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NEHEMIAH 1:4-11

Series: Life Lessons from Nehemiah

[PRAYER] Lord, as we open your word, we're doing that recognizing that you speak to us. But we know that our hearts have to be open. You say that in your word that *I have hidden your word in my heart so that I won't sin against you*. So Lord, we want our hearts to be open so we can take the nuggets from your word and receive them for our hearts. So I pray that you'd bless the study that I've done this week. I thank you for teaching me and guiding me through this passage and applying it to my life. I pray that you would bless our time now as I share some of those ideas from your word with the folks here today. I ask this in Jesus' name, amen.

If you're a 10-14 year old, you're going to want to take notes on the piece of paper that's there. After the prayer today we're going to send you out. Outside there Rose is going to meet you and talk to you about the sermon and things that you had questions about or things that you learned. The rest of you, I would encourage you to take notes too.

As I study this part of Nehemiah, I'm just impressed with his vulnerability. As a leader he doesn't come off as someone who has it all together. He's like us. He's got challenges. He comes with a sense of weakness and vulnerability. As I meditated on that idea this week, I appreciated a couple of phrases that have to do with this vulnerability idea. Vulnerability is this birthplace of courage. It's this place that I think if we're willing to be vulnerable, then courage can take place. Here's a guy who changes his world. It's powerful what happens in the midst of this.

Vulnerability. We're going to spend some time looking at that, taking responsibility for ourselves. That's going to be helpful. Vulnerability is this entrance to a spiritual breakthrough and if we're going to have that, as many of you know, there's going to have to be this sense of being willing to be real in our own hearts before the Lord, to admit our own weaknesses and challenges that we have.

So why don't you stand with me and let's read our passage together.

Nehemiah 1:4. By the way, if you remember in this story, Nehemiah has come to this place where he has listened to the news about what's going on in Jerusalem and it's bad news. So this is his response to hearing the news in the first three verses. It says – *When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven.*

Then I said: "Lord, the God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and keep his commandments, let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer your servant is praying before you day and night for your servants,

the people of Israel. I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself and my father's family, have committed against you. We have acted very wickedly toward you. We have not obeyed the commands, decrees and laws you gave your servant Moses.

Remember the instruction you gave your servant Moses, saying, 'If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the nations, but if you return to me and obey my commands, then even if your exiled people are at the farthest horizon, I will gather them from there and bring them to the place I have chosen as a dwelling for my Name.'

They are your servants and your people, whom you redeemed by your great strength and your mighty hand. Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of this your servant and to the prayer of your servants who delight in revering your name. Give your servant success today by granting him favor in the presence of this man."

I was cupbearer to the king.

You may be seated.

As we look at the first part of that passage, it's just amazing. Notice that it says he *sat down and wept* when he heard the news. So he heard the news about the pain that was going on somewhere else in the world. He saw the struggle that people were facing.

I think that sometimes in our lives we become immune to the pain in our world because we see it so much. If you turn on the news today or you check the news on your internet, or however you get news, most of the news I would suggest is bad news. You hear about the latest event or the latest shooting or the latest natural disaster or something going on that's bad. And when that takes place, we're bombarded with the negative news. So we have a tendency to just gloss over it. "Oh it's just another shooting" and we're off to the next thing.

We must realize there are people behind all of these things. There are challenges happening behind every one of these hurricanes that are taking place. There are Christians trying to serve the Lord in other places in the world where bad things are happening.

I'm just impressed with Nehemiah because notice his response. There's this pain in his response. He's just identifying with the pain of the people that he would just sit down and weep. That it bothered him. There was this sense of heartbreak.

I want to suggest that when we feel the heartbreak of pain of other people, whether those are outside our sphere of influence or the people that we know, I mean sometimes we just know people right around us and our hearts break because they are making bad choices. Sometimes it doesn't have anything to do with them, but something's happening to people and our hearts break for them. But sometimes we are challenged in our own hearts because they break because of bad choices people are making. I want to suggest to you that when your heart breaks for the pain of other people, you are really close to God's heart. That God's heart breaks when we think about the exile and the people going into exile and then coming back. His heart just breaks for that.

