

# The Vision Threatened from Within

I love what Pastor Craig shared this morning and, you know, we really believe that the Lord has entrusted such a wonderful stewardship of truth here as a part of ANC. I just believe God is at work wanting us to be even more people of truth. The truth will set you free. But, more and more, people of grace as well. Pursuing those that maybe know the Lord and maybe don't know the Lord and maybe don't care about the Lord, but, I don't know about you, but I love to build that bridge to that person's heart. I love to build that bridge of grace over which the truth can travel. I love to reach out and convince people that it's never too late for them, as long as they're alive and they've got a free will and they've got the ability to choose, I say let's go after them and let's be a pursuing people, even as the Lord has pursued us. He is so good. He is so kind.

Well, as we continue on with this series in Nehemiah, before we pray, let's just highlight a couple of things. Today's focus is going to be in Nehemiah, chapter 5 verses 1-19. So, if you brought your Bible today, go ahead and open it up to that passage, or your iPhone or iPad or whatever device you have with you that helps you in that regard. And if none of those apply to you, just open your heart and listen and I pray that you'll be blessed and ministered to today.

The title of the message today is "The Vision Threatened from Within." Up until now, you know, there was plenty of threat on the outside. So often that's the case. But, I believe that our biggest tests often come from within. In other words, those who are family; those who are part of the church; those that we work with; maybe our neighbors, our friends. Those who we tend to have higher expectations for, or at least higher standards for, and there's great potential to be tested.

In this case, there was the threat from within.

Before we read today's first verse and go on from there in chapter 5, let's take a look back real quickly into the very first chapter of Nehemiah and be reminded of what I'm going to highlight as kind of like a backdrop for today's message. You'll recall that when Nehemiah first heard about what had happened in Jerusalem, that the walls had been torn down, broken down, and that the gates had been burned, you remember how he responded. He wept and he mourned for days. This deeply affected him. Now, keep that in mind as we go along

through chapter 5 today. I'm going to read the first verse and then we're going to pray. Nehemiah 5:1: *Now there arose a great outcry of the people and of their wives against their Jewish brothers.* The vision threatened from within. Let's pray.

Lord, we just thank You for this time. I just pray that every heart is opened and engaged as we get into Your word as we explore these verses, as we mine the riches out of these truths, and as we make personal application to our own lives, Lord. We don't want to just know the truth, we want to do the truth because we see that as we do both it will set us free the way You want us to be set free, so we can become all that You designed us to be. So, we commit this time to You, Lord. Multiply these moments. Make it all that You want it to be. Perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. In Jesus' name, amen.

There were four internal problems that are revealed early on [in this passage]. There was a food shortage. They were mortgaging their fields, their vineyards and homes to get grain for food. They were borrowing money and being charged interest, which according to the Jewish law was not permitted, so that was going against their Jewish understanding and law. They were borrowing money and being charged interest from Jewish brothers to pay property tax. They even went so far, in order to repay their creditors, they were being forced to sell their children into slavery. This was a very distressing situation. This was a crisis. How did Nehemiah respond?

Well, first, he was angry. But, to his credit, he did not react. In verse 6, we see he was angry. But, he didn't react. He took time, according to the verses that followed. Not much time, but he took time to consider how he was going to act, what kind of actions he was going to take. Please notice the kind of leader he was. He started with those that were most guilty right up front. In other words, an individual confrontation among those. He brought charges against the nobles and the officials before he brought it to the whole public. Then of course in verse 7, he held a great public assembly. The thing that really caught my attention in this—and I pray this won't be a limitation for you, it'll just spark you on and it'll stir the pot and you'll see more things than I'm even sharing—he exhorted them to make Jesus the reason. In other words, he exhorted them to live in the fear of God and thus avoid the reproach of their Gentile enemies. Isn't that interesting? There was a call for change, but it had more to do with motives first. It started with motives, which has to do with the fear of the Lord. Not just a change of behavior, trying to shame them into a change or tell them what to do and not really appeal to the right and wrong of the matter or really speaking to their spirit, so to

speak, but he went right to the right and wrong of the matter and right to their spirits and made his appeal to, "Let's make this about the fear of the Lord."

