

Notes on Nehemiah 5

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V. Internal Problems Hinder the Work – Chap. 5

Step #7 in useful service to God: Rebuke Sin among God's People.

Verses 1-5

1. What did some Jews claim other Jews had done? What problems resulted?

Conflict developed among the Jews

In the midst of the work of building the wall of the city and facing opposition from those outside God's people, Nehemiah had to deal with problems among God's people. People who were Jews, men and their wives, raised a complaint against their Jewish brethren.

Likewise today in our service to God problems will confront us, not just from those who are not God's people, but also sometimes from among those who are God's people. We must deal with problems from within as well as problems from outside.

The complaint: Jews were taking unfair advantage of the hardships of other Jews.

The complaint was that men could not provide enough food for their sons and daughters (v2). Some had even mortgaged their fields, vineyards, and houses to get money to buy food, because there had been a famine or drought (v3). Some had to borrow money to pay the taxes that the king had levied on fields and vineyards (v4).

The end result was that some of them had to sell their own children to be slaves, but then could not redeem them, because other men now controlled their property. Apparently having mortgaged their property, they were not able to pay the interest they were being charged (see subsequent verses). Then when they could not pay, the creditors foreclosed and took the property. This left the people without means to provide income for their families, so they ended up selling them as slaves. Even then they might have some hope of redeeming them (buying them back) from slavery, if they could have a source of income. But as it was, they were in effect losing everything they had to their creditors.

But they said they had the same flesh as their fellow-Jews and had children like theirs. This meant they were all of the same nation, all related to one another as descendants of Jacob. The point of this, we will see, is that Jews were forbidden by the law to charge interest to other Jews, and they could take slaves only for a limited period of time. So the charge was that the creditors were not following the law of God regarding how to treat fellow-Jews in time of need.

The people faced a circumstance where, even above other times, they should have been united, working together in a common cause. Instead, they were taking unfair advantage of unfortunate circumstances others faced. Instead of caring and assisting one another, they sought their own gain at the loss of others.

Verses 6

2. How did Nehemiah react when he heard (v6)? (Think: Is anger always wrong? Explain.)

3. List and explain Old Testament Scriptures that these Jews violated.

Nehemiah's anger at the conduct of the Jews

Nehemiah became very angry when he heard these complaints. Note that anger is not necessarily wrong. In fact, the Bible records many examples especially in which righteous leaders of God's people were very angry when they observed sin in the lives of others. See Psalm 7:11; Exodus 11:4-8; 32:19-24; Numbers 16:15; Mark 3:5; 2 Corinthians 7:11; Ephesians 4:26.

Nehemiah was upset that the people were guilty of sin. Sin should always upset us. No faithful servant of God should be neutral about sin. We should especially be upset when God's people mistreat one another, and especially when it happens at a time when it is so important for people to work together to serve God.

The nature of the sin the people had committed

Many Scriptures forbade what the Jews were doing to one another: See Exodus 21:2-6; 22:25-27; Lev. 25:13-17,35-38,39-46; Deut. chap. 15; 23:19,20; Ezek. 22:12.

The law said that children of Israel could not charge interest of other Israelites who became poor. This did not forbid charging interest of people of other nations, nor did it forbid charging interest for loans for other purposes, such as business expansion or personal pleasure, etc. But when a Israelite was in need, fellow-Israelites were to have pity and help them by lending without interest. Clearly this law was being violated by those who were charging interest to the suffering Jews in Nehemiah's day.

Furthermore, the law provided for a needy Jew to sell himself or family members to be slaves in time of need. This too was actually an act of mercy, because the owner then was responsible to provide for the needs of the slave, who otherwise would have no means to provide for his needs. But Israelites could not permanently enslave other Israelites. After seven years, the owner had to let the slave go, unless the slave wanted to stay. Again, this did not apply to slaves of people from other nations, but only to Israelite slaves.

Furthermore, property that was bought from others had to be returned whenever the year of jubilee occurred, once every fifty years. Knowing this was required, when property was sold its value was calculated on the basis of the number of years the buyer could hold it till he had to return it on the year of jubilee.

