



NEHEMIAH, HOLY AMBITION

“THE PRICE”: PUTTING OUR HANDS TO THE GOOD WORK, PART 2

While you are turning to the book of Nehemiah, let me tell you about something interesting that I read recently..

In the year 2005 a book called “Soul Searching” came out and caused quite a stir among religious folk. It was written by a sociologist at Notre Dame named Christian Smith and the book was the culmination of a project he had been working on for 6 years. In that time he had interviewed almost 4,000 American teenagers ,age 13-17, from all races, all religions, all income levels from many different parts of the country.. And he asked them all a lot of questions about God and their own views on religion.. Several interesting things came to the surface:

First of all, three out of four of the teens in the survey labeled themselves as Christian. But what Mr. Smith found remarkable was that whether the teens labeled themselves Christian, or Hindu or Agnostic.. Unsure.. All of them had very similar answers to all his questions.. Pretty soon Mr. Smith and his research team started to see a pattern developing in the answers.. They could see a belief system starting to emerge. Smith called this new belief system shared by American Teenagers:

Moralistic, Therapeutic Deism

Not a great name for a religious belief system, for sure.. It won't work on a bumper sticker, but it is descriptive..

Moralistic:

- Good people go to heaven, bad people go to hell
- So what religion does is teach you how to be nice
- Because God wants you to **be** good.

Therapeutic:

- God wants you to **feel** good.. He wants to boost your self esteem
- So beyond being a place where I learn how to be nice, church is where I receive therapy for my emotional problems

Deism:

- Classic "deism" the old deism of guys like Ben Franklin is the view of God as the cosmic clock maker.. He sets the world in motion.. He winds it up and lets it go. But once its running, God is just going to watch it go.. He doesn't intervene.
- The new American deism would say the same thing. He does not really intervene in world events and certainly not in the decisions that you make on a daily basis.. Except when you need something.. God there for you in times of crisis.. But other than that, he doesn't have many opinions. It's more of a Genie in a Bottle view of God. Call Him out when you need him..
- You can call him Jesus, or Jehovah or Allah or whatever.. Just do good and feel good about it..

Now remember most of students involved in this research would call themselves Christians.. Recent research shows that over 70% of "Christian" teens leave the church as soon as they are away from home, which is not too surprising to me if what they are calling Christianity is really Moralistic, Therapeutic Deism.

David Wheaton, an Atlanta high school senior, who participated in Christian Smith's study, said many of his peers aren't excited about Christianity because they don't see the payoff. **"If they can't see benefits immediately, they stay away from it,"** Wheaton says. **"They don't want to make sacrifices."**

Now lets look together at a passage in Nehemiah, that Taylor actually spoke about last week. (And by the way, I know you want to join me in being grateful to God for the word He gave to our brother Taylor. And Taylor, I want to thank you for your care for us in bringing that word to us... Hether and I had the best date after church last week. We got to go out to eat together, and mostly we just reflected on your sermon..). **Let's look at Nehemiah 2..** After inspecting the ruined walls surrounding Jerusalem, Nehemiah comes to the officials and leaders of the City and reveals to them his plan.

Nehemiah 2:17-18 (English Standard Version)

¹⁷Then I said to them, "You see the trouble we are in, how Jerusalem lies in ruins with its gates burned. Come, let us build the wall of Jerusalem, that we may no longer suffer derision." ¹⁸And I told them of the hand of my God that had been upon me for good, and also of the words that the king had spoken to me. And they said, "Let us rise up and build." So they strengthened their hands for the good work.

The good work.. That is what Nehemiah calls this labor of Love before him.. And a labor it will be.. Following this discussion, the people of God join arm in arm resolute to put their hands to the good work together. We learn that they will suffer threats of death, hunger, sleepless nights.. All for the sake of the good work.. For Nehemiah's part, he realizes that the building of the wall itself is only the beginning.. As Taylor pointed out to us last week, **the real work before Nehemiah is not the building of a wall, but a building of a people..** God's plan for the earth is never carried out by walls or cities or machines, or movies or tracts or ad campaigns. Those things cannot do the good work for us. It's carried out by people. The people of God and the way they live together is a light in the world, a City on a hill, a spiritual house that is the dwelling place of God before the world. “A display of God's Glory” as Mark Dever calls it. Calling out to those in Darkness..

