

Trinity Sunday

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[0 : 00] In the mid-18th century, after a short-lived career in the Royal Navy, a young Englishman found himself an active participant in the slave trade, traveling to the Caribbean on more than one occasion and participating in selling slaves.

That economy was very much a part of who he was. And although he had a religious conversion to Christianity, he continued in this slave trade for just about a decade before becoming an Anglican cleric.

Very interesting change of careers. Realizing that he had participated in evil, he penned possibly the most famous Christian hymn of all time, and that's Amazing Grace.

He would go on to play a big part in the abolition of the slave trade in the empire at the tail end of the 18th century into the 19th century.

His name is John Newton. A slaver turned Anglican minister and hymn writer turned abolitionist, and at the end of his life, it was reported that he said this, My memory is nearly gone, but I remember two things, that I am a great sinner and that Christ is a great Savior.

[1 : 15] How do you deal with sin in your life? How do you approach it? How do you deal with patterns of thoughts or actions that are hurtful or destructive to yourself and others?

How do you address evil when you see it rear its head in your day-to-day? How do you deal with regret? In no way do I want to suggest that the self-help or self-improvement kind of industry or apparatus is wrong.

Not at all. But I find it remarkable that this industry is worth multi-billions in North America. And I think that truth speaks to this recognition that many of us know that our lives aren't what they ought to be, and we desperately want to do something about it.

We want to deal with the evil that we see or the hang-ups that we have or the habits that we can't kick, the regret that we just can't shake.

Our text today will speak of sin and its destructive power, but more importantly, it will give us a roadmap of how to experience freedom.

[2 : 34] It will speak to the importance of conviction and repentance and amendment of life and how these things are fundamental for a full and free personal life and societal life.

So the text will help us to see and recognize that sinful behavior is always selfish and exploitative. The second thing it will help us to do is recognize that the only path to freedom is through repentance.

And then finally, this text will help us to recognize that repentance must lead to amendment of life. And that amendment of life has to be rooted in the fear of the Lord.

So if you're following with me, if you can follow with me with your Bible, that would be huge. There's a stack of Bibles at the back. Grab one at any time and follow along.

We're going to be in Nehemiah chapter 5, the text that Steve read for us. So we've been in Nehemiah for now four weeks. This is the fourth week. We have witnessed Nehemiah using his influence and skill set to address the horrendous situation of Jerusalem's walls.

[3 : 45] He hears the news. The walls are broken down. He is broken about it himself. He prays. He fasts. He looks for an opportunity to do something. We then saw that he was incredibly bold in approaching the Persian king and asking for a leave and then resources to help rebuild the wall.

And finally, we looked last week at his courage and standing up to a very credible threat that threatened the rebuilding of the walls. It's been walls, walls, walls for three straight weeks. This week says nothing.

Chapter 5 says nothing about the walls. Very interesting. Why is it here? It doesn't... It seems in a way, potentially, that there's a break in the narrative. In fact, some scholars say just that.

They say, you know what? Chapter 5 actually shouldn't be right here. It should be maybe at the tail end. This is an editor's insert of something that happened later on.

But it's really interesting if we consider this placement of Chapter 5 and what it addresses, specifically, the societal breakdown.

[4 : 53] And we remember that the rebuilding of the walls was never just a building project for a physical rebuild of Jerusalem's walls, but a rebuilding of the people that, much like the walls, lay in ruin.

So here we kind of... We see an aspect of how these people are in ruins and how much they're in ruins and how destroyed they are and what they need to, in a sense, be rebuilt.

So, we see right off the bat there's haves and have-nots in Jerusalem. And the haves are not doing the kind, merciful, loving thing by lifting up the have-nots out of their poverty, but rather they're seeing it as an opportunity to get more rich, to press them down so that they could rise higher.

And there's actually three groups of these have-nots or disenfranchised people that are in progressively dire situations. So, look with me, Chapter 5, starting in Verse 1, and we'll read 1 to 5 and see if you can see these people.

