

“The Greatest Threat to Your Calling” // Nehemiah 5:1–19 // Nehemiah # 5¹ // Su 8

Campus Reader: 5 Now there arose a great outcry of the people and of their wives against their Jewish brothers. 2 For there were those who said... “We are mortgaging our fields, our vineyards, and our houses to get grain because of the famine... 5 We are forcing our sons and our daughters to be slaves, and some of our daughters have already been enslaved, but it is not in our power to help it, for other men have our fields and our vineyards.”

6 I was very angry when I heard their outcry and these words.. and I brought charges against the nobles and the officials. I said to them, “You are exacting interest, each from his brother.” And I held a great assembly against them 8 and said to them, “We, as far as we are able, have bought back our Jewish brothers who have been sold to the nations, but you even sell your brothers that they may be sold to us! ...The thing that you are doing is not good. Ought you not to walk in the fear of our God to prevent the taunts of the nations our enemies? 11 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.” 12 Then they said, “We will restore these and require nothing from them. We will do as you say.” ... And all the assembly said “Amen” and praised the Lord. And the people did as they had promised.

14 Moreover, from the time that I was appointed to be their governor in the land of Judah... neither I nor my brothers ate the food

allowance of the governor. 15 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... But I did not do so, because of the fear of God. 17 Moreover, there were at my table 150 men, Jews and officials, besides those who came to us from the nations that were around us. 18 Now what was prepared at my expense for each day was one ox and six choice sheep and birds, and every ten days all kinds of wine in abundance. Yet for all this I did not demand the food allowance of the governor, because the service was too heavy on this people. 19 Remember for my good, O my God, all that I have done for this people.

Announcement

Happy Palm Sunday everybody, at all Summit Campuses. This Sunday officially begins the week that Christians traditionally call Holy Week, and I want to make sure you know what we’re doing as a church:

- On Good Friday (that’s *next* Friday, April 3), we will gather at several campuses to reflect on the sacrifice of Jesus. I’m going to walk us through Jesus’ time in the Garden of Gethsemane, leading us to ponder what he was thinking about in those final moments before he went to the cross, and we’re going to worship and take communion together. It will be a very different, and very powerful service. You’ll want to be there.
- Then on Easter, we’ll come together to celebrate the resurrection and the hope we have in him. Those services will start on Saturday and go through Sunday. You can find all the details—times, locations, and everything you need to know—at summitchurch.com/easter.

¹ Sources consulted: Eric Mason, *Nehemiah for You*, (London, UK: The Good Book Company, 2022); Paige Benton Brown, “[Fearing God in a Fallen World](#)”, June 28, 2014, The Gospel Coalition’s National Women’s Conference; Mark Driscoll,

“Humility and Hospitality (Nehemiah 5:14–19)”; Skip Heitzig, “[Guard against Internal Strife](#)”, May 25, 2005, Calvary Church. And others as noted throughout.

- BTW, to help prepare our hearts for all this, we're reflecting our way through the Gospel of Matthew together in the Daily Revival section of the Summit App. And listen, If you aren't doing the "Daily Revival" yet with us, you're really missing out. I use it every day--it's basically a specialized quiet time created for us as a church. It guides me in praying specific requests for our church, and our missionaries and church planters, and a bunch of personal requests that you turn in at your campuses. It's a great way to stay connected with each other and pray for each other every day. It's one of my favorite parts of every day.
- So, as we enter this week: take advantage of these things to prepare your hearts, and then show up next weekend with a seeking friend beside you! Everybody should invite somebody; nobody should come alone!

Introduction

OK, if you haven't turned there already, I want you to find **Nehemiah 5 in your Bibles**. If you remember from last week, Nehemiah and his people had been making real progress on the wall, but then, as we come into chapter 4, critics and haters like Sanballat and Tobiah really start to impede their progress--not only do they engage in outright sabotage, they spread lies and gossip which undermine everybody's confidence in Nehemiah as a leader. They were almost successful in stopping the work, but Nehemiah rallied the people to remember, redirect, and renew their commitment to the work.

