

Operation Intimidation

Nehemiah 6:1-9, 12-14 and Ephesians 4:29

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Thirty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time

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Our sermon series on the Book of Nehemiah is coming to an end.

Next week we are going to look together at chapter 8, which is a sort of dedication of the wall around Jerusalem.

Nehemiah came to Jerusalem, all the way from Persia, to re-build the city wall, which had been destroyed 70 years earlier by the Babylonian armies, and so the dedication is a kind of culmination of Nehemiah's work.

But today, before the story comes to an end, there is one more attempt to derail and discredit Nehemiah's mission.

Remember Sanballat and Tobiah, who appeared earlier in the story? Well, they're back. In fact, they never really went away. And so they appear in chapter 6 with one more attempt to stop Nehemiah.

Earlier in the story, as you may recall, there were threats of physical violence, and so Nehemiah had to use security measures and he had to post guards. Some people worked on the wall while others were ready for an attack, and then they would switch positions ... through the night, in fact, in order to finish their work.

At one point, even the builders or brick layers had a brick in one hand and a sword in the other. So, this was a very dangerous situation. Lives were at stake. An attack could have come at any moment, and it would have been bloody.

But today, Nehemiah's enemies unleash their final assault. And they use their most intimidating weapon yet. And did you hear what it was? Not a bombing campaign, no missiles or rockets.

The final assault occurs with ... gossip, slander, deliberate lying about Nehemiah's motives.

That's what I want to spend a few moments talking about with you this morning – the power of our words either to build up or to destroy.

The Letter of James to the early church would be one good place to turn to for a New Testament reading. Most of you know the third chapter there very well. Remember where James writes,

³ When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal. ⁴ Or take ships as an example. Although they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are steered by a very small rudder wherever the pilot wants to go. ⁵ Likewise, the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set

on fire by a small spark. ⁶The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole body....

That would be a good New Testament reading, but I chose another one ... from Paul's Letter to the Ephesians. And instead of reading just verse 29, I am going to read the entire paragraph here to give you the context. Paul, as you will hear, is very, very serious about this issue.

Listen to the way he puts this (chapter 4, beginning with verse 29):

²⁹ Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up, according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. ³⁰ And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. ³¹ Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. ³² Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.

The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Dear friends of Jesus Christ,

All of us, I'm guessing, every single one of us, has faced criticism of one kind or another.

Our parents, for example, probably criticized us. They may have been the first critical voices we heard in our lives. They probably told us that we could do better in school if only we tried harder and studied longer and took our school work more seriously.

“Doug, if you don't study harder, you're never going to make something of yourself.” I can still hear those words, and I still wonder if I have made something of myself.

Even our children may criticize us.

Frankly, this one came as a surprise to me. But I learned that children in adulthood feel free to offer critiques of the way they were raised. My children now offer reviews of their childhoods, mostly good, but it's clear that they didn't like everything. And now I get to hear about it. Unsolicited feedback.

And then, outside the family, we hear criticism from supervisors and co-workers, who comment on our work. They like some parts of what we do, but they don't like others. And they let us know. Frankly, I don't see how it's possible to be in a work situation without offering feedback.

We hear criticism from teachers or professors who evaluate our work. That's their job. We turn in papers, and then they offer comments – places to improve, arguments to strengthen.

It's not an easy business, being a teacher.

And of course there are still more places in our lives where we receive feedback, and then we do our best to take it in, to learn from it, and not to be hurt by it.

But there is another kind of criticism or judgment that I want to talk about with you today, and this is a difficult one, because this kind of criticism is unfair, it hurts, and it is designed to hurt us, it is designed to cause injury – and in the case of Nehemiah, as you heard, it was designed to destroy him and everything he had sacrificed his life to do.

“**Gossip**” doesn’t seem like a strong enough word, but often that’s where it begins. A whisper about you – usually it’s a whisper behind your back, and usually it’s from someone who smiles and is nice to you when you’re around, but then, when you are not around, the person can be as brutal and as unfeeling as any serial killer.

