

## “The Greatest Threat to Your Calling” // Nehemiah 5:1–19 // Nehemiah # 5<sup>1</sup> //

**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. As we move into this week Christians traditionally call Holy Week, 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. You’ll want to be there.

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

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](http://summitchurch.com/easter).

By the way, to help prepare our hearts for all this, we're reading and reflecting our way through the Gospel of Matthew together in the *Daily Revival* section of the Summit app. Listen, if you aren't doing the "Daily Revival" with us on the Summit app yet, 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 campus. It's a great way to just stay connected with each other and pray for each other. It's one of my favorite parts of the 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 tried to impede their progress--not only did they engage in outright sabotage, they spread lies and gossip which undermined everybody's confidence in Nehemiah as a leader. They were almost successful, but Nehemiah rallied the people by leading them 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 come from the outside. In chapter 5, they come from the inside, and those internal threats are far more dangerous 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 have financially gotten upside down through predatory loans. Some of the people working on the wall 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 the wrong, and he labels it for what it is--capital "S" sin. He demands they cease this kind of 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, and they apply to you whether you formally lead a church or a business or a family, or if you're simply trying to be a faithful steward over whatever calling God has put on your life.

Here they are, beginning in **v 1: Now there arose a great outcry of the people and of their wives against their Jewish brothers.:**

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

- Last week I revealed to you some really transparent, sensitive, really vulnerable information about myself--I revealed that 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 Super Bowl 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 Super Bowl 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 most famous example of this was the Roman Empire, of course. Rome wasn't so much conquered from the outside as it fell apart from 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: rich Jews were using their money to advantage themselves. They engaged in predatory lending practices—legal but predatory—or unjust hiring policies. They manipulated the court system. And beyond 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 their relationship with God.

- 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, “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*.”<sup>2</sup>
- It 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.
- 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 you and your family, but there’s these other prayers over here rising up against you from the selfish way you live your life, and those prayers are LOUDER than your prayers for blessing. “
- The **Apostle John** says that selfishness or callousness to the suffering of others is the evidence of the total absence of God’s presence from our lives: **1 John 3:17**, “If anyone has the world’s goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart... how does God’s love abide in him?”
- 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.
  - 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 complete in Christ, and nothing can add to or take away from that positionally

<sup>2</sup> 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...”

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 on this, send one to him first), **"The one who sows sparingly will reap sparingly" (2 Cor 9:6)**. Or 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 they 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 raw bar and you could put whatever ingredients you wanted from this raw bar into the bowl, then take it up to the chef so he could prepare your culinary masterpiece. \$7, one bowl—and they gave no other parameters. So you know what me and my poor 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 that 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 bag. What's the least amount we can put in there and still qualify it 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 “For with the measure you use it will be measured back to you.”
- Or, to use Paul’s words again: those who sow sparingly, reap sparingly.

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. And it 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 didn’t even use the stipend provided for me as governor.*”

True leadership, godly leadership, doesn’t *use* the people God has given you influence over to accomplish some personal goal; it pours itself out to serve them. In what I do, I often remind myself: God doesn’t give churches to pastors; he gives pastors to churches: God hasn’t given me this church primarily to build up my ego or allow me to accomplish my financial dreams. God has given me stewardship over this church so I could serve it, bless it, and help it prosper and lay down my life for it.

BTW, maybe you've been at a church where it became clear the pastor or leaders were using the church for their 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 whatever 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?
- For whatever talents he's given you--have you asked 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, 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?
- How about this: If you enter a season where God sets you aside or puts you on the shelf--somebody else starts getting the recognition or the credit, 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 stop 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 leading this way 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; it means you live aware of how real he is; how awesome he is; and how his opinion is really the only one that matters. A better word, 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.
- That's 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."
  - ~~There's a great example of this from church history.~~ In 400 A.D., John Chrysostom was the bishop of Constantinople, which had been established as the new capital of the Roman empire. ~~"Chrysostom" was actually his nickname, and it means literally "golden mouthed."~~ He was an incredible preacher, known for the clarity and power of his sermons. The problem was he was constantly calling out the sins of the Emperor and other Roman nobility, and the Emperor got sick of it. So he ordered him to change his sermons. You know, "*Preach happy sermons about living our best lives now and how God wants us to dominate and stop preaching against my sexual choices and what I'm doing with my money.*" Chrysostom wouldn't stop, however, so the Emperor threatened to banish him if he wouldn't stop. Chrysostom said, "*You cannot banish me for this world is my father's house. You cannot take away my treasure for it is in heaven. You cannot leave me without friends for I have a friend in Heaven you cannot separate me from. You cannot kill me since my life is hidden with Christ and God. I defy you; there is nothing you can do to harm me.*" That's a free place to be and a great place to lead from. *The one who fears God need fear nothing else!*
    - If I fear God and know that he is for me, it doesn't matter what others say about me. It doesn't matter how you threaten me!
    - In him I have the absolute approval of the only one whose opinion really matters.

- ~~The Apostle Paul was the same way. I mean—~~For example, the Apostle Paul: How do 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.” *In every way—whether in pretense or in truth—Christ is preached. And in that, I rejoice.”*
- “Then... we’ll put you in chains.” *“Great—I’ll just convert the guards. 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.”*
- There is an incredible freedom that comes from fearing God alone.
- **It’s 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 juke 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. 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.

**Now, let me point out: Some of you find it impossible to think about God that way, however,** because you’re so uncertain in your relationship with God. You fear God the other way--you’re afraid of him, unsure of how he feels about you because you feel you’re never good enough. 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 and approve of you because you’re good enough; he gives his love freely as a gift, if you just accept it in Christ. He doesn’t love you because you love him enough. He loves you first, freely, as a gift, and you just love him in response.

Some of you feel overwhelmed that you don’t love God enough; it’s not about how much you love God; it’s simply receiving how much he loves you.

- And once you’ve done that... *What else would you have to be afraid of?* If God is for you, who can be against you?
- Is there some obstacle, some problem, you’re worried about in the future? 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, what need he’ll supply what I need regarding wisdom in my parenting 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...*

## 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 who would show us servant-leadership even more than Nehemiah did.
- Like Nehemiah, Jesus, the builder of the true Jerusalem left a position in the palace to come and rebuild our ruined city.
- 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. He didn't just pay for their food at his own expense, he provided his own flesh as the bread of life.
- 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. What Nehemiah was in shadow, Jesus was in substance. Nehemiah went on to sit in the governor's chair and lead 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.
- 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? 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 selfishness on our part? (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. Where are you unlike that servant who rode in on the donkey to wash feet and lay down his life? Is that what you're doing?)

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, "Seek me and know my heart..." Why don't you allow God to seek your heart right now and root out the places of compromise. Surrender them to him...