In Nehemiah 5, a new problem surfaces—one that's far more dangerous than anything they dealt with in chapter 4. In chapter 4, the dangers came from the outside. In chapter 5, they come from the inside--and those internal threats are far more insidious than external ones.

Nehemiah explains in the first few verses of chapter 5 that a lot of Jewish families were really suffering because they're being exploited... by other *Jewish* families. Some of these families had financially gotten upside down through predatory loans. Some of them had to mortgage their land just to survive. A few, we learn in vs 5, even had to sell their children into indentured servanthood just to keep them from starving. And the most tragic thing about all this, Nehemiah says, is that none of this is happening at the hands of their enemies—this is not the work of Sanballat or Tobiah or the Samaritans or the Arabs--it's happening at the hands of their own fellow Jews.

And so, in chapter 5, Nehemiah confronts the Jewish families who are doing this wrong, and he labels it for what it is--SIN, "capital 'S'" Sin. He demands they cease this predatory selfishness, repay what they've taken and restore what's been lost.

And to their credit, vs 12, they do it! (This chapter has a happy ending.)

Nehemiah then points to his own personal example (vv 14–18) as a model for everybody else to emulate. He explains that unlike previous governors of Jerusalem, he refused to live in luxury while everyone around him suffered. He'd even declined to take advantage of a lot of the perks that would normally come with his job. "I've used this position of leader," Nehemiah explains in vs 16, "to SERVE you, not to be served BY you."

There are so many things we learn about godly leadership from this chapter that apply to you whether you are leading a business or a ministry or a family, or if you're simply trying to be a faithful steward over the calling God has put on your life.

Here they are, beginning in v 1:

1. The greatest threat to any work of God is not opposition from the outside but compromise on the inside (5:1)

- **Vs. 1** says, Now there arose a great outcry of the people and of their wives **against their Jewish brothers.**
- Last week I revealed to you some really transparent, vulnerable, deeply personal and incriminating information about myself--I told you I've been a lifelong Cowboys fan. And some of you were like, "You've been pastor here for nearly 25 years. How come we've never heard about that before?" It's because for as long as I have been pastor here, there's never been anything to brag about in that realm. If you're a Cowboys fan, you kind of keep that to yourself. The Cowboys haven't been anywhere close to a SuperBowl in more than 30 years! But, see, when I was in elementary school, in the days of Tom Landry and Roger Staubach and Tony Dorsett, the Cowboys were America's team. And when I graduated high school, we seemed unstoppable. Jimmy Johnson was our coach; Troy Aikman was our quarterback; Emmitt Smith our running back, and Michael Irvin our star wide receiver. We won the Super Bowl (and yes, I say 'we') for the 1992, 1993 and 1995 seasons!) And then, after 1995, the team basically disintegrated and hasn't made it to a SuperBowl since!

You say, "What happened? Did they lose a bunch of their star players?" No, analysts say there were no significant team changes in 1996. The main reason for their downfall, everyone says, was that Jerry and Jimmy couldn't get along. (Jerry Jones was the owner and Jimmy Johnson was the coach.)

- **Why is it that for some of the mightiest organizations,** it's not external enemies but internal problems that bring the downfall?

- The classic example of this is the Roman Empire, of course. Rome wasn't so much conquered from the outside, historians say, as it disintegrated on the inside.
- The same thing was happening in Nehemiah's Jerusalem. It's what happens in every great work of God. When our enemy can't beat us from the outside, he corrupts us from the inside. It's our greatest threat, Summit Church. It's your greatest threat. The greatest threat to the work of God in your life is not usually the attacking demons from the outside; it's your own sinful heart.
- It's usually not the NYT, or the documentary crews, or even the secular entertainment and bigwigs at Facebook or TikTok that pose the biggest threat to us. It's *internal* compromise.

