

For those of you who it meant anything, how was spring break? Mine was horrible too, thanks. No, it's great to be back. If you have a Bible, turn to Nehemiah 5. I missed you last week. I know many of you were gone Sunday as well. Some of you know this. Some of you don't. Mike Turner and I, Big Mike, who's on our staff and oversees our campus outreach ministry, serve as chaplains for the men's basketball team. (Go Mean Green!)

Last week was the conference tournament, and so I'd scheduled to be there, assuming they were going to win the conference championship. They didn't. It didn't go the way I planned, so I'm not going to be at the Final Four. I also didn't go to the conference championship game. So since I had the weekend off already, we just decided to go hang out as a family. So we had a great little time, but I really did miss being with you. I know many of you traveled as well. I'm just really thankful that you're back and back safe and we can continue on together studying Nehemiah tonight.

If you are a guest, I know Clint has already welcomed you. Isaac already did as well in his own sort of Dallas way, and so that was great. My name is Beau. I want to welcome you as well. I'm one of the pastors and elders here, and I'm just delighted you've come to be with us tonight. Over the last month or so, maybe in the last few months, many of you have joined us in our services, and I'm just glad to have you here and pray that what we think about together as a community of faith tonight will be beneficial.

If you are new, we are as a church in the middle of studying this narrative in the Old Testament called Nehemiah. As you might expect, it's about a guy named Nehemiah whom God raised up to lead his people. We don't have time to go into the whole story. This is the fifth sermon, and that's why we're in the fifth chapter.

Essentially, a general synopsis of what has been going on in Nehemiah is God had essentially kicked his people out of the land of Israel, out of the city of Jerusalem, because they had sinned and rebelled against him. When he made a covenant with them, when he brought them into the land, he promised them in his goodness and in his kindness that he would do that. "If you disobey me, if you go after other gods, I will punt you out of the land," and he did. They went into captivity.

The book of Nehemiah is about God raising up Nehemiah to begin to bring the people in God's saving and gracious nature back into his city. Nehemiah is raised up to help with that effort, and he's leading the

charge to sort of rebuild the city of Jerusalem, mostly the wall around the city, and so that's what this narrative is about. It's really fascinating.

The first couple of chapters are just about God putting within Nehemiah's heart a burden to go back to Jerusalem. Then he actually asks the king whom he was a servant of, the king of the known world at that point, if he could go back, and he said, "Yeah, you can go back." He goes back, and he gets the people. In chapter 3, he gathers the people together, and prayerfully, they began to work on the wall. It's just this really neat story.

Chapter 4 through about the first half of chapter 6 is about the opposition that comes in the middle of the people doing this great work of God. As they've been called to put the city back together, to rebuild the wall, as many of you know, anytime you're walking through a fallen world, trying to live faithfully, man, opposition is going to come. We talked about that two weeks ago. That was what chapter 4 is about...the external opposition that came their way, that all these surrounding nations...

Israel is this little, bitty piece of land. On the west side of Israel, for those of you who know your geography, is the Mediterranean, but then the other sides of Israel are all surrounded by these nations today, as it was back in Nehemiah's day, that are not friendly to the people of God. So in chapter 4, there is all this opposition. Then, of course, on top of that are the psychological struggles that happen when you're doing a good work of the Lord, and on and on and on.

Then in chapter 5, we begin to see more of the internal disunity, the internal even oppression that rises up, so that's what we're going to do. We're going to continue reading this letter. Again, part of what God means for us as a community of faith today, many years after this was written, to take from this text is how we as a people are to persevere faithfully in the will of God.

Listen, I don't want to ruin the story for you, but do you know what? The wall in Nehemiah is going to get rebuilt. Sorry, if you hadn't read ahead yet and you were just on the edge of your seat wondering, watching what the drama was going to play out as. It's going to get rebuilt. The will of God is going to happen. God is going to accomplish his purposes.

Jesus Christ is going to return, not to rebuild a wall, but to renew the heavens and the earth. There is going to be a new heavens and a new earth, so the question as we're reading through this is not simply is the wall going to get rebuilt? What's going to happen in the story? It's going to get rebuilt. What we're supposed to be taking from the story, at least in some part, is...*How are the people to persevere and do the will of God faithfully in the midst of opposition and struggle and trials and tribulations?*

What we're meant to take for our own lives is, "Okay, Jesus is coming back. The end of the story has already been revealed. What do we do as we wait? How do we live faithfully in a fallen world that's filled with opposition and trial and tribulation, all these things we see in Nehemiah?" So it's just such a relevant little narrative for us, and I hope you're seeing that more and more as we journey through.

Let me give you just a little bit more context for Nehemiah 5. As we transition out of chapter 4 and into chapter 5, one of the things we learn historically is in these nations sort of opposing the people of Israel and the work of God in Jerusalem, one of the things these neighboring enemies did in order to sort of just put all warfare on the table was they cut off trade with Israel, which is something we still do today with nations, right?

If you know what's going on in world affairs, there are many different nations we, even as a country in some sense, because we disagree with their philosophy of life, we disagree with their foreign policy, we disagree with just about everything about what they're doing, we cut off trade from them, and we encourage other nations, we join in with other nations, other allies, to do the same.

We're hoping that in doing that it will put some sort of pressure on these nations to actually come to the bargaining table to rethink their position, and on and on and on. The very same thing has been happening for years and years, and that was happening in Nehemiah's day. So there was no external aid, imports coming into the nation of Israel, and so think about trade, just fundamental needs: food, clothing, all sorts of things. The trade routes were shut down.

