

Pleasing Dad

Nehemiah 5

Which of these pictures is closer to how you picture God?

Earlier on we sang 'Amazing Grace.' God's grace is amazing. 'Grace' means the undeserved gift neither asked for nor earned. And God gives that to us in all sorts of ways.

The grace of giving us Jesus Christ, His only Son. Living the perfect life and saying, 'God, count this innocence as belonging to my friends.' Dying on a cross and saying, 'God, put all my friends' sins on me and I'll die for them.' Rising to life again and saying, 'God, raise my friends to life, innocent and free, right now and beyond their deaths too.'

But how can 'grace... teach my heart to *fear*? And how does learning to fear lead to your 'fears being relieved?' Martin Luther explained it like this: What God does is to swap one fear of Him - the fear of God as a judge who's going to punish and condemn you - for a way better fear of Him - the fear of God as a Father who absolutely loves you and that you want to respect and honour and bring smiles to with your life.

And that change happens when you're adopted into God's family through faith in Jesus Christ. Receiving the grace of His life, death and resurrection for you; you stop ignoring God or fearing Him as a judge, but have instead this healthy, loving fear of Him as a Father. Jesus changes the picture of God. And as the picture changes, so does the fear.

Paige Brown describes giving her six year old daughter a big hug after a dance recital. She told her daughter, 'Baby, everybody though you were great!' Her daughter looked at her seriously and said, 'But what did *you* think?' *That's* what fearing God as a Father is like - not caring what anyone else thinks, just whether Daddy likes the way you dance.

Proverbs 1:7 tells us, 'The fear of the LORD is the beginning of right understanding.' It's only when you fear God that you get your thinking and your actions straight.

Nehemiah was a man who spoke of and lived in the *fear* of God. Back in Nehemiah 1:11, in his prayers he asked God to hear him and others who 'delight in *fearing* your name.' (The NIV says *revere*, but the Hebrew is actually stronger - it's fear.)

Then in Nehemiah 5, which we read this morning, in v.9 he calls out some people whose actions show they're not *fearing* God - they don't care what He thinks. And in v.15, he talks about how he acts very differently out of his own *fear* of God. Nehemiah wants to please his Father. And he wants the rest of God's family to fear God as Father too, to get their thinking and actions straight. What he teaches us is that this means changing our posture towards other people in a couple of ways.

Knowing and fearing God means that you care more about how other people are treated than about winning. Especially, this means God's family looking out for each other well.

Our Daniel loves a board game - and his current favourite is Monopoly Ultimate Banking. As you know, very few people have actually ever had the patience to finish a game of Monopoly. But if you see it through, you get to a point where those with less money have to sell up their property to the rich one who's winning to stay in the game, until finally, you're out of the game when you've had to sell everything and you're still in debt.

The world works a lot like Monopoly. It's fine to be friends and help each other out, but at the end of the day, everyone is trying to get themselves ahead as much as they can, even if that means the people next to them lose out.

Dan loves the game. He likes to see his collection of properties grow as mine shrinks! And because I'm his Dad, I love Dan. Because he's a six year old boy that I don't want to mercilessly wipe out of the game, if it looks like I might win, where I'm able to do something to keep him in the game, I will.

God loves all His kids. And in the Old Testament, He'd actually given His family, the people of Israel, some rules to make sure that in His family, everyone could stay in the game. Laws in Exodus and Leviticus about not charging each other interest and about returning property before people got into severe debt and poverty.

Then He sent messages through the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah where God said - 'You're not keeping these laws, even though you promised you would - now put that right, or you'll be exiled.' Which, in the end, they were. Because they didn't fear God. They didn't want to please Dad or care about how others were treated. Not as much as they wanted to please themselves.

And in v.9, Nehemiah says, 'What you are doing is not right. Shouldn't you walk in the fear of our God?...' That would mean sacrificing what more you could have to stop your neighbour being bankrupted or enslaved - being knocked out of the game - something that was happening once again in Jerusalem, vv.1-5 tells us. A life knowing and fearing God as Father looks more like Brownlee than Monopoly.

Two years ago, in a World Triathlon Series event, Alisdair Brownlee saw his brother Jonny struggling, on the point of collapse. And he gave up his chance to win the race to hold up his brother and keep him in it, helping him to cross the line (in second place, actually). That kind of attention and sacrifice to keep collapsing brothers and sisters in the game is how God wants it to work in His family.