We see in verse 10, he lived his message. I'm going to be highlighting things as we go along, because that really stood out to me as a main theme of this whole chapter: What kind of a leader was Nehemiah? I don't know about you, but I was blessed, I was inspired, and I was motivated as I saw how he handled things in response to this crisis, this test, this *threat from within*. He lived his message. He made loans, true, as we see in verse 10. But, without charging interest.

In verse 11, his exhortation to make things right: *Return to them this very day their fields, their vineyards, their olive orchards, their houses, and the percentage of money, grain, wine, oil that you have been extracting from them, exacting from them*. In other words, return; let's make right. Let's make restitution. Let's not only return their property but let's return the interest. He made it all about what was right in God's sight and about the fear of the Lord, verse 9. I believe that's why they responded so greatly.

Let's pause and reflect. As we look at your outline at this point, pause and reflect. Why do you think the people responded immediately? Because they did. At first they were kind of speechless, but then they responded immediately to Nehemiah's exhortations. And they responded with the words: *We will restore these and require nothing from them. We will do as you say*, Verse 12. Isn't that amazing? No manipulation, no shame, no blame. He had influence. I believe it was because of the kind of leader he was and the kind of truth he was speaking. He made it all about what was right in God's sight and about the fear of the Lord, going back to verse 9. He lived his message and he was a true servant leader who really cared about the people.

Let's pause and reflect even more about that. Have you had leaders in your life who didn't set a good example? Who didn't make it about the fear of the Lord? Who made it about something else? Maybe they made it about loyalty to them, maybe they made it more about shame on you. Maybe it was something else. And then, how about us. What kind of leaders are we? Do we make it about our position? Just do what I say because I'm in this position? Well, why? Because I said so? What kind of influence do we have? If we only have the influence of our position, we don't have much influence. There are leaders in our midst and leaders that I know that don't have a position, per se, but have more influence than people who have a position. Isn't that interesting? I believe it's because of who they are, the

character that they have, their gifting matters, the life they live and the influence they carry, and the favor they have from God. But it's more than *just do it or else*, or *just do it because I said so*, or *just do it because I'm in charge, I'm the boss*. Oh, much more than that. And of course that is not the kind of leader that Nehemiah was. He lived his message and he walked in the fear of the Lord and he cared about the people and they knew it. But he wasn't going to just settle for this, there was more.

He called for a commitment and he wanted them to swear an oath that they would follow through. They said they would, but then he called in the priests, verse 12, and made the nobles and the officials swear that they would do what they had promised. But even then, even then we see in verse 13 that he continued to cultivate a "fear of the Lord" perspective for this oath. It wasn't a commitment to a commitment. It wasn't a promise to a promise. It was for the Lord. It was because of the Lord.

I just want to remind you what the fear of the Lord is; different ways we can describe it. But at the core, the fear of the Lord is taking Him very seriously. Revering Him and making Him the reason that we do what we do or not do, rather than taking ourselves too seriously. You know, if you take yourselves too seriously, that can often lead to pride. If we take others too seriously, that can lead to anger and idolatry. But when you take the Lord very seriously, you're already walking in humility and as you continue to, then more and more He becomes the reason. Not the other person, they may not be a very good reason. But He is the highest and best reason. So, Nehemiah was that kind of a man, he made Jesus, his God, the reason.

