

Justice and Generosity

Nehemiah 5:1-19

Charles de Gaulle, the former President of France, once asked rhetorically “How can anyone govern a nation that has two hundred and forty-six different kinds of cheese!?” (That’s the cheesiest quote ever)

Governing his hard work! In a home, school, job, city, state, church...

- Pastor Oscar of Nairobi Chapel: “The secret to raising seven daughters is to get and *train South African dogs!*... I have seven beautiful daughters. I tell young guys that if you can make it from the front gate to inside our house, making it past our dogs, and bow down before me, then you can have one of my daughters! But now, one of my girls is married, but she married a church planter, and church planters get a break. They can have one of my daughters for free!”

It’s hard to govern, lead, and protect, provide, and unite those in your care.

Nehemiah, the governor, had some dudes to deal with here, and he may have wished he could sick some dogs on them! But he gathers himself and handles it a bit differently.

Opposition

The issue Nehemiah is dealing w/ is this in chapter 5 is this: **opposition on the inside.**

- **Chapters 4-6** are about **opposition**. Three straight chapters in a fairly short book!
- Chapters 4 & 6: **external threats**. In chapter 4, Nehemiah dealt with **ridicule** and the **threat** of **violence**. He overcame through **prayer** and by taking necessary **security** measures.
- Chapter 5: **an internal threat**. **Hunger and exploitation** threatens the unity of the **people**. It’s actually a very contemporary chapter, having to do with loans, taxes, conflict, the rich abusing the poor, and more.
- **If you attempt a great work for the glory of God you will encounter opposition from the outside and the inside!**

What do we learn here?

Big Idea: Nehemiah preserves the unity of the people and the continuation of the mission by leading with justice and generosity.

- He executes biblical justice within the community.
- He exemplifies personal generosity before the community.

When you get to the end of the chapter, you find Nehemiah’s motive: verse 19.

What is that motivation? **The good of people and the glory of God.**

- This is why we exist, right?
- Nehemiah is showing us what this looks like in real life action.

- Let's follow his lead as we learn to live for the good of people and the glory of God, by maintaining the unity of the church, and continuing the mission of the church, through acts of justice and generosity.

1. Executing Biblical Justice (5:1-13)

A. The Cries of Injustice He Heard (1-5)

- The wealthy are exploiting the poor.
- And it's happening among God's people!
- What good is building this wall, if we aren't glorifying God as His people?

The Idol: "The love of money is a root of all kinds of evil."

- Greed will cause people to trample on the weak.
- Money is not the root of every evil. You can do a lot of good with money.
- It's also the root of food ... and serving the poor, and mission, and so on.
- The question is how do we handle money?

Originally, some of the Jews that returned from Babylon were well off. Ezra said that there were 5,400 articles of gold (Ezra 1:11). According to Haggai, once in Jerusalem, some were wealthy enough to panel their homes, a luxury once reserved only for kings (Haggai 1:4, Boice, 61). When the second wave returned, Ezra notes more silver and gold (Ez 7:16; cf, Zech 6:10)

V 1: "Great Outcry"

- The language of protest and oppression (see Ex 2:23-25; Neh 9:27)
- The wives are joining in. The ladies begin to freak out.
- We haven't heard about the wives until now. They are strategic in their freaking out! They save it for a good time.
- The cry coming from the women is probably due to the fact that their men are working on the wall, and not able to give attention to the fields.
- "Jewish brothers" – They should have known not to exploit the poor (Deut 15:1-18)

2-5: The Problems, the Effects, the Reasons

The **Problems** that Prompted the Protest

1. There's a lack of adequate food
 - because of the focus on the wall (the fields are abandoned). You can't eat walls!
 - because there's a famine (v. 3)
2. Some are "mortgaging" their fields for short-term cash to buy grain and pay taxes.
3. Some have lost their fields because of inability to repay what was borrowed.
4. Some have had to sell their sons/daughters into slavery for the sake of survival.
 - Temporary debt-service (but not permanent slavery) was permitted in Mosaic law among Israelites.

- Sometimes it was the only way a debt could be paid.
- After six years, they were to rip up the debt sheet and let their kinsmen go free (Deut. 15:12; or at the Year of Jubilee, Lev. 25:39–40).
- But this acceptable practice shouldn't have been applied in this situation, where everyone is trying to rebuild the wall.
- Moreover, it seems that those taken into temporary service are being *mistreated*.
- Sadly, slavery has been practiced within the community of faith for years, a sign of great sin. It happened in the SBC, in S Africa and it still does elsewhere.