Now there arose a great outcry of the people and of their wives against their Jewish brothers. For there were those who said, With our sons and our daughters we are many, so let us get grain that we may eat and keep alive.

[6 : 22] There were also those who said, We are mortgaging our fields, our vineyards, and our houses to get grain because of the famine. And there were those who said, We have borrowed money for the king's tax on our fields and our vineyards.

Now our flesh is as the flesh of our brothers, our children are as their children, yet we are forcing our sons and our daughters to be slaves. And some of our daughters have already been enslaved, but it is not in our power to help them.

For other men have our fields and our vineyards. And I'll stop there. We have some people that just have enough money to buy food. They're starving, otherwise they're gone.

There's another group of people that are selling and mortgaging everything they have just to put food on their table. And then still another group of people who are so desperate, they have nothing, just to eat.

They're selling their children into slavery. Just a pause real quick. This is not chattel slavery. This isn't man-stealing, as in the slave trade in West Africa and the Caribbean.

[7 : 32] There was a period of time that people could be slaves, at least in the Jewish life. The seventh year they were supposed to be let free. It wasn't based on race or necessarily race or ethnicity.

But they were still slaves. This is still slavery. And if they were sold into slavery, the family could get some money to buy some food. They would be sure that their children, now slaves, would have food.

But nevertheless, this is a terrible, dire situation. The people have enemies on all sides, and now they have financial hardship on all sides. There's the people that have left their livelihoods to rebuild the walls.

About two months of not working for their livelihoods. And this, of course, would bring financial stress. Not only that, we see that there's a famine. And on top of all of that, there is this heavy tax from the Persians that they have to pay.

They are being pinched on all sides, mortgaging property, selling their children. This is a giant mess. Like the walls, the people are broken.

[8 : 43] All of the borrowing and selling of lands is also, on top of all of that, is at the hands of their fellow Jews.

Who are taking advantage of this situation to get rich. This is kicking people while they're down. And not just some people. Brothers, sisters, cousins, distant relatives.

This is supposed to be the people of God looking after each other. And instead, they are using this as an opportunity to further the riches. It's gutless.

It's lacking any kind of compassion and mercy. It is zero love here. And not only that, it's detestable in God's sight. As the Lord has specifically, and in many different instances, instructed his people to not engage in usury.

To not lend money demanding a heavy tax in return. Especially among the people of God. So it's extortion. And it's something that God hates. Because for sure, it doesn't reflect who God is.

[9 : 52] But also, remember, these are the Israelites who have been slaves themselves. And God has rescued them out of slavery. And then they turn around to, in a sense, extort and enslave others.

It's a very weighty, weighty chapter and a terrible problem. And you start to see why these people, like their walls, are broken. Selfishness and sin is the characteristics of God's people.

Not justice and kindness and love and mercy. They're no longer reflecting God. They're not even trying to reflect God's character in all of this. Selfishness and sin never affect just us.

It will always abuse and neglect others. Why? Because at the heart of a... At the very bottom, at the core of a selfish heart, is pride.

The elevation of self to be more valuable, more worthy, more divine than others. But what really happens is that human dignity is suppressed. Pride and selfishness will always lead to treating people as a means to an end.

[11 : 01] Not as people made in God's image. Not people who have inherent dignity. But mere stepping stones to whatever goal they're trying to achieve.

It's a problem. Selfishness never... It never flourishes. It is like a flower in a desert. How long will it last?

Not sure. Not very long. No water. Selfishness never flourishes. It always destroys. God created humanity to be at peace with one another.

And this is a very interesting fact in all of this. It's not as if the Israelites, some have, some don't have. But the some that do have, okay, you know, it's not nice what I'm doing, but who cares?

It doesn't affect me. God has designed all of human life so that we need other people. So that if we are a part of a community, we can't fully flourish if those around us are suffering.