That's why Jesus mourned or wept, the Bible says, before the crucifixion. It says that Jesus wept over Jerusalem. Why was He weeping? He was weeping because this is the city of God and they're missing out on the blessing. They're missing out on those special things that come when you understand God and you know who He is and what He's doing. So Jesus just wept.

Nehemiah's heart is just drawn to this whole problem and he wants to be part of the solution.

The passage then says that he goes to the Lord and he prays. Now we're going to see next week that there is a four-month period of time in here, but we'll talk about several things in fact about Nehemiah and his character next week as we study more about he was kind of a guy like us who wanted to make a change in the world. And he had some really good things that he could offer, but it came out of just some character that he had. That's next week.

But notice the first thing he does is he prays. He goes, "Lord, I want to talk to you." Now when I start a prayer, usually I start a prayer "Lord" and then I'm into it. Just see how Nehemiah expands the introduction to his prayer. He draws attention to admiration of God just in the way he starts his prayer. A good model for us, a good thing to think about.

He says – *Lord, the God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and keep his commandments.* He's just expanding this admiration of God. *Let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer your servant.* Notice the whole focus of the prayer is on God, not on him. Notice the word *you, your*, how often it's repeated here. *Your eyes open to hear the prayer your servant is praying before you day and night for your servants, the people of Israel.* Just this focus on God, admiration of Him and greatness. It's just a good model for our prayers to open our prayers with admiration of God and who He is.

But now he enters this part in his prayer, which is a confession part. This is where I was just a little bit uncomfortable about the vulnerability, the taking responsibility here. *I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself and my father's family, have committed against you. We have acted very wickedly toward you. We have not obeyed the commands, decrees and laws you gave your servant Moses.*

There's an editorial 'we' that we use sometimes. "We the church" is a way that we might use the word 'we.' Or "we in America." That's an editorial 'we.' This is not just an editorial 'we.' This is a 'we' of personal responsibility. Because notice he says – Even me, *including myself and my father's family.* There's this sense of vulnerability, this willing to admit a problem, this weakness, willing to suggest his own offense, his own guilt.

I'm puzzled by that because Nehemiah himself wasn't alive when the people were taken into exile. This is many years later, seventy plus years later when this prayer is being offered. But he's looking at himself and he's recognizing that he's part of something, this problem. He's not just part of the solution, he's part of the problem is what he's saying here. And he's offering that to the Lord and saying, "Lord, I just want to confess. I want to be vulnerable. I want to take

responsibility for being part of the problem.” So what he does when he takes responsibility, he says – *I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself*. So he’s including himself in the process.

I want to talk about some aspects of this vulnerability, this taking responsibility. I think we all need to learn how to take responsibility for things in our lives, for the challenges that we face because we have a tendency to pass that on to other people. So I’m going to share with you some observations about this idea of taking responsibility.

The first one I want to share with you is this: Taking responsibility for one’s own actions is unusual today. I don’t know if you notice that, but there’s a lot of passing the buck. There’s a lot of blaming other people for the problems. So taking responsibility for one’s own actions is unusual, but it’s here. It’s here in taking responsibility that health begins in our lives. It’s here that when we take responsibility that character grows, that relationships are restored and that change takes place.

There’s some people who believe that the problem is really with the whole world. It’s not with me. “If everybody else would change, I’d be happy” kind of experience. And so the blame goes to everyone in the world.

I like the story of the two young boys who wanted to play a trick on their grandfather. So while he was sleeping in his easy chair, they took some limburger cheese (that’s the real smelly cheese) and they rubbed it on his moustache and then went back around the corner to watch and see what would happen. When grandpa woke up, “[sniff, sniff] This chair stinks,” he says. So he gets up and walks around the room. And as he’s walking around the room, “[sniff, sniff] This room stinks.” So he goes and he starts walking throughout the house and he’s walking throughout the house everywhere and he goes, “[sniff, sniff] This whole house stinks. So he goes outside in the front yard and under the grass and he goes, “[sniff, sniff, sniff] This whole world stinks.” And of course the moral of the story is if you think the whole world stinks, maybe you ought to look at yourself.

