



## THE SHAPE OF GOD'S ECONOMY

*Jeff Peabody  
New Day Church  
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Did you ever hear the old saying, "If it's not one thing, it's another?" I did a little research trying to figure out who first said that, but I could only trace it back as far as Roseanne Rosannadanna from Saturday Night Live. She told Jane Curtin many times, if it's not one thing it's another. If you're not having to deal with one problem, you're dealing with something else.

I have a hunch that Nehemiah very well may have coined the phrase, because every time he turned around, he was facing a new challenge. Last week we looked at the incredibly inspiring story of how Nehemiah called the people to stand up to the enemy they were facing as they rebuilt the city walls. They picked up swords in one hand and shovels in the other and turned the tide. They put their faith in the Lord who is great and awesome and held their ground. It was a fantastic display of bravery and determination.

You would think the people would be breathing a sigh of relief and focusing once again on the work at hand. But if it's not one thing, it's another, and no sooner had the situation settled down with the outside enemies than internal tensions began to boil over.

### **Nehemiah 5**

*Now the men and their wives raised a great outcry against their Jewish brothers. Some were saying, "We and our sons and daughters are numerous; in order for us to eat and stay alive, we must get grain."*

*Others were saying, "We are mortgaging our fields, our vineyards and our homes to get grain during the famine."*

*Still others were saying, "We have had to borrow money to pay the king's tax on our fields and vineyards. Although we are of the same flesh and blood as our countrymen and though our sons are as good as theirs, yet we have to subject our sons and daughters to slavery. Some of our daughters have already been enslaved, but we are powerless, because our fields and our vineyards belong to others."*

Let's pause here for a moment to grasp what's really going on. Nehemiah starts this section out by telling us that the men and their wives raised a great outcry. That's a very revealing statement, because you don't often hear much about the wives. That tells me it

was the women who first drew attention to this injustice. While the men were off working on the wall, their wives were back home trying to keep the family together and it wasn't working. There simply was not enough money. So they raise the outcry and say, "This is not right. Something has to change."

It was a bad downward spiral. Families needed food, but there was a famine, so they couldn't grow anything of their own. The men were consumed with finishing the wall, so they weren't bringing in much income. If this were today, what do people do when no money is coming in and there are bills to be paid? You start putting things on ebay. You sell off whatever you can. And that's what they were doing. Pretty soon, they're mortgaging their property and their homes just to get some cash.

But the need for money keeps growing, including the taxes to the king. So now they're out of food, out of money AND out of resources to generate money. Some of their fellow Jews start loaning them cash, but at high interest rates. So their debt is growing with no way to pay it off. When the loan sharks come to collect, there's nothing to take except the kids. So slavery becomes a way of survival.

It's a horrible practice, and it's a shock. On the one hand, you have the people working together so well together on this construction project. They've overcome so much and accomplished a great deal. But then you discover this disturbing situation that casts a shadow over all their successes. It's totally inconsistent. God had very specifically forbidden them to charge each other any interest on loans or take each other as slaves. There was no gray area here – they were in violation of God's law.

It's scary how easy it is to compartmentalize our lives. We can be doing really well in one area and be a complete disaster in another. And usually it's the same kind of split the people of Jerusalem had. Task wise, we seem on top of it, but relationally we may be falling way short.

When we're living with that kind of inconsistency, God's Spirit within us begins to raise an outcry and say, "This is not right. Something has to change."

That might feel very uncomfortable at first, because it means truth has to come out in the open and things can't stay the same. But it's the beginning of our rescue. It is a huge opportunity for life to be better.

Remember when Jesus compared the gospel to yeast that works its way through a whole lump of dough? The nature of the gospel is such that it wants to work its way into every area of our lives. We are all full of inconsistencies – there's no denying that. The question is: What happens when we become aware of those pockets where the gospel hasn't yet had its full effect?