[12 : 04] It doesn't work that way. God has designed our lives as individuals to be lived in community. And when one suffers, we can turn a blind eye and think things will be okay.

But we will suffer. We will. And this is what is happening here. The community is not functioning properly. It would be like a group of Israelites are building one portion of the wall.

There's some 40 different portions of the wall that had to be rebuilt. They rebuilt this wall and said, listen, my wall, my portion, it looks great. It's excellent. We use the best materials. I'm done early.

Like, who are you? What are you doing? You know, tough to be you. You haven't built your portion of the wall. I'm safe and secure. But that doesn't work. It doesn't work that way. The wall has to be unified.

It has to be strong. There can't be any breaches in the wall. Or the wall ceases to do what the wall is supposed to do. Provide protection. Here, the Israelites are a breached wall in every sense of the term.

[13 : 12] Friends, do you have a relationship where your pride and selfishness is causing the hardship of others? Think about it. Think about it. Pray. Ask the Lord to open your eyes.

Are you a source not of blessing but of destructiveness in somebody else's life? You lord something over other people.

If so, by God's grace, stop this. And conversely, if you are experiencing hardships because of an injustice, because of somebody that, for whatever reason, just pushes you down, you can be sure that God sees it.

That he is not blind to what is happening. The Lord sees you and he is not indifferent to your situation. So, here we have the problem.

We have a perfect example of how selfishness is leading to the destruction of the community and to the people that are doing the prideful stomping of others, so to speak.

[14 : 20] So, what will Nehemiah do? How will he respond as God's representative? He sees the exploitation of the poor and he is incensed. Look with me in verse 6.

Nehemiah speaking. I was very angry when I heard their outcry and these words. I'll pause really quickly there. So, what's to be done? Nehemiah is angry. How will he, as God's representative, respond?

And this gets to our second point where we see that there's great freedom in repentance. So, I'll tell you what Nehemiah doesn't do. He doesn't get angry and do nothing.

Nor does he get really angry and seek to destroy these people. He doesn't seek to cancel them. He doesn't seek to drag their reputation through the mud and have them fired or have them blacklisted.

He doesn't do any of that. Look with me in verse 6 again and then also verse 7. I was very angry when I heard their outcry and these words.

[15 : 22] Verse 7, the first part of it. I took counsel with myself and I brought charges against the nobles and the officials. I'll pause quickly there. Nehemiah's anger was a righteous anger and it was on par with his concern and love for his fellow people.

He was angry because what was happening was terrible. Nehemiah in chapter 1 is absolutely gutted at the state of Jerusalem and by extension its people.

And what he is seeing here is angering him because, we'll see a bit later on, this is the same behavior that contributed to their exile in the first place. Nehemiah, what he does is he gets angry.

But what he doesn't do is that he doesn't let his anger get out of control. His anger is measured. It's appropriate in its response.

But notice too that it's insufficient in its response. He doesn't say angry but he does something about it. He takes counsel with himself, which is to say that he considers the facts. He builds a case rationally, intellectually, prayerfully, and he reflects on the situation.

[16 : 36] And then he brings the charges forward. And it's a great lesson for us. Because in a time when the visceral reactions seem to rule the day, we have an opportunity as God's people to be a stable, just, loving response to the evil that we see.

Not every aspect, but areas in your own life. You don't have to be quick to respond. You don't have to be indifferent. You shouldn't be indifferent. You can be angry, but be measured in that and consider the facts.

And then respond like Nehemiah responds. And how does he respond? Verse 7, the second part of it, and then into verse 8.

I'll read actually all of verse 7 again. He appeals to the facts.

He is stating the facts. He is not saying, you evil, terrible people, unredeemable people, look at what you're doing.

[18 : 11] And it is wrong. While others are buying freedom for Jews who were enslaved to the Gentiles, other Jews were in effect selling them back into Gentile slavery.

