

02.11.2019 VIOLATING THE SPIRIT OF THE LAW

***“Restore now to them, even this day, their lands, their vineyards, their olive groves, and their houses, also a hundredth of the money and the grain, the new wine and the oil, that you have charged them.”
Nehemiah 5:11***

This week’s study is Nehemiah Chapter 5. Here we find how some Jews were responding to the economic crisis in Jerusalem during the time of Nehemiah. This chapter gives us valuable insights into the selfishness of the human heart when not motivated by fear and reverence for God. It also gives us insights into how the people of God will respond when they have the mind of Christ – with mercy and generosity. Finally, we see godly leadership in the life of Nehemiah.

Chapter 5 deals with internal problems among the Jews. Internal dissension can cause as much trouble to the cause of God as does external opposition.

The Economic Crisis and the Grievances of the people; Nehemiah 5:1-5

And there was a great outcry of the people and their wives against their Jewish brethren.

For there were those who said, “We, our sons, and our daughters are many; therefore let us get grain, that we may eat and live.”

There were also some who said, “We have mortgaged our lands and vineyards and houses, that we might buy grain because of the famine.”

There were also those who said, “We have borrowed money for the king’s tax on our lands and vineyards. Yet now our flesh is as the flesh of our brethren, our children as their children; and indeed we are forcing our sons and our daughters to be slaves, and some of our daughters have been brought into slavery. It is not in our power to redeem them, for other men have our lands and vineyards.”

The outcry is against their own people, the Jews (5:1). There are 4 problems:

1. There isn’t enough food for the landless. (5:2)
2. Grain prices were so high that landowners were forced to mortgage their lands to buy food. (5:3)
3. Others had borrowed money to pay the oppressive government taxes. (5:4)
4. Some Jews had been forced to sell their children into slavery (5:5)

Nehemiah’s Response: Nehemiah 5:6, 7

When I heard their complaints, I was very angry. After serious thought, I spoke out against these nobles and officials. I told them, “You are hurting your own brethren (relatives) by charging interest (usury) when they borrow money!” Then I called a public meeting to deal with the problem.

Nehemiah recognises that it is the well-off in his society (nobles and officials) who are oppressing their brothers. The Jews were allowed to lend to their fellow Jews, but they were not to charge them interest.

“If you lend money to any of My people who are poor among you, you shall not be like a moneylender to him; you shall not charge him interest.” Exodus 22:25

Take no usury or interest from him; but fear your God, that your brother may live with you. 37 You shall not lend him your money for usury, nor lend him your food at a profit. Leviticus 25:36, 37

“You shall not charge interest to your brother—interest on money or food or anything that is lent out at interest. 20 To a foreigner you may charge interest, but to your brother you shall not charge interest, that the Lord your God may bless you in all to which you set your hand in the land which you are entering to possess.” Deuteronomy 23:19, 20

Nehemiah Acts: Nehemiah 5:7-13

So I called a great assembly against them. And I said to them, "According to our ability we have redeemed our Jewish brethren who were sold to the nations. Now indeed, will you even sell your brethren? Or should they be sold to us?" Then they were silenced and found nothing to say. Then I said, "What you are doing is not good. Should you not walk in the fear of our God because of the reproach of the nations, our enemies?" (5:8, 9)

To fear God is to be reverent and recognise that He is a holy and righteous God and therefore that whatever He commands is a holy and righteous command. To fear God is also to be afraid to be out of God's will, for *"there is a way that seems right unto a man, but the end thereof is death"* (Proverbs 14:12). We must always put our plans and what seems right in our own eyes before God and be certain that it is in the will of God.

"Serve Him (God) with a perfect heart and with a willing mind: for the LORD searches all hearts, and understands all the imaginations of the thoughts." 1 Chronicles 28:9

"Should you not walk in the fear of our God because of the reproach of the nations, our enemies?" (5:9)

Whenever God's people are unfaithful to Him, His name is mocked among the heathen.

You are so proud of knowing the law, but you dishonour God by breaking it. No wonder the Scriptures say, "The Gentiles blaspheme the name of God because of you." Romans 2:23, 24 NLT

*"Even among those who profess to be walking in the fear of the Lord, there are some who are acting over again the course pursued by the nobles of Israel. Because it is in their power to do so, they exact more than is just, and thus become oppressors. **And because avarice and treachery are seen in the lives of those who have named the name of Christ, because the church retains on her books the names of those who have gained their possessions by injustice, the religion of Christ is held in contempt. Extravagance, overreaching, extortion, are corrupting the faith of many and destroying their spirituality. The church is in a great degree responsible for the sins of her members. She gives countenance to evil if she fails to lift her voice against it.***

The customs of the world are no criterion for the Christian. He is not to imitate its sharp practices, its overreaching, its extortion. Every unjust act toward a fellow being is a violation of the golden rule. Every wrong done to the children of God is done to Christ Himself in the person of His saints. Every attempt to take advantage of the ignorance, weakness, or misfortune of another is registered as fraud in the ledger of heaven. He who truly fears God, would rather toil day and night, and eat the bread of poverty, than to indulge the passion for gain that oppresses the widow and fatherless or turns the stranger from his right." *Prophets and Kings p. 651*

The People Respond and Nehemiah Confirms their Promise with an Oath

I myself, as well as my brothers and my workers, have been lending the people money and grain, but now let us stop this business of charging interest.

