

**Nehemiah 5:1-19<sup>1</sup>**  
***Don't Love the Task More than People***

**Introduction**

ILLUSTRATION: One morning, a woman with a heart condition went into breathing difficulties. Her daughter called the police who in turn redirected the call to the ambulance service.

When the ambulance crew arrived, they gave the sick lady oxygen in order to improve her condition. Meanwhile, her daughter was insisting that the ambulance should bring the patient to the nearby general hospital though there was a smaller hospital nearer their home. The daughter claimed that general hospital had all her mother's medical records.

The crew told her that according to their standard procedures, they were supposed to send the patient to the nearest hospital for emergency treatment.

The daughter continued to argue with the crew while the poor patient was left waiting. It was an hour later before the patient was finally sent to the general hospital further away—not in the ambulance, but in a taxi because both the daughter and the ambulance crew could not agree on the destination.

*(The New Paper, 1 Aug. 2008, pp. 2-3)*

It is ironical that in wanting to be right, we can end up not doing the right thing—i.e. we end up not treating people the right way.

Nehemiah 5 reveals to us the depths of sin in the human heart and how each of us must learn to love our neighbours as ourselves. In this chapter, we take a break from the task of rebuilding wall, and we turn our attention to a festering problem—some social injustice among the Jews at that time. We see Nehemiah switched his role as building project manager to champion of social justice.

Though he was busy leading in the rebuilding of the wall, he did not allow the task to deter him from attending to the needs of some hurting people. He demonstrated how not to love the task more than people. He demonstrated how to treat people in the fear of God.

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<sup>1</sup> 1984 NIV

## I. Verses 1-5

Now the men and their wives raised a great outcry against their Jewish brothers.

Some were saying, "We and our sons and daughters are numerous; in order for us to eat and stay alive, we must get grain."

Others were saying, "We are mortgaging our fields, our vineyards and our homes to get grain during the famine."

Still others were saying, "We have had to borrow money to pay the king's tax on our fields and vineyards."

Although we are of the same flesh and blood as our countrymen and though our sons are as good as theirs, yet we have to subject our sons and daughters to slavery. Some of our daughters have already been enslaved, but we are powerless, because our fields and our vineyards belong to others."

In the midst of this great task of rebuilding the wall for their great God, we hear in Nehemiah 5 a great cry among the Jews. They were not crying out against the Samaritans, the Ammonites, or the Arabs, but against their own people!

Jews were exploiting Jews in a situation of famine.

- There were those who owned no land but needed food.
- There were those who owned land but had to mortgage their property in order to buy food.
- There were those who had to borrow money to pay their taxes to the Persian king. These had to give security and that meant eventually losing what belonged to them.
- There were those who were wealthy but who were exploiting their own people by loaning them money and taking their lands as collateral and their children as slaves.

So there were some in great economic hardships. And there were some who were wealthy yet selfishly exploiting the poor in order to further prosper themselves. They were using their economic power to rob some and to put others into bondage.

To be sure, it was not unlawful for Jews to loan money to one another in their life together as God's people.

- But they were not to act like moneylenders and charge interest.

Deut. 23:19-20—"Do not charge your brother interest, whether on money or food or anything else that may earn interest. You may charge

a foreigner interest, but not a brother Israelite, so that the LORD your God may bless you in everything you put your hand to in the land you are entering to possess.”

- They were to treat one another with love even in the matter of taking security, or making a brother a servant.

Exodus 22:26-27—“If you take your neighbour's cloak as a pledge, return it to him by sunset, because his cloak is the only covering he has for his body. What else will he sleep in? When he cries out to me, I will hear, for I am compassionate.”

Leviticus 25:39-43—“If one of your countrymen becomes poor among you and sells himself to you, do not make him work as a slave. He is to be treated as a hired worker or a temporary resident among you; he is to work for you until the Year of Jubilee. Then he and his children are to be released, and he will go back to his own clan and to the property of his forefathers. Because the Israelites are my servants, whom I brought out of Egypt, they must not be sold as slaves. Do not rule over them ruthlessly, but fear your God.”

The Jews were exploiting Jews in Nehemiah's time. They forgot that the Lord would not allow that among His people. And that's why He instituted the Year of Jubilee in Moses' time. The Year of Jubilee (Lev. 25) was to protect economic justice in Israel. All debts had to be forgiven in the 50th year, all land restored to its original owners, and all servants set free. The rules of Jubilee were given by God to help the Jews to love one another as brothers, and not to transact with one another as profiteers.

Nehemiah 5 records for us that a great cry came forth from those exploited by their fellow Jews. This is not to tell us that Nehemiah had heard them, but that God Himself had heard them. In the midst of a great work to the great God, some people were exploiting others for selfish gain.

The cry of the exploited was really the voice of God's disapproval. Indeed, God's people must guard against exploiting one another for selfish gain.