Now, When the people of Jerusalem set their hands to the good work, they may be thinking that the building of this physical wall is the good work at hand.. But let me show you what Nehemiah is thinking about.

Turn to Deuteronomy 4 with me

In this scene Moses is preparing the people to go into the promised land. He has just been told he is not going in, so they will be going without him.. He needs to tell them how to become the people of God..

Deuteronomy 4:5-10 (English Standard Version)

⁵See, I have taught you statutes and rules, as the LORD my God commanded me, that you should do them in the land that you are entering to take possession of it. ⁶Keep them and do them, for that will be your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.' ⁷For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as the LORD our God is to us, whenever we call upon him? ⁸And what great nation is there, that has statutes and rules so righteous as all this law that I set before you today?

⁹ "Only take care, and keep your soul diligently, lest you forget the things that your eyes have seen, and lest they depart from your heart all the days of your life. Make them known to your children and your children's children— ¹⁰how on the day that you stood before the LORD your God at Horeb, the LORD said to me, 'Gather the people to me, that I may let them hear my words, so that they may learn to fear me all the days that they live on the earth, and that they may teach their children so.'

Do you see God's plan here? God has something to say to the nations! He has a plan to make himself known to the nations.. This plan will continue throughout the bible. Nehemiah is a part of that plan moving forward, but he is just a pointer, just like Moses is just a pointer toward the plan being fully revealed in Jesus.. A plan which Jesus makes perfectly clear for us just before he is taken up into heaven, when he says

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,

Here in Deuteronomy we see the seeds of this same plan.. So what is God's plan for making himself known to the world? Does he say to the people of Israel, "build a magnificent temple to me, and the whole earth will see that I am great?" No.. Does He say, "Build a mighty city.. An economic powerhouse!.. It is your prosperity that will tell the world that I am a great God!" No... It is the obedience of the people.. The **lives that the people live** individually and the way that they live together. That's the plan. That's how God intends to preach himself to the world. That's what vs. 6-7 teach us. It is God's intention that when his people live together under His righteous rule, that there will be those on the outside who look at this life and say: How great is their God.. **Not** how great are these people.. But how great is their God..

This is the meaning of Jesus' words in the sermon on the mount:

Matthew 5:14-16 (English Standard Version)

*¹⁴ "You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. ¹⁵ let your light shine before others, **so that** they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.*

This is what Jesus prays on behalf of his elect as he prepares to go to the cross.. He prays:

John 17:22-23 (English Standard Version)

*²² The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, ²³ I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, **so that the world may know** that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me.*

Taylor said last week, that Nehemiah doesn't **have** Gods plan for rebuilding the wall, he **is** God's plan for rebuilding the wall..

In the same way, brothers and sisters, the Church does not **contain, or hold with in it** God's plan for evangelizing the world.. The Church **is** God's plan for evangelizing the world..

The apostle Paul, in all his missionary journeys had this as his mission in every city that he travelled to.. Establish a church.. Establish a church.. Establish a church.. Lets’ think about that word “church” for a moment..

Look again at vs. 10 of Deuteronomy 4

'Gather the people to me, that I may let them hear my words, so that they may learn to fear me all the days that they live on the earth, and that they may teach their children so.'

About 250 years before the time of Christ, Hellenistic Jews living away from their homeland translated the Old Testament into Greek in a document called the Septuagint.. And Here in Deuteronomy 4 when they came to this work “Gather” they used the verb form of the word *Ekklesia* meaning assembly or congregation.. *Ekklesia* is the word that the writers of the New Testament would use to describe the Holy Assembly of God’s people.. The Church.

Ephesians 5:25 (English Standard Version)

²⁵ Christ loved the [ekkleisia]church and gave himself up for her,

1 Corinthians 12:27-28 (English Standard Version)

²⁷Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. ²⁸And God has appointed in the [ekkleisia]church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, helping, administrating, and various kinds of tongues.

So this is the church universal, and the church local: A group of believers who “assemble” together for a purpose.. What is that purpose? It’s right there in Deuteronomy 4:

'Gather[EK-lay-si-AH-dzoh] the people to me, [for what? For what purpose]that I may let them hear my words, so that they may learn to fear me all the days that they live on the earth, and that they may teach their children so.'

The church is a gathering of people who want to hear from the Lord. But they don’t want to just hear, they want to submit to his word.. So that they might learn how to live together in fear of the Lord..