Obviously, the Jews here in Nehemiah 5 were violating all these commands of the law.

Verses 7-9

4. List 5 things in vv 7-9 that Nehemiah did to deal with them.
5. Explain why these Jews' conduct was especially bad at this point in the story.
6. List and explain **passages** showing what the New Testament church should do when members sin.

How Nehemiah dealt with the problem

We have seen that he was bothered about the problem. Many people are upset over problems among God's people but do nothing about them. Nehemiah determined to act. What did he do?

We can learn much from his example. What Nehemiah did here is the same basic procedure we should follow when we observe Christians today sin against other Christians.

1. He decided upon a Scriptural plan of action.

He thought about the matter seriously. He studied the matter out and decided how best to proceed. He did not ignore the matter, as many people do. But neither did he fly off half-cocked and act or speak without thinking the matter through first. He thought the matter out carefully before he acted. We should do the same before we attempt to resolve a problem among God's people.

2. He confronted the people and directly stated the charges against them.

He personally rebuked the nobles and rulers who were guilty. He stated his charge against them: they were exacting usury (interest) of their brethren – i.e., fellow-Jews.

Note that he did not gossip behind their backs, as many do. He did not just commiserate with innocent victims. He confronted the guilty. This takes courage, but it is the only way to resolve the problem.

Many people today think we should just overlook problems among God's people. We are told that attempting to deal with them might just stir up more trouble or drive people away. But wrong is wrong. People were suffering, and souls were in danger. Furthermore, sin among God's people also drives people away from God, as we will see. Failing to deal with problems just creates more problems. Nehemiah dealt with the problem by confronting those in sin. We must do the same.

3. He called a meeting of the whole assembly to deal with the sins.

V7 tells us that he confronted those in sin and accused them to their faces, then he called them to account in the presence of the congregational assembly. We are not told of any discussion that occurred with them at that time, though I suppose some must have occurred. In any case, it was appropriate to take this matter before the whole congregation, because the sins of the creditors were widely known. Many people were involved and others knew about it. It was not a private matter to be resolved privately, so Nehemiah called a meeting of the assembly to deal with it.

Likewise today, when some of God's people are known to be guilty of sin, the matter must be resolved before the congregation. If men repent, they must acknowledge it to the congregation. If not, the matter must be taken before the church to be dealt with.

See verses on church discipline for how sin among God's people should be dealt with today: 1 Corinthians 5; 2 Thessalonians 3:6,14,15; Matthew 18:15-17; Titus 3:10,11; Romans 16:17,18; 1 Timothy 1:3-11,19,20; 2 Corinthians 2:6-11; 2 John 9-11; Hebrews 12:15; 1 Corinthians 15:33.

4. He presented his evidence against the men in the presence of the assembly.

He explained how, to the extent they were able, the Jews had just gone to great lengths to redeem their Jewish brethren from slavery in other nations. They had been in captivity in Babylon and elsewhere, but had been allowed to return. With great effort and expense, they had helped one another leave bondage.

Did it make sense to work so hard to help their fellow-Jews escape slavery at the hand of other nations, only to enslave them to other Jews? Jews were enslaving other Jews. It was bad enough if Jews suffered at the hands of other nations. Should they suffer at the hands of one another? Such made no sense, so this showed the error of the creditors.

Those who were guilty had no answer for Nehemiah's arguments. Note the value of reasoning with people in error, confronting them directly, even in the presence of the whole assembly of God's people.

5. Nehemiah explained the bad influence of such conduct.

He reasoned further that such conduct was bad, because it would bring upon them and upon God reproach from their enemies. They all knew they had enemies. They were still in the midst of dealing with those enemies at the end of chap. 4.

When God's people themselves are guilty of sin and mistreating one another, this gives people in sin justifiable grounds to ridicule God and His people. We often hear people today ridicule the sin and hypocrisy among God's people. "Why should I want to be one of them? I'm already as good as they are!"

Many passages warn of the danger that improper conduct among God's people will drive people away from God. See 1 Timothy 4:12; Matthew 5:13-16; 18:6,7; Titus 2:7,8; 1 Peter 2:11,12; 2 Corinthians 6:3; 8:20,21; 1 Corinthians 8:9-13; 10:23-33; 2 Samuel 12:14; Romans 2:24.

