



KINGDOM CULTURE AND GOSPEL WITNESS

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INTRO:

- The people's hearts had turned towards God again (ch. 8/9). They were responding to the teaching of God's Word under the leadership of Ezra/Nehemiah.
- They were making commitments out of the inclination of their hearts.
- The evidence of inwards changes is the outward and visible altering of one's behavior. It is the outgrowth of personal spiritual renewal. Grace is not opposed to effort. It is the opposed to earning.
- Nehemiah ends anticlimactically; it shows that without Jesus, real lasting reforms are just not possible.

MAIN TEXTS:

*"In view of all this, **we are making a binding agreement**, putting it in writing, and our leaders, our Levites and our priests are affixing their seals to it." (Nehemiah 9:38)*

"The rest of the people—priests, Levites, gatekeepers, musicians, temple servants and all who separated themselves from the neighboring peoples for the sake of the Law of God, together with their wives and all their sons and daughters who are able to understand—all these now join their fellow Israelites the nobles, and bind themselves with a curse and an oath to follow the Law of God given through Moses the servant of God and to obey carefully all the commands, regulations and decrees of the Lord our Lord." (Nehemiah 10:28-29)

1. CREATING CULTURE: WHAT IS AT THE CENTER, AND WHAT IS BEING WORSHIPED?

- There should be something different about our lives, about a Kingdom culture that we share.
- Faith and expectation that God will do the miraculous and will work among us.
- Every organization/society has a culture: families, churches.

There are two things that shape culture:

- A sense of clear standards: There are biblical commitments of faith that express through our corporate life...
- And strong leadership
- Think of a "greenhouse"—a counter-cultural alternative, and influence, to the dominant, surrounding culture.

Clear Standards: The culture of the Church is shaped through biblical commitments that are expressed in the lives of God's people in community. What is the motive center of their lives? Our loves, what we seek with all of our hearts, will deeply shape us and the culture we help create.

*"But **seek first his kingdom and his righteousness**, and all these things will be given to you as well." (Matthew 6:33)*

*"**Do not love the world or anything in the world.** If anyone loves the world, love for the Father is not in them." (1 John 2:15)*

*"You adulterous people, **don't you know that friendship with the world means enmity against God?** Therefore, anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God." (James 4:4)*

Strong Leadership: Overseers guard the church and help individuals guard their hearts.

- God has given each faith community shepherds who care for and watch over His flock
- The help shape culture and prepare God's people for their mission to evangelize the surrounding community.
- We need bold leadership, those who can say, "Your heart's starting to drift."
- They want you flourish in God's best
- Illustration: Eloise Clarno, a retired missionary who was single and celibate used to call Randy just to ask, "How's your marriage? How are you treating Sandy? Are you loving her like Jesus loves the Church?" She was a God-given overseer in Randy and Sandy's lives, who wasn't afraid to ask pointed and important questions.

- We don't take external man-made rules to change our hearts, but Paul says in 1 Timothy 4:7, *"Have nothing to do with godless myths and old wives' tales; rather, train yourself to be godly."*

"Have confidence in your leaders and submit to their authority, because they keep watch over you as those who must give an account. Do this so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no benefit to you." (Hebrews 13:17)

"Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood." (Acts 20:28)

Principle: An individual's spiritual power, and their attending influence over culture, is connected to that person's intimacy with God. Intimacy will always express through clear standards.

- Collectively, a groups' commitment to Jesus and intimacy with Him will lead to passion and renewal
- Sometimes it's just an individual at a church that is spiritually sluggish. And other times, a whole church.
- Nazareth versus Capernaum; The spiritual climate of skepticism at Nazareth precluded many miracles, but the openness and hunger at Capernaum led to many miracles by Jesus.