Which leads me to #2...

2. Our first compromises are usually financial (5:2-5)

The specific nature of their compromises, we learn from vs 2, were sins of selfishness and exploitation: the richer Jews were using their money to advantage themselves. They engaged in predatory lending practices—legal, but predatory. They took advantage of people through unjust hiring policies. They manipulated the court system. And beyond all that, they just generally had a very self-interested, self-centered approach to life. They stayed isolated from suffering happening around them: "It's not affecting me or my family," they said, "so it's not *my* concern! It's the free market; that's just how the world works! Survival of the fittest!"

Let's just be clear, here, Summit: God regards economic injustice, or callousness toward others' suffering, as sin. And I point that out because there have been times throughout Christian history when Christians in power turned a blind eye to economic injustices as if they had no bearing on our relationship with God. As if the suffering around us is not our problem, as long as we're not the ones causing it.

- Even today, a lot of us feel isolated from the problems around us. We hear about people trapped in cycles of poverty and we think, “Well, that’s a bummer, but it’s not my problem.”
- Listen, according to Scripture, how we treat the poor and disadvantaged around us is a better indicator of our walk with God than is how much theology we know, how often we go to church, how much we pray, or how high we raise our hands during worship. “Is not this the fast that I choose,” says the Lord (you wanna do 21 DOPF? This is the one I most prefer is), “to loose the bonds of wickedness... to break every yoke? To share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?” (Isaiah 58:6–7)
- Bible scholars talk about **‘the quartet of the vulnerable,’** four vulnerable groups in every society, including ours—I’m not making this up; this is straight from the OT: the poor, the widow, the orphan, and the sojourner (immigrant). And God consistently says: “How you treat *them* is how I evaluate *you*.”² The Old Testament makes statements like **Prov 14:31**, “Whoever oppresses the poor insults his Maker.”
 - Notice, it’s not just “these things are wrong,” but these things are a personal offense to God. He takes it as a personal insult. They drive out God’s blessing.
 - **BTW, when I make this point, someone usually misinterprets me as saying I am endorsing big government welfare programs.** That’s not at all the case. The question of what the role the government has in all of this is a separate question. In fact, in this chapter you could argue that Nehemiah warns against government corruption as much as he does preach against the callousness of the rich. What I’m talking about here is the church’s responsibility to the poor around us.
- **The NT only intensifies this: James 5:1–6**, “The wages you failed to pay the workers... are crying out against you... You have lived on the earth in luxury...”
 - *The imagery here is striking.* Notice, the cries of the people you ignore act like a *prayer* prayed against you. God regards the groans of the poor as a prayer prayed against us.
 - God is like, “Here you are, on your knees, asking me to bless your family... but over here there’s these other prayers rising up against you from the selfish way you live your life, and those prayers are LOUDER to me than are prayers for blessing.”
- Here’s my question: What if God’s generosity toward you came in proportion to your generosity toward others? You see, the Bible teaches that principle: God gives grace and blessing to us in proportion to how we give it to others.
 - Now, to be clear: I’m not saying that the more you give the more righteous you become in God’s sight or that you earn acceptance in God’s sight. When you truly repent and embrace Jesus as Savior, you are gifted the full righteousness in Christ, and nothing can add to or take away from that, positionally, before the Father. What I’m talking about is your existential experience of God’s grace day to day; the manifestation of this blessing in your day to day affairs. *That* comes in proportion to your generosity.
 - You see, you can be fully secure in God’s grace *positionally*—and yet experience very little of it *practically*.
 - And **maybe that’s happening to you:** you are praying but just not experiencing God’s blessing, and maybe the issue is your ungenerous posture toward others.
- The Apostle Paul says quite clearly (and listen, I’m just reading straight from the text, so if you’re gonna send me an angry note

² Ex 22:21–24; Deut 10:18–19; Deut 24:14–15; Ps 146:7–9; Amos 5:11–12; Isaiah 1:17; Zech 7:9–10: “Thus says the Lord of hosts, “... Show kindness and mercy to

one another, do not oppress the widow, the fatherless, the sojourner, or the poor...”

on this, send one to him first), **“The one who sows sparingly will reap sparingly” (2 Cor 9:6).** And here he’s talking about giving. If you are sparing in your generosity, God will be sparing in his blessing.

