

The Lethal Power of a Hidden Enemy Pt 2

Books of Ezra and Nehemiah

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I invite you to turn with me in your Bibles to the book of Nehemiah, Nehemiah 5, and we are continuing a message that we began last Sunday. We titled it, so this is the same title "The Lethal Power of a Hidden Enemy." So this is part 2, and we're going to end up kind of finishing up the chapter. That's the focus of the chapter is the lethal power of this hidden enemy and what makes it, it's really surprising just to quickly catch us up to get us back into place, what we're looking at in this passage is God's word to his people in the fifth century BC, 445 BC. Nehemiah leads a group of exiles to return from Persia and Babylon back to Jerusalem. It's the third return that has happened in the last 90 years. The previous two returns began 538 and 458 BC, and now this third return has been led by Nehemiah, they're back in the land and this return to focus is rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, but the three returns together are essentially rebuild Jerusalem, to reestablish worship, to reestablish holiness and so the word of God and worship and the walls, these things are picturing for us and the application for us is not in practical building projects but the New Testament makes clear that the church is the new Jerusalem, that Jerusalem is a type of the church. So to be building Jerusalem, to be building the temple, the New Testament uses that image in a powerful way, 1 Peter 2:4-5 pictures us being built as living stones upon the foundation stone of Jesus Christ. We all are living stones being built into a spiritual house where sacrifices will be offered. And so the imagery is clear and vivid and it's repeated, 1 Corinthians 3:15, you are the temple of God. That is, you, plural. You, Paul says to the Corinthian church, all of you together are the temple of God. The same thing in Ephesians 2:19-22, you are being built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets to build up into a spiritual house.

So the imagery is vivid and repeated in the New Testament and so the application of this passage is if the people of God at that point in history were rebuilding Jerusalem, they were called in the midst of a dark world to rebuild the place of worship, to restore God's glory in his people, and so there's tremendous resonance and application to us because they were doing it in very difficult times. They were under the reign of the Persian Empire, a hostile government and even more hostile neighbors around them. We've seen this, that Nehemiah, they encounter opposition from the beginning and it continues and it's fierce opposition, intense opposition, people who want to stop the work, their neighbors to the north, the Samaritans. You know, Judah is a province of Persia surrounded by other provinces of Persia which are all governed by local rulers and the

local rulers because they're a long way from Persia, have some measure of freedom to do what they will. And so Sanballat we've encountered from the north, is hostile to the work that's going on under Nehemiah's direction. The Samaritans oppose the work vehemently. To the east, the Ammonites and Tobiah, the governor there, are doing everything they can to oppose the work as well and colluding together, these neighbors are colluding together to stop the work, the Ashdodites to the west, the Arabs to the south. We see it again and again. If you haven't looked at this, read through the book of Nehemiah and you'll see this. They're all wanting to oppose the work.

So the people as they're building the wall actually they're building the wall with the fear of imminent attack. At any moment, we saw this in chapter 4, we reviewed this last week, they are actually under the threat of imminent attack. They know their enemies are planning to murder them. They want to attack them, murder them, and stop the work. So great is the hatred for the one true God. Some things never change. Such is the hatred for the one true God that as we try to build in our day, we also find ourselves vehemently and sometimes violently opposed by those who hate him.

So they are building the walls of Jerusalem, the physical walls of Jerusalem, creating separation which we've said really pictures the sense of holiness, and so that the whole picture, I think what God is doing in the books of Ezra-Nehemiah, these three returns, is he's saying his people are called in the midst of a dark world, in the midst of a world that opposes him and his glory, his people are called to rebuild the temple, that is, to restore worship to the center of our lives. It's all about worship. This is what God has sent his Son into the world to reclaim worshipers. That's what he told the woman at the well. The Father is seeking worshipers who will worship him and offer true worship to him, worship him in spirit and in truth. And so in the same way, this was being typified in the rebuilding of the temple, and then the restoration of the law under Ezra, that the only way you can truly worship is to have the word of God change your heart and the word of God reveal to you who God is, and the word of God show you how to acceptably worship him. And then the third return under Nehemiah to build the walls, that true worship culminates, finds its fullest expression in obedience. Worship that is only in word and not in deed is not true worship. Worship will result in holiness, true worship, worship that looks at who God is and what he's done for us and marvels at the sacrifice of Jesus Christ finds then the ability to surrender to him in gratitude for what he's done, not to earn anything. We can earn nothing, but because Christ has given everything, we offer back to him ourselves in worship, word-directed worship and in humble obedience and surrender.