The other thing that is interesting about Nehemiah, chapter 5, is Nehemiah 4 ends with just this sort of really rousing description about how Nehemiah called the people to the wall, and they were on the wall night and day. They were just stationed on the wall night and day. It's really cool how Nehemiah organizes them.

It's really cool how these men and these workers stepped up to the task, but what's not really cool is because they were on the wall night and day... Some of these people who were on the wall night and day were farmers, and because they were on the wall doing the will of God, they weren't back home on the farm. Because they weren't back home on the farm, they couldn't harvest their crops. Because they couldn't harvest their crops, there was no harvest. There was no food.

So the picture in Nehemiah 5 is from the outside, you have trade that's cut off. From the inside there's no food to put on the table because all the farmers, all the people who would be providing those things, providing the harvest, are actually working on the wall day and night, and they needed to stay on the wall

because there was threat from outside that somebody was going to attack. So it's just this desperate situation. Because there was no harvest, because there was no trade, there's a famine that arises.

So in the middle of this beautiful work and commissioning of God to rebuild the city of Jerusalem, there's this really difficult side to the story we typically don't think of when we think about a sermon series of Nehemiah. It's like, "Let's preach about rebuilding, and we're going to rebuild." Yeah, and there's going to be hardship and trouble, and rebuilding for some of these people as they faithfully did that left them devastated, as we're going to talk about here in a minute.

The worst thing is not the neighboring countries that are opposing them. It's not even the famine that's arising because there's no food. The worst thing is even in the midst of the distressing situation, there was this disunity and discord and oppression that arose within the people of God. Worse than the famine itself is how the people began to treat one another in the midst of the difficulty.

So again, one of the things God intends, I think, at least for us as a congregation to receive from this text, to really think about from this text, is how we're meant to treat one another, how we're meant to live together in faith as a church, maybe especially in the midst of distressing situations, in the midst of a fallen world. What does it look like to persevere together in faith in a way that's loving and godly?

Some of the questions that are going to confront us from this text are: Are we compelled and controlled by the lust of our flesh and the greed of our hearts? Are we compelled and controlled by our love for God and our love for one another? Are we living in the way we treat one another that's distinct from the culture at all?

That's part of what we're meant to see, I think, from this text, and if you don't know as Christians, as a local church, we're supposed to live in a way that's distinct from the world. We're supposed to treat each other differently than the world treats each other. Our community is supposed to be marked by certain characteristics and attributes that don't mark other communities in the world.

Jesus himself taught this. He said, "Listen, they're going to know you're my disciples by the way you love one another, by the way you serve one another." He got down on his knees, and he washed their feet. He took on the place of a servant, as we'll read more about later, he washed their feet, he got up, and he said, "As I've loved you, you're to love one another. That's what's to mark you and make you distinct from the world around you."

The philosophy of ethics in the Christian community is not survival of the fittest. It's not, "I'm going to reach my personal goals by all means necessary regardless of who I have to push over to get to them."

That's not the ethic of the Christian community. The ethic of a Christian community is one the apostle Paul so beautifully talks about in Philippians 2. I have this for you. He says, **"Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility, count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others."**

In light of what Christ has done for us, this is the ethic that is to mark us as a people and make us distinct, and even if you're not a Christian in here, you should know by virtue of your own experience in life that the human tendency is to not live for others, but to live for ourselves and for our own kingdoms. The human tendency is not naturally to live for the good of others and for the kingdom of God.

Again, as one of my seminary professors taught, this is one of the primary questions this text is confronting us with. What is it that is really important to us, church? What is it that's really important? Is it the fellowship of God's people and the building of his kingdom, the building of his people? Or is it the fellowship of this world's material goods and the building of our own comfort? What are we living for? What's most important to us?

I just want to say this, just pastorally, then we'll pray and we'll get into the text. Especially in this service, many of you, if not most of you in this room, are covenant members. I'm not, as your pastor, preaching this because I'm discouraged. I'm preaching it because we're going through Nehemiah, but my hope in this is not, "Hey, I really feel like we're just failing miserably as a church in loving one another and considering each other's needs. Therefore, I feel like I have to preach angry. I feel like I have to preach aggressive."

That's not how I feel at all. In fact, I am very encouraged as I think about our members here, the 987 or some odd members of our church. I'm so encouraged by all the different ways you love one another, that you strive to live out your faith in the way Paul and Jesus have outlined, that we've talked about here. First Thessalonians 4... I know this is a text I read to you often, but it just comes to my mind again and again.

Paul says this to the church. "Listen, concerning brotherly love, concerning loving one another," he tells the Thessalonians, "you don't have need of anyone to teach you. God himself has taught you how to do that, and you're loving one another well. I'm writing this to you, though, so you might continue to abound more and more in love for one another." So as I'm preaching this, that's my same sort of angst, because I think you're already doing a lot of these things.

I definitely think the Holy Spirit, I trust, is going to confront us and lovingly talk to us about maybe some areas of our hearts and our lives personally and corporately that we can continue to grow in, but, man, I'm just praying that the result of this sermon is you being built up to continue to do what you're doing more

and more and more. Let's just pray to that end, and then we'll just walk line by line through Nehemiah 5 together.

Father, I'm so thankful that, again, your Word is a lamp to our feet. It's a light to our path, and what happened in this narrative in Nehemiah is just so unbelievably relevant to us. We shouldn't be surprised. That's just the way your Word is, but we're thankful. So we pray tonight that you would take this time and take your Word and equip us to continue to love one another more and more and more, that we would be a people that are increasingly marked by our love for one another, because we understand your love for us through Jesus Christ. It's in his name we pray, amen.

So Nehemiah 5, verse 1... You have a little bit of context, so let's read this now in light of that context.