This is the good work that Nehemiah is putting his hands to.. This is what he is trying to build.. A people who submit to the word and live together in fear of the Lord.. **And this is the good work that you and I are being called to.** The one difference being that we have the living word. We are no longer waiting for God to speak to us definitively! He has told us all he has decided to tell us! Jesus is what God has to say to us.. **Unlike our brothers and sisters**

that went before us who built for something they could not see and did not benefit from, you and I build toward a City that is to come.. The final City on the Hill, the New Jerusalem.. The very kingdom of God that is coming on this earth with Jesus on the throne.

On that day the new earth will be established, as real and physical as anything you can touch right now.. But in the meantime our building project is not a physical building project, but a spiritual one.. A construction project called the church that is God's plan for making himself known to all the nations.. In his mercy, he waits for more to come in.. For when the New Jerusalem comes in power the time will be passed for repentance.. And so he establishes the church as a beacon, an outpost.. A vision of what is to come.. Oh our God is a merciful God.. He is a patient God! How dare we be so selfish and make church about us, and mold it and shape it after our own image.. It is God's message to the world.. That is a Good Work..

We began this series in Nehemiah with two sermons called "Identifying the Good Work", in which I outlined the burning Holy Ambition God placed in Nehemiah, and the work of rebuilding Jerusalem that lay before him.. We defined what a Holy Ambition is . *It is being moved to action for the sake of God's honor..* This is the Ambition in God's heart when he sends Christ into the world to redeem back what belongs to Him, to restore His honor.. And this is the Holy Ambition in our hearts, to see the coming of the Christ in the hearts of more and more men and women all over the world, to see more and more true worshippers being born again into the a new life dedicated to the exaltation of God.. The honoring of God..

We saw that Nehemiah was moved to action, because this was **not** happening in Jerusalem.. They had been miraculously delivered from Exile by the hand of the Lord, and had returned to Jerusalem and even rebuilt the temple.. But the walls that defined Jerusalem were still down, both physically and spiritually. The people had returned yet again to worshiping the false gods of their neighbors and trying to do this while also worshiping the one true God, which breaks the first two commandments in a million peices. The temple was up.. but the wall was down.. There was no distinction between Jerusalem and Babylon.. This is why Nehemiah perceives the need for a wall..

In the same way, if we are honest we can look around us and see that the temple is up today.. But the wall is down.. Our religious institutions are in place, and we are carrying on with our religious activities, but there is rarely a real, gospel wrought distinction between the people of God and the people of the world..

But here is the thing I want us to consider this week.. We have talked about the evidence that is around us in America and in Jackson that the temple is up but the wall is down.. What I

want you to begin considering today is this: **Is the wall down in your own heart?** Is the temple up, but the wall down? Are you carrying on with your religious Christian activities but in reality are you trying to worship other things alongside the one true God? Are you a Moralistic, Therapeutic Deist wrapped in a Christian shell? If so, the temple is up and the wall is down.. In the passages that Taylor brought to us last week, particularly in chapter 3 of the book of Nehemiah, we see the people begin working on the wall by starting with the section right in front of their own house.. They work side by side on the mess right in front of them.. And that builds the wall.. In the same way, if we wish to build a spiritual wall, defining for a watching world what it means to be the people of God, we begin with the mess right in front of us, in our own heart..

So what action are we needing to take? How do we rebuild this wall? As I prepared this sermon this week it struck me that it might be unclear what I am asking you to do in asking you to build this metaphorical wall with me here at City Fellowship, and here along side all our many brothers and sisters in Jackson.. What am I asking you to do? What action am I asking you to take? 1 Peter 1 is a good summary..

1 Peter 1:13-2:5 (English Standard Version)

¹³Therefore, preparing your minds for action, and being sober-minded, set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ. ¹⁴As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, ¹⁵but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, ¹⁶since it is written, "You shall be holy, for I am holy." ¹⁷And if you call on him as Father who judges impartially according to each one's deeds, conduct yourselves with fear throughout the time of your exile, ¹⁸knowing that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, ¹⁹but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot. ²⁰He was foreknown before the foundation of the world but was made manifest in the last times for the sake of you ²¹ who through him are believers in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are in God.

²²Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart, ²³ since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God; ²⁴for

*"All flesh is like grass
and all its glory like the flower of grass.*

The grass withers,

and the flower falls,

²⁵ but the word of the Lord remains forever. "

And this word is the good news that was preached to you.