- Here’s how Jesus expressed it: **Luke 6:38**, “Give, and it will be given to you. Good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap. For with the measure you use it will be measured back to you.”
 - I love that verse. The *first part* always made sense to me: **“Give and it will be given to you.”** But the *last part* always confused me: **“Good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap.”** I never knew what that meant and I was always too embarrassed to ask. I always thought it sounded like a little dance: Good measure (XX), pressed down (XX), running over in your lap...
 - **As far as I know, this wasn’t a Jewish wedding dance.** Jesus was using a farming analogy. In fact, it was supposed to be a little humorous. You see, if you were a harvester, and that was a common job in those days, the way you got paid is the land owner would let you keep the final basket of grain that you collected every day. All day long you would glean grain and load up these baskets with whatever you gleaned and carry them back to the barns. Well, these baskets full of grain got heavy, so the typical harvester would only fill his basket to like half or $\frac{2}{3}$ full at most so it wouldn’t be hard to carry. **Except** for that last basket, the one you got to keep. For that one, they would load it to the top, then press it down, shake it so it all settled, then fill it up again, so that you had in that last basket the maximum amount it could carry.
 - Does that make sense? When Jesus said that everyone would have chuckled because it was a known technique.
 - It kind of reminds me of this little **Mongolian restaurant** my friends and I would eat at when I was in seminary. You

paid \$7 and you got a bowl, and then you’d go to this raw bar where you could put whatever ingredients you wanted into that bowl, and then you’d take the bowl up to the chef so he can stir fry up your culinary masterpiece. \$7, one bowl--and they gave no other parameters. So you know what me and my poor, hungry, seminary friends did. We’d carefully line the bottom with thinly sliced meats, making sure there was no empty spaces, and then we’d mash it down, then put on a layer of vegetables, then mash that down and put on another layer of meat, and then another thin layer of vegetables and we’d do this until it was running over, and then you’d stack up chicken as high as you could and carefully walk over to the wok. By the time we were done it weighed like 9.5 lbs. The owner caught on to us... I know that because when we came back for 2nd semester there was a big sign up that said, “No bowl packing” and he stood there watching us. But our mentality was, “Look, I am allowed one bowl; I will get the maximum amount I can into that bowl.”

- The opposite of that is what the Dorito company does with its bag of chips--you pick it up in the gas station because it looks so full but then you get it back to your car and you open it up and this gigantic woosh of air comes out and I swear there ends up being like 4 Doritos total in there.
- The Doritos company is like, “Look, you paid for a BAG. What’s the least amount we can put in there and still have it qualify... *as a bag.*”

Here’s Jesus’ question: “Which of those two best describes your approach to generosity?” Are you the Doritos company, or are you like me and my friends at the Mongolian restaurant?

- Are you like, “OK, Jesus requires a bowl (think of that as a tithe)... *What’s the least amount I can put in there and have it still count...*”

as a bowl?" Because here's the deal: "With the measure you use it will be measured back to you."

- Or, to use Paul's words again: **those who sow sparingly will also reap sparingly. Those who sow abundantly will also reap abundantly.**

The greatest threat to any work of God is not opposition from the outside but compromise on the inside, and the first form that compromise usually takes is financial. That grieves the Holy Spirit of God and it drives out his presence and his blessing from whatever it is you're involved in.