**"Now there arose a great outcry of the people and of their wives against their Jewish brothers."** So there's this great outcry that happens in the middle of the opposition, in the middle of the famine, and the outcry, though, is not mostly about the famine. It's not mostly about their neighbors. It's mostly about their Jewish brothers who are doing something that is causing extreme disunity in the church.

In verse 2, it goes into more detail. **"For there were those who said, 'With our sons and our daughters, we are many.'"** In other words, "We have a lot of mouths to feed. There are a lot of kiddos sitting around the table." **"So let us get grain, that we may eat and keep alive."** In other words, here you have them lamenting this. "Golly, there's no food. We have a lot of people to feed, and we have to get grain. We have to find grain."

So much so, it says in verse 3, **"There were also those who said, 'We are mortgaging our fields, our vineyards, and our houses to get grain because of the famine.'"** So these people, these hardworking farmers, are so desperate because of the famine, they're now actually selling their land. They're doing whatever they need to do just to put food on the table for their family.

Verse 4 says not only are they having to worry about finding food and resources just so they could eat, but they also are having to pay their taxes, which is relevant during this season, amen? **"And there were those who said, 'We have borrowed money for the king's tax on our fields and our vineyards.'"** So they were borrowing money to put food on the table. They were borrowing money to actually pay their taxes that they owe.

Listen to me. Get this picture in your mind. Rebuilding the wall in Jerusalem, these are the people who have been there night and day. These are the faithful people. They're not lazy people looking for a handout. These are faithful people who have been faithful to Nehemiah's leadership, to God's leadership to them through Nehemiah, in rebuilding the wall of Jerusalem. Doing the will of God has been very costly

for them. There's no food to feed their starving children. There's no way to provide for their families. They've lost their possessions. They've racked up incredible amounts of debt.

Their faithfulness to God has led to devastation in their lives, and it might do the same in your life and in my life. I realize we live in the West, and we live more than just in the West, we live in Texas in the West, in North Texas. So, suffering for Jesus, the implications of our commitment to our faith and our lives are nothing as drastic as this. At least if they are, I don't know about that. I'd love to know about it, if in your life, you feel like, "Yeah, I can totally on a real practical level relate to these people who've had everything taken away from them."

That's not our experience, but do you know what? All around the world today, it is the experience of our brothers and sisters in faith. All around the world today, there are brothers and sisters of ours who could read this text and go, "Yes, that happened Saturday to me." In fact, just one example, this last week in Pakistan...

I don't know what you know about Pakistan. I don't know much, but I do know 1.6 percent of 180 million people there are Christians. I know last weekend 3,000 people in a great mob, based on a false accusation against a Christian, stormed certain neighborhoods, torching hundreds of homes of Christians. So today, right now, some estimate there are 300 poor Christian families homeless. Why? Because of their faithfulness to God.

This is just one little neighborhood in one little nation in one little part of the world. All over the world today, although we don't feel the sufferings like Nehemiah and the people, they're being felt by our brothers and sisters, which is why the writer of Hebrews in Hebrews 13 says, "Remember those, church." **"Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them..."** It's not to make you feel guilty. It's meant to make you prayerful.

Remember them. **"...and those who are mistreated, since you also are in the body."** They're not a part of this body, but we're a part of the body together, the universal body of Jesus Christ. So the author is saying, "Don't forget." This text may seem so far away from us, and we're going to see in a minute how it's really not. On a practical, day-to-day level, it does, but it's not to our brothers and sisters.

So one of the things I'm just praying in my own life and in our lives is that God would continue to make us more and more mindful of our brothers and sisters, more and more mindful of the plight of our brothers and sisters, the ways in which their lives have been devastated, not because they're lazy, not because they're being disobedient, because they're being faithful and obedient, and for us to be prepared as well, if

this day comes for us, that we would stand as firm as they do in the faith. What an example, our brothers and sisters are around the world!

Sadly, most days we're simply too absorbed with our own lives to even think about it, and so we don't even have the emotional or mental energy to think about anybody else even close to us, much less around the world, but I'm praying the Lord would do more than that. Just a word here on what's going on in Nehemiah. Look at verse 5. It's even worse, though, and verse 5 sort of outlines and really gives us a picture of the most horrific thing happening as the wall is being rebuilt, and it's something that should actually just make our stomachs sick.

It says, "**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...**" They're not just losing their fields. They're not just losing their vineyards. They're not just having to borrow money at exorbitant amounts of interest on their taxes. Their sons and their daughters are being given over as slaves.

If you have a son or a daughter, just use your imagination as we read through this. Think about that. This is horribly realistic. If you're not a Christian, the Bible is horribly realistic at points, and this is one of those points, in my opinion. The situation is so dire that their sons and their daughters are being taken as slaves. The most horrific part is who's taking them as slaves and who's taking everything else from them. It's not the neighboring nations. It's their own people. This is what it says: "**...it is not in our power to help it, for other men [the Jews they're mad about] have our fields and our vineyards [and our children].**"

So the great horror of Nehemiah 5 is not the famine or the opposition from the neighboring countries. It's that there were some wealthy Jews who were actually seeing their brothers and sisters in need, and instead of filtering it through the lens of Hebrews 13, not that they had the book of Hebrews, but through the law they did have, which we'll read about here in a minute, instead of filtering it through that lens, they actually filtered it through the lens of, "Wow! How can I use this situation and their need to gain for myself?" It's unbelievable what's happening here.

Do you know? The last few months at corporate prayer, if you've been coming, we've been praying as a church against payday lending here in our city. If you read the newspaper, which I hope you do, most of you do electronically, but whatever form... If you're old school like me and you like the paper, read the newspaper today. On the front page, there's this massive article about payday lending. We've been praying actively against that.

