



Walking in a Healthy and Holy Fear of God

Gregg Caruso // Nehemiah 5

INTRO

- A. Most of you have probably heard the phrase “cancel culture” in the last couple of years. I too have heard the phrase but hadn’t taken the time to try and understand it until recently.
1. Here’s a succinct definition: The idea that a person, or group, can be culturally minimized from having a prominent public platform or impact.
 2. What occurred to me is that there are words that Jesus followers, churches, and preachers sometimes use that when secular unchurched people hear them, they (almost) instantly cancel us.
 3. We don’t have the time today to mention every theological term, or concept, or doctrine that might sound strange or weird to an unchurched secular person but here are a few:
 - a. This first one is often viewed as rather humorous...Washed in the blood. This is an example of language that can freak people out. A mentor of mine used to recall that when he first heard that term used in church, it was very unsettling, he thought to himself, “When does THAT happen?”
 - b. Shame and guilt. I don’t know about you, but I sometimes get the sense that in our wider cultural context ALL shame and ALL guilt is to be rejected. I see that Scripture teaches that there is legitimate shame and illegitimate (or toxic) shame. It’s the same with guilt—all guilt is not necessarily bad.
 - 1) Legitimate shame exposes our depravity (like Adam and Eve in the Garden). Legit shame will “nudge us into the light of God’s presence” where legitimate guilt will then carry us home to true repentance.
 - 2) Illegitimate (or Toxic) Shame is an intrusion on our inherent dignity as image bearers of God. It is the awful experience of becoming aware that we are seen as deficient and undesirable by someone whom we hope will deeply enjoy us.¹
 - c. And a third Biblical concept that our culture may desire to cancel is what we find at the heart of Nehemiah 5...the fear of God.
 - 1) Like shame, there is a healthy and holy fear and there is an **unholy terror** that can masquerade as a healthy fear. From my perspective, we

¹ References to Legitimate and Illegitimate shame are from Dan Allender’s book *Wounded Heart* (pgs., 63, 65).

see this unholy terror mostly in abusive relationships that terrorizes women and children.

- 2) Today we will be talking about obtaining a healthy and holy fear of God, yet I need to also clearly state that if you are in a relationship that is abusive, either spiritually, emotionally, physically, or sexually—**you need to separate as quickly as you can**. And if our staff or elders can help you in any way, feel free to contact one of us. We will be discreet. Unholy fear is not okay.

B. So, with that said, let's turn our attention to "Walking in a Healthy and Holy Fear of God" from Nehemiah 5. There are nineteen verses in chapter five. We will see the key, or thesis statement, verse of the chapter in v. 9 (pretty much in the center of the chapter).

C. With this in mind, I will read Nehemiah 5, pray, and then we'll jump in: *"Now there was a great outcry of the people and of their wives against their Jewish brothers. ²For there were those who said, 'We, our sons and our daughters are many; therefore let us get grain that we may eat and live.'³ There were others who said, 'We are mortgaging our fields, our vineyards and our houses that we might get grain because of the famine.'⁴ Also there were those who said, 'We have borrowed money for the king's tax on our fields and our vineyards. ⁵Now our flesh is like the flesh of our brothers, our children like their children. Yet behold, we are forcing our sons and our daughters to be slaves, and some of our daughters are forced into bondage already, and we are helpless because our fields and vineyards belong to others.'⁶ Then I was very angry when I had heard their outcry and these words. ⁷I consulted with myself and contended with the nobles and the rulers and said to them, 'You are exacting usury, each from his brother!' Therefore, I held a great assembly against them. ⁸I said to them, 'We according to our ability have redeemed our Jewish brothers who were sold to the nations; now would you even sell your brothers that they may be sold to us?' Then they were silent and could not find a word to say. ⁹Again I said, 'The thing which you are doing is not good; should you not walk in the fear of our God because of the reproach of the nations, our enemies?¹⁰ And likewise I, my brothers and my servants are lending them money and grain. Please, let us leave off this usury. ¹¹Please, give back to them this very day their fields, their vineyards, their olive groves and their houses, also the hundredth part of the money and of the grain, the new wine and the oil that you are exacting from them.'¹² Then they said, 'We will give it back and will require nothing from them; we will do exactly as you say.'¹³ So I called the priests and took an oath from them that they would do according to this promise. ¹³I also shook out the front of my garment and said, 'Thus may God shake out every man from his house and from his possessions who does not fulfill this promise; even thus may he be shaken out and emptied.'¹⁴ And all the assembly said, 'Amen!' And they praised the Lord. Then the people did according to this promise.*

