

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Mission, Fueled by a Vision

(Studies in the Old Testament book of Nehemiah)

I am so sorry

(Nehemiah 8:18--9:37)

Study #12

Introduction: Manners...

When I think back to lessons learned from my father, I think of a love of gardening, an appreciation for integrity and hard work, a commitment to family - and manners.

Dad was insistent that my twin sister and I "*mind our manners.*"

In fact, he would tell me, "*Mind your manners*" when I had just failed to do so or when he suspected that I was about to fail to do so.

Dad didn't care about which fork I used for the entrée at a formal dinner.

He did care deeply that I hold a door open for a lady, that I give up my seat on public transportation to someone in need, and that I said "*Sir*" and "*Ma'am*" when addressing a grown-up.

And you and I "get" that manners are important.

It's just good manners to greet people warmly, put the seat down after using the toilet, and chew with your mouth closed.

But some "good mannerisms" come and go. Some are culturally defined and are not universal. For instance...

- Today, not everyone values children saying "*Sir*" and "*Ma'am*" to adults.

- Many people don't care if you put your elbows on the table during a meal.
- Thank-you notes and RSVPs are appreciated, but not much expected.
- It's not a "thing" here, but in the Middle and Far East, you would never expose the soles of your shoes at someone.

There are, though, some manners are universally good.

"*Thank you*" is a mannerism for all, everywhere, always. The simple act of saying, "*Thanks*" takes the focus off of me and puts it on you. Leading with thanksgiving feeds a grateful orientation to life. We have a whole holiday given to promoting thanksgiving.

"*Please*" is another one. To say "*Please*" is to do battle with an entitlement mentality. "*Please*" kills demandingness. "*Please*" acknowledges dependency.

And "*I'm sorry*" is just as important. To say, "*I'm sorry*" is to agree that I failed to live up to an accepted norm - my own, yours, society's. On any given day, any of us might need to say, "*I am so sorry*" to a good friend, a spouse, a child.

Of the three cardinal manners, I believe that "*I'm sorry*" is the hardest.

The other two are challenging because they put the focus on someone besides ME. "*I'm sorry*" is the most difficult precisely because it keeps the focus on ME - but not in a good way.

"*I'm sorry*" means that I've held up a mirror and found a problem. I didn't speak as I should have. I acted badly.

I'll bet that all of us will admit the necessity of good manners when we are out in society. We know that manners matter. It turns out that "manners matter" in social and in our walk with God.

"*Please*" (in prayer) and "*Thank You*" (in prayer and in a general orientation to life) are always the way to approach God. And "*I'm sorry*" is the humble, honest, broken way to approach Him when we have sinned.

To say, “*God, I’m sorry*” -to confess sin - is to take a step on the road to maturity and change, and it is to be ushered into a world of freedom and joy.

What you have heard about confession is true. Confession is terrible for the reputation. But it is very, very good for the soul.

We catch up to the Jews in Jerusalem, late in the Jewish month, Tishri (approximately our September/October), just in time to hear them say, “*I am so sorry*” to God.

Review...

Tishri is always a busy month in the Jewish year. It was a very busy month for Nehemiah and the Jews around 445 BC.

On the first two days of the month, revival broke out as the people listened to what the Bible told them to do, and did it.

Going forward through the month, we can be confident that they observed the high and holy Day of Atonement on the tenth day, as was commanded by Moses.

A few days later, they moved into temporary tents (“booths” or “tabernacles/tents”) they had made for the week-long celebration of the Feast of Tabernacles.

As chapter eight comes to an end, Tabernacles is winding down, but the action is far from over.

When Moses gave instruction as to how to observe this feast, he listed the distinctive sacrifices to be offered during the seven days.

And then he told the Jews that on the 8th day, there was to be a **[Numbers 29:35] “solemn assembly.”**

That means that the people were to re-gather, post-Feast of Tabernacles, to confess their sin.

Coming Together to Seek the Lord (vv. 1-4) **Approaching God with Humility (vv. 1-2a)**

[1] Now on the twenty-fourth day of this month¹ the sons of Israel assembled with fasting, in sackcloth, and with dirt upon them. [2a] The descendants of Israel separated themselves from all foreigners...

