

PP **Nehemiah: The Power of the Dollar**

Text Nehemiah 5:1-10

Part 18, Oct. 27-28, 2012

PP Illus *“No test of leadership is more revealing than the test of opposition. Christian leaders can go to pieces under such pressure. Some grow too discouraged to continue. Others...become embattled, embittered and vindictive. Not so Nehemiah. Nowhere does his leadership shine more brilliantly than in his handling of opposition.”¹*

If you study church history, you will find that the most successful attacks on the church have not come from unbelievers, but by those who profess to know Christ

External pressure can push a church together, but internal strife usually pushes the church apart

This begins to happen as we look in chapter 5: ***“Now there arose a great outcry of the people and of their wives against their Jewish brothers.”*** 5:1

To capture the force of this terrible situation, pay careful attention to the word ***‘against’***

This is no longer the surrounding nations threatening...it is Jew against Jew

From three groups there arose a ***‘great outcry...against their Jewish brothers’***

PP The ***first*** group was made up of those who were struggling to get enough food to survive ***“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.’”*** 5:2

Imagine a great group of exiles arriving in Israel having no land, no crops to harvest, and dependent on earned wages to survive

Instead of receiving the generosity of God’s people, they were struggling to even get food

They are coming to Nehemiah, the Governor, for help

PP The ***second*** was made up of farmers struggling under exorbitant debt because of famine

“There were also those who said, ‘We are mortgaging our fields, our vineyards, and our houses to get grain because of the famine.’” 5:3

These farmers were living through economic upheaval, with crops failing because of the famine

They were forced to take out loans just to get grain

PP The ***third*** was a group of people who were struggling under tax burdens

“And there were those who said, ‘We have borrowed money for the king’s tax on our fields and our vineyards.’” 5:4

The famine was bad enough, but the King could care less, you had to pay his taxes

The Persian king received a fortune in annual tribute, very little of which ever benefited the local provinces

Some of the poorer Jews had to borrow from their wealthier countrymen to pay them

In order to borrow the money, they had to give security against their properties, and many of them were defaulting on these loans losing their land

After that, all they had left was to sell their children into indentured slavery: ***“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***

¹ John White, *Excellence in Leadership*

it is not in our power to help it, for other men have our fields and our vineyards.” 5:5

It was either starvation or servitude!

They are trapped: with no fields or vineyards they had no means to buy their children back

These three groups were not people living irresponsibly, mismanaging their monies and pursuing their reckless desires digging themselves into wrongful debt

They weren't people who were unwilling to live responsibly just asking for handouts!

The bible is remarkably consistent with its message to those who will not work responsibly:

PP ***“keep away from any brother who is walking in idleness... If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat...do their work quietly and to earn their own living.”***

2 Thessalonians 3:6, 10, 12

These groups are suffering, life had come against them and circumstances forced their situation
And those in a position to help were doing nothing but exploiting the poor

This isn't a passage to denounce debt, and it isn't one to tout socialism!

It's a passage that shows what happens to the church when those who can, refuse to show mercy to those who need

And what was driving this internal strife...our ever-present, still modern love of money...greed!

It was as much a problem then as it is today!

It was as much a problem in Jerusalem as it was in the ancient world, and it is today in the church like it is in the world

There were worldly, compromised people of God and they affected the entire community

Notice with me how a Godly leader of God's people should react

PP 1-He became very angry

“I was very angry when I heard their outcry and these words.” 5:6

‘I was very angry’ doesn't sound like a good reaction does it?

Let's not overlook at he hadn't gotten very angry at Sanballat, Tobiah or Geshem

After all, what do we expect from the enemies of God?

He simply realized where they were coming from and reacted appropriately to them

His anger was directed from those who claimed to be the people of God and yet compromised!

These wealthy Jews were in need of correction, not because they had wealth, but because they were withholding mercy and justice from those who were legitimately in need

Friends, as a fellow leader of God's people, I can understand his anger very well!

Church fighting, disunity, is what I worry about the most, and guard against the most!

It has pure, destructive power!

Just briefly consider this: there is no mention of work being done on the wall at all in our passage

Internal strife does that in the church; it halts progress and stymies the mission, exactly the plan of our enemies!!

If they could not get the work to stop from without, they will try to destroy from within

Illus The late preacher J. Vernon McGee once wrote, *“In the history of the church we have*

PP *seen that when the devil could not destroy the church by persecution, the next thing he did was to join it!”*

PP 2-He did nothing until he was thinking clearly

“I took counsel with myself” 5:7a

Anger and all emotion tends to cloud our judgment

The goal is not to remove feeling and emotions from our hearts, rather to make sure they are following right thinking

He was filled with righteous anger, but he disciplined himself to think through the situation

PP “Whoever is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and he who rules his spirit than he who takes a city.” Proverbs 16:32

Again, he aimed before he fired, and thought before he spoke

PP 3-He first confronted the guilty privately

“I brought charges against the nobles and the officials. I said to them, ‘You are exacting interest, each from his brother.’” 5:7b

You are exploiting your own people and are guilty of violating the Word of God!