¹⁴Moreover, from the day that I was appointed to be their governor in the land of Judah, from the twentieth year to the thirty-second year of King Artaxerxes, for twelve years, neither I nor my kinsmen have eaten the governor's food allowance.¹⁵ But the former governors who were before me laid burdens on the people and took from them bread and wine besides forty shekels of silver; even their servants domineered the people. But I did not do so because of the fear of God.¹⁶ I also applied myself to the work on this wall; we

did not buy any land, and all my servants were gathered there for the work. ¹⁷ Moreover, there were at my table one hundred and fifty Jews and officials, besides those who came to us from the nations that were around us. ¹⁸ Now that which was prepared for each day was one ox and six choice sheep, also birds were prepared for me; and once in ten days all sorts of wine were furnished in abundance. Yet for all this I did not demand the governor's food allowance, because the servitude was heavy on this people. ¹⁹ Remember me, O my God, for good, according to all that I have done for this people." --Nehemiah 5

- D. [Again, this final verse/prayer of Nehemiah is a little iffy. It's not a prayer I would feel comfortable praying. For instance, looking back on my time as the IIP here at CCC, I could not and would not pray this prayer. My prayer would be more like, "In spite of me, Lord, your good hand has been upon us as a church." So again, let's notice Nehemiah's humanity...] [pray]

II. BODY

- A. We see from these verses that Nehemiah has his hands full. So far, he's been dealing with opposition from OUTSIDE the walls and now, here in chapter 5, he's dealing with some significant opposition from INSIDE the walls.
- B. What we find in this chapter is that **systemic oppression of the poor** has been built back into the social system and Nehemiah confronts it directly.
- C. Here are five observations that will help us understand what's going on here in chapter five:
1. V. 3 tells us there is a famine in the land, so the crops were failing, and the livestock were severely undernourished.
 2. V. 4 tells us that that there was a tax payable to the king.
 3. There were upper class Jewish people who were offering what amounts to second and third mortgages at high interest rates.
 4. V. 5 tells us the upper class was forcing their own countrymen to sell their children into debt slavery, and they were (apparently) selling their own people to Gentiles.
 5. So, in addition to trying to get the wall built, the people were suffering because of the famine, the tax, and their own self-serving **and** oppressive practices toward their own people. Many had to mortgage their homes, fields, and in some cases, their own children to get by.
 - a. The implication (in the middle of v. 5) is that some of their daughters became sex slaves.
 - b. All of this was a VERY serious problem. When Neh saw what was going on he became "very angry" (v. 6). [The Hebrew word means to burn with anger.] I suspect Neh already knew this was going on but was waiting for the right time to address it. [Leadership Principle?]

6. Nehemiah seems to have been a wealthy man (The role of “cupbearer to the king was probably more like the Food and Beverage Manager and Head of Security for the King—he was most likely very well compensated).
 - a. We see in v. 10 that Neh lent the people money and grain.
 - b. In vs. 14-19 we see Neh’s example:
 - 1) V. 14: He did not take the governor’s food allowance, which would have come in the form of taxation from the people.
 - 2) V. 16 He did not buy-up land, which means he did not take advantage of those who struggled because of the famine and the various forms of oppression.
 - 3) Vs. 17-18: Neh apparently had a minimum of 150 people over for dinner every night for several years, which he paid for out of his own pocket.
 - 4) I already told you what I think is going on in v. 19...
- D. Again, the main point of the chapter seems to be v. 9, which is at the chapter’s center: *“Again I said, ‘The thing which you are doing is not good; should you not walk in the fear of our God because of the reproach of the nations, our enemies?’”* --Nehemiah 5:9
- E. What we need is a good definition of a healthy and holy fear of God...
 1. One pastor theologian constructed an excellent definition using several verses from Proverbs: “According to the book of Proverbs, ‘the fear of the Lord’ is a continual (Prov. 23:17), humble, and faithful submission to [God], which compels one to hate evil (Prov. 8:13) and turn away from it (Prov. 16:6) and brings with it rewards better than all earthly treasures (Prov. 15:16)—the rewards of a love for and a knowledge of God (Prov. 1:29; 2:5; 9:10; 15:33), and long life (Prov. 10:27; 14:27a; 19:23a), confidence (Prov. 14:26), satisfaction, and protection (Prov. 19:23).” —Douglas Sean O’Donnell ²
 2. Well regarded author (the late) Jerry Bridges wrote a book entitled *The Joy of Fearing God*.³ In the book he attempts to unpack the paradox⁴ that having a healthy and holy fear of God is not something to avoid but embrace. Bridges says that A healthy and holy fear of God is an important key to a joyful, fulfilling, and genuine intimacy with God. (I would add that in a marriage both spouses are to have a healthy and holy fear of the covenant they have made—in addition to their healthy and holy fear of God.)
- F. Neh 5 identifies (at least) three ways to actively walk in a healthy and holy fear of God:
 1. The fear of the Lord means that we commit to practicing biblical justice—caring for the poor with a willingness to speak truth to power.