And here's an interesting thing. Jewish slavers ought to be an oxymoron. Exploitative Christians ought to be an oxymoron. Selfish Christians ought to be an oxymoron.

Now that last one, it's easy to say, very hard to be. But this is the call on our lives. It's the call on the Jewish people's lives.

To not be slavers. Because they used to be slaves. God himself pulled them out of slavery. God himself fashioned a community and called them by his own name.

God himself gave the law. God himself made a covenant with the people. And then the people turn around and sell their own people outside of the covenant community.

[19 : 13] It's a big affront to God. And it's saying to God, you know, okay, we understand what you've done, but it doesn't matter to us. It's undoing, in a sense, of what God has done.

And God will not sit idly by when all of this happens. So Nehemiah calls them out for their sin. He doesn't sugarcoat it. And he doesn't blow it up bigger than it was.

If that's even possible to understand. He sticks to the facts. Calls a spade a spade. And what's the result? Look at the latter part of verse 8. They were silent and could not find a word to say.

What can you say if somebody calls you out for the sin in your life and you truly don't have an excuse for it? You say nothing. You're silent.

I mean, pride can well up and you can say, who are you to say that to me? And you can make up excuses. But in your heart, you know that the truth is the truth.

[20 : 18] And here they're silent. They're convicted of their sin. They could not hide nor excuse it. And this is the start of their freedom. See, what's interesting here is that they're the ones selling people into slavery, but they're slaves too, are they not?

They're slaves to the sin and the darkness and this obsession with money and the things that it brings. So much so that they're willing to disregard human life.

Who's the slave here? This is the beginning of their freedom. The opening paragraph of morning prayer, it says just this.

And this is in the Book of Common Prayer. And this is from the old 1662. I'll try to read it in a more vernacular. But this is what it says. Dearly beloved brethren, the Scripture moves us in sundry places to acknowledge and confess our manifold sins and wickedness.

And that we should not dissemble nor cloak them before the face of Almighty God, our Heavenly Father. But confess them with a humble, lowly, penitent, and obedient heart to the end that we may obtain forgiveness of the same by His infinite goodness and mercy.

[21 : 28] That does not sound like somebody entering into slavery but out of it. Forgiveness. Forgiveness. Mercy. To know the goodness of God.

This is confession. This is why confession seems really difficult at first. But when you're on the other end of it, if you have truly confessed and you haven't made, kind of downplayed your sin.

You haven't made excuses. But you have just been just straight up honest. This is, there is great freedom in that. Confession leading to forgiveness.

Why? Because of Christ leading to knowledge of God and His goodness and mercy. This is freedom. This is true health. Christ says, what does it profit a man to gain the whole world yet forfeit his soul?

What does it profit you to hide your sin before God? And yet, remain as a slave to your passions, to your desires, to your sin, to the dark, hidden life that you are trying to live.

[22 : 39] It's freedom that Christ has set us free. So, Nehemiah addresses the sin. The people are convicted. And then, end of story? No. Then what happens? And this is our third point.

There's amendment of life. Look with me. Verses 9 to 13 here. So I said, the thing that you are doing is not good. Ought you not to walk in the fear of our God to prevent the taunts of the nations, our enemies?

I'll just pause really quickly before I continue on. The world, whether we think so or not, looks at God's people, looks at the church, and judges, in a sense, God by the way we act.

And it's not to say that we're going to act perfectly, but it means that there's a lot more on the line. We're a young church, okay? We're a year and a half in. We haven't had many hiccups. We haven't had any huge relational breakdowns.

Okay? Some of us are still becoming friends with one another. Relational breakdowns will inevitably come. We will step on each other's toes.

[23 : 49] You will be offended. I will be offended. I will be offended. I will offend. How will we deal with it? Will we leave out the back door or deal with the issue at hand, opening up an opportunity for restitution and healing?

And then the community grows deeper and the bonds grow stronger. And then all of a sudden, the world notices. Your friends notice. Community is not like other communities.