Note that this is an argument regarding the importance of proper influence. Sometimes people claim that we need not be concerned for what effect we have on the enemies of truth, because they are lost and don't care about God anyway. But God cares! He does not want these people to have justifiable grounds to reproach Him or His people. And sinful conduct among God's people makes it so much harder for those in sin to be converted to the truth.

Verses 10,11

7. What example did Nehemiah set, and what did he tell the erring Jews to do?

8. List and explain *passages* showing the need for repentance and restitution.

6. Nehemiah set a good example.

Nehemiah himself, along with his brothers and his servants, were lending money and grain to the people in need. Obviously they did so without charging interest. So he called on the other creditors to likewise quit charging interest.

Surely Nehemiah did not mean this to be boastful or bragging. The point was that he himself was already showing them the example of what they should do. It was both possible and proper to lend money to those in need without charging interest. This would eliminate the problem. So he directly called on the people to imitate his example and cease charging interest.

Note how important it is, when we face sin and seek to stand for truth, that we ourselves have a clear conscience and a good example. Nehemiah could never have convinced others to cease mistreating others had he himself been guilty. The same applies to us today.

7. He called for repentance and restitution.

Having charged them to discontinue charging interest and no longer do so in the future (v10), Nehemiah then demanded that they make restoration of the things they had wrongfully taken: lands, vineyards, olive groves, houses, and the portion of the money and crops that they had charged the people.

Note that there was to be no procrastination. He said to do it “even this day.” Correction of sin is urgent.

Many Scriptures teach that, when we have committed sin, we must acknowledge the sin, be sorry for it, and determine to cease committing the sin to be forgiven and please God. That is repentance. See Luke 13:3,5; 24:47; Acts 17:30; Matthew 21:28-32; Acts 2:38; 3:19; 5:31; 20:21; 2 Peter 3:9; 2 Corinthians 7:10; Acts 8:22; Matthew 6:12; 21:28-32; 1 John 1:8-10; Proverbs 28:13.

But it is not enough just to discontinue the sin. To the extent possible we must also correct or overcome the harmful effects caused upon others by the sins we have committed. This is also part of doing the “fruits of repentance.” In this case that required returning the property that had been wrongfully taken. See Ezekiel 33:14,15; Leviticus 6:1-5; Ezra 10:3,11,17,19,44; Matthew 21:28-31; Luke 19:8; Philemon 10-14,18,19.

Verses 12,13

9. What did the people in sin agree to do, and how did Nehemiah respond?

8. He required a definite, stated commitment of exactly what changes would be made.

The sinners stated that they would restore the property and would no longer require of the people that which they had no lawful right to require. In short, they promised to do what Nehemiah had charged them to do. The matter was effectively resolved among God’s people, because the sinners agreed to make the necessary corrections. This is the only acceptable solution likewise today, when there is sin among God’s people.

Nehemiah then went further and called upon the priests, the spiritual leaders, to put the sinners under oath to make a sacred promise to make the correction they had promised to make. Note that it was not enough just to obtain a general promise to “do better,” or a general apology of “I’m sorry.” Nehemiah demanded a specific understanding of exactly what correction was required and a definite, stated commitment on the part of the people of exactly what they were going to do to correct the matter.

Such measures are also needed today when people have sinned, especially when Christians have sinned against one another. We should not be satisfied with just a general confession, “I’m sorry if I have wronged anyone.” When the wrong is known, the sinner must make specific

commitment of exactly what they will do in the future to correct the error. Such an approach helps people know exactly what is agreed upon and exactly what to expect of one another. It gives a definite resolution the problem. And it motivates the sinner to make the change that is needed. If he fails to change, everyone will know because everyone knows what he agreed to do.

9. He emphasized the seriousness of the matter and warned of the consequences of further sin.

To show the seriousness of the need for people to make the promised changes, he shook out the folds of his garment. This symbolized that God would likewise shake out the men if they did not keep their promise to change and make restitution. He would reject them and empty them from their own houses and property.