So that's the big picture here and what we saw is that we're trying to apply chapter 5 has this just stunning surprising turn of events. We noted how in chapter 4, they're building the wall, they've built half of the wall, it's got to half of its height, their enemies are ready to attack at any moment, they've received word that they're going to come after them from every angle. Nehemiah has deployed guards, he's got everybody with their weapons. He says they're doing the work with one hand and holding a weapon in the other. They don't go to get water without their weapon. They're sleeping in the city expecting attack. Then we read in chapter 5, that there was an outcry that when you first read it, you expect is the outcry that has come from attack. Surely the enemies are there. Surely the enemies

have finally come to Jerusalem to try to destroy the people and the work. The outcry, though we find out, is not that at all. It's an outcry, a cry of great distress, a cry of anguish that is offered in the face of cruelty and oppression, yet the source of the outcry is not the enemies from without, the source of the outcry is from a hidden enemy within. The people are oppressing one another and Nehemiah is appalled.

So we're going to read the fifth chapter. You'll see this unfold and then we're going to continue our application, exposition/application of this passage. Nehemiah 5:1. We begin now just reading out of chapter 4, this is the last verse, verse 4:23.

23 So neither I, my brothers, my servants, nor the men of the guard who followed me, none of us removed our clothes, each took his weapon even to the water.

1 Now there was a great outcry of the people and of their wives against their Jewish brothers. 2 For 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. 5 Now 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. 7 I 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. 8 I 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. 9 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? 10 And likewise I, my brothers and my servants are lending them money and grain. Please, let us leave off this usury. 11 Please, 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." So I called the priests and took an oath from them that they would do according to this promise. 13 I 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." And all the assembly said, "Amen!" And they praised the LORD. Then the people did according to this promise.

Now Nehemiah gives us some background about what's going to happen over the next 12 years. Listen to what he says.

14 Moreover, 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.

Let's pray.

Father, we ask that You would now help us by Your Spirit to fear You, to tremble at Your word, and to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which we've been called. Lord, we ask this by Your grace and for Your glory. Amen.

The lethal power of a hidden enemy. What he's describing here is a catastrophic development that was as lethal as it was surprising. They were expecting the attack to come from without but the attack was actually coming from within and it came from within in such really kind of a reasonable way. That's why it was so unexpected. They were in the midst of very difficult times economically. They were under incredible psychological strain. What would it be like to be living thinking you're about to be attacked at any moment for day after day, week after week, month after month? It takes a toll on one. They were experiencing intense financial pressure. They mention there's a famine. The crop yield is down. They don't have the time to even spend that they need to be working on their crops because they're in the city building the wall.

So there's a sense in which that the points this morning I want to gather our thoughts around, three points. The first is a reasonable but devastating action. A reasonable but devastating action. It's hard for us to fully relate to this because there's a great distance between us and the text not just in time but in just the practice of how life was lived, but what you basically have is, you have here the realization that times were very hard economically and that the people were forced to deal with these economic hardships and they basically just went about business as usual. They did things that were actually, they were actually imminently logical. They were culturally acceptable. They were even

biblically permissible if you don't get the big picture. If you're really just thinking about biblical precepts, what they did was almost all of it was biblically permissible.

So it was reasonable, it was culturally acceptable, it seemed to be biblically permissible and yet it was devastating in effect, and what this warns us is that in times of difficulty and affliction and psychological strain, financial pressure, that we may also take reasonable actions that might be strictly speaking biblically permissible and yet miss the will of God to such a degree that we, as these people were doing, undermine the entire work of God. This is what's so astonishing and that's why I think that word "outcry" is in that first verse. You expect the outcry from outside and the outcry comes from within, and then you read through the text and you say, if you really look at this the way, without prejudging it from 21st century morals, you look at it as it should be from within the text itself, you find that the actions really weren't that far from what we probably would have done ourselves. In fact, they may be very close to what we are doing ourselves if you just translate it into the modern day. We may be doing things that are sound and logical, culturally acceptable, biblically permissible, and yet in reality they may not be spiritually responsible, not really taking account of who we are in Christ and what we're called to do, and therefore missing it by that much. It's like the sight of a gun, if the sight's off a couple of millimeters, think about how far you're going to miss the target 200 yards away. We must have the sights precisely where God wants them to be.

But this is a reasonable action. Let me just kind of explain that again. What was happening here and what he's describing is, in the midst of this financial pressure, some of the people there because their crops have failed, because they're under financial strain, they have mortgaged their property and after having mortgaged their property, now they're not able to pay their bills then and then to pay their bills, they are actually now selling their sons and daughters into slavery. This is something that's very hard for us to relate to but this was a part and has been a part of society from the beginning almost until the modern day. This is indentured slavery. Indentured slavery is actually, there's other kinds of slavery where, like, America and other parts of the world at different times have used, chattel slavery where there's no voluntary basis as a part of it, so that's even a different level order of injustice. But this is indentured slavery is you sell yourself as a slave for a period of time to pay off a debt. That's what these people are doing, and this is even biblically permissible. Exodus 21, Deuteronomy 15, God gives direction for how you're to handle this process of selling yourself into slavery and how the Jews are to treat one another in that process.