After a week during which the people learned that “***the joy of the Lord really was their strength***” through *feasting*, they have now come together *fasting*.²

The rough sackcloth³ and dirt on their bodies⁴ are signs of humility and brokenness. They have come together to tell the truth and to get honest with God.

A Day Set Aside to Focus on God (vv. 2b-3)

[2b]...and stood and confessed their sins and the iniquities of their fathers.⁵ [3] While they stood in their place, they read from the book of the law of the LORD their God for a fourth of the day; and for another fourth they confessed and worshiped the LORD their God.

Last Sunday we saw the people stand and listen as Ezra, the scribe, read from the Law for as long as six straight hours. Here, there is another prolonged period of giving attention to God.

¹ This is the month Tishri, the seventh month of the Jewish calendar, the first month of the civic year.

² Fasting is a time-honored spiritual discipline, engaged in by God’s people whenever they have faced a major life decision, have felt themselves to be under unusual pressure, or have sensed a need for a fresh turning to God. Believers in Old and New Testaments have fasted. Jesus assumed His followers would fast. The first Christians fasted, as recorded in the book of Acts, and they have continued to do so over the centuries to this day.

³ Sackcloth was a strong, rough cloth woven from the long, dark hair of the Oriental goat or the camel. It served the purpose of an ordinary piece of clothing, but over time came to bear a primarily symbolic meaning, indicating repentance.

⁴ 1 Sam. 4:12; 2 Sam. 1:2; Job 2:12; Jonah 3

⁵ To see the significance of this corporate confession of sin, we must understand the sense of historical continuity and solidarity that existed among the Jews. To confess the fathers’ sins was to confess their own.

First, they listened to the Law being read, again, for three to four hours. And that was followed by three to four hours of sober confession of sin.

Leaders Lead in Worship (v. 4)

Neither Ezra, the priest and scribe, nor Nehemiah, the governor, are mentioned.⁶ But the solemn assembly isn't leaderless. Levitical priests do, here, what priests were to do. They spoke to God (prayed) on behalf of the people.

Everyone is standing, expectant. The first words out of the priests' mouths magnify and praise God.

Behold the Goodness of God (vv. 5-15)

Intro: Bless the Lord! (vv. 5-6)

*[5] "Arise, bless the Lord your God forever and ever!
O may Your glorious name be blessed
And exalted above all blessing and praise.
[6] You alone are the LORD.
You have made the heavens,
The heaven of heavens with all their host,
The earth and all that is on it,
The seas and all that is in them.
You give life to all of them
And the heavenly host bows down before You.*

The prayer moves forward, turning from a sweeping praise of God to a rehearsing of God's special work in the history of Israel.

Grace to Abraham (vv. 7-8)

*[7] "You are the Lord God,
Who chose Abram
And brought him out from Ur of the Chaldees,
And gave him the name Abraham.*

⁶ It may be that as the leaders, they are behind the scenes, orchestrating things.

It all started with Abraham. Abraham was "ground zero" for God's plan to bless the people of Israel.

God gave covenant promises to Abraham, promises of a **land**, a **nation**, and **descendants**.⁷ And God kept His every promise.⁸

*[8] You found [Abraham's] heart faithful before You,
And made a covenant with him
To give him the land of the Canaanite,
Of the Hittite and the Amorite,
Of the Perizzite, the Jebusite and the Girgashite -
To give it to his descendants.*

And God's dealing with Abraham was just the beginning of His involvement with this family line.

The story moves on from Abraham to his descendants. We think of Isaac and Jacob and his twelve sons - who soon found themselves enslaved in Egypt.

Delivered from Egypt (vv. 9-11)

*[9] "You saw the affliction of our fathers in Egypt,
And heard their cry by the Red Sea.*

The sense is that God noticed what was happening to His people. He is "the God who notices" what His people are suffering.