In fact, I've been so encouraged. The church has actually risen up to take to city council resolutions that have been passed by our city council that are going to the state on Tuesday that are pushing back against

these companies that are targeting, which was what the article points out... They're targeting the most vulnerable and poor in our community, which includes many members of our church, mind you. Most of them are right up here on University, right up here in our neighborhood or right over here on East Oak Street, right over there, down there by Oak Street Draft House, in that area.

These people are just setting up, and they're exploiting the most vulnerable in our community. So we've been praying against, it as we should, because it's horrible. It's not just that you thought something cool was going to be near Schlotzsky's, and it wasn't. It was Speedy Cash. It's what Speedy Cash is. They were at the homecoming parade. They were throwing out Frisbees, I guess, to try to be friendly. I just had Haddon take it and throw it back at them. Not really. I'm just kidding. He didn't do that. I wouldn't. I didn't make him do that.

What's happening in Nehemiah 5 is far more horrible. It would be like covenant members of our church setting up payday loans to take advantage of other covenant members of our church. Pagans are going to do what they're going to do, but the people of God, which is what's happening in Nehemiah 5, are acting in the very same way. There's nothing distinct about the way they're acting. So again, it should make us sick to our stomachs, and God, as you might expect or, if you're not a Christian, you might hope, actually had already spoken to his people about not doing this very thing again and again and again in the Torah.

Let me just read a couple for you. I have them up here. You don't have to turn there. This is what Deuteronomy 23 says: "You shall not lend interest to your brother, interest on money, interest on victuals, interest on anything that is lent for interest." In Leviticus 25, it goes into more detail. It says, "**If your brother becomes poor and cannot maintain himself with you, you shall support him...**" So, listen, it's not just that they're doing what they're not supposed to do. It's that they're doing the exact opposite of what God had told them to do in light of his own grace to them.

So it's not just that they're going *this* way. It's that they're going *this* way, and they're supposed to be going *this* way. It's pretty amazing. He goes on and says, "**...as though he were a stranger and a sojourner, and he shall live with you.**" You don't kick him off his land. You bring him onto yours. You give him yours. You share with him. "**Take no interest from him or profit, but fear your God...**" which Nehemiah is going to come to twice in this passage. "**...fear your God that your brother may live beside you. You shall not lend him your money at interest, nor give him your food for profit.**"

Again, the countercultural nature of how God intends for his people to live... "All the surrounding nations, this is how they're going to act. You don't act that way. You do this, because this is totally different." This is a totally different ethic. It's pretty unbelievable. Then he talks to the slavery issue. He says, "Listen, if your

brother becomes poor and sells himself to you, you shall not make him a slave." So he very explicitly, very clearly has already told them what to do.

Do you know what's so unbelievable about this? Why had the people been kicked out of the nation to begin with? Because of their disobedience. Here they've come back into the nation, and they're right back at it. If you're following this story, Nehemiah says, "There arose a great outcry among the people *indeed*," and there should've been. If you're following the flow of Nehemiah, the narrative, it really does make you at this point stop and ask the question, as one commentator did: What's the use of a rebuilt Jerusalem without a holy people to dwell with God?

Who even cares if the wall gets rebuilt at this point? There are no faithful people to live within it, and God is more about his people than he is about the walls. This picture and this story again is such a realistic picture of a life of perseverance in the faith in the midst of a fallen world. So there's oppression. There's injustice, and there's this great outcry.

Just to push pause here and to think about this for our lives... I think it's far too easy for you and me to distance ourselves from this text and to sort of look down our noses at the unfaithful people of God here and say things like, "Oh my God, I can't believe they were doing that. I would never do that." So you sort of compare your outward struggles to their outward struggles, and you feel good about yourself. There's a way you can actually read this text and preach this text where you're feeding your own self-righteousness, and I don't want to do that.

Instead, I want to look at it and let it be a mirror to us how we might actually be doing some of the same things. It's going to look different. I don't think there's any enslaving of children going on in Little Village right now. Kourtney, is there? If there is, let us know. I don't think that's happening. I don't think anybody has a vineyard to be taken away or has had one taken away of late. It's going to look different, but underneath it... Don't just look at the outward. Look at the heart. Look at what's driving them to do this.

Is what is driving them not the greed and the lust of their hearts for comfort, to bathe in the comforts of the world, just like their surrounding neighbors? Even though we're not enslaving each other's children, could it be the building of God's kingdom, the building of God's church, the building of whatever it is the Lord has us doing could be hindered because we ourselves are consumed with an interest and a desire to make ourselves comfortable and our Christianity comfortable rather than being utterly devoted to do the will of God?

I just wonder if we're even to use the phrase from Nehemiah 5, what might some of the great outcries in the life of our congregation be? In your life, what might some of the great outcries be? What are some of

the potential areas of injustice and disunity among our church, among your home group, in your own hearts?

We're a multicultural, multiethnic, multigenerational church, and diversity lends to this sort of oppression and injustice more than homogeneity does. So this for us particularly is worth stopping and thinking about because we have people from different classes. We have uneducated. We have educated. We have every different color. We have it all.

Even as you think through the history of the people, what's happening here? It's the wealthy taking advantage of the poor. Even if you think about, as the story goes on, in the New Testament, when it was just a train wreck and they had to appoint deacons to help it, what was the issue? It was an ethnic issue. It was Jews and Gentiles struggling together.