1 Peter 2

¹ So put away all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander. ² Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation— ³if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.

⁴As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, ⁵ you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

That is the work.. That is the good work that I am asking you to put your hands to.. Building up an *Ekklesia* made of living stones..

Now, make no mistake.. The building of the church is a miracle of grace, made possible through the shed blood of Jesus Christ. An absolute work of the Holy Spirit.. And if we look throughout the scriptures, whenever we see the Holy Spirit work dramatically, that means a whole lot of work for us.

When the spirit falls on the disciples at Pentecost, their lives became almost instantly more difficult. You can rest in this: **A work of the Holy Spirit means more work for you..** No doubt.. The book of Nehemiah is no fairy tale.. Nehemiah doesn't just pray for God to rebuild the wall and then it's all smooth sailing, one open door after another.. No.. You remember Nehemiah 2.. He says, "the good hand of the Lord was upon me".. The Lord is with him.. The Lord says "I'm with you.. Now welcome to the hardest work of your life"..

So when I ask you to put your hands to the Good Work.. I mean work.. And y'all know how the whole concept of work operates right? Work always costs you something.. But it also pays you something..

When you go to work it's going to cost you something.. Time, sweat, tears.. Work always costs you something. But it also pays you something back.. Money, joy, pride.. So when you go looking for a job, you are thinking to yourself.. Is the cost to me worth the payoff?

Now think back to that kid that took part in that survey said.. Think back to what he said about his peers and their view of the church, the *Ekklesia*, the hope of the world, the display of God's Glory. He said:

"If they can't see benefits immediately, they stay away from it," Wheaton says. **"They don't want to make sacrifices.** They aren't excited about Christianity because they don't see the payoff."

Let me read to you a passage from Paul about his life as a believer:

2 Corinthians 11:25-28 (New International Version)

²⁵Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, ²⁶I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. ²⁷I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. ²⁸Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches.

Now, let's be honest, if your Christianity is no more than Moralistic, Therapeutic Deism, than the cost of following Christ is not worth the payoff.. If your God is some genie in a bottle God that doesn't love you enough to discipline you, and is too weak to judge the world in righteous anger... You would have to be an idiot to suffer for that God.. the cost isn't worth the payoff..

But if you could say with Paul:

Philippians 3:8-11 (English Standard Version)

⁸Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ ⁹and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith— ¹⁰that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, ¹¹that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

If you could say with Paul:

Romans 5:1-4

*¹...we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, ...**(Oh everything has been made right again! I made war with the God who made me and yet, in Christ, at great cost to himself he made peace.. And we are restored! Though I had chosen death, God brought me back to life! Though I had loved the dark he has come to get me and brought me back into his glorious light.. and not only me, but US! The great Ekklesia..)** We rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. **(That is the sense of Romans 5:1-2.. and If you believe that, than you can believe verse 3.. Which says this)** ³Not only so, but we also*

rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance;⁴perseverance, character; and character, hope.

Moralistic, Therapeutic Deists don't rejoice in their sufferings.. but Christians can.. The Ekklesia can.. Because the payoff is infinite.. We get to be with God! Forget all that Golden Streets and Mansions built in Glory junk.. You get to be with God forever.. That is the payoff! We get Jesus! The same Jesus who said:

Luke 14:27-30 (English Standard Version)

²⁷Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple. ²⁸For which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost,

So that is what I am asking you to do today, is to count the cost.. What lays before us is the Good Work.. The building of the Ekklesia.. The building of the City on a Hill.. A Holy Ambition..

So as we close I just want to help you consider what the Cost will be if you put your hands to the Good Work.. I think it boils down to this:

A Holy Ambition always comes at the cost of personal ambition. Really that's the point of this sermon.. This is a sermon with only one point and that is this: If you are going to put your hands to the good work, the benefits are infinite! But it will cost you.. And really it will only cost you one thing.. Your personal ambitions have to die. They have to go..

The question is, what are your personal ambitions.. Because sometimes we have trouble identifying those.. But all of you have them. Without exception.. So if you want to count the cost today, I want to ask you to try and Identify your personal ambition and then see if you are willing to let that be replaced by a Holy Ambition.. We are going to let Nehemiah help us determine what some of our personal ambitions might be, but you need to know this is not an exhaustive list.. We all have latent personal ambitions crying out to us trying to crowd out the holy ambition of God.. Let's turn back to the book of Nehemiah now. And let me ask you this:

Is Comfort your personal ambition..