Like we've seen so many times before, Nehemiah's response to his situation is full of wisdom we can apply to our own lives. Look at how he reacted:

*When I heard their outcry and these charges, I was very angry.*

I can't tell you how happy I am that he included that little bit of information. I love it that Nehemiah got angry. He wasn't angry with the people for complaining – he was sharing their anger over the situation. He identified with the pain they were feeling.

When was the last time sin or injustice made you emotional? We are too complacent sometimes about the things that break God's heart. Paul let himself feel sin deeply. He wrote to the Philippians and said,

**Philippians 3:18-19**

*For, as I have often told you before and now say again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ.*

We get upset about a lot of things – when life doesn't go our way, when we're misunderstood, when we feel disrespected. But I don't know how emotional I get over the fact that people live as enemies of the cross.

And quite frankly, my point is not that we need to have a lump in our throat or that we need to go ballistic. Being emotional isn't the point – feeling the weight and wrongness of sin is, because that's when we will be motivated to do something about it.

A nurse by the name of Margo McCaffery wrote the book on managing pain. In it she says, "Pain is whatever the patient says it is." In other words, if someone in the hospital complains that they hurt somewhere, it's not the doctor or nurse's job to say, "Oh it's not that bad." It's their job to take the patient's description at face value and deal with the pain.

The same thing is true of sin. If you tell me that what I said to you hurt you, it's not my place to say, "Don't be so sensitive. It wasn't that bad." If it hurts, it hurts. We won't begin to change our sinful habits until we connect with the depth of the pain those habits are causing.

Several years ago, when Addison had just started taking guitar lessons, I heard him practicing one day and noticed that he wasn't playing a chord quite right. I explained to him the proper fingering, and he promptly burst into tears.

That reaction made no sense to me at all. My words hadn't sounded harsh to me. Isaac had been sitting in the room too, so I turned to him for validation and said, "Isaac, I didn't sound mad, did I?"

And he said, "Well...actually dad...I kind of agree with Addison." I didn't know what to say. I didn't want to believe it at all. But I had to realize that maybe I wasn't the best judge of my own tone.

Connecting to the weight and emotion of our own sin begins with simply not dismissing what the other person is saying about how our actions impact them. Pain is what the other person says it is. It is only as we enter into their pain that we will feel enough motivation to change. Nehemiah connected with the pain of the people, and it made him angry enough to do something about it.

*When I heard their outcry and these charges, I was very angry. I pondered them in my mind and then accused the nobles and officials. I told them, "You are exacting usury from your own countrymen!" So I called together a large meeting to deal with them and said: "As far as possible, we have bought back our Jewish brothers who were sold to the Gentiles. Now you are selling your brothers, only for them to be sold back to us!" They kept quiet, because they could find nothing to say.*

*So I continued, "What you are doing is not right. Shouldn't you walk in the fear of our God to avoid the reproach of our Gentile enemies? I and my brothers and my men are also lending the people money and grain. But let the exacting of usury stop! Give back to them immediately their fields, vineyards, olive groves and houses, and also the usury you are charging them -- the hundredth part of the money, grain, new wine and oil."*

Even though Nehemiah is angry, he doesn't fly off the handle. He doesn't react based on his emotions. It says he pondered these charges in his mind. The phrase there in the Hebrew is literally closer to something like, "I took counsel with myself."

That's always a good thing to do when you feel a strong emotional reaction. Not only does it give you time to choose the best course of action – it also gives you the time to reflect on the CAUSE of your emotion. Why did you feel so strongly about it? What made you blow up or tear up? Once we know WHY something bothers us, we will have a better understanding of how to address it.

By the time Nehemiah confronted the people who were committing the offense, he had figured out the central issues on the line. He identified three very clear reasons why what they were doing was wrong, and I think it's because all three of them go against God's economy.