Diversity, it seems, biblically almost lends to this type of disunity and oppression and injustice. So we're right to think about it. Again, I just wonder what are ways the privileged among our own church might be taking advantage of the less privileged? The educated, the less educated? How might you be using other people, even and maybe especially other believers within our church, to gain an advantage for yourself? I know it's totally unfair that I just gave you six questions, and I've thought about it for two weeks. You've not thought about it.

I know you're going to need some time to wrestle through some of these with other believers. Let me just kind of help give you some common things I see within our church that, again, I'm not terribly concerned about but I do think we need to think about, and this maybe will help you to get the wheels turning so as you meet with each other this week and pray with each other this week and repent with each other this week that you can have some thoughts. Here are some things I see. Again, it looks much different than Nehemiah 5, but the heart is the same.

1. *Taking advantage of each other's kindness.* I think some of the ways we can use one another in the body of Christ, in our body especially, is just by simply taking advantage of each other's kindness. We have so many singles and young people. One of the things we see a lot is you're living with your roommates, who are brothers in Christ, are a part of this church.

Because you know that and because you know they're godly and they love you and they're kind, you'll actually not pay your rent on time, because they'll pay it for you. You'll actually not buy your own groceries because they have chips hanging around for you. Get your own chips. Don't abuse your brother's kindness in that or your sister's kindness in that. We see this often.

Another thing, even on the flip side of this... I'm going to try to hit different pockets here. Very easily, those of us who have kids we can begin to abuse our babysitters by not paying them anything. Listen, I know some of that, the way it starts, is because someone tells you they want to serve you so you can go on a date, which thank you, those of you who do that. You have no idea at this point how much that is a gift to those of us who have young children or old children who still need babysitting, some of you. So they come over, and just slowly but surely, you just quit even thinking about them.

A long time ago, they told you they'd like to do this to bless you, but even though they're saying that, did you ever think that 18- or 19-year-old might actually benefit from something you could do for them. I know they're not asking for it, but in your own heart, how easy is it to just abuse that kindness and abuse that privilege, as now you're going out and it's like date night four times a week. Amen? Our date night is Monday... Anyway. Just abusing each other's kindness and taking advantage of each other, not thinking and considering one another's interests but only our own. It's easy to do that.

*2. Having a consumeristic mindset.* Another thing is just the consumeristic mindset that we bring into all spheres of life but that we bring into the church. This consumerism we bring into the church that leads us to be consumers of one another in our friendships. If you're a guest, if you're new here, if you're not a Christian, I'm not talking to you. Some of you are covenant members, and, man, you've been here for years and you don't serve anybody.

Do you know what? Even worse than that, you don't have any intention of doing that. You renewed your covenant. You checked "Yes" on the box that said, "I'm going to serve within and outside of the church." You're not doing it, you haven't done it for years, and you're not going to do it. You have no intent to do it. I'm not talking about you filling a spot on the org chart. I'm not talking about you going down there and wearing a gray shirt or a green shirt and serving in Kids' Village. I'm just talking about your mindset.

Your heart toward this community of faith is not to give; it's to take, and it has been to take for a really long time. So you come here on Sundays and you hope and pray you'll continue to get your spiritual goods and services doled out to you, but you're not thinking about anybody. You're not thinking about anybody in your home group. You're not thinking about anybody in this church. You're not praying for anybody. You're just thinking about you.

If your home group is not thinking about you, not only are you not thinking about them, you're leaving that home group because they're not thinking about you. You're just a consumer, and it's okay for you to admit that and to repent of that. Do you know what? Sometimes we don't even know we're doing it until you enter into that church or you enter into that friendship and you don't get what you want from that friendship or that church. Do you know what you do?

You leave that friendship or that church to go to the other friendship or church that will give you what you want. In doing that, what you're revealing is, "I don't care about this friend or this church. I care about me and what this friend or this church can or can't give me." We're consumers, and we bring this into so many of our conversations, so many of our services, so many of our situations and circumstances in life.

Just a word to those of you who are college students, and I'm going to say a word to you specifically, not because I think you're doing a poor job of this. Actually, you're doing better than most of us. If we didn't have college students who were members of our church, we wouldn't have a Little Village or a Kids' Village. We just wouldn't.

College students, one of the things we've talked about again and again over the years is however long God has you here, whether it's a semester or 2 or 6 or 15 or 28, for those of you who just need to get done with it already, however long the Lord has you here, that you would give to our church, give to our city. Man, set down roots.

Don't just have a commuter mentality where you come into this city and you just take. You're just here to get your degree and then get out of here, maybe get some friends along the way, maybe get some cool sermons. You're not thinking about this city at all. You're not thinking about this church. You're not thinking about anything but you, and there's this mentality here in Denton where you can very easily and subtly do that.

I just want to cast a vision for you to not do that. For however long you're here, set down roots. Give. Do you know what? Like many who are still here who are now out of college and married and having houses and children, you might find while you're here being faithful and giving instead of just receiving that it really is more blessed to give than to receive, and you might want to stay. This might be the wall the Lord would have you on long-term alongside of us.

That doesn't all go against what Matt was saying last week about some of you needing to go. I'm just saying it's easy to have that mentality. Especially those of you who are in college, man, plug in, be here, let us help you, and pour into this place. Leave this city, and leave this church, healthier than you found it. You have such a great opportunity to do this.

3. *We simply lack self-denial in our lives.* We just refuse to deny ourselves what may be even rightfully ours for the sake and the good of others. I'm going to get really specific with you, okay? One of the primary areas we do this, and the culture does this, which is another reason we should be different, is sex. Even those of you who are married, I just hear you talk about sex. You just use your spouse for it. If they don't

give it to you, you'll go find it somewhere else. Your mindset towards your spouse is not considering their interest. I'm not just talking to the men here. It's considering your own interest.

