

“Internal Conflicts”

Nehemiah 5

Rev. Min Chung

(Lord's Day Service, October 29, 2017)

Nehemiah 5

¹*Now there arose a great outcry of the people and of their wives against their Jewish brothers.*

²*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.”* ³*There were also those who said, “We are mortgaging our fields, our vineyards, and our houses to get grain because of the famine.”* ⁴*And there were those who said, “We have borrowed money for the king's tax on our fields and our vineyards.*

⁵*Now our flesh is as the flesh of our brothers, our children are as their children. Yet we are forcing our son and our daughters to be slaves, and some of our daughters have already been enslaved, but it is not in our power to help it, for other men have our fields and our vineyards.”*

⁶*I was very angry when I heard their outcry and these words.* ⁷*I took counsel with myself, and I brought charges against the nobles and the officials. I said to them, “You are exacting interest, each from his brother.”* And I held a great assembly against them ⁸*and said to them, “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. ⁹*So I said, “The thing that you are doing is not good. Ought you not to walk in the fear of our God to prevent the taunts of the nations our enemies?”* ¹⁰*Moreover, I and my brothers and my servants are lending the money and grain. Let us abandon this exacting of interest.* ¹¹*Return to them this very day their fields, their vineyards, their olive orchards, and their houses, and the percentage of money, grain, wine, and oil that you have been exacting from them.”* ¹²*Then they said, “We will restore these and require nothing from them. We will do as you say.”* And I called the priests and made them swear to do as they had promised. ¹³*I also shook out the fold of my garment and said, “So may God shake out every man from his house and from his labor who does not keep this promise. So may he be shaken out and emptied.”* And all the assembly said “Amen” and praised the Lord. And the people did as they had promised.

¹⁴*Moreover, from the time that I was appointed to be their governor in the land of Judah, from the twentieth year to the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes the king, twelve years, neither I nor my brothers ate the food allowance of the governor.* ¹⁵*The former governors who were before me laid heavy burdens on the people and took from them for their daily ration forty shekels of silver. Even their servants lorded it over the people. But I did not do so, because of the fear of God.* ¹⁶*I also persevered in the work on this wall, and we acquired no land, and all my servants were gathered there for the work.* ¹⁷*Moreover, there were at my table 150 men, Jews and officials, besides those who came to us from the nations that were around us.* ¹⁸*Now what was prepared at my expense for each day was one ox and six choice sheep and birds, and every ten days all kinds of wine in abundance. Yet for all this I did not demand the food allowance of the governor, because the service was too heavy on this people. Remember for my good, O my God, all that I have done for this people.*

Introduction

Today we will talk about generosity and Biblical justice. I'm involved in different kinds of circles, some which talk a lot about missions, but we need to always evaluate the content and details of missions through the Biblical lens and perspective. I'm also involved in the counseling circle, and when people talk about counseling, we need to examine in detail in the perspective of the Bible. It's the same thing with social justice: we need to evaluate those things Biblically as well. In this text we will make seven comments at the end about Biblical justice because this passage talks about injustice.

God is building the wall through Nehemiah; He is building the city and people of God. God was using Nehemiah and it has been incredibly successful up until now. But we see in chapters 4, 5, and 6, Nehemiah is going to run into conflicts. Chapters 4 and 6 show how he had to face opposition from *without*, but chapter 5 shows how he has to deal with conflicts from *within*. In this chapter, Nehemiah deals with injustices in the community: Nehemiah's personal contribution to the project. Nehemiah takes measures to end the exploitation of the weak in the community by its powerful members who are ignoring God's commands. The problem is centered on the complaints of the poor Jews against the wealthy Jews who were either ignoring their desperate needs, or were actually making those needs worse by exploiting them. Things were made worse by a famine, so those who owned property were forced to mortgage their fields, vineyards, and houses in order to get food and necessities. Others had to borrow in order to pay the king's tax on their lands. Some were even forced to sell their children into slavery to their fellow Jews in order to pay their bills. These things existed even in the Old Testament. In disregard to the Mosaic laws, which forbade Jews from loaning money with interest to fellow Jews in need, the wealthy Jews were not only charging interest but also taking Jewish children as slaves as collateral for the loans. They were operating as heartless businessmen, putting their own financial gain foremost disregarding how it hurt their poor brethren and their families.