We think of money when we hear the word economy, but it really comes from two Greek words: *oikos*, meaning house, and *nomos* meaning law. And so economy originally referred to the way someone manages their house. So when I talk about the shape of God's economy, I'm talking about the way things are managed in his house. And they're done very differently than other "economies" we find in the world. What the people in Jerusalem were doing might have been acceptable in other societies, but not in God's house. So what did Nehemiah identify as the core problem with their behavior? To begin with, **it reverses grace.**

When I read through this story, I wondered what the modern application would be. Although some of you may have entertained the thought of selling off one or two of your kids, that's not really part of our culture. The takeaway couldn't really be to stop holding

each other's families as slaves. So initially, I thought the message would be about what Ron Sider calls "Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger." I thought we'd be wrestling with our responsibility to open our hearts and wallets to the plight of the poor. And God definitely cares deeply about that topic. That theme is hammered home all through the Bible. And New Day HAS been a generous congregation – caring for flood victims and hurricane victims, AIDS orphans, Meeker Middle School students and those within our own congregation. I am totally humbled by the way this church takes that message to heart.

But the more I reflected on the passage, the more I realized it was dealing with much more than poverty. It certainly touches on financial inequality, but in God's economy, money is never the main currency – grace is. And what bothered Nehemiah most was that the behavior of these people was glaringly inconsistent with grace.

Nehemiah points out to them that the whole point of coming back to Jerusalem was to get people OUT of slavery. They were leaving captivity behind in Babylon. This community was about restoring freedom, not taking it away. So for the wealthy classes to treat the lower classes this way was not just bad – it was the opposite of everything Jerusalem represented.

Now that's a concept that translates directly into our lives today. The Christian community at its core is about restoring freedom. God has bought us back from our slavery to sin and has forgiven us completely in Jesus. But all too often, we don't turn around and share that same grace.

It's like the parable Jesus told about the man who owed the king a huge sum of money. He went and begged the king for mercy, so the king cancelled his debt. But then the man turned around and found a guy who owed him a very small amount of money and threw him in jail when he couldn't pay. His life didn't reflect the great forgiveness he had received.

We read a story like that and can't believe he could be so hard-hearted. But it's very easy to justify not letting things go in our own life. If I were one of the wealthy people with slaves in Nehemiah's day, I think I would have rationalized things by saying, I'm really doing these people a favor, because they had no options. I didn't have to lend them money at all. And now that I did, they owe me something. It's their own fault if they didn't think things through before they borrowed the money. I don't need to feel bad because I deserve to get back what's mine.

And God would say, well, that's the rules the rest of the world operate by. But my people are going to be marked by a difference. You will have a heart-shaped economy, where compassion overrides payback, where mercy triumphs over justice and where relationships matter more than rights.

Let me be clear: I'm not talking about putting up with abusive relationships here. There are times when clear, firm boundaries need to be drawn. But I'm talking here about the

much more common issues of holding grudges and the easily injured attitude that many of us carry around at work or church or family reunions or on the soccer field.

We don't want to forgive people or let them off the hook for their wrongs because we feel that grace is undeserved. They truly hurt us and we deserve to get something from them, whether that is dignity or an admission of guilt or a commitment to change. They owe us. But that's the sticky thing about grace. It can never be earned, so the only way to give it is in a situation where you feel like the other person doesn't deserve it. Otherwise, it's not grace. The rest of the world is going to do what they want, but as the people of God, we are to be marked by the baffling choice we make to show grace to each other. That's the character of God, and it is so powerful when it is at work.

On Monday of this past week Gregory Smith went into a check cashing business in Indianapolis with the intention of robbing it. He hopped over the divider and pointed his gun directly in the face of Angela Montez. She was sure she was going to die. She begged him not to do it and told him he would be throwing away his life. He told her he and his daughter were homeless, that he couldn't find a job and he had no choice. They continued talking and at some point, it became clear that Angela was a Christian. And Gregory asked her right there if she would pray for him. So she did. The two prayed together for almost ten minutes. Afterwards, he took the bullet out of his gun and gave it to her, and they gave each other a hug.

Gregory ended up turning himself in to police, and in an interview from jail, he described how moved he had been by the grace Angela had shown to him. Her choice to show compassion rocked his world.