² *The Beginning and End of Wisdom*, Crossway 2011: 37.

³ WaterBrook Press, new edition 2004.

⁴ Remember, a paradox is a seeming contradiction, meaning at first glance it appears to be contradictory, yet upon further consideration it is not.

2. The fear of the Lord means that we commit to practicing biblical conflict resolution.
3. The fear of the Lord lives with the knowledge that our personal integrity is being observed.

G. We will look at each one individually:

1. The fear of the Lord means that we commit to practicing biblical justice—caring for the poor with a willingness to speak truth to power.
 - a. One of the most often quoted verses in the Bible is Micah 6:8: *“He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”* --Micah 6:8
 - b. We must ask, “What does it mean to ‘do justice’”?
 - 1) To “do justice” means giving people what they are due, whether it is protection, or care, or punishment—regardless of social, racial, gender, or economic status.⁵ [Caveat: While this statement is true, I would add that **if**, in this country, we have built social and political systems that include systemic racism and systemic sexism, we must acknowledge that people of color and women in general have not had the same access to resources and opportunities—and these injustices must be **lovingly and persistently** addressed.]
 - 2) My definition of justice is simpler: Seeking the highest good in every situation.
 - 3) In his Montgomery Bus Boycott speech in 1955 Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said: “Justice is love correcting that which revolts against love.” --Dr. Martin Luther King ⁶
 - c. In my studies, I have found that seeking justice is at the very heart of the reason that Jesus was willing to leave the perfection and majesty of heaven to come into our rubble. We see this in Luke 4:18-19, which is actually a quote from Isaiah 61—and Jesus is launching His public ministry.
 - 1) *“The Spirit of the Lord is upon ME, because HE anointed ME to preach the gospel to the poor. HE has sent ME to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, TO set free those who are oppressed, ¹⁹ TO proclaim the favorable year of the Lord..”* --Luke 4:18-19
 - 2) As Jesus concludes His earthly ministry, this passage becomes the calling of the Christ-follower and the Church. I would suggest it is **summarized** in the Great Commission.
 - a) Preach the gospel to the poor: [Gk. ptōssō] Literally meaning to crouch, cower. It refers to the beggarly poor.

⁵ Adapted from Tim Keller, *Generous Justice*.

⁶ Montgomery Bus Boycott speech, delivered at Holt Street Baptist Church on Dec. 5, 1955.