2. COMMITMENTS THAT CREATE CULTURE: LIVING OUR COMMITMENTS

- **Relational Commitments:** Sex and Marriage
 - This isn't about racism. It was about forming alliances and ensuring economic viability
 - It was also about religion. The ancient Near East was patriarchal in many ways, but it was matriarchal when it came to religion. You were Jewish if your mother was Jewish, even if your father wasn't.
 - So intermarriage brought idolatry into Israel. While Balaam was unable to curse the nation Israel as a whole, he was still able to seduce some to sin (Numbers)
 - Intermarriage across the lines of unbelief and faith always brings an erosion of confidence in God.
 - We trust God with our future happiness and sexual fulfillment. That leads to a sexual ethic, and even comprehensive ethical choices, that differ from the world around us. The culture holds that sex is only physical, but God teaches that we're an embodied spirit, so the psychological, sexual union has significant spiritual implications
 - We all live in a culture that will draw our hearts away from God.

"We promise not to give our daughters in marriage to the peoples around us or take their daughters for our sons." (Nehemiah 10:30)

"But while all this was going on, I was not in Jerusalem, for in the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes king of Babylon I had returned to the king. Some time later I asked his permission and came back to Jerusalem..." (Nehemiah 13:6-7)

"Do not intermarry with them. Do not give your daughters to their sons or take their daughters for your sons, for they will turn your children away from following me to serve other gods, and the LORD's anger will burn against you and will quickly destroy you." (Deuteronomy 7:3-4)

"Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? What harmony is there between Christ and Belial? Or what does a believer have in common with an unbeliever? What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? For we are the temple of the living God." (2 Corinthians 6:14-16)

"About the same time I realized that some of the men of Judah had married women from Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab. Furthermore, half their children spoke the language of Ashdod or of some other people and could not speak the language of Judah at all. So I confronted them and called down curses on them. I beat some of them and pulled out their hair. I made them swear in the name of God that they would not let their children intermarry with the pagan people of the land." (Nehemiah 13:23-25 NLT)

• **Financial Commitments:** Work and Rest

- Sabbath and rest relate to what we believe about God
- Am I in control, or is God? Can I trust God with my life if I rest from work?
- Sabbath was a counter-cultural, prophetic witness of God's faithfulness and sovereignty over the tyranny of work/greed
- We need rest for our souls, as well as our bodies

"When the neighboring peoples bring merchandise or grain to sell on the Sabbath, we will not buy from them on the Sabbath or on any holy day. Every seventh year we will forgo working the land and will cancel all debts." (Nehemiah 10:31)

"He carried into exile to Babylon the remnant, who escaped from the sword, and they became servants to him and his successors until the kingdom of Persia came to power. The land enjoyed its sabbath rests; all the time of its desolation it rested, until the seventy years were completed in fulfillment of the word of the LORD spoken by Jeremiah." (2 Chronicles 36:20-21)

"So I confronted the nobles of Judah. "Why are you profaning the Sabbath in this evil way?" I asked. "Wasn't it just this sort of thing that your ancestors did that caused our God to bring all this trouble upon us and our city? Now you are bringing even more wrath upon Israel by permitting the Sabbath to be desecrated in this way!" (Nehemiah 13:17-18 NLT)

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. How do you think culture shapes you? What culture shapes you the most?
2. How do you shape culture, and is that an individual or corporate endeavor?
3. Do you have an experience with the church where outward behavior is all that matters?
4. How do you see the relationship between an inward change of the heart and the outwards expressions of that change?
5. How do you see a unique Kingdom culture shaping you and your community? Both your faith community and the broader culture.
6. What to do think of the relationship between faith—a sense of trust and expectation in God's desire to work among his people—and the manifestation of God's power? Is your view consistent with the message or at odds and if so, why?
7. How do you relate to/react to the ideas of clear standards and strong leadership? Did the message presentation shape those views, or reshape them? If so, how?
8. How do you see the principle of intimacy with God and its relationship to spiritual power/confidence working in your life?
9. How do the counter-cultural commitments that come with following Jesus either encourage or discourage you? How does their practice create a "greenhouse" of kingdom culture that is a prophetic testimony to God's faithfulness? Do you see that in your life, and why or why not?