Here are my questions:

- **Do you give generously, abundantly?** We always say "live sufficiently and give abundantly; save sufficiently, give abundantly." If you do that, then God will give generously (abundantly) to you in pursuit of your calling.
- **Do you isolate yourself from suffering around you, or do you run toward it?** If you isolate yourself from suffering around you, God will *isolate his blessing* from you.
 - A great way to apply this is to come to one of our **Serve Saturdays**. The whole point of Serve Saturdays is helping you get exposed to some of these groups so you're not isolating yourself from them. A substantial part of our budget goes to ministering to these groups, the quartet of the vulnerable, right here in our own city; this is a way you can acquaint yourselves with them.

- **Are you asking the Holy Spirit to open your eyes to suffering around you?** If so, then respond where he puts something in your path and God will respond to you when you pray.

3. True leadership is servanthood (5:14–18)

In vv 14–18, Nehemiah sets up a contrast between him and the other, more self-interested leaders. He says in **vs 15**, "**The governors who came before me, he said, laid heavy burdens on the people. They took a daily ration of forty shekels of silver... Meanwhile,**" he says, "**I am feeding 150 staff every day at my own expense and I'm not even using the stipend provided for me as governor.**"

True leadership, godly leadership, doesn't use those God has given you influence over to accomplish some personal goal; godly leadership pours itself out to serve them.

In what I do as your pastor, I often remind myself: God doesn't give churches to pastors; he gives pastors to churches: God hasn't given me this church to build up my ego or to allow me to accomplish my personal dreams. God has given me stewardship over this church so I could serve it and lay down my life for it.

(BTW, maybe you've been at a church where the opposite was the case: it became clear the pastor or leaders were using the church for his own ends. There were accusations of financial mismanagement; abuses of power. If that's you, I just want to say that I recognize how difficult it can be for you to even come back to a place like this. And you being here—we don't take that lightly; I know it's a huge step. I hope over time we can earn your trust; we do our best here to operate with transparency and integrity and we've set things up so

that neither I, nor any other leader here, is able to manipulate or misappropriate the church's resources.

That's how I'm applying it. **Here's my question for you:** In what God has given YOU stewardship over--are you leveraging it for your kingdom, or for his?

- If you make a bunch of money, praise God for that—make more, make 10x more if you can!— but are you using it primarily to enlarge your lifestyle or expand his kingdom? Have you used your prosperity to increase your standard of living or standard of giving?
- In whatever talents he's given you--have you even asked God what purposes he has for them in *his* kingdom?
- If you're a manager, a boss--Do you think of your employees primarily as cogs in a machine--instruments for profit? Or do you think of them as people God's given you stewardship over--for you to grow them and bless them and help them prosper?
- If you're a parent, what's your posture toward your children? Are you like, "You little budget-drainers are really messing up my lifestyle..." (I mean, it's like Ray Romano says, "Having children is like living in a frat house—nobody sleeps, everything's broken, and there's a lot of throwing up.") Do you live with bitterness that they are messing up your lifestyle? Or is your attitude, "What a privilege to have this gift of God entrusted to my care. What an honor to serve you and pour my life out to help you learn to thrive in God and the world"?
- If God has given you a **position of influence over others**, do you spend more time concentrating on what others think about you, or on what they think about him?
- Or how about this: If you **enter a season where God sets you aside or puts you on the shelf**--somebody else starts getting the attention or the recognition, are you ok with that?