Knowing and fearing God also means that you care less about what other people think of you than about obeying God. Because he wants to please God with his life, Nehemiah doesn't care about his reputation or his rights.

In vv.6-13 he publicly challenges the people who wrote the cheques for his wall building project. The city leaders; the ones with authority and money. He doesn't fear what they think, or how they'll react, because his healthy fear of God is greater. He even calls them to have the same fear of God in v.9.

How often have you known that God wants you to speak but you haven't because you're afraid of what the people you'd speak to would think or say or do? Nehemiah's healthy fear of God enables him to speak, because it was bigger than his fear of what people thought of him. He's only living for God the Father. He's only dancing for Daddy.

And Nehemiah doesn't care about getting everything he's entitled to. In vv. 14-18, he says the people who used to have his job of city governor before him claimed every perk and expense they could - even when it meant ordinary people struggling even more. Nehemiah did it differently. He didn't *get* all he could from the people he led; he *did* all he could for those people.

How do you live like Nehemiah - not caring about what people think, or about maximising your own wealth or ambitions or security? It all depends on what you care about most. What Nehemiah cared about most is there in v.15 - 'out of the *fear of God* I did not act like that.'

What area of your life would change most if you lived out 'wanting to please God' more than anything else'?

‘Anyone who sets himself up as “religious” by talking a good game is self-deceived. This kind of religion is hot air and only hot air. Real religion, the kind that passes muster before God the Father, is this: Reach out to the homeless and loveless in their plight, and guard against corruption from the godless world.’

That’s from James 1:27 in the Message translation. It’s just one of many places in the Bible where God says that a pretty good measure of whether you know and fear Him is how you treat the poor and marginalised. It’s a repeated theme in the book of James, not to mention the Old Testament Law, and the Prophets, the books of Psalms and Proverbs, and the teaching of Jesus.

God says repeatedly in His Word that what would please Him would be bringing care, compassion, healing and shelter to the abused, the mugged, the disdained and downtrodden. And Nehemiah 5 teaches us a little of how to do that.

In vv.1-5, we read about the slavery of poverty. The word ‘outcry’ in v.1 is deliberately reminding us of the Exodus story - the outcry of God’s people when they were broken by slavery to Egypt. It’s supposed to be a shocking idea that the same language could be used about how the better off of God’s family were treating their poor brothers and sisters.

These verses build a picture of the powerlessness of their poverty. Mortgaging homes just to afford food. Borrowing money just to be able to pay tax. Being forced to sell their children into actual slavery to pay their debts.

People sometimes condescendingly comment that the poor are poor because they’ve made bad choices. The truth is, the poor are usually poor because they *never had any choices*. Look at v.5 - ‘we had to sell our kids into slavery to have money to eat. We don’t have any money or property to bargain to set them free. We’re *powerless*.’

This exact thing still happens around the world. Children sold or stolen into slavery for service, sex or soldiering. And families powerless to do anything about it. There are many around the world, and there are many in this country, and there are many, tragically, in our churches, who are enslaved by a poverty they are powerless to overcome. The voiceless and the choiceless. So - what can the people of God do to respond? Well - what does Nehemiah do?

First of all, *Nehemiah gets angry*. In v.6, we read that when he is made aware of all that is going on in his own city, he is not just briefly saddened, or a touch miffed, but he is 'very angry.'

Have you ever gotten so angry that you can't let something go? Most of us probably have. But would I be right in saying that it's usually about something to do with how *we've* been treated? Because Nehemiah feared God, he got so angry about how *the poor* were being treated that he couldn't let it go. Angry enough to *do* something about it.

I think for many of us Christians, the first thing we need to do to treat the poor well is to become a lot more upset for them than we have allowed ourselves to be. To pray for God to break our hearts and put a fire in them. Because if we don't become angry enough to do something, we won't do anything more than make ourselves feel better with the odd donation here and there.

Getting angry about poverty needn't mean rash lashing out. We read in v.7 that Nehemiah 'pondered these charges in his mind.' He took the thing that God had given him to be worked up about and gave it a good deal of thought, reflection, and no doubt prayer. Then he put righteous anger into action.