Those of you who are dating, it's the same thing. You don't love her. You're using her, which is why you're having sex with her. You do not love her. You're just using her to get some temporary comfort. You don't love him. You're just using him to get the hug from your dad you never got and the affirmation you feel like will be there and you realize never really is. It's not love. It's using one another. We use each other. It's not right.

Even more generally than that, one of the areas in our church I really see a lot of this happening, where we just fail and refuse to deny ourselves is just the area and the idea of Christian freedom. We've just grown up in a church we felt like was legalistic. Now we're here, and apparently we preach grace and others don't, which I don't think is all that true. I think mostly it has to do with our own hearts and mindsets when we were there. Some churches are legalistic.

That's fine, but we've swung the pendulum and said we're going to watch what we want to watch. We're going to use the language we want to use. We're going to drink what we want to drink, and we're going to do it without any sort of mindset toward the good of others. We don't even consider who we're in a conversation with because we're just so used to doing what we want to do and doing it under the banner of Christian freedom.

That's not Christian freedom. You're just as enslaved. Now you're only enslaved by your own desires instead of what someone else wants you to do. It's the same thing as legalism. It's just on the other ditch. We're refusing to deny ourselves, and in doing so we're doing the exact opposite of Philippians 2. We're becoming stumbling blocks to one another. We're violating each other in ways God says, "You ought not do that." We're failing to consider each other.

Maybe we're not using each other in that, but we're definitely creating a sense of oppression to their faith, if nothing else. We're pushing down, stunting their faith, by our lack of resolve to do what's best, not just for our own selves and what we want to do, but for what's good for others. Man, these are just some areas. I could keep going, but I hope this helps you as you wrestle this week, as you think, and as you begin to ask yourself, "What are some areas in my life where I am prone to use people, to oppress people?"

If you want to really get an idea of your own life personally, just follow the trail of your lust. Follow the trail of your greed, because whatever you're lusting after in your heart... For me, it's comfort. It's achievement. It's wanting a righteousness of my own. It's wanting to be the best at whatever I'm doing. Whatever it is for you, you will go after that, and you will use and do whatever you need to do to get it.

Again, it's so easy to look at Nehemiah 5 and go, "Oh my God, I cannot believe they did that." Well, that heart, as hopefully you now can consider, is in you, just like it's in me. Man, we're just as prone to do that. Do you really think it's that big of a step to do things you never thought you could do? Listen, some of you, I know you know it's not that big of a step, because you have just been riddled with shame and guilt. You don't need me helping you put a list together of how you use people. You know.

Even this week, your spring break was full of it, and you feel so guilty and so shameful that you don't feel like you could come to the Table of Grace. You don't feel like you could come to God, that he would just reject you outright, that there's no hope for you because you've done such despicable and horrible things. Friend, that's not true. The message of Christianity is there's room at the Table for even a guy like me, who has done sorts of things I just feel so guilty and shame-ridden over. People like you, those are the people whom God delights to save is what the Scriptures say.

Others of you have been on the receiving end of that abuse or oppression, and so you feel guilty, you feel dirty. Maybe you feel angry, so you just won't come to God either. Maybe for you, the Lord tonight, man, this would just be a moment in your life where you remember, "That was the night the Lord called me to himself in a way I thought he never could or would because of my past, because of my history, because of my present." Maybe the Lord would do that.

Paul says, "Listen, put to death what's earthly in you. Covetousness, greed, which is idolatry, put it to death, because if you don't, church, it's going to lead into us using one another to get what we want." It's amazing how this narrative is so relevant for us. Nehemiah 5. Let's look now. How does Nehemiah respond to this? This is the issue. Remember, they're still rebuilding the wall. They're still trying to be faithful and persevere in the work, so it's just a train wreck of epic proportions, like it normally is. This is Nehemiah's response when he hears this great outcry.

In verse 6, he says, "**I was very angry when I heard their outcry and these words.**" Nehemiah was right to be angry. He was angry, and he was right. It was a righteous anger. There is a righteous type of anger that glorifies God. Most of the anger you and I are familiar with is unrighteous. It's based on our kingdom, not on God's kingdom. It's based on our wants, not on God's wants. It's aligned with the lusts of our own flesh, not the desires of God's heart, but there is a type of anger that's righteous that does reflect the character of God.

God gets angry. Jesus got angry. He walked into the temple and he saw the greed and what it had done to the people of God and how it was influencing what was going on in the temple and he flipped over the

table and he kicked everybody out. He was angry about that. Let's not try to soften who he was. He was angry in a righteous way, and there's an anger that's righteous and right before the Lord.

In fact, honestly, there are circumstances and situations where you and I should be angry. If we're not angry, it should bring into question why. Just to use the example we've already talked about, the payday lending. If it doesn't make us angry that poor people and vulnerable people in our own church and community and neighborhood are being taken advantage of, it should bother us. That's not someone else's problem. That's contradictory to God's heart, and so as his people, we should be the tip of the spear in being reflective of his thoughts about that.

Graciously, winsomely, we should respond, which is what you see in Nehemiah in verse 7. It says, "**I took counsel with myself...**" He didn't fly off the handle. He didn't go into a fit of rage like I do, like some of you do. He didn't do that. He thought about himself, and I don't know what counseling with himself looks like exactly. I know what it looks like for me when I do it in the good times and in the bad.

He thought about his response, and then he responded. He says, "**...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...**" He brought everybody together. Lest you go, "Well, that doesn't sound biblical," let me tell you why he brought everybody together. The people he was supposed to go to get the problem solved, the ones who were going to be the judges, were the very people who were causing the problem.