So, let's take a look at this. More insight into what kind of leader Nehemiah was. That's what I really want to communicate this morning and I hope you're hearing that loud and clear. Different things that we can emphasize in this chapter, but what really stands out to me is his leadership. I believe there are some practical lessons that we can learn and things that we can apply in our own lives as we examine our own lives in terms of what kind of leaders are we? –With or without a position, because leadership is all about influence at the core. More insight into the kind of leader Nehemiah was. He didn't use or abuse the system or the people. Rather, point #1, even as he served as governor for 12 years (you can see in your notes the details of that) he had some benefits for being governor, he had a food allowance. Isn't it interesting that he never used the food allowance? He could have. It wouldn't have been wrong to do that. It was provided for, but he didn't use it. He actually spent out of his own pocket and gave what he gave and did what he did out of his own pocket, not using the food allowance. Why? In contrast to other leaders that preceded him, other governors that

preceded him that did use and abuse the system. He didn't. Why? Because as we see in verses 14 and 15, he feared the Lord. He had a reverence for God that kept him from practicing, putting a heartless burden on his fellow Jews. He had wonderful leadership qualities. Compassion for those under him and refusal to use the privileges at the expense of others.

Now, I'm reminding you at this point where we started. Remember when we first heard about what had happened in Jerusalem with the walls and the gates. He wept for days. He mourned for days. I hope you haven't forgotten that. Now, that becomes very relevant as I stress this next point: He stayed on mission. Rebuilding the wall, not building a personal empire. It wasn't about him. It was about the Lord and what the Lord wanted to do. His heart was broken with compassion. He loved the Lord, he feared the Lord, he loved the people. He cared about the people. No wonder he had influence! When you love Jesus and you love the people, you're going to have influence because they will know you do and they will know you love the Lord and they'll love that you love and care about them and you're going to have influence. Now, may we have the fear of the Lord in that influence! Because the truth of the matter is that when people feel that you love them and care about them, you will have influence with them but may you have the fear of the Lord even in that so that you don't eventually give way to using them. Maybe it didn't start off that way, but it can end up that way. He stayed on mission.

So, let's review before we go on. He was a servant leader. He feared the Lord. He had love and compassion for the people. He stayed on mission.

The next point: He was willing to sacrifice. Who of the hundred and fifty Jews that were mentioned in that chapter that he was providing food and drink for on a daily basis, he bore the cost out of his pockets rather than putting demands on the people. He was willing to sacrifice. Then, finally, he was in touch with God. He prayed. He prayed that God would remember him; not fail to act on his behalf. Because of the concern that he had for the people. Seven times in his prayers, according to the book of Nehemiah, he asked God to "remember me with favor," he would pray. It's the same prayer that he voiced at the very end of the book of Nehemiah, in Nehemiah 13:31.

So, let's review. He was a servant leader. He feared the Lord. He cared about the people; love and compassion. He stayed on mission that God had invited him into and put on his heart. He was willing to sacrifice. He was in touch with God. And finally, there's great evidence that he

believed in the gift of favor. It was all about favor. Do you remember how he appealed to King Artaxerxes in chapter 2? He prayed ahead of time, he prayed and fasted before he approached. You may remember this, you didn't dare come into the king's presence in a downcast mood because you could get your head cut off. Because anything that might pull the king down or cause you to be a burden to him in any way, shape, or form could cost you your life. So, he prayed, he fasted, and then he went into the king's presence in chapter 2 of Nehemiah, and he was downcast and the king asked him why. But, even then as you'll recall, and you can look back there later, he made it about favor, "If I have found favor in your sight." That was his attitude. No presumption. No entitlement. Humility in the fear of the Lord, knowing that favor was a gift. It was going to be a gift if King Artaxerxes granted him permission and blessing to go to his homeland and rebuild the walls and replace the gates. It was going to be a gift.

So, let's examine our own hearts now. It's one thing to listen and consider these things and appreciate these things. I believe we have a church culture here at ANC Omaha that we would appreciate these things. We would rise to these things. In fact, for most of you, that's probably why you're here, that apparently you see these things among the leaders that are in our midst—and, may we all be leaders, position or not—but, I believe these things matter to you. Humility matters to you. The fear of the Lord matters to you. Love and compassion matters to you. Not using people matters to you. Blessing people matters to you. Sacrificial giving matters to you. Prayer matters to you. God's favor matters to you. I believe that's maybe for most why you're here, primarily.