One of the things we see when we carefully look at the Scripture is this, that we will find ourselves, our sensibility is offended often by what we find in Scripture, and sometimes if you're proud and arrogant, you dismiss the Scripture because you know better and you look at it and you despise the cultural backwardness, and if you've imbibed the spirit of the age, you think that newer is always better. That's just categorically wrong. Technology gets a little better but life doesn't get better, sin doesn't get better, evil doesn't get better. And in fact, greater technology just gives people more ability to do great destruction because of the evil in their hearts. So it's a mixed bag, but what we need to understand is that the Lord, the problem with man is so systemic that he doesn't always

address the cultural injustices the way we might want him to. Who's right, you or God? Is it really that, you know, they were backward then and we're so much farther advanced today? Biblically, no.

I think a good illustration of this, one of the reasons God doesn't do some of the things we would like him to do is because he is infinite in wisdom and we are not, and so he doesn't fix all the cultural issues and the injustice issues that we see in society because there's something more important, that is, the souls of men and their eternal destiny. So to fix the justice and injustice takes the focus off, in some ways, not always, and there certainly are examples where he's calling us to live as changed people now with justice, but he changes hearts first. He doesn't change society. That's not God's plan. He's going to do that one time in the future when Jesus comes and restores his reign to all of creation.

A good illustration of this is like to think about maybe a medical, think about a doctor on the battlefield, and maybe to even make it a little more clear, think about a doctor who goes into the army or in the midst of a crisis, military crisis, but his training maybe is in the area of orthopedics. You know, he knows how to take care of the bones of people and imagine he's in the field hospital and there's a battle and people come in and he sees a man with, you know, compound fracture in his leg that he knows how to fix, that if he could fix that, this man will walk, but if he can't fix it quickly enough, he knows this man will likely lose his leg. But there's 25 other people who are in danger of dying if he delays long enough to fix this man's leg. What does a wise and compassionate doctor do? He saves the lives of those who need their lives saved. He prioritizes. He does medical triage. He decides, "This is the one I must see first. This is the guy who's going to bleed out first. I've got to stop the bleeding. This is the guy that I see second. This is the guy that I see third. That's the guy I see 25th. Even though I long to be able to fix his bones, I know what's going to happen to this man, he's going to lose his leg." That's just common sense. It's just wisdom and God, you see, society is broken, there's a spiritual war going on, there are people that are bleeding out spiritually, in danger of going to hell, and God says, "I'm not so interested in fixing what you think I want to fix, I'm fixing the hearts of people." That's the gospel and we need to think like God thinks.

So this is what's going on, and even that, so what he does then in Exodus 21 and Deuteronomy 15, is he actually gives Scripture to govern the practice of how they handle this indentured slavery, that at every seven years the Jews were to release their slaves, the Jewish slaves, and they were to set them free. The Sabbath year. In the year of Jubilee, even more so. So the Scripture even does that and what it's telling us is, listen, in the midst of that culture, that was the way, the best way for people's lives to be cared for and the gospel still go forth because Christianity is not a social project. It is the power of God unto salvation.

So they were actually, they were selling themselves into slavery in the way that the Scripture said, the people were taking the payment of debt that way, and it was certainly culturally acceptable among the people around them, but what they failed to do was to really carefully apply the word of God and that's what ended up making this apparently reasonable action a devastating reality, the reasonable action had a devastating reality at

the same time, the outcry is that their children are in slavery, being sold into slavery because of there's some usury going on, so there's some inappropriate measure as well, but the thing that Nehemiah is really angered by is the fact that the Jews are selling their Jewish brothers and sisters that have become slaves to them, they're selling them to the nations. That's what he's describing in verse 8. He's speaking of himself and the other leaders here, "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?" What he's saying is you're selling your brothers to the nations again, we're going out and buying them back because you cannot sell a Jewish brother to a Gentile because that means they're a part of that ungodly household.

So what's happening is the people of God are being spiritually plundered because the people are just thinking in terms of the business practice, they're basically practicing, you know, common sense without spiritual wisdom, and if the practice continues, they're going to sell off the whole next generation to the Gentiles. The whole project will fail. The wall will be built, the temple will be built, and yet there will be nobody there, no Jews left, and Nehemiah is appalled that they have missed it this badly. So there's a possibility of doing things that are reasonable, business as usual, even wise, culturally acceptable and yet spiritually devastating.

Now the second point this morning is a glaring omission. What is it that they did wrong? What did they do wrong? Nehemiah points it out real clearly in verse 9. What was the thing they lacked? They had common sense. They were doing what was standard business practice. What was it they lacked? Verse 9, "Again I said," this is Nehemiah speaking to them, "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?" The glaring omission was they did not fear God. They didn't care about his name being reproached by the nations.