Nehemiah saw these problems as serious enough to stop the work on the wall long enough until they were resolved. The way he dealt with and responded to the people shows us some Biblical principles for resolving conflicts in the Church of Jesus Christ as well.

I. The Complaint – the powerless [1-5]

A. Problems – 4 problems [1]

In the midst of a great work for a great God, a great cry was heard among the Jews, because there was injustice. Injustice here means the strong taking advantage of the weak and the rich taking advantage of the poor. Here the powerless, possession-less, position-less, and penniless are being abused. In this chapter there are two different groups working on the wall: the haves and have-nots. Notice that Nehemiah still calls all of them brothers, though they had different financial statuses, they were still bound together as fellow Jews – people of God. They were related through their ancestor Abraham, in their sense of nationality and in the mutual worship of their God. Sometimes when we have more, we actually have less. This is what will happen to these people.

B. Problem 1 – The people who owned no land and who needed food [2]

The population was increasing and there was a famine so the people were hungry and they could not help themselves, so they cried out to Nehemiah for help. These cries

perhaps came especially from the women because the men were fully engaged on the building project, unable to do their usual work, and were therefore unable to feed their families.

C. Problem 2 – The landowners who had mortgaged their property in order to buy food [3]

Even the people who owned land had problems. They were forced to mortgage their property to benefit the wealthy few. Mortgaging means they raised money by temporarily forfeiting the use and fruit of their property, meaning they also risked eventually losing everything. They were borrowing money to pay the heavy tax on produce collected by the Persians. Inflation was on the rise and prices were going higher. The combination of debt and inflation was enough to wipe out a person's equity very quickly. In times of economic stress, the rich get richer while the poor get poorer. We are living in a sinful society – people with power abuse it most of the time.

D. Problem 3 – The people who had to borrow money to pay for high taxes [4]

In order to borrow money, they had to give security, meaning they would eventually lose their property. The Persian king received a fortune in annual tribute (about twenty million Persian darics a year), very little of which benefitted the local provinces. Usually, a government collects taxes to benefit society, but unlike our situation today, the tax did not support local services, they only supported the king.

E. Problem 4 – The wealthy Jews who were exploiting their own people by loaning money and taking their lands and their children as collateral [5]

When Nehemiah says “our flesh” and “our brothers”, the complaint emphasizes the closeness of relationship among Israelites. In Jewish culture, there was an emphasis on closeness, where people who were not related by blood treated each other as family. Yet they were abusing one another: the powerful were abusing the powerless.

In times of economic distress, families would borrow money from each other, sometimes using children as collateral. If a man could not pay the loans and his interest, his children, wife, and even the man himself could be sold into slavery during the time. The slavery then is different than the slavery we think about now – usually the terrible abuse in American slavery as well as slavery in the modern world, such as sex slavery. Though abuse may have occurred depending on the families, here it refers more to temporary debt slavery, not permanent slavery, which was permitted in the Old Testament. Leviticus 25 says they are more like hired workers who lived in and helped a family to pay their debts.

In the Old Testament, both the slave and slave owner had to treat each other in love. We see this in Ephesians 5, where slave owners were to treat slaves as God would treat them, and slaves were to work wholeheartedly for the slave owners. The same principles can be applied to our jobs today. Debt slaves were to be released every seven years, according to Deuteronomy 15, or every fifty years, according to Leviticus 25. The 50th year was called the Year of Jubilee where all debts are cancelled and people are freed

from slavery, which points forward to our freedom from slavery and sin in Jesus Christ. Though the slaves were to picture the gospel, there were those, especially the powerful, who abused the situation.

The irony for the Israelites was that, as exiles in Persia, their families were together, but now because of dire economic situations at home, their children were being sold into slavery. For the people with money, though they were free from the slavery of exile, they were enslaved in their hearts by money. These Israelites were sinning by abusing others.