Nehemiah is looking at himself and saying, “Look. I am entering into this. So I recognize that I’ve got a part of this problem.” The challenge is that we tend to look at all the percentage of problems that exist in other people, not just ourselves. So in the verse, Nehemiah what he says is – *I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself and my father’s family, have committed*. There’s this sense of taking responsibility. There’s a tendency.

And how much responsibility was his? It’s got to be less than 1%. I mean I don’t know how much of this problem of the exile was Nehemiah’s. I have a hard time imagining... But he’s taking responsibility for his own heart. I think what we need to do is take 100% responsibility for our small percentage of whatever the problem is. Taking responsibility is strategic because it’s the beginning, it’s the vulnerability that allows us to move into change. It’s the thing that allows us to change in relationships. When we start recognizing our part, that we are not just victims in life, that things start to happen.

Which brings me to the second point, which has to do with blaming. This idea of blaming is challenging because when people blame and blame and blame, they develop a victim mentality.

The idea of a victim mentality is “I don’t have any power. I’m just a victim here. The problems in my life are caused by other people and because they are caused by other people, I have no control and no ability to get anything done. I can’t move forward in my life.” Where I would suggest that when we start taking responsibility for our lives, then it empowers us in a powerful way. God would have us do that in our lives.

This week I asked Mike Dammann (who’s a police officer), “Mike, could you tell me some of the excuses that people give when you pull them over for speeding?” Oh I had fun reading his list of things that he sent. One of them was “I’m wearing heavier boots.” I just think that’s so funny. People say, “Oh I’ve got to get to the doctor for my appointment.” Or “my wife’s going to be mad at me if I’m going to be late.” Do you see how people pass the buck and the problem is always somebody else’s problem? I found that all of the excuses that he shared with me quite fascinating. In fact people have all kinds of reasons. “I don’t speak English, so I couldn’t read the signs.” “I thought you would ignore me.” All of these comments that people made to a police officer when they find themselves in a difficult situation. I find that we tend to blame our problems, whatever they are.

So I asked Mike (because I want to know this), “When I get pulled over by the police officer for speeding, what do you say to them that maybe he would not give you a ticket?” He said, “You know, the best thing you could do is just say, ‘You know, officer, I was wrong.’” You can give whatever reason you want, but take responsibility instead of trying to blame it on other people. I’m not sure if that will work for you, but if it does, let us know. The idea I just think is that blaming I think is one of those things that gets us into trouble.

I think it happens in young people as children. Often you say, “Okay well what did you do wrong?” “Well she did....” And there’s this pass the buck in what somebody else did instead of taking responsibility for self. So this idea of responding well to our own challenges is important. and as we do, good things happen.

Now this problem with blaming didn’t start recently. It actually took place in the Garden when Adam and Eve took and ate of the fruit of the tree that God told them not to eat. God asks the question, He comes into Adam and He says, *“Have you eaten from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from?”*

The man said, “The woman who you gave me—she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it.” Let’s blame it on somebody else.

So God said to the woman, *“What is this you have done?”*

“The serpent deceived me,” she replied, “and I ate.”

There’s this tendency to blame. We must take responsibility for ourselves if we want to be able to move forward. So that’s another observation of this idea that Nehemiah’s doing. He’s taking responsibility.

Let me give you a third observation. That taking responsibility is an attack on one’s identity. This is why I think sometimes children have a hard time taking responsibility because if they’re corrected, sometimes you correct a child and they get all upset and they don’t realize the value of correction but rather they see it as a personal attack on who they are. “I am not a good person

because I have done something wrong.” And really this is where humility starts to grow in our own hearts.