I've got to admit that this was and often still is my personal ambition problem.. See basically most of us are always just trying to work the best deal possible for ourselves.. We are looking for where we can get paid the most amount of money for the least amount of work.. I never has designs on being rich.. It takes too much work to Get rich.. I just wanted to have enough

money to not have to think about it. I wanted comfort. I want to be able to go out to eat when I feel like it, buy a few clothes now and then without checking my bank statement.. I don't want to budget, I don't want to scrimp, I don't want to make sacrifices.. I want to be comfortable. Look at the last verse of Nehemiah 1.. Remember what Nehemiah's job is? Cupbearer to the king. Nehemiah has worked his way up the ladder from being the son of a conquered and shamed people to the right hand man of one of the most powerful men in the world at that time. He is a trusted advisor; in fact he may be the only person the king trusts completely. There are many under his command, and he lives with the king.. He enjoys the comforts of the kings palace.. Life is good for Nehemiah.. But a Holy Ambition replaces his personal ambitions, and he gives it up to go build the wall.. Now while Nehemiah is in Jerusalem, King Artaxerxes declares him to be the Governor of that region.. And that sounds like it might be a step up, but I want you to notice something in **chapter 2 vs. 6**.. Before the King sends him off to Jerusalem, the king asks how long Nehemiah will be gone, because he wants his cupbearer back. You know what Nehemiah does after months and months of hard work shoring up the City and building up the people into a nation again? He goes back to the King. He keeps his word and goes back to his job working for the King of Persia. So He gives up a comfy job, for a much harder job, but one with a lot more clout.. And then he gives that high clout job up, just to keep his word. He doesn't even get to live in the City he helped build! God gave him a Holy Ambition, and it cost him comfort and prestige.

What about Security.. Is that a personal ambition of yours?

Are you often worried if there is going to be enough money? Are you consistently paranoid about the safety of your family? Have you sought out to live in a house that is at the edge of your means because it is in the right neighborhood? **Turn to Chapter 4**..

Nehemiah 4:16-17 (English Standard Version)

¹⁶From that day on, half of my servants worked on construction, and half held the spears, shields, bows, and coats of mail. And the leaders stood behind the whole house of Judah, ¹⁷who were building on the wall. Those who carried burdens were loaded in such a way that each labored on the work with one hand and held his weapon with the other.

From the moment that he opened his mouth to ask permission to go to Jerusalem, Nehemiah was living under the threat of death.. He could have been beheaded for asking a personal favor of the King. Here in this passage he faces threats of attack from surrounding governments. Later on one of his own strikes a secret deal with Nehemiah's enemies in order to bring him down. He is slandered, insulted, threatened. But a Holy Ambition has crowded out his personal ambition for security. Obviously for him, That cost is worth the payoff..

What about Companionship?

This is a strange one isn't it.. Do you consider yourself to have an ambition for companionship? Consider Nehemiah's situation.. He goes to a people he doesn't really know, he inspires them to work.. Surely over the course of all the months of living together with these folks there is a bond built, and they are now buddies! Well, yes and no.. Let me get you to turn to one of my favorite passages of this book. It's in the last chapter.. Chap. 13.. Now I am about to steal some thunder from one of the last sermons in this series, but I am going to bet on the fact that you will have forgotten all of this by then.. **Let's pick up in vs. 23-25.**

Nehemiah 13:23-25 (English Standard Version)

²³In those days also I saw the Jews who had married women of Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab. ²⁴And half of their children spoke the language of Ashdod, and they could not speak the language of Judah, but only the language of each people. ²⁵And I confronted them and cursed them and beat some of them and pulled out their hair. And I made them take oath in the name of God, saying, "You shall not give your daughters to their sons, or take their daughters for your sons or for yourselves.