What they did was they looked at their circumstances, they saw the pressures that they were under, they made what otherwise might have been somewhat sound decisions but they failed to take their circumstances and their options and consider them in light of the bigger picture of God's plan. They were acting as independent agents, free agents to do what they thought was best for themselves rather than those who belonged to God, because if they had understood that they would understand that we cannot be selling and taking advantage of our brothers at this moment in history because the work is too important. If they had put their circumstances and their difficulties in light of the larger context of God's word, God's plan, what is God's agenda? If they had just asked themselves, "Why are we here? What are we here for? Are we here just to deal with financial pressure and just to make ends meet and to make our budget so that we can check off that we paid all our debts and we got everything that we need and we're continuing to manage our wealth and we're making a way? Or are we not here for the purposes of the kingdom of God?" They were there to rebuild Jerusalem, to populate Jerusalem with worshipers, true worshipers. They were there to be set apart from the nations. The walls themselves mean being holy and set apart. "How can we then be selling our children into slavery to the Gentiles, the nations?"

And the reality is it's very easy to have this glaring omission, the fear of the Lord, as something that must be continually practiced by the people of God. We have to pray for it. We've got to labor for it. The fear of the Lord comes from the word of God, comes from the Spirit of God working in our hearts. It means to be reverent. It means to see all of life as lived before the face of God. God wants us to live our lives and that's one of the presence of God in the Bible, when you read the presence of God, he was in the presence of God various places throughout the Old and New Testament, the figure of speech that is used is literally before the face of God. To be in his presence is to be before his face. The word "face" is there in it. It pictures our countenance and God's countenance face to face.

So we're to live our lives before the face of God. We're to live our lives as if God is right here at every moment, everything I'm doing and I'm trying to please him, that's living in the fear of the Lord. "I want to just be pleasing to You. I want my life, every decision I make to glorify You." That's what it means to be a worshiper of the Lord. That's what we're here for. So are we doing things that are hindering that purpose in our lives and in the lives of the community? That's the important thing here. The people that were doing this, they were still going to be able to be in Jerusalem, be at the temple, but the people that they weren't thinking about were not. They were allowing by their, I mentioned last time that careless self-interest, self-interest that's not necessarily, you know, there are places where we have to look after our self-interest. You know, you have to eat, you sleep, you take care of yourself, your family, but we're not called to careless self-interest, we're called to self-interest in the light of the fear of God that seeks him first, "Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness."

So they were basically guilty of careless self-interest. They were thinking about themselves and what they needed to do. They were not actively thinking about their brothers and sisters. It was the failure to actively think about their brothers and sisters that was the enemy that was bringing destruction on the people of God. It was something that small, just not thinking carefully about the impact my actions are going to have on my brothers and sisters. That's where they lost it, and how easy that is for you and me do to exactly the same thing.

You know, I want to try to apply this in an area that is, I think, really relevant to this particular passage and through our lives today. We're all in a time of great pressure. We can sense the spiritual hostility getting greater toward Christians, right? You know, it's becoming closer to the day that it may be criminal to say God made men male and female. So we see that happening, we see the antipathy to the gospel. We wonder about what's going to happen to society, what will our children and our grandchildren experience, and then we also have just the difficulties of just living, right? Our famine today might be considered COVID, the coronavirus. It's a difficult situation. Ted mentioned he's lost, I've got the same thing, things just don't taste right yet. They may never again, I don't know, until heaven which will make us long for heaven even more and that's good. But the coronavirus, you know, so many people infected with it, many of you know someone who's lost their life. It's a real interesting time and pandemic, is it a pandemic, is it not? Well, that's debatable but it's certainly enormously contagious and

has been significantly deadly, yes, and should be of significant concern to everyone at some level. But in the midst of a world where you can't really trust everything that you hear, it's confusing, and so people are trying to make their own appropriate decisions and actions to how to respond to this. How do you do what God wants you to do in this world?

There are so many decisions, you know, to mask, to not mask, when to, when not to. Many of you are still viewing from home because you believe it's unsafe for you and I'm not saying it's not. This is a decision we have to work hard to make and some are erring on one side or the other. Some of us are too cautious and some of us are too un-cautious, and what's the right balance? Only God knows. But the question is how do you think about that decision? How do you make a decision as practical as that, whether to come back to church in person or not, or whether to visit certain people, to not, how do you make that decision? Well, you look at all the data, right? You try to find the data. You do research but online there's so much differing information and some of it seems to be suppressed or you wonder so much of it that doesn't fit the main media narrative doesn't get out there.