Humility is... I was trying to think this week. Is humility do we focus on other people or do we focus on ourselves with humility? Then I realized that we do both, depending on the situation. If we are successful in something, humility means we give credit to God and others who've contributed to that success. But if we're wrong, we want to focus on ourselves and recognize that we have a part in that or that we have some way that we can take responsibly.

It's this aspect of humility that's so attractive. I think it's attractive to people that... Nehemiah's this leader. He's a leader that's humble. He says *we*. Just the idea that he's saying, “We have a problem here and I'm part of that problem,” is an attractive thing about a leader who doesn't just say, “You guys need to do this and you guys need to do this.” Nehemiah's going to give direction, but he does it in a way that demonstrates this humility that I want and I think we need in our lives. He demonstrates that here in his prayer by taking responsibility for himself.

Humility is this valuable quality. In fact the scripture tells us – *Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time.* Humility recognizes how small we are, or how weak or frail we are, how great God is, and then allows Him to be in control and in charge. So that's a third observation.

A fourth observation of taking responsibility is that God's plan for confession opens the door for more grace. More grace. Everybody receives grace. You could be grateful because you get grace whether you're responding to God or not. Whether you're a Christian or not a Christian, you get grace. In fact the Bible says that God's grace falls on the just and the unjust. In other words, everybody gets grace. The fact that you are able to breathe or you're able to see a sunrise. Christians and non-Christians both see a sunrise (if you're up that early in the morning) or a sunset and you get to enjoy it. Okay? That's God's grace at work. God's grace is at work in the lives of nonbelievers and they get to experience blessings in their lives.

But there's something about humility that gives you more grace. You get seconds on grace I think would be a good way to say it. Let's look at the verse that says – *He gives us more grace. That is why Scripture says: "God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble."*

Do you like having seconds? When we had our lunch the other day, Rose brings this excellent potato salad that she makes and it's seasoned just perfectly and it was a whole bowl of it. So I'm sure you got some if you like potato salad. But when I was done with that, I went back to get seconds because I really like that potato salad. I think we need seconds on God's grace. Does anybody want seconds on God's grace? I do! Yes! Let's ask God for seconds on grace. I want more grace.

How do we get it? He tells us right here. *He opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble.* The humble person is the one who says, “I don't know it all. I can trust God even though I don't have all the answers. God doesn't have to prove Himself to me. I can give myself to Him.” That's humility. Humility is so valuable.

Humility is necessary for the student who's going to learn something. I know some of you students have classes where some students just sit back like "you can't teach me anything." Humility is so valuable in a person's heart that allows them to look outside of themselves instead of being the person who evaluates God as if I'm going to decide what God can and can't do. It's the person who says, "God, I'm going to trust you. I don't understand everything about you, but I'm going to trust you. I want to give my life to you in that respect." So humility is valuable.

Let's go to one more observation because I don't think we can talk about this idea of guilt without separating guilt and shame. Guilt and shame. Guilt is this ability to take responsibility for our actions and it can be a healthy emotion that leads to repentance. God designed it that way. He gave us a conscience so that we could make a change, we would adjust.

The problem is that shame is an attack of Satan. It's self-condemnation is what it is. It's an attack on the person himself. So we see in Romans 8 it says – *Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.* I think that what happens is that we give Satan too much credit. I mean Satan is the attacker. He's the one who's accusing us. And he does that in our lives. But then I think we somehow take the responsibility over and we do self-condemnation. We start putting ourselves down, and that shame is a problem.

So let me just compare the difference between guilt and shame just for a moment in this chart. On the one hand on the left we have guilt and guilt focuses in on the action, the behavior itself, where shame focuses on the person. Guilt is a step toward change, where shame is a step toward negativity in our lives. Guilt helps us feel empowered because now we've taken responsibility and we're part of the solution, whereas shame makes us feel unworthy and unloved. Guilt says I made a mistake. Shame says I am a mistake.

And to the extent that you feel shamed today, I want you to know that God wants to take that away. It's very important that we take responsibility. We ask the question, what did we do wrong? Okay. "Here's what I did. I sinned," Nehemiah says to the people, "and my family has sinned. I'm with you in this." He takes personal responsibility and he's going to be part of the solution. It's powerful what he does in this particular situation I think in this passage.