He didn't go to them. He brought everybody to them and says, "Hey, listen. This is what's going on. You know it. Everybody knows it. Let's deal with this," and he confronted them. In verse 8, he said, "**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!**" He's just going, "It doesn't even make sense. The whole purpose of us coming back was to be brought back into the people of God, and now you're enslaving us once again."

He's just distraught about it. He's angry about it. Listen, his righteous anger about the injustice and oppression led him to lovingly confront them. Our anger about injustice and oppression shouldn't just give us certain feelings inside. It should eventually lead to us lovingly, graciously, winsomely confronting the injustice and sin and the oppression, especially within our own church.

There are a number of ways you can lovingly confront sin and oppression and injustice. You can do it through prayer. You can do it through conversation. If need be, you can do it through a public rebuke, just

like Nehemiah does here, but our righteous anger should lead to loving confrontation. Look at their response.

**"They were silent and could not find a word to say."** Oftentimes, an acknowledgment of guilt is most sincerely expressed through silence. This is actually why a lot of traditions in the church have a moment in their service for an acknowledgment of guilt where it's just silent, because we're just silenced before a holy God, knowing we're a sinful people. You see this often.

I saw it with my son this weekend. He's a great kid, but every now and again he disobeys. I don't want to throw Haddon under the bus, but he disobeys a lot. Sometimes he tells me the truth about it, and sometimes he doesn't. Sometimes when I'm there and see him do it, he doesn't know I'm there, like he did this weekend. I can't remember what he did, and I just said, "Hey, what happened, buddy?" He turned around, realized I was there. "Did you just do this?" No response, but he knew he was busted. He was acknowledging his guilt by his lack of response.

Maybe even tonight some of us, man, as we've thought through and we're thinking through, the wheels are turning about some of these things, just beginning toward repentance with an acknowledgment of your guilt, quit trying to make excuses and just acknowledge you're guilty. Don't try to justify yourself. You don't have to. Jesus has already done that for you, but just acknowledge your guilt before the Lord in silence.

That's what the people did, and Nehemiah said, **"The thing that you are doing is not good."** It's not godly. It's not righteous. **"Ought you not to walk in the fear of our God to prevent the taunts of the nations our enemies?"** I love here you begin to see the motive for Nehemiah confronting them, the motive for why Nehemiah was angry, and it's twofold.

First, the fear of God and what we learn here is the problem that was going on was these people had too much fear of people, accompanied by a desire to be just like them and bathing in the comforts of the flesh and too little fear of God. Nehemiah is going, "Don't you fear God?" Do you know what they're actually doing? This is remarkable. God had given the people the land. God said, "This is your land. I'm going to give it to you."

He promised it to Abraham and to his descendants. He had given the people the land. They had disobeyed, been kicked out. Now he's bringing them back in and giving it to them again. These people are actually taking the land and are not only acting like it's theirs, but then taking other people's land that's really God's and stealing it. It would be like me charging rent on you leasing out your spare bedroom. Does it make sense? This is God's land. He gave it to them for free, and now they're using it. He's saying, "Don't you fear God?"

The other motivation he has here is the reputation of God, that the nations were actually taunting the people of God. Whenever the church begins to act just like the world, do you know who the first people are to notice it? The world. They know even more than we do sometimes we're supposed to live in a countercultural way, and Nehemiah is saying, "Don't you see the name of God is being blasphemed in the nations because of your actions? You're not acting any different than them. They see it, they know it, and they're mocking our God."

Nehemiah is just going, "Man, fear the Lord, and the Lord's reputation is at stake here. This isn't good." That's why some of you won't confront, because you think confrontation is about you and whether or not this person is going to receive it or whether or not they're going to feel judged. There's a way to confront that's gracious and loving and winsome. I put those adjectives in there on purpose.

Confrontation is not about you. It's not about me. Confrontation is about God. It's about the fear of God. It's about the name and the reputation of God. So if God is real and if he really wants for his people, you and me, to live distinct from the world, if he really intends for our lives to be any different than those who are not Christians, then for you and me to see one another walking in injustice and oppression and sin and to not lovingly confront each other about it, it's the most unloving thing we could actually do. It really is.

That's why you see Nehemiah here. He's just loving these men well. Then in verse 10, he's a part of it. In some way, he's been a part of this. He says, **"Moreover, I and my brothers and my servants are lending them money and grain. Let us abandon this exacting of interest."** In some sense, he was a part of it. He wasn't squeaky clean here, or at least that's how it reads.

Then in verse 11, starting to lead them toward repentance, he says, **"Return to them this very day their fields, their vineyards, their olive orchards, and their houses, and the percentage of money, grain, wine, and oil that you have been exacting from them."** "Repent. You've acknowledged your guilt. Repent." What you see here is true repentance, again, is not just feeling bad about something you've done.

It's allowing that feeling, that sense of guilt, to compel you into, as much as you can, restoring and reconciling what has gone wrong. That's what you have here. As much as it's up to you and to me, whatever we've taken, we restore. Whatever we've broken, we reconcile as much as we can. That's what he's saying, and that's what true repentance looks like. He calls himself, and he calls the people and this great assembly to repentance, and it leads to radical obedience. Praise the Lord!

