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Nehemiah

Lesson 5: Nehemiah 5

There are many things happening now in Jerusalem. The Jews are dealing with the pressures from surrounding political powers. They are highly motivated to work on the wall, though it is physically exhausting. As if the threat of an enemy attack weren't stressful enough, in chapter 5 we will see how the people are dealing with the additional stress of a lack of food and finances.

Read Nehemiah 5:1-5

Nehemiah hears an overwhelming cry for help. Many Jews are in great financial distress. There is a famine throughout the land. On top of that, the wealthy, ruling class of Jews have placed additional financial burdens on them. The poorest of the Jews cry out to their wealthy brethren because they don't have enough food to feed their families (v 2). In the Law, God commanded successful, well-off Jews to take care of their poor brethren who had nothing to their name (cf. Deuteronomy 15:7-11). Unfortunately, that's not happening. Consider for a moment all of these builders working on the wall, and no food to feed them or their families. Whether we're talking about the Jews in Nehemiah's day, or the church today, we as God's people are a volunteer workforce. They're not getting paid a nice salary for their work, nor are they receiving a fancy incentives package. There are a lot of things you can do without in order to get God's work done, but food is not one of them. Think about a time when you had a group of people working on your house or the church building. Those people can

really eat! In the people's case in Nehemiah 5, they cannot focus on the building God's wall if they're worried about making it through the day with enough food.

There is another group of people that have mortgaged their belongings just so they can afford food (v. 3). We all know the basic economic principle that says when the supply is short, the price goes up. That is exactly what those with money and power were capitalizing on. However, these impoverished Jews recognize they're being taken advantage of. They know that the Law is on their side, and that their fellow Jews should be cutting them some slack instead of making it more difficult.

The last group is complaining that they have had to borrow money to pay for property taxes owed to the king, and there is no way they can afford to pay. This has forced them to give their children into slavery in order to pay off their debt (vv. 4-5). Remember, the wealthy among God's people are overpricing goods and financing the mortgages of their poorer Jewish brothers at high interest rates. In light of this situation, it is helpful to understand a foundational law that God established through Moses.

Read Leviticus 25:39-43

According to the Law of Moses, the Jews were not supposed to treat their indebted fellow Jews like slaves. Instead, they were allowed to enter a much more positive arrangement we



Finer Grounds

sometimes refer to as “indentured servitude.” They work to pay off a debt, and when the debt they owe is paid in full they are now free to go. In this section of grievances, these poor Jews are reaching out for Nehemiah to help, because their brethren are disregarding God’s laws.

How do we treat our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ when they are in need of food, clothing or finances?

Sometimes circumstances beyond our control (such as famines) place us in great need. Do you live by an “I scratch your back, you scratch mine,” policy when it comes to giving directly to your brothers and sisters? Or do you have a “What’s mine is yours” policy?

What are some obstacles that might make you feel hesitant to give generously to brethren in need?

What do you think is necessary to overcome those obstacles?

It’s very important for us to be wise in the ways we help others in physical need. Keep in mind that the context of this passage is Jews

helping fellow Jews. We need to show great consideration toward our spiritual brothers and sisters before helping the lost financially. Sometimes it can be easy to become so focused on providing physical assistance to people of the world who seem to be down and out (which is a great thing to do) but at the same time we may totally overlook the fact that there are members in our own local body who are barely treading water financially. It’s not always like the poor Jews in Nehemiah 5. Many Christians may not seek help from their brethren because they feel they don’t deserve it, they don’t want to burden the church, or simply from pride. It may take time to develop trust and a relationship with your brothers and sisters in Christ when it comes to giving physical aid, but if you treat them with fairness, and kindness that trust is easily won.

Read Nehemiah 5:6-13

Nehemiah responds to the unfairness and greed of the nobles in a way that puts the fear of God back into them. Nehemiah certainly had to have tough conversations and confrontations throughout his governorship, and he doesn’t hold back here. Can you imagine the governor himself calling you and your peers into an emergency meeting to read you the riot act until you’re red in the face from shame? That’s exactly what Nehemiah does, leaving the nobles speechless (vv. 7-8). Have you ever disciplined your children for something that they knew was wrong? If they are guilty, they usually respond with silence or mumbling. They know they are busted! It is the same with the nobles. Nehemiah is so angry that they are charging a “usury” (i.e. interest) on loans. As you probably guessed, this too was in direct violation to God’s law (cf. Leviticus 25:35-38).