So how do you know who to trust? Well, we should try to find out the facts, yes. We should try to research it. We should try to do what is reasonable. We should think about and consider what's culturally acceptable. We should think about what's certainly legally permissible. We should obey the law best we can unless they're telling us to disobey God. But we must make sure that we are not spiritually irresponsible when we make our decisions, whatever those decisions are. We are responsible before God to make decisions in the fear of the Lord. We're responsible before God to make these decisions in light of the larger picture, the larger context of God's word and God's plan and God's agenda because it's very easy for us to make, we're constantly making life about our agenda. And some of these, there's some complex decisions and we're going to make decisions that are different from one person to another and we have to love each other and Romans 14 says, "Let each one do as he's convinced in his own mind," a sense of following your conscience. But let me just also add to you the biblical balance is don't follow a biblically uninformed conscience. Your conscience needs to be informed by Scripture. Your heart can tell you the wrong thing six ways from Sunday. Are you listening to the word of God?

So how do we make those decisions? Well, a glaring omission. They were not putting it in context and I want us to look for a little direction on how to make these decisions from the next point, the third point this morning. We've seen a reasonable action and devastating outcome, we've seen, secondly, a glaring omission, they failed to look at it in light of the fear of God. Now third point, a shining example. Nehemiah stops the narrative in verse 13. He's telling us the story as it happened and he stops the narrative and inserts in his writing of this part of the book verses 14 through 19, these six verses in which he recounts for us a summary of his 12 years as governor. Now we're really just in the first year of his time as governor in verse 13, but then he expands out and tells us about the whole 12 years because he wants to tell us about how he thought about making decisions like this, and we have in this a shining example of what we should be like. And

I wanted to note the shining example, first, consider his actions, and then we'll consider his motives because I think the text calls these things to our attention. A shining example: Nehemiah's actions and then Nehemiah's motives.

His actions. First of all, he does not take what is rightfully his. He lays down his right to the governor's food allowance. This is why he's telling us this. In verse 14, "Moreover, 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." That is, there was the right that the governor had to request a tax from the people that would pay for him just to eat and the people in his household to eat. And he said, "I did not take it for the entire 12 years." In fact, he then, it tells us in verse 18, he reminds us again at the end of verse 18, "Yet for all this," this is the last part of verse 18, "Yet for all this I did not demand the governor's food allowance, because the servitude was heavy on this people."

So his action was he did not exercise his rights. He laid down his rights. And not only did he lay down his rights but he actually, he gave of himself. When he says in verse 17, "there were at my table one hundred and fifty Jews and officials." Think about that. Every day you've got 150 people coming for dinner. You kind of shudder, some of you ladies say, "Oh, my goodness, 150." "Hey, honey, listen, some people are coming over tonight." "How many?" "150." He had 150 people that he fed on a daily basis out of his own pocket and he tells us, he goes to tell us. Now for us, it's harder to relate to this. One ox a day, six choice sheep. A whole cow and six sheep plus birds. I think he's talking about chickens. There ought to be some fried chicken in there as well.

So the whole, not just a side of beef, both sides of beef, six sheep every day. Birds. I was reading a statistic, I forgot to write down the numbers, but essentially if you multiply 12 years, 365 days a year, it's like 4,200 oxen. He's got a herd of oxen that are like Job. He's a wealthy man and he has access to that because remember he was the cupbearer to the king, one of the most influential people in the Persian Empire. This Jew, God had put him at that place and yet he's not, now he could keep his wealth but he's spending his wealth for the people. Once every 10 days, he brings out the wine, furnished in abundance. "Yet for all this I did not demand the governor's food allowance." He's not taking anything from the people. He's giving to the people. Those were his actions.

Now what are his motives? He makes that clear in verse 15 when he says, "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." He exhorted them to the fear of God and he now says, "Listen, this is why I did not take the governor's food allowance." Listen, Nehemiah, it's reasonable for you to do that. It's permissible for you to do that. It's acceptable for you to do that. "But it is not spiritually responsible for me to do that. God has called me as his servant, his slave. I belong to him." And he's thinking about what's happening, he understands the stakes, he understands the situation and therefore he not only lays down his rights, he lays down his wealth to advance the kingdom of God. Out

of a fear of God because he wants to live his life before the face of God. He knows the greatness and the majesty of God. He knows the wonder of what it is to be God's child.

So the fear of God is the first motive. We see the second motive we would see is compassion for God's people. Twice he speaks of the burden that the people are bearing. Verse 15, he says, "But the former governors who were before me laid burdens on the people." Look at verse 18, "Yet for all this I did not demand the governor's food allowance, because the servitude was heavy on this people." He says, "The reason I didn't demand the food allowance, another reason, not just the fear of God, it's also compassion for God's people." He actually looked around him at the people around him. He wasn't just thinking about his life and protecting himself and making the best decision for himself. He was thinking about the community, the people of God because he feared God and he had compassion on God's people.