If you want another example of godly anger about the exploitation of the poor, here's a literally perfect one - Jesus Himself. The time He famously got angry and showed it is recorded in all four gospels. In John 3, we read that Jesus took time to go and make a whip of cords to drive out the temple money changers who were ripping off the poor. Anger. A thought through plan. Action.

When is anger godly and when is it not?

The second way that Nehemiah responds to poverty, in vv.7-11, is to *advocate for the poor*. To use his position to give the voiceless a voice. Speaking truth to power, even if that risked power getting annoyed with him and getting even.

Nehemiah calls those with power to account. He gathers a large meeting of people to 'deal with them...' v.7 says. For us, there's lots of ways to do it - meeting with, writing to or petitioning elected officials; supporting the advocacy campaigns of organisations like Tearfund. I'd be interested in speaking to anyone who thinks that advocating for the voiceless is something

God is putting on your heart as one of our Missional Communities - because I think He's calling someone here to that.

Nehemiah calls 'sin', 'sin'. Nehemiah pulls no punches in vv.7-9 - he says 'what you are doing is wrong and not God fearing.' It's sin to be growing wealthy on the backs of poorer brothers and sisters. It's sin to let them starve whilst you maximise your returns.

Sometimes, until we hear it out loud, we kid ourselves that how we're treating people is okay, or unnoticed. Advocating for the poor involves saying out loud, 'this is not okay, or unnoticed. It is wrong in God's eyes.'

Nehemiah calls for specific action. In vv.10-11, he has a tangible proposal for what should be done to put things right. And what he suggests in these verses is basically - 'let's do it the way God told us to, shall we? Let's not charge interest on lending each other money, and let's give back the property that was sold to us by those so poor they had no choice.' And you know what? The people in power said, 'yes' in v.12! Advocating for the poor *can* work.

18 years ago, churches across denominations and across 40 countries, along with other others joining the cause, championed the Jubilee 2000 campaign - calling for the cancellation of debts for nations crippled by the debt they were in. It was based on the Jubilee laws in Leviticus about cancelling debt, restoring land and bringing equality to people and places enslaved by poverty.

And it achieved a great deal. It didn't end world poverty. But it did lead to many powerful Western nations changing their policies, and to over \$100 billion of debt being cancelled for 35 of the world's poorest nations. Advocating for the poor *can* bring change.

Finally, Nehemiah responded to poverty by *apprenticing people in generosity.* In vv.14-18, we read about how, instead of claiming all the money and food from the people due to him as governor of the city, he hosted people as guests at his expense. And look who's at the table in v.17. Ordinary people, as well as the officials who had been mistreating them - and those who had come from other nations.

Nehemiah doesn't just throw money at the poor. He welcomes them to his table. He shares life and friendship with them; relationship and hospitality. A few months' back, when we looked at Luke 16, we heard Jesus saying in 16:9

- 'I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed to eternal dwellings.' And we noticed that the 'friends' Jesus was talking about there were 'the poor.'

Treating the poor the way Jesus did and the way He wants us to isn't just getting angry on their behalf or advocating on their behalf. It's getting involved in relationship, truly welcoming and sharing with them at your table. And it's involving others and apprenticing them in doing that too.

Those same officials whom Nehemiah had called out and called to change - we see in v.17 that *they* were invited to Nehemiah's table too. To sit, eat, drink, laugh - and learn from Nehemiah a better way of relating to and providing for the poor.

You probably don't have room for 150 people at your dinner table like Nehemiah did. But who *do* you have room for? The poor? People who need to learn a better way to relate to the poor? People 'not from round here'? The 'new in town'? Those with less money? Those with more? Who would be blessed by being at your table, and who would learn from it?

The good news of Jesus Christ is that there is a family table that God invites you to sit at. He's the Father. And He welcomes the poor and marginalised. And He welcomes those who treated them wrongly and have learned to put that right. And He welcomes those of all nations who will put their faith in Jesus Christ.

That's a Father I love to fear. And so did Nehemiah. See how he finishes things off in v.19? 'Remember me with favour, O my God, for all I have done for these people.' You see what's in his heart? He's not asking that *people* will remember him for what he's done for them. He doesn't care about that.

Nehemiah was only dancing for his Daddy. He didn't care what anyone else thought. 'Father God, did you see that? Was it good?' God says to the one who fears and loves Him as Father; who lives for Him and is only interested in what God likes: 'You are my son, you are my daughter, whom I love - with you I am well pleased!'