It's not perfect. But there's a humility by God's grace that looks to treat others with dignity more important than yourselves.

And the world will see. Nehemiah here appeals to the people of God and how they have become the taunts of the nations.

I'll continue on in verse 10. Moreover, I and my brothers and my servants are lending them money and grain. Let us abandon this exacting of interest.

[24 : 50] Return to them this very day their fields, their vineyards, olive orchards, and their houses, the percentage of money, grain, wine, and oil that you have been exacting from them. Then they said, We will restore these and require nothing from them.

We will do as you say. The motivation for change is unmistakable. Ought you not to walk in the fear of our God? The Bible, the Bible's book of wisdom, Proverbs, it speaks a number of times that the beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord, or the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.

The fear of the Lord is to recognize that He is Lord of all and that His ways are always the best. That if He calls us to repent and calls us to amend our life, that it is the best for us.

It is the wise decision. It also means that if we find our lives to be in contrast to God's ways, we, not Him, are in the wrong. There's no arguing.

There's no negotiating with God in that regard. So what happens? The people relent. They're in the wrong. They show their godly contrition and promise to repay what has been stolen.

[26 : 03] What's interesting here is verse 10. Because Nehemiah is the angry one. He is the righteous judge in this situation. But verse 10, it says, Moreover, I, and this is Nehemiah talking, I and my brothers and my servants are lending them money and grain.

Let us abandon this exacting of interest. And it's, there's a bit of debate about whether he is convicted for doing, like he is kind of in the midst of also lending money and he is accused, like he is feeling convicted of usury.

Or if he is essentially testifying that he used to do this himself. But either way, what we see here is that as humility starts to take root in some people, as they confess their sins, it begins to spread.

And as we have an opportunity to confess our sins to one another and pray, it says in James that you may be healed, part of that healing is humility begins to spread.

And we see that somebody, by God's grace, has the courage to confess their sins, and it gives us an opportunity to also confess our sins. If pride can be a super spreader, so to speak, then so too humility.

[27 : 25] Humility begets humility. And here we have a situation in verse 10. Listen, whether it's, I too am, this is Nehemiah speaking, I too am seeking forgiveness, or I used to do this and it was wrong and I'm testifying that this is the right way to do it.

Either way, humility is starting to take root in this community. Life is starting to come back into this community. It also shows us that it's not enough to simply say sorry if we have been, if we have wronged someone and pass over an opportunity to restore and bring restitution.

In fact, if I was to say to my family, only I love you and did nothing to show my love, how would that be love? In the same way, if you say sorry, you have an opportunity to show that you're sorry and you don't, how is that true contrition?

We do not practice penance in our church. It's not a part of what we believe in the 39 articles, our kind of confession of faith, in the same way that the Roman Catholic Church does.

But penance, in a sense, showing your contrition by paying people back at cost to you, at potentially great cost to you, is a beautiful example of a heart that is turned towards the Lord and is seeking healing and seeking restitution.

[28 : 54] A heart that is humble. Look with me at verse 13. And Nehemiah here, he is holding their feet to the fire.

They have spoken, they promise that they are going to pay their brothers back. They have promised, in a sense, with their contrition to show penance. But Nehemiah holds her feet to the fire.

And this is what it says. Look with me in verse 12. Verse 13, sorry. I also, sorry, verse 12. Then they said, we will restore these and require nothing from them.

We will do as you say. And I, Nehemiah is speaking here, and I called the priests and made them swear to do as they had promised. I also shook out the fold of my garment and said, so may God shake out every man from his house and from his labor who does not keep his promise.

So may he be shaken out and emptied. This is a prophetic act that is to say, if you don't follow through, may the same thing you are doing to others happen back onto you.

[30 : 05] It's a way, it's like a handshake on steroids, so to speak. And the call, in the end, is to practice what you preach, back up what you say, and don't delay.