- I've always been deeply convicted by the story of how John the Baptist responded when he entered a season where he started to fade in popularity--being put on the back-burner, so to speak.
- You see, there was a time in his life when John the Baptist was the most popular thing around--everybody was podcasting him, following him on social media--but then Jesus came along and Jesus started to get more attention than John. And some of John's followers said to him, "Are you ok with this? All these people who once sat in your audience are now going to hear him! Your crowds are way smaller now." And John said those famous words, "**He must increase, and I must decrease!**" (John 3:30). I thought, "Would I respond that way if that happened to me?" I've told you my story about praying for God to send revival to the Triangle... early on in my ministry here I'd set aside a day for prayer and fasting...
- After saying, "**He must increase, and I must decrease,**" John went on to say, "Look, I'm just like the best man in a wedding party." Traditionally, the role of the best man is to serve the groom and to make sure the wedding goes off without a hitch. He's kind of supposed to be invisible, to be honest. **Imagine** you are watching a wedding and the whole time, the best man is trying to hog attention for himself. In the rehearsal dinner he's always upstaging the groom—the groom tells a story, he tells a slightly better story; the groom makes a toast, he makes a longer one; and when the wedding party walks in to start the ceremony it's obvious he wants to be the center of attention. He's up there, hamming it up with the crowd, keeping people from taking in the solemnity of the moment. And then, at the most glorious part of the ceremony--that moment when the doors swing open and there she stands in all her resplendent glory. Everyone in the wedding starts cutting eyes back and forth between the bride and the groom. But then you notice the best man pops his head around the groom and starts making eyes at the bride, winking at

her... What's the groom going to do? He's going to turn around and punch him in the throat, right? *How dare you direct the attention of the BRIDE away from me?* Isn't that how Jesus feels when I focus more, in my position of influence, on what you think about me more than what you think about him? *As a pastor, I'm supposed to teach you to love, admire and depend on him, not me!*

- That's true for you, too in whatever area God's given you to serve in. God gives you what he gives you for the bride, not for yourself.
- And when it comes time to be set aside, or put on the back burner, you're ok with that. Because it's not about you, it's about him!

Again: Whatever he's given you stewardship over--are you using it primarily to serve yourself or serve Christ?

And that brings us to...

4. The fear of God is the heart of leadership (5:9, 15)

- **Twice in the passage Nehemiah connects** the way he leads with the fear of God.
 - "I could have used my position to serve myself," he says in **vs 15**, **"But I did not do so, because of the fear of God."**
 - In **vs 9** he urges the other leaders to do the right thing for the same reason: **"So I said, 'The thing that you are doing is not good. Ought you not to walk in the fear of our God...?'"**
 - **"Fear of God" doesn't mean you live terrified of God**, of course; it means you live in the awareness of how real he is; how awesome he is; and how his opinion is really the only one that matters. In fact, a better word in English, perhaps, is "awe."
- One of Nehemiah's secrets of success--the secret of success of any true Christian leader--is they live their life for an audience of

ONE. They are constantly aware that God is constantly present, that he sees it all, even the smallest things, and his opinion is the only one that matters.

- Being in awe of God what enables them to avoid captivity to everybody else's opinions; the fear of God is what enables them to resist the allure of money or compromise; the fear of God is what enables them not to be intimidated by people on the outside threatening them because they're like, "Well, God is bigger than all those people and God's opinion is the only one that really matters."
- **John Wesley** famously said, "The man who fears God needs to fear nothing else."
- For example, take the Apostle Paul. Have you ever thought, "How can you threaten a man like Paul?"
 - "Paul, if you don't shut up, we'll kill you." *"For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain..."*
 - "Fine. Then we won't kill you—we'll just ruin your reputation." *"No matter, in every way—whether in pretense or in truth—Christ is preached. Therein I rejoice."*
 - "Then... we'll put you in chains." *"Great—I'll just convert the guards you chain me to. Oh—and by the way, those in Caesar's household from the last place you chained me up send their greetings in Christ to you."*
 - "Then we'll throw you in a dungeon." *"Perfect. I've got some letters I've been meaning to write. You see, I'm confident that all things are working together for good to those of us who love God, who are called according to HIS purpose."*
- There is an incredible freedom that comes from fearing God alone.
- **This is how I want to be and by the way, if you pray for me, and I hope you do, I'd love for you to pray that for me, as your leader.** Over the years, I've told a story that captures how I want to be

with Jesus. It's a Summit classic; but I checked my notes, it's been at least six years. 😊