ILLUSTRATION: Here's a true story. In the late 1990s when Singapore was going through an economic downturn, many people lost their jobs. A certain church started a benevolent fund to help some jobless members ride over this difficult period.

A man in that church was one of the recipients of this gesture of love from the church. Not long later, he came back again for help with his sob stories. The church leadership told him that priority would be given to others since he had already received some benefits of the fund.

The man was furious and accused the leadership for lacking love and practicing favouritism.

The leadership tried to pacify him by suggesting that they would help find him a job. He flatly refused, and in the process, leaked out the fact that he himself had actually declined many job offers because they were not according to his liking.

Speaking on behalf of the leadership, the pastor said to the man in a very firm manner, “In that case, we will not only stop giving you money from the fund, but also stop praying for you to find a job. God has already answered you, but it is you who have not responded to Him.”

God’s people must guard against using one another for selfish gain. The love and compassion of the church is not a weakness to be exploited for selfish gain.

Nehemiah demonstrated how not to love the task more than people. He demonstrated how to treat people in the fear of God—we are not to make use of people for our own selfish gain.

The exploitation of the people was indeed no small matter. In fact, it was wide spread enough to be brought up as a community concern. Nehemiah gathered the people and made a public call in order to do the right thing.

## **II. Verses 6-8**

When I heard their outcry and these charges, I was very angry. I pondered them in my mind and then accused the nobles and officials. I told them, “You are exacting usury from your own countrymen!” So I called together a large meeting to deal with them and said: “As far as possible, we have bought back our Jewish brothers who were sold to the Gentiles. Now you are selling your brothers, only for them to be sold back to us!” They kept quiet, because they could find nothing to say.

It is important to note that the building of the wall did not create these problems. It only revealed them.

Nehemiah “pondered” the charges in his mind. The word “to ponder” means “to consult within his heart”. Actually, Nehemiah put his heart and his head together as he pondered the problem and sought God’s direction. He got control of his feelings and his thoughts so that he could give constructive leadership to the people. He was “very angry” but he was in control (v. 6).

Nehemiah then decided to call a great assembly and publicly address the people whose selfishness had created this difficult and painful situation. Theirs was a grievous public sin, involving the whole nation. It demanded public repentance and restitution—i.e. to do the right thing and walk in the fear of God.

Nehemiah's call to walk in the fear of God was not one that called for fire and brimstones to rain down on those who had sinned. Yes, it is possible that in order to move people to walk the way of God, we can intentionally or unintentionally impress in them a morbid fear of God.

ILLUSTRATION: Theodore Roosevelt was sworn in as the 26th President of the US in 1901. As a child, Roosevelt was sickly and nicknamed "Teedie". His mother found him so fearful of the Madison Square Church—he would refuse to enter it if he was alone. So she pressed him to tell her why. She found out that he was terrified by the word "zeal". Roosevelt had heard the pastor read the word "zeal" in the Bible, and became terrified by it thereafter.

She then read to her young son from a concordance those passages that contained the word "zeal". At one point, Roosevelt excitedly told his mother to stop. The line was from John 2:17 from the KJV which read, "And his disciples remembered that it was written, 'The zeal of thine house hath eaten me up.'"

Yes, it is possible that in order to move people to walk the way of God, we can intentionally or unintentionally impress in them a morbid fear of God.

But Nehemiah's call to walk in the fear of God was not one that called for fire and brimstones to rain down on those who had sinned. Instead, it was a call that consisted of two appeals.

- First, he appealed to their brotherly love by reminding them that they were robbing their own fellow Jews (vv. 7-8). His appeal was based solidly on the Word of God, for the Law of Moses forbade Jews to exact interest from one another. The Jewish nation went into Babylonian Captivity as an agricultural people, but some of them came out a mercantile people, having learned how to use money to make money. According to the Law, lending money to a fellow Jew is okay provided you don't violate God's Word, and exploit those who are helpless by charging usury and putting them back into bondage. The selfish moneylenders were nullifying the redemptive purpose that God was bringing to pass through Nehemiah.
- Second, Nehemiah appealed to Israel's witness to their Gentile neighbours (v. 9)—to their testimony as God's people. God called Israel to be a "light to the Gentiles" (Isa. 42:6; 49:6), but their conduct was certainly anything but a witness to their pagan neighbours. If we truly fear the Lord, then we will want to honour Him before those who don't believe in Him.

Nehemiah's call to walk in the fear of God was not one that called for fire and brimstones to rain down on those who had sinned. Instead, it was a call that

consisted of two appeals that were both strong and sincere, and rooted in the Word of God and His love for the people.

In the same way, God is calling and appealing to us:

- Not to take advantage of another for selfish gain, especially when that person is in a position of vulnerability. Rather, help that person in brotherly love so that God's redemptive purpose can be fulfilled.
- Not to tarnish our Christian testimony as God's people before an unbelieving world. When we tell the unbelieving world that God loves them and wants to save them to be His people, we want them to take us seriously by demonstrating to them the love of God we show to one another as His people.