The overall vibe: Verse 5: **Total Powerlessness. They feel defeated, crushed.**

We're not sure when this happened, but it was probably **about a month into the rebuilding effort**. It probably started quietly and slow, and then spread like fire, the way division and injustice usually happens.

The Effects for the Community

- **Discord**. They were at odds with one another. The covenant of brotherhood was violated.
 - Note the emphasis on "brothers"
- **Diversion**. People were diverted from the mission. This is what internal division does!

The Reasons: (1) Failure to Submit to Scripture, and (2) Lack of Love

- This is where disunity among the people of God can always be traced!

(1) Failure to Submit to Scripture

- They aren't honoring **the spirit of Deut 15**. The reoccurring theme: "There should be no poor among you" (15:4, 7, 11). In the NT this idea is reflected in Acts 4:32-37.
- The rich are not following **Micah 6:8**.
- They are not keeping the royal command: "**Love your neighbor as yourself.**"
- They are also violating **specific OT commands**:
 - **It was okay to loan money to a fellow Jew, but they were to charge no interest. (Ex 22:25; Deut 23:19.** Nehemiah accuses them of usury – terrible interest.
 - They were not to **enslave a fellow Jew**
- **When you put tradition, experience, or self-interests above the Bible, then disunity happens.**
- **Don't substitute personal preferences for biblical references.**
 - We are united around the truth.
 - God's ways are for our good; for our flourishing.
 - When the husband/wife says he's not adhering to Scripture, then problems will exist. And the same for the church.

(2) Lack of Love

- The wealthy should have been serving, supporting, sacrificing for the good of their brothers and sisters, but instead took advantage of them.
- Greed made them unloving.
- Doesn't disunity come back to love?

Romans 12:9-10, 13

⁹Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. ¹⁰Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor... ¹³Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality.

That's what we need. There's an absence of this in Neh 5.

New Testament Examples of this kind of injustice and internal division because of lack of submission to Scripture, and a failure to love.

1 Corinthians 11-ff. Agape feast

- The rich could get there early, but the poor came later. By the time the poor arrived, there was no food. The rich were oppressing the poor.
- Paul says, **"Your meetings do more harm than good."**

James 2:1-3: Partiality to the Rich in the Assembly

- A failure to submit to Scripture and love one another. "If you really fulfill the royal law, love your neighbor as yourself, you are doing well."

Both cases: a lack of submission to Scripture, and a lack of love.

B. The Steps of Justice He Took (5:6-13)

The sequence has about five parts...

i. Righteous Indignation (6)

Like Jesus in the temple, Nehemiah knows this isn't right and something has to be done.

- **You have to be careful about this emotion.** Often it's **not** righteous.
- It's **possible** to be angry and not sin, but it's **very difficult!**
- But it would be wrong to be **indifferent** when sin is threatening the unity of the church and the mission of the church.
- This disunity was distracting the people from the mission and bringing dishonor to God.
- Righteous indignation isn't when **you get fired up over something for selfish reasons.**
- Righteous indignation is about **God's glory and God's people and God's mission.**

ii. Careful Contemplation (7)

- He got his emotions under control. **He chilled.**
- How do you keep righteous indignation from growing sinful? This.
- If you don't settle yourself, then your response may not be righteous!
- **How many of you later regretted saying or typing something in anger?**
- "Whoever is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and he who rules his spirit than he who takes a city" (Prov. 16:32).
- **If a leader can't control himself, he will never be successful in controlling others.**
- **If you can't handle criticism, or hardship without growing bitter and angry, then you don't need to lead!**
- You must learn to deal with your emotions in a godly, gospel saturated way.
- When you are angry, you need to preach the gospel on yourself. You have to apply grace to your life. James says: "Be slow to speak, quick to hear, and slow to anger. The anger of man doesn't produce the righteousness of God. Instead, "put it away, and receive with meekness that implanted world...." (**James 1:19-21**). Quiet yourself, humble yourself, get before God and His word, and allow the presence of God come and bring you comfort, clarity and strength.

iii. Direct Confrontation (7b)

Nehemiah boldly accuses the nobles and officials of **exacting interest**.

- He has biblical warrant for this rebuke (**Deut. 15, 23:19**).
- He doesn't talk to fifty people about the problem; he goes and addresses them.
- That's how Scripture says we must deal with offenses, **personally and directly**.
- **No maneuvering, no passive aggressive actions, no avoiding the other person... go talk.**
- **How many problems in churches could be stopped, how much healing could be experience, if we would not allow time to pass, but have that talk, not gossip, but go talk?**
- **This conversations are opportunities to grow, rely on God's grace, learn, and experience gospel reconciliation.**

iv. Public Explanation (7c-9)

He holds a public assembly to address the matter (7c).