Verse 12 says, **"Then they said, 'We will restore these and require nothing from them. We will do as you say.' And I called the priests and made them swear to do as they had promised."** So the people

repented. He called the priests. Then he takes his pocket out, shakes out his pocket, and he says in verse 13, **"So may God shake out every man from his house and from his labor who does not keep this promise. So may he be shaken out and emptied.' And all the assembly said 'Amen' and praised the Lord."**

The great outcry of oppression and disunity was turned into worship. Nehemiah 5 is awesome, horrifying, wonderful, redeeming. Man, the cries of injustice have now turned into cries of worship as God has done his good work and brought his people to repentance. So the people cry out. They praise together. Then what I love about this is Nehemiah actually then sort of shows how he has been trying to be an example, imperfect as it may be in some of these things. This is verses 14 through 19, which is the rest of the chapter, and then we'll come to the Lord's Table.

He didn't just call them to repentance; he acknowledges his own guilt. He has been trying to lead out in some of these things. In verse 14, it says, **"Moreover, from the time that I was appointed to be their governor in the land of Judah...twelve years, neither I nor my brothers ate the food allowance of the governor."**

In other words, he was a royal appointee of the king, and that came with certain royal privileges. What he's saying is, "I didn't take those privileges. I emptied myself of those privileges. I made it my royal prerogative, even though I could, to not do that." It says, **"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."**

Nehemiah again acted in a countercultural way. Even though it was well within his privilege and his means legally to do that, he laid aside his royal privileges, and he did not take... This is what he says in verse 15: **"But I did not do so..."** Why? **"...because of the fear of God."** Man, do we fear God? **"I also persevered in the work on this wall, and we acquired no land, and all my servants were gathered there for the work. Moreover, there were at my table 150 men, Jews and officials, besides those who came to us from the nations that were around us."**

Again, this is what he's saying, "I could've gone to their table like the people before me did and taken their food from their table. Instead, I invited all of them to my table and gave them my food and let them keep theirs." It's just radical what he's saying here. He talks about the oxen and the sheep and the birds and the wine he gave them, and he says, **"Yet for all this I did not demand the food allowance of the governor, because the service was too heavy on this people."** He was considering their interest, not just his own.

Verse 19 says, "**Remember for my good, O my God, all that I have done for this people.**" "God, I'm doing this for you. Let this be pleasing. Let the words of my mouth, the meditations of my heart, the actions of my hands be pleasing to you." In an act of grace, Nehemiah, the royal appointee of the king laid aside his privileges for the sake of God's people.

Isn't there something that is just so magnetic about this to our souls? Isn't there something that's just so attractive to seeing a person in a position of power and authority who lays aside his rights? I don't care if you're a non-Christian or Christian. It doesn't matter. There's something about this in our souls that's drawn to it.

Even this week as the new pope, Pope Francis, has been elected... You know that, right? First Latino. Praise the Lord for that. He was elected from Argentina. Even this week as I've read the headlines about him, they've been making much of this aspect of who he seems to be in his character, because people are drawn to it.

This is one of the AP reports I read about the pope. It says he is the longtime archbishop of Buenos Aires, the son of a middle-class immigrant. He's known as a humble man who denied himself the luxuries that previous Buenos Aires cardinals enjoyed. He often rode the bus to work instead of the limo they gave him to ride. He cooked his own meals. He turned off the heat on the weekends when he's at his house so as to keep the bill down. He regularly visited the slums that ring Argentina's capital.

He was walking out of the hotel the day after he became pope. Do you know what he did? He carried his own bag, and he stopped and paid his hotel bill, which to you and me is like, "Yeah, we should just all do that." He's the pope. Do you think he's trying to send a message? I think he is. Do you know what? People are drawn to it. Christian, non-Christian alike. There's something about it that's so attractive. This is what Nehemiah was doing.

I wonder if and to what degree it has ever struck you as beautiful and stunning that this is the exact same thing, even more so, that Jesus Christ has done for every one of us. Jesus, the royal appointee of the Father, of the King of the universe, the real Head of the church, has done the exact opposite of what we have done. He did not come to be served. He came to serve.

Instead of seeking his own comfort and his own gain at our expense, he emptied himself so we who have sought our own comfort and gain at his expense could be brought to his Table. The spiritually famished could be fed, even though we have no reason to be fed. This is what Philippians 2 says. Let's read it again. You'll see the verses I left out at the beginning on purpose, but the motivation and means by which we're to live in a countercultural way is following after Jesus.

**"Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interest, but also to the interests of others." How? Why?**  
**"Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.**

**And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore, God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him..."** As we're about to sing. **"...the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."**

Listen to me. The only thing that could possibly empower us through our selfish ambition to push beyond the lust and the greed and the self-absorption of our flesh, the only thing that could possibly compel us to empty ourselves for one another is seeing how Jesus has emptied himself for us. When you see that, when your heart sees that, when it becomes more than just a theological truth to you, how can you do anything but turn and do the same as Jesus?

He emptied himself to redeem you and me. Now he's the King, and his enemies are a footstool under his feet, and he has a Table he has prepared for us, and we're invited. As we come to the Lord's Table, we're going to get to even foreshadow that by taking of his body and his blood represented in the elements. We're foreshadowing that we're going to be at the Table with him, because he has kicked open the way for us to be at his Table even though we have no reason to be there.

So Father, we thank you for this truth and just for your Son and all that he is and all that he has done for us. I pray and ask that as we come to the Table tonight, invited by you because of what your Son has done for us, that our hearts would be overjoyed. This isn't a time to be depressed. Lord, if we need to confess and repent of our sins, I pray that we would, but God, by your Spirit now as we come, would you just help our hearts to marvel and stand amazed at who your Son is and what he has done.

We thank you for Nehemiah and the picture in so many different ways this narrative of his life and the life of your people in this point in history is for us, but Lord, would you fix our minds and our hearts now on Jesus, the One who came and on our behalf made a way for us to be reconciled to you by emptying himself and substituting himself in our place for our sins. It's in his name we pray, amen.