Finer Grounds

The fact that the wealthy Jews are charging their brethren so much interest is compounding the debt cycle. The poor Jews are left with no choice but to be sold into slavery. Nehemiah puts all the blame on the nobles for “selling” their brothers into slavery to serve them. Not only is this a sinful violation of the Law, but the nobles haven’t considered how their actions look to the rest of the world. At the very beginning of the book Nehemiah was heartbroken to hear that God’s people were a “reproach” to the enemies around them (cf. Nehemiah 1:3). What do you think the unbelieving pagans in the surrounding area will say about God’s people when they hear the rich are enslaving the poor? What will they say about their God? Our actions represent not only ourselves but the God whose name we wear. It’s important for us to remember that we are to be good ambassadors for Him in this world.

It’s highly unlikely you’ll find Christians enslaving one another in America any time soon. However, we can still fall into the same trap of taking advantage of or exploiting those with less power. How would God feel if we took a brother or sister to court to get what they owe us?

How might that make the church look to the non-Christians who found out? Read 1 Corinthians 6:1-8 to see the New Testament counterpart to Nehemiah 5.

Contrary to the behavior of the nobles, God entrusts the wealthy of this world to take greater responsibility in doing good for others (cf. 1 Timothy 6:17-19). Nehemiah embodies this

principle, and takes advantage of every opportunity to use his power and finances for good of God’s people. He leads by example, reminding the nobles how he is already lending money and grain to the poor (v. 10). Nehemiah asks the nobles to immediately return the property and goods they’ve been confiscating from the brethren (vv. 11-13). Fortunately, the nobles see the error of their ways and gladly consent. Nehemiah has them make an oath that they will follow through on their commitment. In an interesting display, he demonstrates how God will respond to any of them who break the oath by shaking out his robe. The shaking out of his robe symbolically demonstrates Nehemiah’s request of God to bring them to financial ruin if they dare break the oath to do right by their impoverished brethren.

Do you feel that the nobles are getting the short end of the stick in having to provide aid to the poor Jews?

What benefits will they receive from fulfilling their end of the bargain?

Read Nehemiah 5:14-19

When you read this last paragraph of the chapter, does it seem like Nehemiah is bragging about himself? Or is his reference to not making use of his food allowance something other than bragging? The more we reflect on what Nehemiah’s doing, it seems he’s giving a public



Finer Grounds

record of his accountability as governor. Wouldn't it be nice if all politicians were this transparent! Not only did Nehemiah not overspend, he purposely didn't take advantage of what he was allowed to by the king. Nehemiah recognized that his leadership role was to serve God's people, not to be served (that sounds an awful lot like something Jesus would say in Mark 10:45). Nehemiah was appointed to this position by King Artaxerxes, and cushy food allowance came with it. It was his right as the ruling authority. However, Nehemiah recognized that even though it was his right, he knew that it would lay a larger burden on the people. That burden would have affected his ability to lead the people under him. Not only that, he was more afraid of the consequences from God than he was from the backlash of the people.

Nehemiah recognized that a good leader needs to be accountable and even sacrifice their rights for the good of God's kingdom. Think of some individuals you personally know and respect as leaders in the church. What are some "rights" they give up in order to lead effectively?

At some points in our lives we have to lead others. Whether we want to or not, the task of leadership and influence is thrust upon us. We lead as a mother, teacher, event planner or even in the professional workplace. For some, leading others can be very uncomfortable. It can be hard to make decisions for the good of a group, knowing not everyone will be happy. Have you ever had to pick a topic for Bible study and you

always have that one individual complain? Have you ever planned a family trip to the zoo and one of the kids wanted to go to a theme park instead? Have you ever had to delegate for a ladies day? What if you upset sister Sue because she always leads singing, but you assigned her to head up the cooking committee instead? When you are put in a position to lead or influence God's people you must be willing to accept responsibility, make sacrifices, and not let the power go to your head. Sometimes you will need to sacrifice your time, energy, and even financial resources.

Nehemiah had to deal with the growing pains of restoring Jerusalem and God's people to their proper glory. He listened to the justified complaints of the poor. He responded to their struggles immediately and was willing to tackle the problem and admonish the nobles for their corruption. Finally, we see him give an account for his use of time and resources in his leadership role. A good leader finds balance and leads by example. Nehemiah serves as an enduring example of a man of God who was willing to promote unity among God's people, while making great personal sacrifices for the good of the Lord's work.