- Apparently the nobles didn't respond to his private confrontation with them.
- Nehemiah must have pulled his workers off the wall to do this. That's how important it was to get this right.

8-10: He makes four main points in his speech (all rooted in sound theology)

- Hurting your brothers/sisters is out of step with our view of freedom (8)**
 - **He appeals to the irony of Jews enslaving fellow Jews!**

- They have a history of being redeemed from slavery, most recently, it seems that prior to Nehemiah's return some were forced to sell themselves to Gentile homes, but their fellow countrymen freed them.
 - But now they want enslave one another!?
 - Those who know freedom should want to promote freedom, not enslave people. (Deut 15)
- b. **Hurting your brothers/sisters is wrong (9a)**
- "What your doing is not good."
- c. **Hurting your brothers/sisters dishonors God (9b)**
- "Ought you not walk in the fear of our God?"
- d. **Hurting your brothers/sisters damages our witness (9c)**
- "Prevent the taunts of the nations." So here are the **Ashdodites, Ammonites, Termites**, looking over the wall saying, "oh they're just like us."
 - **Preserving your testimony is more important than financial gain.**
 - **If someone asks for tax help, or finance help, and you give them shady advice, how will they feel when you invite them to worship?**
 - **Jn 13:34-35**: This is how they will know.... Love for one another (also, **Jn 17:20-21**)

v. **Holy Restoration (10-13)**

i. **Leaders should lead the way in repentance (10).**

- Nehemiah is either (1) admitting that he and his closest associates are implicated in the injustice. (He was after all, a man of means. He too may have loaned money and grain to needy people, expecting a return. So he confesses his own fault). Or (2) saying that he has loaned money but on very different terms, in accordance with the law, without interest, but he realizes in the moment that what is called for during this time is **not a loan, but gifts**.
- Option 2 is the best option; I don't think option 1 is a good one based on Nehemiah's reaction in verse 6. So Nehemiah is asking others to follow his lead of generosity.

ii. **True repentance involves making things right (11-12)**

- He commands (1) **a return of interest**, (2) **a general amnesty**.

iii. **True repentance involves a holy commitment (12-13)**

- The people agree, and solemnly promise to keep their word.
- V. 13: Nehemiah gives an illustration. There like, "**what are you doing Nehemiah, the shiver?**"
- **This shaking out of his robes symbolized what God would do with the lenders if they didn't keep their word. Shaking out your robe/feet was a sign of condemnation (Acts 13:51; 18:6; Matt. 10:14).**

- **He says God will shake you out from the robes of his blessing if you don't repay what you've taken.**
- **The blue-collar guys are like "This is great, now I'll get my air compressor and table saw back!"**

iv. True repentance leads to celebration and renewal (13b)

- Repentance leads to praise!

Applications: Let's do justice for the good of people and the glory of God.

- **Let's repent of any elitists' attitudes toward the poor any mistreatment that has been done against them.**
 - We are not better than the poor, the orphan, the widow, the stranger. In the gospel, that's us!
 - If anyone should identify with the poor, not feel superior toward them it's Christians.
 - If anyone should be sympathetic and concerned for them, it should be us.
- **Let's see the world through the lens of Scripture, not through the lens of our self-interest or our political preferences.**
- **Let's hear their cries of injustice, and let's advocate on behalf of the weak.**
 - **We need to remember that part of the purpose of influence is to speak up for those with no influence.**
 - Nehemiah is going at the guys with the power, on behalf of the oppressed. That's very courageous, godly leadership.
 - The poor, the orphan, the widow, the immigrant, the challenged, and other vulnerable people are not only powerless, they are voiceless.
 - We must always speak up on their behalf.
 - Why? Because they're image bearers of God. And because in the gospel, we identify with them!
- **Let's remember Romans 12 as a church:** "Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly" (Rom 12:16). **The church can and should pursue unity amid economic diversity.**
 - **In the church, the poor should be cared for, but they should also be contributing to the work – just like here in Nehemiah.**
 - **A poor single mom, cleaning hotel rooms, could actually be mentoring a wealthy lady in North Hills – if perhaps the maid has walked with Jesus for a long time, and is able to teach this wealthy lady how to live a godly life.**
 - **The church is unique in this.**

2. Exemplifying Personal Generosity (5:14-19)

Nehemiah sets a godly example for the community to follow. He's all in.