But, how about our hearts? There's always more with the Lord and none of us have arrived and we need to take a look at these things as we live a lifestyle of humility in the fear of the Lord. Taking care of our hearts, forgiven, forgiving, and free to be all that He has created us to be. Let's pause for a moment and take a look at our hearts. Is there any area of our life now where we are giving to get? Even, serving to be served? Do we need to be needed? Now, we want to be used, we want to make a difference, that's good. For the glory of God, the benefit of others. But, do we need to be needed because that will make us feel better or more important? That is not pleasing to the Lord. That's in effect using that person. Is there any way we are using? Is there any expectation that we haven't surrendered to the Lord? Are we looking to that person to do what they're supposed to be doing according to God's word but they're not? Are you willing to forgive and let that go today and make it about your heart, whether they're obeying the Lord or not? Are you willing to take care of your heart; make it about your relationship with Him? That will free you to serve. That will free you to give. Even

if they're not serving you, even if they're not reciprocating. When we give, when we do, who are we doing it for? Are we doing it for that other person? The next time you get upset with them, they're not going to be a good enough reason for you to be able to continue to do it. The next time you have an unmet expectation, they're not going to be a good enough reason for you to continue to give and serve. Jesus wants to be the reason that we serve. Notice His life, His love, Who He is, Who He is in us. He came to serve, not to be served. That's Who He is. That's Who we are in Him. Serve. Does God want to purify the motives of our serving these days.

Let's take a look at that, this is between you and the Lord. Is Jesus the reason that you do what you do or not do. Is He the reason? Now, maybe it's a mixture. Maybe there's more than one reason. Maybe you love to give. Maybe you love to serve, you love to bless, you love to love and that's okay. I'm not trying to micromanage your motives. But, have we connected with the highest reason, is He worthy? Is the Lamb worthy of the reward of His suffering? Even if there's no response, even if there's no appreciation, even if there's no fruit, no outcome that's positive. Is He worthy? Is He worthy? There it is. There it is. Humble yourself in the sight of the Lord and He will lift you up and He will add significance to your life and He will define you and He will refine you and as you submit to Him, he will refine you more. But, you'll welcome it more because He is the reason and He is your life more and more and more.

Does God want to do any fine tuning in our hearts in this regard? Have we kind of gotten into a pattern or a habit of, "Maybe He isn't the reason. Maybe I'm giving to get. Maybe there's an outcome in mind." We're not justified even if it's an outcome He wants, by the way. We need to settle it at the extreme and even if the worst case scenario happens, if the desire that we're praying for and obeying for never happens, is He enough? Is He enough? Is He the One that satisfies? And then compassion. Could it be, could it be that God uses situations like this that Nehemiah is referring to. Could it be that as we humble ourselves, as we submit to the sovereignty of God, as we fear Him and as we make Him the reason, could it be that these hard situations—And it had to be hard, he got angry, it was hard. It had to be disappointing. It had to be so hard, this internal threat and strife. But, he realized, there's only one like the Lord. He did not expect people to be everything they're supposed to be. He called them up higher, he didn't settle for the status quo, but he knew that it wouldn't be helpful at all or pleasing to the Lord at all if he put his eyes on man and put his trust on man. So, his heart had to be broken at times, but I believe that is what God used to further refine him and give him more of a heart of compassion and have God's heart for the people. Have God's heart for

the people, which would be an accurate, humble assessment of reality of the imperfections of the people, of the tendencies of the people, but he didn't take it as an opportunity to indict them and judge them and shame them, but he had even more love and compassion for them and that gave him the ability and the influence to call them up higher and they responded immediately.