II. The Charge – the powerful [6-11]

A. Righteous anger [6]

As Christians, we have two natures. In our sinful nature, we are angry because we do not get what we want. But the anger Nehemiah shows is not sinful anger but righteous anger. In our Spirit's nature, we have a desire for God to be glorified, therefore we can be angry for righteous reasons.

The English word 'anger' is one letter away from the word 'danger'. Sinful anger will lead to danger in our lives. But Nehemiah shows righteous anger. He is spiritually angry because something is not right. It is not a reaction out of sin, but out of the holiness of Spirit's nature for the glory of God and the love of His people. This anger is the other side of love for God and His people.

B. Private consultation [7]

When verse 7 says "I took counsel with myself" and then says "You", it is probably a private talk between Nehemiah and the nobles, consulting them and pointing out their sins. There is much wisdom before you do anything publicly it is always good to deal with problems privately, maybe one-to-one even, but privately. Because during that time people can ask questions and you can persuade them so they will do the right thing.

The rich got rich because as they were returning from exile, others were generous by the grace of God to give them material goods. God moved the hearts of the oppressors to give them money and goods, so that they would have something to live with when they returned. God gave them everything, just as God gives us everything we have, so just as God is generous to us, we are to be generous to others. But the nobles were using their wealth to make more money and abuse others.

C. Public confrontation [8]

Nehemiah is saying, "we have brought them from slavery to freedom", but now we are enslaving them ourselves. There was a public confrontation after the private confrontation because sin was prevalent and the whole society knew of the sin, so he is teaching them what to do with sin.

D. Perspective instillation [8]

Nehemiah said that what the rich were doing was “not good”, just as when God saw that it was “not good” for Adam to be alone. It was ‘not good’ because they were to show the generosity of God to the nations, but by becoming selfish and abusing their power, they were hindering their witness. Failure to treat others, especially other brothers and sisters, with compassion is an insult to our Maker and a block on our witness and testimony. Israel was supposed to be a light until their neighbors and the Gentiles, but they were abusing others and hindering their witness to other nations.

It is far better to lose money than to lose the privilege of your witness to the lost. You can always earn money, but it is very difficult to restore damaged testimony. Through all things, we must show the generosity of God for His glory. The opposite is true: when we love other brothers and act in justice and mercy in our generosity, the name of God will be lifted through us.

E. Calling for repentance [10-11]

In verse 10, Nehemiah asks the rich to not charge interest rather than using money to gain money. Instead, since they have plenty, they should use the money to lend it to others and help them. He also asks that they give back the land, since they do not need it, to build the city and build the nation. He is calling them to repentance.

III. The Correction – the promise [12-13]

A. Commitment with people [12]

The commitment of the nobles and officials was immediate. There was accountability with the spiritual leaders and immediate obedience.

B. Commitment with God [12-13]

In verse 12, Nehemiah asks the priests to come and declare to the nobles both a blessing and a curse. He gives a physical symbol, by shaking out the fold of his garment, of the spiritual consequences of disobedience. The disobedient would be disciplined and cast out of the community.

This type of curse formula was a solemn conventional way of compelling commitment to a course of action. By saying “Amen”, the whole assembly took upon itself the terms of Nehemiah’s command.

C. Can we dare to commit?

Yes, we can dare to commit. If we fail, will we receive this curse? No! Because Jesus Christ died on the cross, and He took all the curses of our failures. We are already justified in Jesus Christ. Make a commitment even if you fail! Because when you fail, you can go to Jesus again and again and again.

I have to say this many times at our church, but I still sin, so I am thankful again and again. Even when we fail, we always fail in Christ. Even when we fall, we always fall on the rock-solid foundation of Jesus Christ. Even though you fail, make a commitment to

be generous, to love others, to do all these things for God, whether reading the Bible or prayer! Make a commitment because He is going to give you grace. Grace of forgiveness and grace of power and strength so that we can go on.