There's a third, I think, motive that we see. The fact that he would lay down his wealth for the people, you see love. This is sacrificial love. Not only is he not protecting himself, he's laying down his rights and he's acting sacrificially. He's giving just so much wealth every day for the people of God and obviously the Lord keeps blessing him. I think what you see is his cattle, man, they were doing well. They were reproducing, the sheep were reproducing, the chickens were reproducing because God was blessing a man who laid himself down for the glory of God. The Lord loves to do that. But the fear of God, the compassion for God's people, and sacrificial love.

So the shining example is, listen, as we try to make decisions about how we're to live, no matter what area of life we need wisdom for, are we doing what we're doing with a conscious awareness it's because I fear God? Is that the reason? And we're supposed to be prudent. The Bible says a wise man sees danger and hides himself, and certainly many of our people would be at high risk and you need to protect yourself, and I'm not saying you're not supposed to, but I'm saying you must do this God's way. You must make the decision God's way, not your own way. Don't lean on your own understanding. That's true for every one of us, no matter, like I said, whatever side of the issue you tend to be. Are you taking the position you're taking and doing what you're doing out of the fear of God? Are you doing what you're doing out of a compassion for your brothers and sisters in Christ? Is that a motivating part of your decision or is it self-protection? Is it reasonable self-protection, culturally acceptable self-protection? Man, it's culturally acceptable but cultural protection, I mean, cultural self-protection looks nothing like Jesus. Again, it doesn't mean, I'm not saying, I'm not telling you what the answer is for you. I don't know but I'm telling you how you need to ask the question and I believe because the culture is pressing on us so much, that probably almost all of us are not thinking about this the way we need to. I confess, I've wrestled and struggled to think about this biblically.

I want to talk to you a little bit about, I've been thinking about and, again, I'm telling you this, I'm trying to inform us biblically so that we can make our decisions in the fear of God with more confidence that we're doing it out of the fear of God, compassion for our brothers and sisters, love for others, and an understanding of the big picture, and if you

love Jesus, you should want to do it that way. But I want to talk to you about, I've been thinking about this thing quite a bit the last few months, and the issue, it relates to this, the issue is the value of physical presence versus virtual fellowship. Is there a difference? I mean, everybody would know there's some difference, how much difference? Well, I don't know completely obviously. I mean, I don't know exactly. I think it's certainly, I'm glad that we have, I'm so grateful we have the power to have virtual fellowship and that we have been able to do that. Praise the Lord for that. But some of us may be choosing virtual fellowship when we're not fully taking account of the reality of the value of physical presence.

Is it the same? Does it help us to be able to shepherd and love one another like the Scripture tells us in Hebrews 3:12-13? It says, "Take care, brethren, that there not be in any one of you a sinful, unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God." Now we tend to hear that as an American this way, "Take care that I don't have a sinful, unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God." That's part of what's meant but if you read it carefully in context, what it means is this, "Take care, brothers, that there's not any among us who has a sinful, unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God." It means you're not supposed to just look here, you're supposed to look around you. You're supposed to have a heart and I'm supposed to have a heart of compassion for every other person who names the name of Jesus and we're to shepherd them and care. We're to care for one another.

And he goes on later in that same letter in Hebrews 10:25 to say, "Don't forsake the assembling of yourselves together as is the habit of some," and he says right before that, "You must provoke one another to love and good works." You provoke one another to love and good works. You need someone stirring you up to love and good works. I need someone stirring me up to love and good works. We are called not just that we need, we're called to meet the needs of others who need to be stirred up to love and good works. And if we're following Nehemiah's example which is just really the example of Jesus, Nehemiah's name means "comfort from Yahweh." Nachum, ah, it's comfort from Yahweh. Jesus is the comforter. The Holy Spirit is another comforter. Jesus comes with the comfort of God and Nehemiah is giving us the example of this kind of compassion that looks at others and says, "What can I do for them, to help them follow Christ and to be what God wants them to be?"

Well, this idea of is physical presence, how important is it? It's certainly, I mean, we're so blessed to be able to use technology nowadays. Isn't it, I mean, it's really neat to be able to. Remember the days, those of you who were around in the '90s and you were old enough to, remember what it was like to not be able to call somebody when you were driving? I mean, we're not supposed to do that now anyway, right? Uh-oh, I just made a confession online. No, but you know, you can tell your phone to call and you can call people as you're driving hands free, right? But you couldn't even call anybody. I mean, you would think of a phone call you have to make, I need to stop at, they used to have things called payphones, young people, and you put a quarter in there, before that it was even a dime, and you could make a phone call. And you had to look for payphones, they

had them around pretty much, you know, you could find one pretty soon. Now you can't find one anywhere today because nobody needs them. They're carrying their phone.