Do it immediately. And he causes this to be done in the presence of the priests, which in a sense is in the presence of God, that this oath has been made, and the result, the people went away thinking, man, I made a lot of money, and now I'm going to be poor.

Look with me at the latter part of verse 13. The latter part of verse 13. So, right here, and all the assembly said, Amen, may it be so, and praise the Lord, and the people did as they promised.

Praise the Lord. All of a sudden, freedom has truly taken root. Their sins have been forgiven. They have a blueprint on how to restore the pain that they caused.

They can worship God with a clean conscience. Have you ever come to church with a messy conscience, and have tried to sing, and tried to take Holy Communion, and tried to put on a face, and yet, you know that there is grievous sin in your life that you haven't confessed, and you're afraid to confess it, or you have some kind of habitual problem that you can't kick, and instead of bringing it into the light so that you may experience freedom, you come into the church with chains around your ankles, you're just a slave.

[31 : 50] Have you ever had that situation? Lord knows I have. And that is not freedom. It's not freedom to hide things, but here, a perfect example. They have confessed their sins.

Yes, I promised to restore, you know, handshake on steroids before God, before the community, and the result is praise. Freedom. They're starting to have this right relationship with God because they have a right relationship again with each other.

They've praised the Lord because they repented. It is always going to lead to freedom because it always will be a gift from God that He is taking a heart of stone and making it into a heart of flesh.

This is the way you are meant to live. This is freedom. The people repent of their wickedness, and the breaches in the community began to be amended. And this points us to Christ.

And how? How does it point us to Christ? Jesus, out of love for us and to give His Father glory, ransoms us from slavery. Not the slavery because there's a famine or because, you know, we're on this work project and we have to pause our livelihood or because there's taxation that's too heavy.

[33 : 05] It's the slavery that we experience because we are slaves to sin and we are slaves to our flesh and we have no ability inside ourselves to say no to temptation.

He saves us from that. He ransoms us from slavery, an eternal slavery that will not just result in a period of slavery but an eternity of slavery.

And He ransoms us from that. And He does so at great cost to Himself because in the end He doesn't say, okay, I'll pay back, you know, what's owed and out comes the ledger and Jesus is balancing it all out.

He gives Himself in our place so that we can be made free. And all of a sudden we see in Nehemiah chapter 5 this beautiful picture that prepares us to understand the Gospel.

That our freedom will never come without a price. That the extension of true love, self-giving love will always be costly. So in light of that, as free people, free men, free women, do we then enter a life of selfishness?

[34 : 18] Do we lord things over people? Do we hold back forgiveness? Do we look down our nose at people? they're just a means to an end?

I'll use this person to further my own goals? No, we're free. And we extend that same freedom given to us by pointing people to Christ. Amazing grace is, going back to John Newton, it is, I mean, I'd be hard-pressed to find a hymn that's more famous than Amazing Grace.

And I mean, the words are dynamite, but I think why it is such a beautiful hymn is because of the man who wrote it. A man who traded slaves but was himself the biggest slave.

And he experienced the grace of God and he, by God's grace, humbled himself and confessed his sins and dedicated his life to abolishing the great evil that he was a part of.

And this just flowed out of his heart. It's a beautiful, beautiful, beautiful hymn. Friends, let us do the same. Let us pray. Heavenly Father, we thank you for this example in Nehemiah chapter 5.

[35 : 39] We thank you that you don't sit idly by when injustice happens. You see all and you hate injustice. You hate evil. You hate it when people are exploited and treated as less than human, subpar.

Lord, may this church never rest in that, in that kind of sin. May we never be a church that exploits people and when we do, when we do enter into selfish ways that, Lord, we will be quick to repent and quick to make restitution.

Lord, please we ask that you give us your Holy Spirit to help us to live this life you've called us to live. And as we continue with the rest of the service, Lord, we ask that you would bless our time and we pray this in Christ's name.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.
Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.