I said these words are usually spoken behind our backs, but that’s not always the case. Sometimes these words are spoken to our face, and we don’t realize immediately that we have been attacked.

I worked with someone one time who – maybe you’ve heard this expression – could damn the clock by asking what time it was. It was only later that you realized the full meaning of what was said. Words were spoken, and later you realized that a knife had found its way between the ribs.

This morning I don’t want to spend much time talking about the people who gossip, either the malicious people who speak lies about us or the people who thoughtlessly pass those lies along.

Either way, the Bible is clear. Don’t do it. Don’t be the person who speaks ill of another person. Don’t make up stuff.

And if you hear something that may or may not be true, don’t just mindlessly pass it along. You might want to go to the person who is being maligned in order to find out if it’s true or not, but never, ever, pass along a bit of information just because it’s too juicy to keep to yourself, or because it makes you seem important to be in possession of information like that.

Actually, I think Paul’s words to the Ephesians should be enough for us: “**Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up....**”

That seems clear to me. Doesn’t it to you?

What I want to talk about today are not the perpetrators, the people like Sanballat and Tobiah who make our lives miserable. There will always be people like them, people who find enjoyment, or some perverse pleasure, in tearing down another person’s reputation.

What I want to talk about today are the people, like you and me, who are the targets, the people who find ourselves on the receiving end. What are we supposed to do about that? How are we supposed to react?

And even if you have never been on the receiving end of lies and gossip and slander, please listen to this anyway, because your time will come. Few if any people get through life without being attacked unfairly, without having their names or their reputations smeared, without something negative being hurled our way.

I wish it weren’t true, but it is.

Here's the first truth I would like you to see, and it comes directly from the story we heard for today. When are we the most vulnerable to gossip and slander? Sorry to tell you know this, but it's when we are at the top, it's when we're doing really well, it's when we're sailing along without a care in the world.

As I mentioned, the wall around Jerusalem was nearly built. Nehemiah was already planning the dedication, thinking about what he was going to wear. What do you wear to the dedication of a city wall?

And just at that moment, it hit. The person who is most vulnerable to attack is the person who thinks he or she has finally made it.

Last week, while I was getting ready for today, I tried to think of other stories, biblical stories, where this was true, and then I realized that nearly all of the stories from the Old Testament had this as a theme.

Think of king David. Think of Jonah. Jonah had just completed the most successful missionary campaign in the ancient world, and almost immediately he fell into depression.

The same with Elijah. Depression followed immediately after his successful demonstration of the superiority of Yahweh over Ba'al.

Charles Swindoll, the American pastor, on whose book this sermon series is based, the book is called *Hand Me Another Brink* – Charles Swindoll says that his most discouraging day of the week is Monday, usually right after a really good sermon on Sunday.

It's on Monday, he says, that he most susceptible to attack, to slander, to gossip, to judgment. I know that among pastors he is not alone.

When is that time for you? When is it that you are most susceptible? It would be important for your spiritual life to know when this happens, because then you can do something about it.

Here's the second truth I find in this story: God – think about this – God allowed this attack to happen. It seems so unfair. Here was Nehemiah doing what God called him to do with his life, Nehemiah had given up that grand life back in Persia (in the king's palace) to live in the not-very-attractive city of Jerusalem, and God allowed a couple of good-for-nothings, low lifes, to viciously attack him.

Now, some people, I know, like to say that God sends these tests into our lives. God gives us trials like this one in Nehemiah 6.

And I think you know me well enough by now to know that I resist that way of thinking, because I don't know if God really sends pain into my life to find out what I'm made of.

In my case, at least, I think God already knows what my strengths and weaknesses are. I think God knows how much pain I can take and when I will most likely to cave in under the pressure.

But the truth here in this story – the *inescapable* truth – is that God allowed this final assault from Sanballat and Tobiah to occur.

Do you know something? What I get from this story is that following God and doing God's will – which is what Nehemiah does throughout the story, he's almost too good to be true at times – following this path of obedience and faithfulness is going to be very, very difficult.