And it didn't just affect him. Charles Mudede is an editor for *The Stranger* and a professor at PLU. He talked about this story on his blog, and he compared it with another story in the news this week of atheists in New York plastering ads all over the subway that said, "A million New Yorkers are good without God. Are you?" And then he made this comment which I thought was remarkable:

*Though I'm an atheist...I'm much more drawn to the substance of the first news story than the substance of the second. In the first American story, we find the depths of the human condition; in the second, the heights of human arrogance.*

Grace catches the world off guard. It is so radically contrary to anything the rest of society offers that even most skeptical non-believers stop and take notice. That is the power of the character of God in action.

Let me give you one more quick illustration that happened this week. Greta Hale, who is a fifth grader in our church, was dealing with a girl at school who was not treating her well. She was saying mean things about Greta to other students and really hurting her feelings. One night, her mom Marisa was reading this verse to her from the Bible:

### **Proverbs 25:21-22**

*If you see your enemy hungry, go buy him lunch;  
if he's thirsty, bring him a drink.  
Your generosity will surprise him with goodness,  
and GOD will look after you.*

Greta heard that and jumped up saying, "I know what I'm going to do!" The next day at school, she gave the girl a note she had written on a heart-shaped piece of paper. It said, "Even though you have been mean to me, I will always be your friend." The girl was so moved, she got up and gave Greta a hug, and the relationship was restored.

Even though you have been mean to me, I will always be your friend. That is grace. We can find all kinds of ways to justify NOT showing grace. The other person is wrong, they haven't said they're sorry, they're not showing us grace. And it all sounds pretty convincing. Until you remember what Jesus did for us, and how huge all our sin against him is in comparison to what anybody has done to us. It's not about what the other person deserves – it's about what is consistent with who Christ is.

A second characteristic Nehemiah notices about the sin that's going on is that

### **It misplaces trust.**

The poor people were asking the question, "How will we survive if we don't have money?" The rich people were asking a similar question: "How will we make any money to live on if we don't charge interest or collect on our debts?" In both cases, money is seen as the solution. Nehemiah calls them on that:

*"What you are doing is not right. Shouldn't you walk in the fear of our God...?"*

Fear of starvation has a way of overruling fear of God. Reverting to what we could call "worldly" means of collecting on debts reflected a lack of trust in God as provider. They were taking matters into their own hands instead of going to God and waiting for him to come through.

I wish I could say I never did that. But I like control too much. I end up placing my faith and trust in things that I think are quicker and more concrete.

The problem is, whatever I place my trust in other than God can't live up to my expectations. We can't find our security in a job. We can't get our sense of identity from a relationship. We can't find peace of mind in a bank account. Why not? Because none of those things is permanent.

Only by walking in that fear of God, as Nehemiah puts it, only by throwing our trust entirely on him will we find the security we're looking for.

### **Psalm 112:1, 8**

*Blessed is the man who fears the LORD,*

*who finds great delight in his commands.*

*His heart is secure, he will have no fear;  
in the end he will look in triumph on his foes.*

Where are you placing your trust this morning? What are you counting on for your future? Another way to look at it would be what could you not imagine doing without? You can begin to release that to God, to ask him to help you let go of being in control. In God's economy, there's only room for him as the object of our faith.

Nehemiah could see that as the people were making these bad choices, they were not trusting God to take care of their needs. That was partly why he felt such a gut reaction against it. Another reason for his feeling the way he did about their behavior was because

### **It dims the visible spectrum.**

In physics, light is classified as electromagnetic radiation. There are waves of it all around us – some that we can see and some that can't be detected by the eye. The light we can see is called the visible spectrum.

Just like light, God's glory is all around us, whether we can see it or not. He's just glorious in nature, regardless of our awareness. But for some reason, the way he has chosen to make some of his glory visible is through us.