And He does more than notice. He rescues. (vv. 9-11)

God brought the ten plagues against an arrogant Pharaoh and the oppressing Egyptians. At the tenth and final plague, Pharaoh said, "Good riddance!" and forced the Jews to leave his land.

⁷ The Abrahamic Covenant is found in several places in the book of Genesis, originally stated in chapter 12, and then restated in chapters 13, 15, 18, and 22.

⁸ In fact, throughout the bulk of the historical section of the Old Testament (Joshua - Esther), God's people were living in the land of Canaan.

But, then, he quickly changed his mind and chased them as far as the western shore of the Red Sea to re-enslave them. It was there that God performed the benchmark miracle of the Old Testament.

With Israel caught between a rock and a hard place (the sea and the Egyptian army), God held Pharaoh and his army at bay and divided the Red Sea so that Israel to cross over on dry ground.

After that, Israel never needed to ask if God loved them. After the Exodus, they never needed to doubt if God was for them. God went to bat for His people.

The prayer of the solemn assembly continues. The priests shift the scene from the Red Sea to the Sinai wilderness.

Provision in the Wilderness (vv. 12-15)

God guided (v. 12)

**[12] “And with a pillar of cloud You led them by day,
And with a pillar of fire by night
To light for them the way
In which they were to go.**

These Jews had never been in the Arabian peninsula. They didn't know where they were supposed to go. So, God led them through the desert by cloud and fire, straight to Mount Sinai.

He wanted them to know the right way to travel. He also wanted them to know the right way to live. So, there at Sinai, He gave them the Law.

God gave the Law (vv. 13-14)

God met with Moses on Mount Sinai and gave the nation what no nation had ever received: a direct revelation of His moral will.

He gave them a written, objective list of do's and don'ts so that they would know how to flourish, to thrive.

And that is not all.

God provided food and drink (v. 15a)

**[15] “You provided bread from heaven for them for their hunger,
You brought forth water from a rock for them for their thirst,**

Here is not only a God who notices and who rescues. He is a God who provides.

And, it was not as if God wanted His people to spend the rest of their national life in the wilderness, chasing a pillar of cloud and fire.

No, He provided a land for them to possess - the Promised Land of Canaan. And, He graciously invited them to enter and take that good land.

So, there you are in the square in Jerusalem listening to the priests recount your national story in prayer to God.

Has the Lord been good to the nation? Has He provided, protected, guided, and delivered? No question.

Then we hear the word, **“BUT”**, a word that puts us on the alert.

There is a shift in the works as the prayers now focus on the response of God's people to His goodness. And the first line summarizes the nation's behavior from the days of Abraham forward.

An UGLY Response to the BEAUTY of Grace (vv. 16-31)

God, Gracious to REBELS in the Wilderness (vv. 16-25)

BUT Israel immediately rebelled! (vv. 16-18)

**[16] “But they, our fathers, acted arrogantly;
They became stubborn and would not listen to Your
commandments.**

Note the progression.

An arrogant (independent, self-reliant) posture led to stubbornness; stubbornness resulted in a refusal to listen.

Husbands are sometimes accused of “selective hearing” - and there have sure been times when I’ve not listened to something Kathy told me that it would have been good for me to have heard.

Kids often can’t hear “*Clean up your room!*” but can hear the opening tune from a favorite show a block away.

And Israel loved to listen to God’s words of grace and love, but selectively chose to not hear His commands.

It gets worse. Alongside their “*closed ear policy*” to God’s commands, they instituted a “*memory-loss program*” with respect to God’s grace toward them.

***[17] They refused to listen
And did not remember Your wondrous deeds which You had performed among them.***

And what did God do in the face of Israel’s rebellion? Had you been in God’s shoes (?!), after all the goodness you had shown Israel, what would you have done?

Would you throw Israel out and start over? Would you give them up and choose another people? That’s what I might have done.

Not God. He dealt with them graciously.

That is the kind of God, God is: forgiving, gracious, compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness.

God continued to forgive them - EVEN AFTER THEY MADE THE GOLDEN CALF.

Unbelievably, this incident occurred very soon after they had been delivered from Egypt through the Red Sea.⁹ It happened while Moses was up on Mount Sinai receiving the Law from God.