One of the many jobs I had in college was soccer coach for a middle school-aged boys' team. It was my first experience coaching and the team was pretty good--and the coaching was pretty spectacular, too, if I do say so myself. First season I'd ever coached and we went undefeated for our entire season. We made it all the way to the Harnett County semifinals (You say, "Well, that doesn't sound like a big deal"; it was to me, OK?), and we got paired up against this team we'd never played before. This team had this one exceptional player--the most skilled player we'd encountered all season, and--catch this detail--*she* was fantastic. My little 12 year old boys didn't have a category for this. She was like Magic Johnson with a soccer ball, slicing through the defense whenever she wanted and she kept getting shot after shot on goal. I knew there was no way we even had a chance at winning the game until we'd figured out a plan for her. So a few minutes into the 2nd half, I pulled our sweeper, David, out of the game, and I said, "David, I am sick of that girl getting all those shots on goal." He said, "Me too, Coach. I hate that girl." I said, "Well, David, let's not go there. But," and then I leaned in and got right in his face, "For the remainder of this game, that girl is your one assignment. No more shots on goal. I don't care what else is going on on the field, the only thing I want you focused on is stopping her. You understand me, David?" Yes sir, coach. "David, I don't care if the guy next to you bursts into flames--that's not your responsibility. *SHE* is your responsibility. Am I clear, David?" "Yes sir, coach." He turned to run back onto the field." I said, "David, do it all legally." We'd worked on this kind of stuff in practice; slide tackles and such.

A few minutes later—here she came down the right side of the field. She juked our left fullback and left him in the fetal position crying for his momma. She got around our stopper and now it's just her and the goalie and she pump fakes and he went diving and so now it's just her and a wide open net. Game over.

And then... out of nowhere... in my peripheral vision I see a blur, a little David-shaped missile coming right at her—and he just leveled her. Not a slide tackle. Like full-on football tackle. They both go down; there's a little mushroom cloud of dust where they were standing.

The whole field went silent... dumbfounded. Like, "Did that just happen? Then after a few seconds of silence, it just exploded into chaos. Everybody was mad. Their team was furious because they thought he'd tried to take out their star player. Our team was furious because they know they're going to get awarded a penalty kick and likely win the game off of it. The ref was mad, trying to decide if this kid needs a red card or a court date. Our parents were mad because they were like, "Did psycho-coach send in that kid to take that girl out?" I'm mad because I'm thinking, "I might be going to jail."

The only person on the whole field oblivious to all of this is David. He stands up slowly, helps her up like a gentleman... looks over at me... big grin...and gives me a thumbs up. And I'm like, "This just went from bad to worse for me."

I pull him off the field and say, "David—WHAT was that?! What's wrong with you, David? Where's your brain? Point to your brain, son." David very innocently points here. And then I said, "David, what were you thinking?"

And he looks at me, dead serious: “Coach... you told me to take her out... illegally.” I said, “Do it all legally.” He thought I’d said, Do it illegally.”

And she was fine. They got the penalty kick and won the game. And just to make the story more awesome, David is now grown up and he and his wife attend our Summit Apex campus. Somehow he still trusts my leadership, which is... amazing. (And concerning, about him.) But here’s what’s always been impressive to me about that story. Even at 12, David knew the rules of soccer well enough to know that he was going to get in trouble for doing that. He knew they’d get a penalty kick; he knew he might get a red card; he knew he might get grounded after the game. And yet, he didn’t care about any of that. In his little warped, 12-year-old brain, he had one consideration: “If Coach is happy with me, then all is well.”

We should, of course, teach our 12 year olds to make better decisions than that. But it’s a great attitude to have toward Jesus. **All that matters is if he’s happy.** The one who fears God need fear nothing else. Some of you need to start thinking about God that way. You need to live your life for an audience of one.

Of course, let me point out: Some of you find it impossible to think about God that way, because you’re so uncertain about how he feels about you. You constantly wonder if he’s angry with you; you feel like you’re never good enough to earn his approval and love. And that’s because you’ve never really grasped the heart of the gospel, at least not on a heart level. God doesn’t love or approve of you because you’re good enough; God gives his love freely as a gift. Christ purchased it for you; it’s not about what you do for him, but what he’s DONE for you. God doesn’t love you because you love him

enough. He loves you first, freely, as a gift, and you just love him in response.