We still should be cautious of making commitments because when we do, we should have a mindset of growing through the commitment in terms of progression by God's grace. You do not just flippantly make commitments, but as you make commitments, even though you fail, you still trust in Christ. You want to follow your commitments so you can grow through this process. As a Christian, you never make a commitment to perfection but to the process of failing, going to the cross, and receiving forgiveness and strength, because the blood of Christ never runs out.

Nehemiah stopped the work because building the people was more important than building the wall. In fact, the reason why they were building the wall was to build the people and city of God. People are always more important than projects. Many organizations use people for projects, but the Church of Jesus Christ, including CFC, uses projects to build the people of God. That's what the Bible is about, what God is about, and what we are about. So when the people were not generous and there was sin in the community, they had to stop the work to correct the sin and build the people of God.

Generosity always shows the love of God. I remember when we were still starting the church of CFC, most of us were students and we were very poor. I belong to an association called the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA), and personally to one of the Korean presbyteries. I went to a meeting on the East Coast over twenty years ago and everyone was praying with one another and sharing their prayer requests and needs. One pastor was crying as he was sharing his financial needs because he could not provide for his wife and children, and we all cried together. As I was leaving, this pastor runs out to me and slips something in my pocket and runs back – a wrinkled hundred-dollar bill. I still remember his generosity: even though he was poor and didn't have much, he sacrificed and gave love to me. Generosity will show the power of God to people, so we need to be God's people to build the kingdom of God for His glory.

IV. The Conduct – Nehemiah

This point can apply to anybody in authority, including parents, pastors, teachers, and presidents. As Nehemiah speaks to the people, he lives out what he preaches.

A. He did not abuse his power [14-15]

Nehemiah was willing to forsake the rights of his food allowance and taxation, like the previous governors, in order to serve. He gave up the opportunity to live in luxury to live with necessity for his people. According to the Bible, we no longer live for ourselves because we live for the kingdom of God, just as Nehemiah did.

B. He was faithful to His calling [16]

Nehemiah knew that real estate value would shoot up after the completion of the wall. He could have bought up cheap land before announcing the project and made a profit, but he was focused on his calling and responsibility.

C. He was generous to others around him [17-18]

Each day, Nehemiah fed 150 people at his table. Even as he did this, he did not demand the food allowance of the governor, but gave out of his own pocket. He was generous to those around him.

D. He was living for God's glory [19]

Nehemiah 5:15

The former governors who were before me laid heavy burdens on the people and took from them for their daily ration forty shekels of silver. Even their servants lorded it over the people. But I did not do so, because of the fear of God.

There are two ways of reading verse 19. One is that Nehemiah is using his merit to receive what he wants from God. The other way is that Nehemiah is saying, "Remember what I have done, because You have done so much more. I am doing this to thank you, love you, and praise you." Nehemiah is saying this for the second reason.

The first is the cry of the one who thinks he is owed, but the second is the one who thinks he owes eternity. One is the cry of the lender; the other is the cry of the debtor. We are indebted to God because He has given us Jesus Christ, and all of our lives He will lavish His love upon us. He will give us more and more, and no matter what we give to God, we will never out-give Him. All Nehemiah has done for the people is for God's glory and honor and because he loves God and wants to show Him to others.

He does everything out of a fear of God, a reverential worship of God that we see in verse 15. The fear of God is the filter of his life and decisions. In everything he does, he checks that it will honor and glorify God. Whenever you make decisions, big or small, ask, "What will honor God more?" This is one of the wisest questions you can ask because we are not living for ourselves but for the glory of God. We are not lords, but servants of God; we are not by ourselves, but children of God living for His glory.

Henri Nouwen gives three lies of identity.

1. I am what I have
2. I am what I do
3. I am what other people say or think of me

These are all lies. The Bible says, "I am a child of God in Jesus Christ. I am a servant of God, to live for His glory. I live to show what God is like. As He is generous to me, I will be generous to others." That is who we are in Jesus Christ.

V. Comments – Biblical justice

Psalm 103:6-7

*⁶The LORD works righteousness
and justice for all who are oppressed.*

*⁷He made known his ways to Moses,
his acts to the people of Israel.*

The context of Nehemiah 5 is very similar to the context of Psalm 103 where the people are out of exile. The context of “righteousness” and “justice” in verse 6 is provided in verse 7, is about the exodus – the work of God through Moses for the people who were enslaved in Egypt and were freed to live for God.