The people gathered around the base of the mountain and worshiped the golden calf Aaron had made, calling it “god.”

What a slap in God’s face.

But, even after THIS sin, God didn’t abandon them. In fact, He continued to bless them throughout their time in the wilderness.

AND God blessed them beyond measure! (vv. 19-25)

He led them by the pillars of cloud and fire from place to place.

He gave them the Spirit’s instruction, manna for food, water from rocks, and clothing that didn’t wear out. He gave them military victories over vicious enemies.

Because of their refusal to enter the Promised Land when they were first offered it, their stay in the wilderness was exactly a generation longer than it should have been.

But, eventually, the time came for them to enter Canaan. It was all God had promised and more.

It would be like someone telling you that they wanted to help you and your family get into some decent, affordable housing. They even offer to drive you to your new home. So, you get in the car, expecting to take part in a Habitat for Humanity building project.

But your friend drives west on IH-10, takes the Camp Bullis Road exit and shows you to your new home in The Dominion.

***[25] “They captured fortified cities and a fertile land.
They took possession of houses full of every good thing.
Hewn cisterns, vineyards, olive groves,
Fruit trees in abundance.
So they ate, were filled and grew fat,
And reveled in Your great goodness.***

And then? After Joshua passed off the scene, we’re back to “**BUT**” at the period of the Judges.

⁹ Exodus 32.

God, Gracious to REBELS in the Time of the Judges (vv. 26-27)

***[26] But they became disobedient and rebelled against You,
And cast Your law behind their backs
And killed Your prophets who had admonished them
So that they might return to You,
And they committed great blasphemies.***

Despite all the kindness God showed to His people, they still rebelled. BUT, when they rebelled, God didn't sit passively on the sidelines. He actively intervened to turn them back to the right way.

He disciplined them, often in some pretty severe ways. Then, in their suffering they would yelp for help. Then, He would deliver them yet again.

And while Israel obeyed God no better during the period of the kings than she did during the period of the judges, God continued to deal with His people in grace while the kings ruled.

God, Gracious to REBELS in the Time of the Kings (vv. 28-31)

***[31] Nevertheless, in Your great compassion You did not
make an end of them or forsake them,
For You are a gracious and compassionate God.***

Like a boxer who catches his breath between rounds so that he can go on fighting for another three minutes, Israel would use the time right after her most recent deliverance to rest up for another round of rebellion against God.

And, He kept on rescuing them, time after time after time.

The final section of this prayer of confession (verse 29) finds the Israelites again standing toe-to-toe with God.

They simply refuse to admit that He is God and that they are not. "Submission" is, to them, a four-letter word.

This recounting of the nation's failings includes a fascinating word picture. We are told that ***"they turned a stubborn shoulder and stiffened their neck."***

Back when I was in college, I spent some time on the wrestling team. No claims to grappling fame, but I enjoyed the sport.

During our warm-up exercises, the coach would bark out, *"On your necks!"*

Then, we would roll over on our backs and bridge up so that the only parts of our bodies touching the mat were our feet and head.

The point of this awful exercise was to strengthen our necks so that if we were about to be pinned by an opponent, we could raise ourselves and our opponent off the mat with our neck muscles alone. A good wrestler can avoid defeat if he has a strong neck.

In wrestling, a strong, stiff neck is a good thing. It's hard to pin a wrestler with a strong neck.

To be a child of God with a stiff-neck is not so good. It is to be someone who never gives in to God - and that is disastrous.

It's disastrous because, while a wrestler who submits loses the match, when we submit to God, we win. Abundance follows the decision to submit to God.

For hundreds of years, the Jews had been bridging up on their necks, refusing to allow Him full rein in their lives, never letting Him have His way, never obeying Him.

So finally, after eight hundred years of rebellion, God let His people suffer the results of their disobedience! He ***[30] "gave them into the hand of the peoples of the lands."***

That's right. Despite the promises of the Abrahamic Covenant, God expelled Israel from the land He had promised them.¹⁰

So, finally, God gave up on Israel, right? That is the end of them, as the chosen people of God, right? No!