- **Leadership is not lordship. It's about following Jesus, and inviting others to come along.**
- **Leaders must go further than the followers at time in sacrifice.**
- **Leading is all about example – 1 Timothy 4:12, 1 Peter 5:3**

1 Timothy 4:12

¹²Let no one despise you for your youth, but set the believers an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity.

Nehemiah gives a great alternative to the way the rich were operating.

- **He pauses to describe his style of leadership.**
- **Instead of allowing your greed to use and abuse people; use your wealth to bless people.**
- **In short, his labor was a labor of love.**

Nehemiah's humble, compassionate leadership style reflects many of the same characteristics of Christ's leadership...

• Personal Sacrifice (14-15a)

- **Nehemiah didn't take the privileges that the governors had before him.**
- **Where did the money come from to get these perks? Taxing the people. Nehemiah refused.**
- **He didn't lay burdens on the people.**
- **He cared about them.** He was asking them to work.
- **He didn't "lord it over the people."**
 - We find that same language in Matt 20 and 1 Peter, great texts on leadership.
 - Nehemiah wasn't a bully.
 - Bullies exist everywhere, sadly, even in the church.

• Humble Reverence (15b)

- **Why did he do this? Because he feared God.**
- **Nehemiah is engaged, he's humble. He wasn't boasting.**
- **He's practicing Micah 6:8**

• Faithful Perseverance (16).

- **He was laboring alongside of them, not using his position for personal gain.**

• Hospitable Service (17-18)

- **All the people were at his table and his expense; without the governors perks**
- **That's a big table or some very little people!!**
- **You would have to talk on walkie-talkies. "Pass the salt." And it would get there the next day.**

- Scripture contains many wonderful examples of hospitality, and this is one.
- Where does this display of generosity come from? Based on the previous chapters, it's an overflow of Nehemiah's own godliness.
- Nehemiah is aware of the good hand of God upon him. When you get grace, you get generous; when you get mercy, you get hospitable.

- **Holy Ambition (19)**

- This prayer reflect the awareness that human judgment isn't always accurate and it's not most important.
- Nehemiah says I do all this for the good of the people, and the glory of God.
- When you serve the Lord, you don't do it for the applause of others. You do it unto God.

Interviewer: "Nehemiah, we would like to interview you about your wall..."

Nehemiah: "The good hand of my God was upon me."

The words of **1 John 3:16-18** are illustrated in the generous actions of Nehemiah.

¹⁶By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. ¹⁷But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? ¹⁸Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth.

That's what the nobles should have been doing — caring for their brothers in need... Nehemiah cared about people, and he cared about the glory of God.

Application: Let's be a generous people.

- Let's be sensitive to the needs around us, and let's meet needs through deeds.
- Let's practice hospitality as an overflow of a generous heart.
 - Hospitality is a display of mercy and for evangelism.
 - What may happen if you invite some unbelieving friends over for dinner this week?
 - The proper response to God's grace is grace.
 - Hospitality reflects the King and the coming kingdom. (Luke 14)
 - It gives a movie preview. People say I want to see the whole film!
- Let's use our abundance to bless others.
 - In Ross' church in S. Africa, a guy parking cars, he's making about 10 mill a year... This whole conference, he funded it. He paid for every African pastor to get here. ("Yeah, I had a dream last night that he was supposed to move to Raleigh, NC).

Why is this chapter in the Bible? What ultimate significance does it have? Well, it teaches us some very helpful things, doesn't it? To be people of justice, generosity,

and people who pursue unity for the good of others and the glory of God.

But if we change lenses from a microscope to a wide-angle lens, then this is what I see. Unity was essential because **God was preserving this people, keeping his covenant, and through them, bringing forth our Messiah.**

God's purposes would not be thwarted by this internal division.

- Greedy men can't stop God's purposes.
- And He used Nehemiah toward that great end – Nehemiah had no idea probably about how far-reaching his just actions would be.

And Nehemiah points us to the leadership of Jesus, who lived and ministered for the **good of people and the glory of God.**

“You shall call Him Jesus, for he will save **His people** from their sins.”

- He glorified the Father, accomplishing the work the Father gave Him to do (Jn 17)

And the Father, “remembered” His Son, by raising Him from the dead.

This Savior walked justly, and practiced generosity and hospitality.

- He welcomes the nations to His table.

Nehemiah governed well, but Jesus reigns forever – as Lord over the church and the cosmos.

Let us look to Christ for strength to do our part as the people of God.

May the work of Christ for us, lead us to lives of justice, generosity.

May Christ unite us together as we continue His mission.