plead with you not to feel like it's a secondary part of what we're trying to do here. In fact, the Lord commands us to sing to him.

It's not because he needs to be sung to. The Bible tells us there are heavenly creatures on repeat around the ears and the throne room of God that never stop saying, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come." No, God has commanded us to sing to the Lord because we need to sing to him, because in singing to him, God takes what's intellectual and he drives it down into the heart, and he connects the heart with the head as we worship him in song.

As we sing what is true about the Lord, what is intellectual is connected into what is spiritual and emotional. That's why God says, "You sing to me. You sing to me with joy. You sing to me loudly. You get after me in worship with song." So I want to plead with you not to view it as something secondary and use it as a chance to hurry up and get out of here so you don't get stuck in traffic.

Rather take the limited time God has given you this week to gather together as the saints and wring out of it all we can together as we've gathered in this corporate covenant community to worship our God. Let me pray for us, and then we'll begin to celebrate the compassion of God made available to us in Christ, and we'll begin to sing to our Lord.

Father, thank you for these men and women. I pray you would stir our hearts up with compassion and empathy to the world around us, first to our brothers and sisters in Christ here at The Village, then to our brothers and sisters in Christ around the world, and then overflowing out of those walls into the lost and secular world around us, that we might love and serve well those who are far from you. Help us. It's through your beautiful name I pray, amen.

Love you guys.

© 2013 The Village Church