All this solution, including the commitment and the warning of consequences of failure, was witnessed by the people. As a result of the commitment that had been made, those in sin made the needed correction. In short, the solution worked and resolved the matter.

Step 8 in useful service to God: Set a Good Example and Be Willing to Sacrifice.

Verses 14-17

10. What had Nehemiah done to help ease the people's burden?

11. Application: Explain why a good example is important for God's people.

Nehemiah did not accept the provisions that had been allotted to the governor.

Nehemiah did not just require others to care for the needy and seek their wellbeing. He had already stated that he did not charge interest when he loaned to people in need. But these next few verses show how he went even beyond that in sacrificing to achieve the cause for which the nation labored.

First, he said that, for 12 years (from the 20th to the 32nd year of the reign of Artaxerxes) he did not take the provisions that the governor had a right to receive (cf. v18). Here we are plainly told that Nehemiah was the governor at that time.

Former governors had taxed the people requiring that they provide the governor with bread and wine and forty shekels of silver. Even the servants of the former governors had made demands of the people. Nehemiah, however, demanded none of this, because of his fear of God.

There is no evidence that it would have been wrong for Nehemiah to accept such provisions to charge for his services. The laborer is worthy of his hire. But he saw the depressed conditions among God's people (see v18), so he did not charge them, apparently having an adequate income from other sources. He practiced what he had preached to the creditors among the Jews, and he even went far beyond what he had required of them.

Nehemiah himself joined in the work.

He did not consider himself or his servants to be above joining personally in the work on the wall. Rather he and all his servants gathered and participated in the work.

Some leaders think they are too good to personally dirty their hands with the actual work. They think they should sit and supervise while others sweat and labor. True leaders, however, do not just command others; they lead by example.

Likewise, he did not seek personal gain by accumulating wealth for himself. He did not buy land. No doubt this includes especially not taking the land of those in poverty. But apparently in general he did seek to accumulate personal wealth. Rather, he sacrificed so the work could go on and the people not suffer.

We too need to sacrifice for the good of God's work and concentrate on getting the work done in the best way, not trying to accumulate personal gain.

He even provided for the needs of many others at his own expense.

Besides providing for himself and his servants, without taking provisions from the people, Nehemiah used his own provisions to provide for 150 people who were Jews and rulers. They all sat at his table. He fed them, and perhaps even housed them. And this did not count people whom, as governor, he entertained from surrounding nations.

We are not told what sources of income he used to do this. He had evidently been prominent in Persia, so perhaps he had accumulated some wealth. Or perhaps he received income from the king's treasury, instead of from taxing the people. In any case, the point is that he could have used his position to increase his own wealth and prosperity, but instead he used what he had to forward the work.

All this shows Nehemiah's generosity and concern to see God's work prosper. He was willing to make personal sacrifices, labor hard, and provide for others at his own expense, in order to accomplish the work.

Verses 18,19

12. Describe the daily allowance Nehemiah needed for himself and his people.

Nehemiah's daily provisions summarized

Providing for all these people required Nehemiah to have prepared one ox and six sheep each day, besides fowl. And every ten days he received an abundance of all kinds of wine (remember that wine is not necessarily alcoholic in the Bible – see notes on 2:1). But in all this he did not require that the people provide for him as governor, because he saw how the people were heavily burdened as it was (see on v14).

Obviously, this provision required an income of some kind, but we are not told what it was. The important point is that he did not take from the people, but gave for the good of the work.

He finishes this description of his efforts on behalf of the work by calling on God to remember all he had done for the good of God's people. He did not expect a reward from the people, but he hoped for reward from God. We should do the same.

What sacrifices have we made to serve God? What have we given up that we might really like to have or do? Many will not even give up personal pleasures, such as sports, entertainment, or recreation, in order to serve God. Some, rather than sacrificing these at times to serve God, actually want the church to provide more of such things for them!

People think, "I want it. I enjoy it. Why should I give it up?" So we persist in pleasing self at the cost of practicing immorality or causing a brother to stumble or just failing to sacrifice as we should to accomplish the work God wants done. We need to learn from Nehemiah.

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