### **Isaiah 42:6**

*I am GOD. I have called you to live right and well.  
I have taken responsibility for you, kept you safe.  
I have set you among my people to bind them to me,  
and provided you as a lighthouse to the nations.*

That's our purpose. What we do has the potential to highlight God for people, to lift him up and make him easier to see. But we also have the potential to dim that glory with our actions. We can make it harder to recognize him, and that was what was happening in Israel. Nehemiah had said to the people,

*“What you are doing is not right. Shouldn't you walk in the fear of our God to avoid the reproach of our Gentile enemies?”*

Their actions were resulting in disdain and ridicule by their surrounding neighbors. It was a poor reflection on God, which was the opposite of what God's people were meant to do.

It dims the visible spectrum of God's glory when people who call themselves Christ followers aren't walking the same path as Jesus. It dims the visible spectrum of God's glory when we go after glory of our own. It dims the visible spectrum of God's glory

when we are more concerned about pleasing people than pointing them to Jesus, because then we're trying to get people to be happy with us, and we're satisfied when they like us. Let's be a group of believers whose deepest desire is to love people until they are satisfied with Christ.

In all these ways, you can see how God's economy operates so differently from the way the world's economy operates. Extending grace. Living a life of dependence and trust. Looking out for God's glory first. It is a radical departure from how the people of Jerusalem were living, and if we're honest – a pretty radical departure from where we live much of the time.

But what's encouraging to me is the very next section of this chapter. After Nehemiah laid out his argument, look how the nobles responded:

*"We will give it back," they said. "And we will not demand anything more from them. We will do as you say."*

*Then I summoned the priests and made the nobles and officials take an oath to do what they had promised. I also shook out the folds of my robe and said, "In this way may God shake out of his house and possessions every man who does not keep this promise. So may such a man be shaken out and emptied!"*

*At this the whole assembly said, "Amen," and praised the LORD. And the people did as they had promised.*

There was a famous cartoonist in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century named Rube Goldberg. He became famous for drawing these imaginary inventions that were way too complicated to do something really easy, like using a napkin or putting toothpaste on a toothbrush. The game mousetrap was based on his inventions. In fact, the Merriam-Webster dictionary actually turned Rube Goldberg's name into an adjective to describe "doing something simple through a complex means."

Sometimes we make getting out of sin way more complicated than it has to be. We invent all kinds of artificial hurdles and barriers that make it seem harder than it is, when really it's a very simple matter of obedience.

The people heard what Nehemiah said and they changed. How refreshing is that? They didn't get bogged down in guilt and shame. They didn't waste their time being defensive and explaining their actions. They knew Nehemiah was right. So they said yes. Yes, you're right. Yes, we'll change. Yes, we'll be accountable. Yes, we'll follow through.

How incredible that must have been. In unison, this entire community decided it wanted to reshape itself according to God's economy. What an awesome testimony even that change must have been.

As I said before, we all have layers of inconsistencies that result in us being out of step with God's will. Whether we struggle with forgiveness or trusting God or having our

actions bring glory to him, there are going to be places in life where we fall short. The good news is that God's grace is there waiting for us every time we say yes to him. Yes God. You're right. Yes I need your forgiveness. Yes I will change. Yes I will be accountable. Yes I will follow through.

Nehemiah wraps up this section by telling us about his own personal choices during this time. He had been appointed governor of Jerusalem by this time, and as governor, he was entitled to certain privileges: tax money and land and a certain amount of food and wine. They were his by right. But he gave them all up, because he didn't want to burden the people.

Instead, he joined in the work on the wall with everyone else. And he regularly fed over 150 of the officials at his table.

*I never demanded the food allotted to the governor, because the demands were heavy on these people.*

That's living according to God's economy. That's living like Jesus. Jesus gave up his own rights and chose instead to join us on the wall. Jesus knows the demands are heavy on us. He knows we're weary and weighed down. And he calls us to himself. Say yes to me. My burden is light. And he spreads out a banquet before us and says welcome to my house. We do things differently here.

May that be said of us as well.