You might think that living the Christian life makes the problems go away. That's what I hear from some of you, when the hard times come. But that's not what the Bible tells us. The hard times, the malicious and undermining work of the people around us, continue to occur, even after we've surrendered, even after we decided to follow the way of Jesus. There is no escaping it.

And God allows it to happen. So here's the question: For what purpose?

I think that it happens, these times of trial and testing happen, to build us up. I think we go through it to grow and to become stronger and to become less susceptible in the future. I think we are tested so that we grow into the people God wants us to be.

Nehemiah – I don't know if you heard this – Nehemiah was able to resist Sanballat and Tobiah, even though they sent messages four different times. Each time Nehemiah held his ground. He refused to be intimidated.

Ultimately, Sanballat came at Nehemiah five separate times, threatening to expose him: **“You just came here because you wanted to be king. You pretended to be nice, and you said you were interested in a wall, but really you're just here to seize power.”**

That was the accusation, the malicious lie that was spread about Nehemiah. And it was unfair. And it was hurtful. And it cruel. And it must have hurt as much as anything in his life ever hurt him.

And yet, Nehemiah survived this final assault. He was strong, where I might have been weak and pathetic. He was strong where other Old Testament characters gave in to depression and self-pity and worse.

It was the testing that made Nehemiah strong. It was the testing that made him fit to be the governor of Judah, which is what God had in mind for him.

As it turned out, he was just the right person to rebuild and reshape this people of God for the future. Jerusalem and the temple and the wall had to be rebuilt so that God's plans, culminating in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, could be realized.

Let me mention the third and final truth I see in this story: When Nehemiah became aware of what they are accusing him of, he did something, and it's not terribly surprising, but I can't emphasize enough how important this was.

So, the third truth here is Nehemiah's response. He prayed of course – because he always prayed, it was second nature to him – but then (and this is important) he calmly spoke the truth.

“Such things are as you are saying” he said, **“have not been done.”** Period. That was his public statement.

No accusations. No hitting back in anger and judgment. Just a simple statement of fact.

I wonder if we have forgotten how powerful truth can be. There is always a temptation – I feel it as strongly as anyone – there is always a temptation to go on the counter-attack. To hit back harder. To choose to fight. I wish it weren't so, but it is.

And the example of Nehemiah is in many ways far more powerful. And quite frankly, it's timely. Our world could use his example.

What he said in response to the gossip and slander was a simple statement of fact: **“No, it’s not true. I don’t want to be king. It’s not why I came to Jerusalem. Such things as you are saying have not been done.”**

Try it sometime. Try speaking the truth in a calm and civil manner. It’s very difficult, I know, to keep feelings in check. It’s very difficult to control our impulse to lash out. Using social media to hit back is very tempting for some of us. It’s become the tool of choice in our culture, and it’s unhealthy.

Most often – please listen to me when I say this – most often the best response is simple, direct, and factual.

As John 8, verse 32, says, **“The truth will set you free.”**

We live at a time when leaders and politicians model very different kinds of behavior. And just so you know, I’m saying this about both ends of the political spectrum. And with so much gossip and slander and fake news in the air, it’s hard to know anymore where the truth is.

How much of what we see and read in the news can we believe?

And so, we live at a time of polarization and distrust. It’s hard for me to remember a time in my own life when there has been so much anger. Our public discourse, the way we talk to each other, is certainly at a low point. I don’t know if it’s at the lowest ever, but it’s low. And we can all feel it.

There’s a tension in the air, and in our politics, and in our conversations with each other. There are topics we don’t dare to talk about with each other for fear of starting an argument.

But the solution – at least this is the lesson I learn in Nehemiah, and this is why I have repeatedly said during this sermon series that Nehemiah is a type of Christ, that Nehemiah shows us what the Christ will be – the solution is not to trade insults or to make accusations. The solution is not to spread lies and disinformation about those with whom we disagree.

The solution is to speak the truth always, to trust that the truth will set us free.

Try it sometime.