- i. While I understand that up-and-outers are in need of the gospel just as much as down-and-outers, there seems to be a priority on those who have experienced oppression.
 - ii. This is what we see in Neh 5, the wealthy Jews needed spiritual renewal just as much as the poor do, yet Neh addressed the systemic issues related to the poor being oppressed.
 - b) Proclaim release to the captives: [Gk. aichmalōtos] Literally meaning to be taken or conquered by a spear. The idea is that their captivity has been thrust (or imposed) upon them.
 - c) Recovery of site to the blind: [Gk. tuphlos] Derived from a word (tuphlóo), which means to envelop with smoke, so as not to be able to see clearly.
 - d) Set free those who are oppressed: [Gk. thrauō] Literally means to break in pieces. (The Scarecrow in The Wizard of Oz)
 - e) Proclaim the favorable year of the Lord: Year of Jubilee -- The name of the semi-centennial festival of the Jewish people, which lasted for a year. During this year all debts were canceled and all who were slaves were set free (Lev. 25:39-54). What Luke 4:19 is saying that upon acceptance of Jesus Christ and His message, our (sin) debt is cancelled and we are freed from enslavement to our sinful nature.
2. The fear of the Lord means that we commit to practicing biblical conflict resolution.
- a. I noticed some commentators compare how Neh handled the conflict in chapter 5 as being similar to the church discipline process in Matt. 18.
 - 1) Nehemiah confronted the “nobles and rulers” in private first. The text doesn’t tell us exactly how the group responded...
 - 2) Then he held a “great assembly” (v. 7)
 - 3) BTW – commentators are about 50:50 as to whether or not Neh sinned in vs. 6-7a: *“Then I was very angry when I had heard their outcry and these words. ⁷ I consulted with myself...”* --Nehemiah 5:6-7
 - a) There’s no doubt that Neh was a fiery guy.
 - b) We’ll see in the last chapter (13) that Neh certainly had an anger problem.
 - b. A review of the Matthew 18 church conflict resolution process:
 - 1) When we talk about the Matt 18 church discipline process we usually just pull out vs. 15-17: *“If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother. ¹⁶ But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that by the mouth of*

two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed. ¹⁷ If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.” --Matthew 18:15-17

- 2) It is important to see that what ties the whole chapter together is God's concern for the spiritually needy, which includes: The powerless, those victimized by sin, and people who have sinned against others and not repented.
 - 3) With that being said, the four stages of conflict resolution (or church discipline) in Matt 18:15-17 are pretty straightforward. There is:
 - a) Loving one-on-one inquiry (v. 15). This should almost always start with a question—like, “Help me understand...?”
 - b) Loving concern for truth by 2 or 3 witnesses – “*that every word (RHEMA) may be confirmed*” (v. 16).
 - c) Loving communication and a restructuring of the relationship as needed (v. 17).
3. The fear of the Lord lives with the knowledge that our personal integrity is being observed.
- a. The less observable integrity we have, the more quickly we will be cancelled. Persecution is a given, but we don't have to take out a gun and shoot ourselves in the foot!
 - b. And let me say that personal and observable integrity is not about having it all together. It's about a humble acknowledgement and authentic repentance WHEN we blow it.
 - c. The final 6 verses on Neh 5 are laying out what it means to be both integrous AND generous.
 - 1) He and his family (“*kinsman*”) did not tax the people's food supply.
 - 2) They did not dominate the people they were governing.
 - 3) Neh, in v. 15 states the primary reason for his integrity and generosity was “*because of the fear of God.*”
 - 4) He led from the front. He and his servants led by example in the rebuilding of the wall.
 - 5) Even though he was (apparently) wealthy, he did not buy up land and impose financial hardship on the people. Instead, he advocated for the returning exiles to have their own land, crops, and households that were safe from the various forms of extortion.
 - 6) It appears that he fed 150 people every night out of his own pocket. Or, like a good politician, he raised the money.

- d. These are acts of both integrity and generosity that become a model for the Church to follow.
- e. I have been so saddened by the seemingly endless news reports of Evangelical pastors and leaders using and abusing sincere Christians for their own financial gain and sexual pleasure.
- f. The best way for us to fight back is to keep Jesus and the gospel of grace at the center of all that we **desire** and all that we **do**.

III. CONCLUSION

- A. As we land the plane, consider this: someone has said that in all conflict, Satan tends to remain neutral and supply ammunition to both sides. Our adversary, the devil, likes to divide God's people, or divide a nation, by getting them to wrong one another and then not to deal biblically (or honestly) with the problems that arise. We must be committed to walking in a healthy and holy fear of God, resolving inevitable conflicts God's way, and committed to pursuing integrity as well as generosity to the poor.
- B. In closing, here is the essence of the gospel...
 - Our sinfulness is our biggest problem (not how we've been wronged)
 - Forgiveness (not achievement) is our greatest need
 - Repentance (not willpower) is the dynamic in all real change
- C. The Christian life is a life lived in a healthy and holy tension; we are humble because we know we are sinners, and we are bold because we know we are loved.
- D. Nehemiah came out of the palace to offer a broken and dispirited people a way forward and Jesus came out of heaven to offer you and me the gift of salvation.
 1. Will you acknowledge your sinfulness?
 2. Will you receive forgiveness?
 3. Will you walk in ongoing repentance?