The kind of fear that changes the world starts with simply embracing the love and acceptance God has given you as a gift.

- And once you’re assured of that... *What else would you have to be afraid of?* If God is for you, who can be against you?
- What could the future possibly present to me that my God couldn’t handle? I am convinced that nothing, Paul says, not height nor depth, not death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor anything in all creation can separate us from the love of God in Christ.
- There’s no need he’ll ignore; no obstacle he won’t overcome; no provision he won’t supply. *He who did not spare his own Son for us, will he not also with him freely give us all things?*
- If God is for me, he’ll supply whatever I need for my parenting or my marriage or help in my job or whatever else it is I need.

The fear of God is the heart of leadership, and that leads me to the last one...

VAMP

5. Jesus is the truer and greater Nehemiah (5:19)

- We see some amazing character traits in Nehemiah, things we can and should emulate.
- But there’s a hint in this chapter of someone even greater than Nehemiah; someone who would embody servant-leadership even more than Nehemiah did.
- You see, like Nehemiah, Jesus, the builder of the true Jerusalem left a position in the palace to come and rebuild our ruined city.

- And like Nehemiah, Jesus refused to exploit the people God had called him to serve. He never got rich during his time of service; he didn't even have a place to lay his head, he said.
- Unlike Nehemiah, however, Jesus did more than simply refuse to take from his people; Jesus actually laid down his life for his people, after they had betrayed him. He didn't just pay for the food of those around his table at his own expense, he provided his own flesh as the bread of life on the table.
- Nehemiah laid aside his rights as governor—Jesus laid aside his rights as the Son of God.
- Nehemiah came to Jerusalem riding on a horse; Jesus came on a donkey, the transportation of a servant. Nehemiah sat in a governor's chair and led a building campaign; Jesus took up a towel and washed his disciples' feet. Nehemiah used his position to lift burdens—Jesus used his position to carry them by taking them onto himself.
- What Nehemiah was in shadow, Jesus was in substance.
- Perhaps most striking of all: Nehemiah prayed, ch 5 vs 19, **"Remember me, O my God, for good, for all I have done for this people."** Jesus said, "Remember *them*, O my God, for good, because I suffered in their place."

Nehemiah was a good leader who refused to exploit his people—Jesus is the perfect leader who let himself be exploited for the people. That's the kind of leader we follow. He's not one who used us for his purposes, but one who laid down his life for ours. Hallelujah, what a Savior.

And because of that, it is a joy to fear him and him alone in all things, and I'm compelled to pour out my life for others the way he poured his out for me.

Is this how you're living? Is this the kind of leader you are?

Let's return to where we started: The greatest threat to God's work is not opposition from the outside but compromise on the inside. I just want to ask: Where might that be happening with you?

Could it be in some secret sin you refuse to confess? Maybe a lack of generosity? Is that primary sin of the TSC? A refusal to tithe? A fixation on only your needs or a callousness to suffering around us? Maybe an ungenerous spirit toward other brothers and sisters in the church expressed as jealousy, or a refusal to forgive, or a bitterness you hold to others that manifests in resentment and gossip?

SUMMIT: What if the greatest threat to the activity of God *here* was not attacks from the outside, but selfishness on the inside? (BTW, I actually considered this weekend just stopping Nehemiah and doing a message about Palm Sunday, but I thought in some ways, this is the perfect way to go into Holy Week. Are you prepared to follow him in holiness, and humility, and in pouring out your life to serve others?)

Where is God telling you to repent?

- In a moment our worship teams will come and we're gonna sing a song that begins by saying, "Search me and know my heart..." Why don't you allow God to search your heart right now and root out any places of compromise. Surrender them to him...