God STILL didn't forsake Israel. In fact, the reason He orchestrated their exit from the Promised Land was so that they would, in their misery, cry out to Him again. Which they did.

They cried out to Him in the days of Zerubbabel when the first band of refugees came back from Babylon to rebuild the temple seventy years after its destruction. God graciously gave them success.

Then, they cried out to God in the days of Ezra, when he led another group of five thousand Jews back to Jerusalem to re-establish right worship. He granted them success, too.

At each step, when they had returned to Him, He blessed, forgave, and restored - just as He had done countless time throughout the nation's history.

And now, finally, seeing that God still seemed willing to restore, we know why the Jews have gathered together again in the days of Nehemiah for a ***"solemn assembly."***

Just like a small child might bring a wrecked toy to his mom or dad to fix, (or as I might say to any of my tech-savvy friends when I've messed something up on my desktop...), they hold out their ruined lives to God, and ask, *"Thank You so much for all You've done for us. We're so sorry for what you've done. Would you please fix us again?"*

God, Let Us Behold Your Amazing Grace AGAIN! (vv. 32-37)

"Gracious and faithful God, our lives are HARD..." (v. 32)

Life hasn't been easy for God's chosen people. They have been suffering for some time - centuries, actually. Now, the Jews are calling on God for deliverance.

In their crying out to Him, they recognize a painful reality. They are simply reaping what they have sown.

"...and we know we're getting what we deserve" (vv. 33-35)

[33] "However, You are just in all that has come upon us; For You have dealt faithfully, but we have acted wickedly.

"We have deserved every bit of hardship that has come upon us. We shot ourselves in the foot. We did it to ourselves."

Everybody who might have been looked to for leadership dropped the ball - David, Solomon, the priests, the prophets. Everybody blew it. And as a result of what they have done, they are enslaved.

"Lord, We are Slaves in Our Own Land!" (v. 36-37)

[36] "Behold, we are slaves today, And as to the land which You gave to our fathers to eat of its fruit and its bounty, Behold, we are slaves on it.

[37] Its abundant produce is for the kings Whom You have set over us because of our sins; They also rule over our bodies And over our cattle as they please, So we are in great distress."

They thought that a life independent from God would bring liberty. They discovered that arrogant independence was a Bring Your Own Chain party, with foreign kings ruling over them.

¹⁰ The northern kingdom (Israel) was defeated by the Assyrians in 722 BC. The southern kingdom (Judah) was defeated and deported to Babylon in 586 BC.

The bottom line is that they are in a world of hurt. They see now that they have violated God's just laws. They have spit in His face.

But they understand what kind of God it is they are dealing with, throw themselves on His mercy, and ask Him to shower them with grace one more time.

Dozens of times, He has taken the Israelites back after their sin. Dozens of times, they have cried out for mercy, and He has said "YES!" Dozens of times God restored them after their punishment had taught them a lesson.

Will He do it, yet again?

Conclusion:

The Jews of Nehemiah's day were very sorry for their rebellion against God.

And the point of their long confession was a hope that God would forgive as He had in the past when His people said, "*I am so sorry*" - and praise God, He did!

That is the kind of God our God is: forgiving, gracious, compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness.

When His people turn to Him by way of serious and humble confession, He forgives, cleanses and restores. That is His policy.

And so, at the end of their long rebellion, Israel has at last realized that they had leaned their ladder against the wrong wall. By this confession (Nehemiah 9!), they have climbed down THAT ladder to begin climbing the ladder of submission and faithfulness to God.

Are you ready, today, to confess?

When you come to God, today, and tell Him, "*I am so sorry*" for your sin and rebellion, He promises **[1 John 1:9] to forgive [your] sins and to cleanse [you] from all unrighteousness.**

In Jesus, God has been so, so good to you. Is today the day that you need to come clean with God to be cleansed by God?

He is ready and willing to clean you up and to mend your brokenness. He is simply waiting for your simple confession. Go ahead - it is REALLY good for your soul.