1. This is about God’s act on the Israelites in exodus who are oppressed in Egypt.
 - a. The oppressed are in exile because of sin
 - b. Humanity is in exile to see the need to be rescued because of their sins [not specific sins but general sin nature]God allows suffering to happen in this world that is a result of general sin so that we would see the need to be rescued by God as we are oppressed in this world.
2. God saves the oppressed Israelites and judges the Egyptian oppressors. His justice act was to picture the Gospel – mercy to the oppressed and justice to the oppressors.
3. The command for justice was often to the Israelites who became oppressors to their own people after they have been freed from their oppressions – this was a call for repentance.
4. His justice was for the oppressed Israelites to see the need for a rescuer [just like in Egypt] and the oppressing Israelites to see the need for repenting of their sins of oppressing others [after the return from exile/in Nehemiah 5].

Before the return from exile, as in Egypt, Israel was in need of a savior. After they returned from exile, as in Nehemiah 5, the reference to justice is often a call to repentance.
5. The goal of His justice is for us to see Jesus so that we can be redeemed in Him, not for equality as a goal, though it can result in equality.
6. If the goal is mere equality, neither the oppressed nor the oppressors will repent of their sins and therefore, will fail to be redeemed in Christ, which is the goal of Biblical justice.

Equality is a consequence of the Gospel entering people’s hearts. It cannot happen with repentance or without seeing our sins.

Communism, Marxism, and utopianism all have the objective of equality, but this cannot happen without the eradication of sin through repentance and through Jesus Christ. Even though equality can be a result, if people repent of their sins, equality is not the only result. The goal should be generosity: giving everything, even our lives, just as Jesus gave everything for us. Through this we show the love of Jesus.
7. If we have been saved, we would repent of our sins of injustice [to do justice] and become the people of mercy [to love kindness], as we live to picture and glorify [humbly walk with your God].

Micah 6:8

*He has told you, O man, what is good;
and what does the LORD require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,*

and to walk humbly with your God?

Many people in the social justice movement use this verse to back themselves, but we need to understand it in context. “To do justice” means to repent of our sins of injustice to become people of mercy and love kindness. The Hebrew word for ‘kindness’ is *chesed*, a word describing God’s generosity to people. We are to show that in our lives as we repent of our sin, we cannot help but to become loyally loving, and picture and glorify God. Therefore, Jesus says to deny yourself to do justice, to carry your cross to walk humbly with God.

Conclusion

In social justice, there is often a lack of emphasis on the need of oppressors. Often, the verse concerning justice is *to* the oppressors, so that they would repent of their sins. A Biblical call of justice is more about repenting of our own sins than pointing out others’ sins, that we would help and love others around us. Sometimes there is a lack of understanding about the goal. Equality temporarily helps, but repentance helps people become generous like God and eternally helps with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. There is also a lack of emphasis on the picturing of the Gospel – emphasizing the need for Jesus and showing Jesus.

In our community and church, we need to repent of our sins, so we can become loving and generous people, and the community and world will see the love of Jesus Christ, powerfully, spiritually, and eternally through all the things we do.

For some of you who are struggling, make a commitment to receive the generosity of God. You often think God is stingy with His Son’s blood, “He will not forgive me. Can I go to Him *again* for the same sin I’m committing?” You need the generosity of God and the forgiveness of Jesus Christ. Do not dwell in the puddle of your tears, but go to the LORD who will wash you with His blood. Go to Him again and again and again: He is a generous God whose blood will never run out, and whose blood is more powerful than your sin.

For others of you, you need to pray that God would convict you to respond like these Israelites, people of justice, and repent of our sins. You need to become merciful and loving people in everything you do to show the love of Jesus Christ to the world around you. God will give specific convictions to show you how – to neighbors, to international students, to the poor, to orphans, to sex slaves – God will give you the heart of generosity for His glory.