It's very easy for us to blame problems on other people. I worked with a girl who is sixteen years old. She and her mom came to see me. Dad wasn't interested in coming to see and be a part of this. In fact the girl had a problem with anger at sixteen years old and she said, "And my dad really has a problem with anger." In other words he's the problem. And I said, "Okay. Here's what I'm going to do with you. I'm going to help you deal with your anger and then I'll show you how you can help your dad deal with his anger." She rolled her eyes at me like "oh yeah right." I said, "Okay, well let's work on it." So for the next three or four weeks, I really helped her and God's grace helped her to deal with her anger issues and know how to manage herself so she wasn't controlled by other people. She was able to gain better control of her own emotional management in her life at sixteen years old. It was great.

So after about four weeks I said, "Okay. Let me help you give you some ideas about how to help you with your dad's anger." Again she rolled her eyes. I said, "Okay look. Just try this. Okay? You've made a lot of progress in your own emotions. Try this with your dad. Next time your dad

comes in (because dad would want her to do her chores or homework or whatever it is) and tells you to do something – take out the trash or whatever you didn't do – I want you to try this. Look him in the eye and say to him, 'Dad, I'm sorry. I'll take care of it.' Just those words. 'Dad, I'm sorry. I'll take care of it.'" So she says okay. She was ready for a change and she was very responsive.

So she went away and she came back the next week and I said, "How did it go?" She said, "Well it was really interesting because normally he comes in and he starts yelling at me and lecturing me about the challenge. But there were these dishes that weren't done and it was my job to do them. So he came into my room and he told me about the dishes and he started to talk some more and I said, 'Dad, I'm sorry. I'll take care of it.' And my dad didn't know what to do. He just kind of looked at me and then turned around and left the room." So I said, "It's really helpful when we take responsibility for our part of the problem."

One of the things I appreciate about Christianity is that this is how it all starts for us. That when you come to God, you must admit humbly I'm a sinner. Romans 3:23 says – *For all have sinned. All. All. Every one of us have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.* That's how it all starts for us. So we share this together. So it's a beautiful thing within the Christian community that we experience this humility inside of our hearts.

Romans 6:23 says – *For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.* It is a gift that God gives us, which makes us then more grateful for what God has done.

See the Christian life is this beautiful place that we enter and the door is a low one. So we have to bow in order to come and enter the faith. It's just God's design that we would understand this humility and that's what Nehemiah does in this passage. He's humble, he's leading, he comes to the Lord, he asks God for something. In fact that's what he does last in this passage. Notice at the bottom he says – *Give your servant success today by granting him favor in the presence of this man.* So of all of the things he says, he comes down now into verse 11 and here's where he makes his request that's really small. If you compare his whole prayer, heavy on the admiration of God, heavy on the character of God, and "God, I'm coming to you to ask you to listen to me," and then one sentence: Lord, would you do this for me?

Next week we're going to see how Nehemiah is going in before this man who's the king that he's going before and he's going to ask for time off, he's going to ask for letters of commendation, and he's going to ask for a donation. I means he's going to ask for a lot. No wonder he's praying because this doesn't look like something his boss might normally give. We're going to talk about more of what that looks like in very practical ways for our own lives next week. But this week we're just focusing in on this humility, this vulnerability, this willingness to come before God and allow him to be great and for us to be small and for us to recognize our need before him.

So would you stand with me and let's pray together.

[PRAYER] Heavenly Father, we do come now and ask for your grace, more of your grace in our lives. Lord, we know that requires humility and that is frankly difficult sometimes, especially when so many other people have done wrong things around us. Help us to take responsibility for our part. Teach us what it looks like to trust you and then, Lord, we ask that you would open doors of opportunity like you did for Nehemiah for change in our lives. So we come humbly before you and ask for your grace to work in our lives today. In Jesus' name, amen.