Nehemiah demonstrated how not to love the task more than people. He demonstrated how to treat people in the fear of God by first publicly calling people not to make use of one another for selfish gain. He then went on to give an even more powerful demonstration—he demonstrated using his life example.

### **III. Verses 14–19**

Verses 14-16—Moreover, from the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when I was appointed to be their governor in the land of Judah, until his thirty-second year—twelve years—neither I nor my brothers ate the food allotted to the governor. But the earlier governors—those preceding me—placed a heavy burden on the people and took forty shekels of silver from them in addition to food and wine. Their assistants also lorded it over the people. But out of reverence for God I did not act like that. Instead, I devoted myself to the work on this wall. All my men were assembled there for the work; we did not acquire any land.

During his twelve years as governor, Nehemiah used his position to help the people. He did not use the people to help himself; to build a kingdom for himself. In that day, most officials exercised their authority in order to promote themselves and protect their personal interests. They had very little concern for the needs of the people.

But Nehemiah did not use his position to prosper himself nor to burden the people. Rather, he paid out of his own pockets. The point here is that Nehemiah was careful not to exploit and burden the people (5:15). The previous governors and their assistants had used their positions for personal gain, perhaps taking bribes from the people for favours promised.

For people in places of authority, the temptation to increase wealth and power is always present. Power corrupts; absolute power corrupts absolutely. We all need to walk in the fear of the Lord so that we will not exercise our rights in

a way that exploits others. In fact, to fear God may well mean we are to suspend our rights.

Nehemiah was an example—he not only paid for his own food, but he shared what he had with others. He regularly fed over 150 guests, both residents and visitors.

Verses 17-18—Furthermore, a hundred and fifty Jews and officials ate at my table, as well as those who came to us from the surrounding nations. Each day one ox, six choice sheep and some poultry were prepared for me, and every ten days an abundant supply of wine of all kinds. In spite of all this, I never demanded the food allotted to the governor, because the demands were heavy on these people.

ILLUSTRATION: When I was a graduate student at the Singapore Bible College, I had the privilege of having people from different countries as my classmates. One of them was a lady from Korea. Typical of many Koreans, she was very diligent and determined to do well.

One funny thing about her was that just before a major test or examination she would usually prepare some nice food and gave it to the lecturer concerned. I braved myself to ask her one time cheekily, “Why do you feed so-and-so so well so close to his test or examination?”

She replied with all sincerity, “It’s our Korean culture. It’s to show our respect to the one who teaches us. Once my teacher, always like my parent”

So when I was recruited as lecturer at the same college, I had Korean students in my classes, but I don’t remember any of them had prepared me food before taking my tests or examinations.

But I remember a student from Myanmar. He was poorly supported by his home church. As I interacted with him, the Lord put a burden in me to help him in some way. After praying, I committed myself to pay for his three daily meals in college throughout his years of study there. The meals were heavily subsidized and so the food fees were actually not high at all. So what I had decided to give was really not a big amount.

I remember this conversation with him one day. He said, “I want to share a blessing with you today. God has sent someone to put some money in my mailbox for the past few months. I don’t know who that person is, but on the envelope are the words. ‘Enjoy your food in college.’ So I want to praise God!”

He shared with so much joy and thankfulness to God that I literally felt very embarrassed. After all, the amount was actually not much. But I thanked the Lord silently in my heart because what I considered so little could bring so much joy and thankfulness to someone else.

I am telling you this because I have learnt an important lesson from the Lord—i.e. it is more blessed to give than to receive. I didn't get the blessing of food from my students, but I did give the blessing of food to a student; and saw him strengthened in his faith and trust in the Lord.

Nehemiah not only paid for his own food, but he shared what he had with others. He regularly fed over 150 guests, both residents and visitors. He demonstrated with his life example how to treat people in the fear of the Lord—i.e. it is not about exercising our right to take our dues from others, but expressing our responsibility and privilege to share our blessings with others so that they too can experience the grace and goodness of God.

Nehemiah 5:19 indicates perhaps the greatest thing about Nehemiah's service. What he did was not God-pleasing just because he gave to others. What he did was God-pleasing because he did it only to please Him and not men. He didn't want praise or reward from the people. He wanted only to please God and asked to be remembered by Him.

Verse 19—Remember me with favor, O my God, for all I have done for these people.

Let's learn well from Nehemiah's example—remember less of your right to take, but more of your responsibility to give. And the Lord will remember you with favour as you give in His love and name.

## Conclusion

Nehemiah demonstrated how not to love the task more than people. He demonstrated how to treat people in the fear of God.

- Treat people in the fear of God by resisting the temptation to make use of people for selfish gain.
- Treat people in the fear of God by not insisting our right to take from others, but exercising our responsibility to give to others.

Let me close with a challenge—we must be the church before we can build the church. We must care for one another inside the church before we can effectively reach others outside the church for Christ.

So let us serve together, but never love our service more than our relationships with the Lord and with one another.