So it's a blessing. It's also not always such a blessing, is it? We are very distracted people. But anyway, okay, so the issue is virtual fellowship versus physical fellowship, physical presence. I want to put before you that I think the Scripture gives us reason to think and to understand that physical presence far surpasses virtual fellowship, and I want to submit to you and you think about it, I've been thinking about this biblically. There are so many interesting things and one of the things I kept thinking about was the Incarnation. God became flesh and dwelt among us. And you know, when Jesus built his kingdom, now think with me about this, wouldn't it have made sense, the Bible says at the right time Christ died for the ungodly, in the fullness of time God sent forth his Son. God sent forth his Son at the right time, in the perfect time he wanted to send him forth. But if I were helping God out, I would think wouldn't it have made more sense to send Jesus when he could have preached and people all over, even if he wanted to just keep it to Israel, all over the Israeli TV network could have watched. Think about that.

Now if you really believe the Bible and you think biblically, you understand that God could have done it anyway he wanted to, and the fact that he didn't is significant. It's not like he thinks later, "Man, I didn't think of that. We could've used technology." He sent his Son in human flesh where John said, "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us and we beheld His glory." That same apostle would describe his faith in this way as he introduces his first letter. Listen to this, listen to what John says, "What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched and our hands have handled concerning the word of life." We are telling you what we saw, what we heard, what we looked at, what we touched.

There's something about that. God makes us physical. Our body, we don't believe in the Greek dualism, that the really important part of man is just spiritual. No, the Bible teaches that the whole man was made in the image of God, including somehow the body. We don't understand that but that's what the Lord says. He values the body. That's why Jesus' body resurrected. That's why and you will spend eternity in your body either in the presence of God and in glory, or in hell. The Bible says at the end of time all the dead are going to be raised and rejoined to their bodies, and then they will enter into either eternal life or eternal death.

So when Christ came, he came in a physical body. People heard his voice, vocal cords expressing the word of God. And think about it. I mean, seriously, wasn't there a better way. Why didn't you have a seminary training and have everybody come. No, what he did was they lived with him for 3 ½ years. Day after day they walked with him. They ate with him. They just lived life with him. Then he sent them out, this ragtag group of guys that the Pharisees are like, "These are your disciples? Really?" They went around the world and they went place to place. They walked place to place. Couldn't we have had cars by then? No, the Lord wanted them to walk.

Now I'm not saying we're not supposed to have cars and all that, we're going to use them now but isn't it interesting that God did it that way? And he ordains, the way he wanted to save the world was with somebody else with flesh and blood coming to your place, speaking in your hearing, eating food with you, touching you and telling you about his Son. That's the way he did it. There's something, there's something very significant about physical presence. Immanuel, God with us.

I was reading a book that was talking about this issue, that talked about the digital and disembodied discipleship. Digital and disembodied discipleship. The danger of that. It doesn't mean we can't use it as an auxiliary help but it should never be the main thing. Now listen, in this situation because we are dealing with the pandemic that we are, some of you need to be home and you need to stay home and you don't need to be here. I'm not saying you don't but I'm telling you this, that you're losing something dramatic not only personally, the people here are losing something dramatic from you. They're losing the ability to see your smile. They're losing the ability to hear your voice. They're losing the ability to feel the touch of a handshake. And listen, this is one of the things that tells you, listen, the masks are not going to go on forever for the people of God. No way. I don't care what Anthony Fauci says. He doesn't know the word of God. I mean, I'm not saying I listen to him a little bit, I'm not saying that he's not, be balanced, but listen, seriously.

It's interesting, just think about Genesis 4 when Cain is upset, do you know what God says to him? He says, "Why is your countenance downcast? If you do right your countenance will be lifted up." God face to face with Cain says, "Why are you frowning?" When you have a mask on, you can't see the smile, you can't see the frown. There's a distance. Now I'm not saying it's not the right thing to do. Do you hear me saying that? What I'm saying is when you make the decision to do that, the burden is on you to overcome the loss of the barrier.

What do I mean by that? Okay, so the folks that are at home. Many of you need to be home and you may have to stay home for a lot longer because we don't know how long this is going to last, but I think that the Scripture says the burden is on you because your physical presence isn't here blessing others, and we must think about it from the standpoint of other-centeredness, not me-centeredness. It's not nobody calls me, nobody blesses me. No, what are you doing for others? That's the way God asks the question. We come to him saying, "Nobody's doing anything for me." He says, "What are you doing for others?" And so if you're at home, the burden is on you. You are out of it maybe the right thing, you're maybe doing exactly the right thing, but you have a responsibility, a spiritual responsibility that must be carried out.

So what are you doing to make use of every digital means you can to bless others in the body of Christ? Are you seeing and doing this out of the fear of God and out of compassion for God's people? And are you sacrificing for the kingdom? And the same thing for those of us who know folks that aren't here, we've got to do the same thing for them. And when you wear your mask and I wear my mask more than I would like to. I mean, I really do think there's going to be some... Listen, seriously just for a moment indulge me. We don't have enough honest science out there. Here are a couple of

questions. What happens when your CO2 level rises for a long period of time and you live that way for weeks and months and years? Because the CO2 level in your blood rises as you wear a mask slightly. I don't know. I don't know, I just want a scientist to really investigate that. This is going to take time to understand it. I still wear my mask. I'm telling you, I wear them but what does happen when people don't see the countenance? What does that do socially?