And he stayed on mission. Are you on mission? What is your mission? Do you know who you are? I pray increasingly so, you know who you are as a child of the King and if you're not, that's curable. You can become a son or a daughter of the King and get to know your Papa better and better and better and your Lord and Savior more and more and more and to know Him in a deeper and a fuller way as He is your delight. As you delight in Him. That's what He wants, that's what's pleasing to Him. So, do we see our life as living for Him, or are we responding to His invitation to us? The mission that He's invited us into. Have we made that transition in our lives that we're no longer living, we're not trying to be good for Him, we're not trying to be obedient for Him, we're not trying to live for Him. We're living in response to Him, we're living for Him, true motives of the heart motivated out of love, but we're not trying to accomplish anything. We're not trying to achieve anything. We know we already are the apple of His eye. We know we already are sons and daughters of the King. We know we already have been rescued and we're so grateful, we're so appreciative and the love just flows in response. The obedient love and the obedient humility and the obedient fear of the Lord flows in response to His great love for us. That puts our hearts in a position to respond to invitation into His mission that He's inviting us into.

That was true of Nehemiah. Nehemiah didn't come up with this idea. His heart was broken. He knew God was inviting him into this mission. He prayed about it, he fasted over it, and he made an appeal to the king. The king granted him favor and he stepped into the flow of God's mission to rebuild the walls and replace and repair the gates. Are you willing to sacrifice? If you only do what's convenient, or are you willing to have your faith, your life, your love, your time cost you something?

I believe that our culture is going to change. Both this culture and the United States of America. It's going to need to cost us something. That will mean different things for different people. But, we can't settle for the status quo. We can't just protect our own interests. Are we willing for our faith, our trust, our life, our love for Jesus to cost us something? Whether it's loving our wives, respecting our husbands, investing in our children, giving of our time and talents and gifts, finances here and around the city and around the world, in response to



Him? In response to Him? Not giving to get, but in response to Him? Are we willing for this life as a son or daughter of the king to cost us something? Nehemiah was willing for it to cost and he spent time in prayer to get God's heart. Evidence that he had God's heart is that he realized that it's all about favor. You can't do it on your own strength. You can't do anything, you can't go anywhere unless God says so. That's how I want to live. There's a lot that humanity can do but it doesn't last. I want to live on the grace of God, the power of God, the favor of God, and I don't want to try to make anything happen.

You know, the truth of it is when you put your heart in a position to receive and apply these things that we've been talking about today—servant heart, fear of the Lord, humility, staying on mission, sacrificial living, prayer and thanksgiving—you're putting your heart in a position to receive the reality of: *His yoke is easy. His burden is light.* You know what that means? Humility and meekness. Humility, agreeing with God. Meekness, not trying to control the outcome. A life of humility and meekness. The humility and meekness of the Lord positions your heart even in the midst of great challenges. To be amazed at the grace-giving ease and the grace-giving power and the grace-giving ability to go through difficult circumstances. His yoke is easy. His burden is light and you will find rest for your souls.

That's how I see Nehemiah. I didn't see him as an uptight leader, a controlling leader. I see him as a leader who knew who he was, knew what his assignment was, knew his God, knew what was right and wrong, knew the word of God. A man of integrity, a man of compassion, a man who feared the Lord, a man who's willing to make sacrifices, a man who's willing to love and serve and give. I believe He is inviting us, God is inviting us through this chapter to enter into a lifestyle of this kind.

I have an exhortation for you just as Nehemiah did for the nobles and the officials. My exhortation to you is to respond to the Lord, obviously, in light of these things that I have mentioned. First examining your heart and responding to Him. I would also encourage you if you need prayer or further input from somebody else, go to somebody that you know and trust and ask them for prayer. God doesn't want us to just be hearers of the word, but does also. That's where transformation happens. Hearing and doing. Acting on it, putting it into practice. Nothing would have changed if they wouldn't have responded to Nehemiah's exhortation. And nothing will change here unless you respond to God's exhortation through me, by His Spirit, to your heart. How will you respond? What will you do? What will it be? Respond to the Lord. Don't see it as between you and me, see it between you and Him.

Lord, add to the increase this time, this message, this series, this life. This inspiring life of Nehemiah. A servant leader, a man who walked in humility and the fear of the Lord. A man who loved people, a man who had compassion, a man who prayed, a man who was willing to have his life and even his position and his faith cost him something. Will we become like that? Will we become a people of that type? I pray that will be so. All for Your glory and for the benefit of others. In Jesus' name, amen.