If you read Exodus 22, Deuteronomy 23 and Leviticus 25, what emerges are God’s rules and regulations for lending money

PP a. It is not wrong to lend money to a Gentile for interest, for a nonbeliever

PP b. It is not wrong to lend money to a Jew, a fellow Christian (Nehemiah was doing this)

PP c. It is wrong to demand interest when you lend money to a Jew, a fellow Christian

PP d. It is wrong to enslave a fellow Jew, or put in bondage a fellow Christian

PP His Word guided His people how to loan to your brother: ***“You shall not charge interest on loans to your brother, interest on money, interest on food, interest on anything that is lent for interest... that the Lord your God may bless you in all that you undertake in the land that you are entering to take possession of it.” Deuteronomy 23:19-20***

The truth is, these nobles and officials were so greedy they cared nothing for God’s Word

It is obvious that Nehemiah’s words produced no sorrow in them, so he moved to the next level:

“I held a great assembly against them” 7b

PP 4-He confronted the unrepentant publicly

When private confrontation does not work, it must be forced out in the open

PP a-Look what you are doing against our family!

PP “Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity!” Psalm 133:1

“We, as far as we are able, have bought back our Jewish brothers who have been sold to the nations, but you even sell your brothers that they may be sold to us!” They were silent and could not find a word to say.” 5:8

In that day the custom was to indenture yourself as a servant until the loan could be repaid

Exchanging labor for cash in order to pay off the debt

This would usually require the family to help as well

You are working your fields, and then you also have to work your creditor’s fields

Except the creditor was charging so much interest that the borrower could not end his service Nehemiah and those who could were paying off these loans to their own fellow Jews, and note his emphasis of this, *‘our Jewish brothers’*

Four times he uses the word *‘brothers’* in his appeal

PP God’s Word explicitly forbade this behavior: *“If your brother becomes poor beside you and sells himself to you, you shall not make him serve as a slave: he shall be with you as a hired servant and as a sojourner.”* **Leviticus 25:39-40**

Notice the power of truth: *“They were silent and could not find a word to say.”* **5:8**

But he isn’t done because silence is not the goal, repentance is

PP b-Look at what you are doing against our God!

“So I said, ‘The thing that you are doing is not good. Ought you not to walk in the fear of our God...?’” **5:9a**

At the root of greed and exploitation is a refusal to trust that God will supply all your needs

It betrays the lack of fearing Him, of trusting Him

Fearing God is not just a terror of stepping out of line and getting struck down

Walking in the fear of God is faith-filled obedience

It’s having in our hearts a mixture of awe and adoration for Him that is so strong, we desire to obey Him trusting He will meet all our needs being true to His Word

When you are tempted to play that lottery, don’t think your heart is so noble that it wants to help the poor

When we struggle letting our Christian brothers and sisters borrow things we own, it is more than just taking care of our stuff

When we hold back from giving to the church and to those in need, it is betraying a distrust and disobedience so deep in us that we usually rationalize it away

Nehemiah connects the behavior of these wealthy leaders to their lack of trust and obedience! He takes them to their heart

Friends, let us all remember this: we aren’t at the root of sinful behavior until it turns vertical!

PP c-Look at what you are doing to our witness

“...to prevent the taunts of the nations our enemies?” **5:9b**

Illus The Roman Emperor, Julian, was trying to restore Rome to their pagan roots, and he was

PP increasingly frustrated with Christianity. He wrote this: *“Why do we not observe that it is their [the christians] benevolence to strangers, their care for the graves of the dead, and the pretended holiness of their lives that have done the most to increase atheism [which is what he called Christianity]? It is disgraceful when no Jew ever has to beg, and the impious Galileans [or Christians] support not only their own poor but ours as well...”*

PP *“So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.”* **Galatians 6:10**

PP *“For there will never cease to be poor in the land. Therefore I command you, ‘You shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy and to the poor, in your land.’”*

Deuteronomy 15:7-11

When we love each other, as well as those around us, we increase our witness of Jesus Christ! And when we fight among ourselves, treat each other poorly, we give ammunition to our critics. They watch us fight, and they say, look at that church, look at Christians, they are no different than anyone else, what a joke!

PP d-Finally, look at what you are doing against your leadership

“Moreover, I and my brothers and my servants are lending them money and grain.” 5:10

Godly leaders walk the talk, demonstrating what they are preaching

Look at what I am doing: I’m lending my own money and food, but without interest

I’m obeying the Word of our God, I am walking in the fear of our God

Here is the courageous call of God’s leaders, and it forces me, your pastor to examine myself

PP often: ***“Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith.”*** **Hebrews 13:7**

Let me close with a summary and a look forward

Is your heart free from greed; from the love of money?

A heart free from greed, trusting in God, will be evident in a hand open wide to the needy

Are you giving as you ought to the church, and to those who have become poor?

Discerning how God wants you to give, not rationalizing why you should not

Are you committed to loving those in the family of God?

There will likely be many opportunities in the midst and wake of this storm to demonstrate to the world all around us, this is what Jesus Christ does to people

He helps them love each other and take care of each other!

Next week, we are going to see the response of the guilty to Nehemiah’s courageous leadership

Pray