The benefit, there is some restriction in the transmission of the virus but what's the cost? What's the cost personally? I know some say that there's something about you recycle the virus in your own mask and you have a greater viral load if you're wearing a mask. That's somebody saying that. I don't know if it's true or not but it could be a cost. But there certainly is a cost relationally. You can't see if someone's smiling when you walk by them in the store. Have you not had that experience? You look and I even think I'm smiling at them but they don't know I'm smiling at them. They may think I'm irritated with them. Do you know what we must do? We must as Christians the burden is on us wearing our masks to communicate what can't be communicated because of the mask. We need to speak words of blessing more when you're wearing your mask. So I'm not saying not do it, I'm saying do it responsibly, owning and let us be a light in the midst of it because I think, listen, if you don't wear them in certain circumstances, people don't even want to listen to what you have to say, right? So I'm really not trying to make that a debate, I'm just saying that regardless of what your decision is, you make the decision that is reasonable and accurate but you handle it with spiritual responsibility.

So we all are called to understand how important it is for us to touch one another, to love one another. The Lord made us to need to be touched and to think that you're supposed to stop shaking hands, listen, I could make a case we're supposed to be kissing one another from the New Testament. That's one of the commands repeated at least four times. "Greet one another with a holy kiss." Anthony Fauci would not approve of that. But who knows more? The Lord.

We have to be gracious in this. Listen, it is complex. It's difficult and, listen, I know people are really, there's a lot of people suffering. There's a lot of people in the hospitals right now and you know that and I know that. We need to be compassionate but we just need to be joyful people who are doing what we're doing in context. We're thinking about the kingdom of God and the glory of God. "So whatever we do whether you eat or drink, do all for the glory of God." And let's love one another as we do it. Let's rejoice in each other's Christian responsibility and just like Romans 14 says, some celebrate just the Sabbath, some celebrate every day the same. One eats, one drinks, one eats meat, one doesn't, one drinks wine, one doesn't. Let each one do as he is convinced in his own mind, loving one another and trusting that each one of us answers to God. But it's okay to still talk to one another about it. "Hey, tell me why you do that or why you don't do that?" Love one another to engage in those conversations and then whatever we do, if we choose something that makes us less accessible, the burden is on us to care for our brothers and sisters because that's what Jesus would do.

That's the example of Nehemiah and remember the danger is if we don't do this, if we just kind of in a lazy way carelessly make a decision not really thoughtfully, responsibly evaluating what the Bible says and looking at what we can find out about what the science says too, but the Bible guiding everything because that's the one thing that doesn't change. If we don't do that correctly, we can do the same kind of damage that the people of Israel did in Nehemiah's day. We could unwittingly undermine the entire work of God in our day. It's a very sobering thing to realize.

So the Lord wants us to take this seriously. Do what we do out of love and Nehemiah makes this point vividly. When he does that cultural expression that he uses when he shakes out his robe, he was very emphatic. He said, he makes them promise, "You're going to do this. You're going to stop treating each other with this careless self-interest. You're going to stop doing this, right? You're going to do what I'm telling you to do, right?" He makes them promise. He brings the priests in to hear the promise. "Did you hear what they said?" "Yes, I heard it." "Okay, I'm telling you now before all the people here," he shakes out his robe and says, "Anyone who doesn't change their ways to now live this responsible godly way, may God shake him out of His people." That's how serious it is to the Lord. The Lord intends his people to love one another. He wants us to love one another and serve one another for his glory, and when we do it to one of the least of these our brothers, we do it unto Jesus.

Let's go to the Lord in prayer.

Our Father, how grateful we are for Your grace in our lives, that You came into the world, You sent the Lord Jesus Your Son into the world, He became flesh and dwelt among us, and He revealed Your heart to us perfectly because no man has seen God at any time but the only Begotten who is in the bosom of the Father. He has declared Him. We can see what You are like and the people that have written the gospels, they saw Him like John said in 1 John, they heard Him, they touched Him, their hands handled the Word of life. It's not a spiritual idea, it's a living person that we worship, the Lord Jesus Christ, and we are the body of Christ. We are now His flesh and blood in this way, in this world, even though His glorified flesh and blood is at the right hand of God. Lord, help us to love one another. Help us to make wise decisions. Lord, there are so many of us that have differing circumstances, differing challenges, some of these are personal, medical challenges that we have, others are people that we love that we need to protect, and there are very valid reasons to be evaluating and considering our actions and so we pray for You to give us wisdom. But help us prize and truly value what You value and to make whatever decisions we make for the glory of God, in the fear of God, and for the love of others. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.