You must restore their fields, vineyards, olive groves, and homes to them this very day. And repay the interest you charged when you lent them money, grain, new wine, and olive oil."

They replied, "We will give back everything and demand nothing more from the people. We will do as you say." Then I called the priests and made the nobles and officials swear to do what they had promised.

I shook out the folds of my robe and said, "If you fail to keep your promise, may God shake you like this from your homes and from your property!"

The whole assembly responded, "Amen," and they praised the Lord. And the people did as they had promised. (5:10-13)

What is the difference between a promise and an oath? An oath is legally binding; a promise is not. If I refuse to honour a promise, no-one can take me to court. But if I refuse to honour an oath that I have made to another party, that party can take me to court and insist that I honour the oath that I have taken.

The Witness of Nehemiah: Nehemiah 5:14-19

1. He did not take the official food allowance due him from the government.

This was in stark contrast to the previous governors who had made heavy demands of food, wine and money from the people.

For the entire twelve years that I was governor of Judah—from the twentieth year to the thirty-second year of the reign of King Artaxerxes—neither I nor my officials drew on our official food allowance. The former governors, in contrast, had laid heavy burdens on the people, demanding a daily ration of food and wine, besides forty pieces of silver. Even their assistants took advantage of the people. (5:14, 15)

2. He states his motivation.

“But because I feared God, I did not act that way.” (5:14, 15)

3. He refused to enrich himself with land and property.

I also devoted myself to working on the wall and refused to acquire any land. (5:16)

4. He devoted himself to the work God had sent him to do.

I also devoted myself to working on the wall. And I required all my servants to spend time working on the wall. (5:16)

When we are called to leadership, God expects us to be accountable for those we lead. We are to require them to be faithful to the task they are called to.

Since an overseer manages God’s household, he must be blameless... hospitable, one who loves what is good, who is self-controlled, upright, holy and disciplined. He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it. Titus 1:7-9

“What doth the LORD thy God require of thee, but to fear the LORD thy God, to walk in all his ways, and to love him, and to serve the LORD thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul” Deuteronomy 10:12

5. He paid his expenses out of his own pocket (the expense was not light) because he saw the people he served were already carrying a heavy burden.

I asked for nothing, even though I regularly fed 150 Jewish officials at my table, besides all the visitors from other lands! The provisions I paid for each day included one ox, six choice sheep or goats, and a large number of poultry. And every ten days we needed a large supply of all kinds of wine. Yet I refused to claim the governor’s food allowance because the people already carried a heavy burden.

Remember, O my God, all that I have done for these people, and bless me for it. (5:17-19)

For Reflection:

Nehemiah 5:1-13

1. Do I fear God and seek to give Him glory in every area of my life? Do I obey His commands unquestioningly?
2. Do I recognise that when I do not live a Christ-like life, God is mocked by the unbelievers who are watching me?
3. Do I devise ways and means to improve my economic status or do I wait for God to solve my economic problems?
4. Do I recognise that God is interested and has a plan for every aspect of my life – spiritual, mental, material, social and physical?
5. Do I recognise that every aspect of my life, whether it is worship or seeking wealth, must be done in the fear of God?
6. Do I take advantage of those who are poorer or less powerful than I am?
7. If I have disobeyed God's commands either wilfully or through ignorance, am I willing to repent and change my ways when confronted with my disobedience?
8. Do I have the mind of Christ? Do I always want to be merciful and kind to those who are poor in this world's goods? Am I willing to be merciful to the unmerciful, kind to the unkind and forgiving to the unforgiving?

Nehemiah 5:14-19

1. Am I like Nehemiah? Do I have reverence for God? Am I afraid to be out of God's will for my life?
2. Do I recognise, like Nehemiah, that if I choose to be always in God's will, there are many decisions I will not make and many things I will not do because they are in conflict with His will?
3. Even if I am wealthy, do I live a simple lifestyle?
4. When I am rich because of the perks of my job, do I still choose to live simply?
5. If I am in church employment and have the ability to enlarge my income due to the allowances available to me, do I still live simply? Do I choose to not accept the additional allowances, recognising that the money I do not claim can be used to further God's cause, whether it be evangelism or ministry to the poor? If I do take the allowances, do I use the money to help those less fortunate than I?
6. Do I recognise that while God promises me salvation unconditionally '*whosoever will may come...*' *Revelation 22:17*, nevertheless there are blessings that are conditional upon my faithfulness to Him... '*them that honour me, I will honour... To the faithful you show yourself faithful; to those with integrity you show integrity*'. *1 Samuel 2:30, 2 Samuel 22:26*
7. If I failed to trust God to provide for me or I have been unmerciful and ungenerous in the past, have I confessed my failure of faith to Him, recognising that He is '*faithful and just to forgive us our sins*' *1 John 1:9*?
8. Have I experienced God's faithfulness to me as I live a life that is merciful and generous?

My eyes shall be on the faithful of the land that they may dwell with me. He who walks in a perfect way, he shall serve me. Psalm 110:6

A church leader (overseer) is a manager of God's household, so he must live a blameless life. He must not be arrogant or quick-tempered; he must not be a heavy drinker, violent, or dishonest with money. Rather, he must enjoy having guests in his home, and he must love what is good. He must live wisely and be just. He must live a devout and disciplined life. He must have a strong belief in the trustworthy message he was taught; then he will be able to encourage others with wholesome teaching and show those who oppose it where they are wrong. Titus 1:7-9 NLT

Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. Acts 20:28