Now isn't that just glorious? Wouldn't it be great if you could just do this kind of thing? Here we are in the last chapter of the book and these men are going back to the same stuff that they were doing at the beginning of the book. The same stuff, in fact, that got the people exiled for in the first place.. Worshipping other Gods.. Taking on the worship of all the surrounding peoples.. And their pastor cusses them out, beats them up and pulls them around by their hair. This is not the way to win friends and influence people is it? **Look, it is real easy to confuse building community with building companionship.** Building biblical community is not necessarily cozy.. It is committed.. but not cozy. Cozy serves me.. Community serves the other. Community is on a mission. That means you work at becoming hospitable.. Hospitality is welcoming outsiders.. Fellowship is welcoming insiders, but hospitality is welcoming outsiders, and welcoming outsiders is, by definition, awkward and uncomfortable. If God gives you a holy ambition, you need to understand that this means your bunko night might have to go so you can have a new family over for dinner. But here's the thing, y'all.. if all those bunko partners get that holy ambition right along side you? Then I can promise you this: Even though you may spend much less time with those folks, your relationship with them will be much deeper than it was back when you were just playing stupid bunko.. Taking on the Holy ambition of God for the nations means having a heart for the lost.. And that will come into conflict with an ambition for cozy, fuzzy friendship. And that kind of leads to another one

What about respect or reputation?

And what I mean here is mainly the respect of the world.. And here is where I want us to really be on guard, because an ongoing temptation that we will always feel is the same temptation that Israel kept falling prey to. They wanted the respect of the people around them.. They had kings.. God had given Israel judges, but they had kings.. So that's what they demand from God.. "Gives us kings so we can be like the other nations.. they are laughing at us, God"..

Every time Israel slips into idol worship, they cry out "Give us a God we can see with our eyes like the other nations have".. They build a golden calf.. And even try and call it the one true God.. They build Asherah poles, and high places and in some awful circumstances begin the practice of sacrificing their own children.. Because that was the practice of the nations around them and they desperately wanted to be like the other nations.. **Oh this is our temptation as well.** We see dummies on TV calling themselves Christians and burning Korans and protesting at funerals, and we are rightly embarrassed.. And we are tempted to fall off the other side of the horse.. And say "We're not really like that! Look we care about the same things you care about! We care about poverty and we don't like racism, and we believe in justice for the poor!" And we do! And we should care about those things ! But there are other things that we care about too. We believe that marriage is an image of the relationship between Christ and the Church.. And so two men getting married, we believe is a mockery of that picture.. that's awkward for us.. So we start to shave off that awkward corner.. We believe that God is the author of life and that it is not a part of our reproductive rights to murder a child in the womb.. That's awkward. And so we start to shave off that awkward corner as well.. Because we want to be like the world.. We want to be respected.

We believe Jesus when he says "I am the way the truth and the life.. No one comes to the father except by me.." No one.. That is really where it gets extremely awkward... And soon we find ourselves shaving off even that awkward corner.. We might even find ourselves repeating that St. Francis Quote "Preach the gospel always, and whenever necessary, use words.." My flesh can really cozy up to that quote if my ambition to be admired by the world is strong. Now don't get me wrong, I believe in preaching the Gospel with my life.. but I am also eager to let myself off the hook from preaching it with my lips.. Because that is when things get awkward.. Very few people get offended by us living the Gospel, but when you speak the Gospel it is very easy to offend folks.. They truth is we need both!

Are you willing to be misunderstood? Are you willing to be considered irrelevant? Uncool? Even dangerously backward? The only way you will ever be OK with that is if a Holy Ambition for the honor of God crowds out the personal ambition for your own honor..

If you take up the good work, there will be times when the payoff does not seem equal to the sacrifice.. At those times, open up Hebrews 13 and strengthen your hands for the work:

Hebrews 13:1-14 (English Standard Version)

¹Let brotherly love continue. ²Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares. ³Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them, and those who are mistreated, since you also are in the body. ⁴Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous. ⁵Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have, for he has said, "I will never leave you nor forsake you." ⁶So we can confidently say,

*"The Lord is my helper;
I will not fear;
what can man do to me?"*

⁷Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith. ⁸Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. ⁹Do not be led away by diverse and strange teachings, for it is good for the heart to be strengthened by grace, not by foods, which have not benefited those devoted to them. ¹⁰We have an altar from which those who serve the tent have no right to eat. ¹¹For the bodies of those animals whose blood is brought into the holy places by the high priest as a sacrifice for sin are burned outside the camp. ¹²So Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood. ¹³Therefore let us go to him outside the camp and bear the reproach he endured. ¹⁴For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come.

Let us now celebrate together the sacrifice of our Christ, who went outside the camp for us, to purchase for himself a people.. an Ekklesia..