



How many of you know what a meme is? A meme is an image of a person or animal with a funny or witty caption that is spread virally on the internet. If you are on Facebook, trust me, you've seen them. Today I want to talk about conflict and to do that, I think a few memes are in order. These four memes I found all describe our different views on conflict:

"This is my attempt at Conflict Resolution." (*Game of Thrones?*)

"If you get into a conflict, face it."

"Conflict is bad. False. It's neutral." (I miss Dwight from *The Office*)

"There is no conflict." (How many of you are excited about the new *Star Wars* movie, Episode VII?)

How do you deal with conflict? Are you good at it? Terrible? Truth is, we all have differing views on conflict and how to handle it. Some of us run from it like the plague. Others rush into it with a smile because you're missing a few marbles. Seriously though, business leaders put up with self-centered and divisive people on their team because they fear that if they confront them, then they'll leave the company and sales will plummet. Parents avoid disciplining their teenager because it's just too hard and they just don't want to deal with the fallout. Pastors can easily allow people in the church to gossip, live in immorality, and treat others harshly because we are either too scared to confront them or we are scared to lose them from the church. What I see happen all the time in the church or on a little league baseball team is that people will run into a problem or a conflict with someone and instead of dealing with it, they just go find another church or play for another team. Here's what happens: all types of garbage piles up in our lives when we don't lovingly confront problems in our family, neighborhood, school, church or anywhere we are in close relationships with other people.

As we continue our series through the book of Nehemiah, which is like his personal journal, we come to more opposition and more conflict. This time it comes from inside the wall. In chapter 4, the opposition to the rebuilding of the wall comes from outsiders, from Israel's enemies. After they deal with that conflict, things continue to go really great. The people of God are unified, they are working together, everyone is excited, the wall is almost built, and that all lasts for about a month. Here in chapter 5 the conflict comes from inside; their very own people are being oppressed and abused. If Israel is going to be the people of God,

then care for the poor and dealing with their own issues will need to be at the forefront of their future together.

The first step Nehemiah takes in dealing with conflict is to first acknowledge there is a problem. Let's read Nehemiah 5:1–5,

Now the men and their wives raised a great outcry against their fellow Jews. 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 fellow Jews and though our children 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."

Acknowledging the Problem

Some of the Jews who came back to Jerusalem were rich. Most were poor. Yet, everyone was working together, entire families, to rebuild the wall. At a certain point the poor Jews basically went on strike. They have had enough. What led to this boiling point? Several things. First, there was a severe famine. Grain was hard to come by and people were starving. This famine was most likely caused by a drought and since the people were busy working on the wall, they weren't farming. In addition, hundreds of people were flooding into Jerusalem to help rebuild the wall and they just couldn't meet the new demand for food.

Not only was there a famine, King Artaxerxes required everyone to pay taxes. It's expensive to run a global empire and the King taxed everyone. Most often, the people who collected the taxes—nobles and officials—were corrupt and charged higher taxes so that they could pocket some of the money for themselves. So, the money they would use to buy grain instead went to pay taxes.

To make matters even worse, the poor Jews began borrowing money from the rich Jews and they were being charged Visa-like interest rates! Those with enough cash were financing their neighbors' debts, charging high interest rates, and becoming even more rich. The poor were mortgaging their homes, fields

and doing whatever they could to buy grain. It's hard to imagine, but some were even selling their children into slavery. Sadly, we still see this heartbreaking problem in our world today. Poor families around the world sometimes will sell their children into slavery, especially the sex trade industry, just to feed their family.

As we look at all this, what was the core issue? Was the issue greed? Yes, but it goes deeper. Were the poor being oppressed? Yes, but that still doesn't get to the heart of the matter. The core issue is that God's people were sinning against one another. What good would a high wall do if inside the wall they were abusing and destroying each other? There is a direct correlation between the mission of any organization or movement and how they treat one another. For the church of Jesus Christ, we must learn how to be the church before we can build the church. We must first care for one another deeply before we can hope to reach the community for Jesus.

The first step in confronting a problem is admitting there is one. Someone has to have the courage to say:

"Dad has a drinking problem."

"Billy is struggling in school."

"Mary is a gossip."

"Dan and Susan's marriage is falling apart."

"Mom seems depressed."

"Rick is cutting corners on his expense accounts."

I know this isn't easy to do. But, it can be done with grace and truth. Nehemiah reminds us here to resist the temptation to remain silent. Relationships are messy. Building trust is hard. Why? Because we are deeply flawed people. If you have any close relationships, soon enough you will sin against someone or someone will sin against you. How will you handle it? How did Nehemiah handle it? First, he admitted there was a problem, then, he confronted the problem and made things right. Look with me at verses 6–13,

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 charging your own people interest!" So I called together a large meeting to deal with them and said: "As far as possible, we have bought back our fellow Jews who were sold to the Gentiles. Now you are selling your own people, only for them to be sold back to us!" They kept quiet, because they could find nothing to say.

So I continued, "What you are doing is not right. Shouldn't you walk in the fear of our God to avoid the reproach of our Gentile enemies? I and my brothers and my men are also lending the people money and grain. But let us stop charging interest! Give back to them immediately their fields, vineyards, olive groves and houses, and also the

interest you are charging them—one percent of the money, grain, new wine and olive oil."

"We will give it back," they said. "And we will not demand anything more from them. We will do as you say."

Then I summoned the priests and made the nobles and officials take an oath to do what they had promised. I also shook out the folds of my robe and said, "In this way may God shake out of their house and possessions anyone who does not keep this promise. So may such a person be shaken out and emptied!"

At this the whole assembly said, "Amen," and praised the Lord. And the people did as they had promised.

Making Things Right

Nehemiah sees and feels what's wrong. I don't think it's enough to see injustice, we must feel it. We must internalize it. Nehemiah gets angry! He's angry because the people of God were disobeying God's Word. The Mosaic Law (the Ten Commandments and the first 5 books of the Bible) was given to help God's people know how to live in relationship with God and with one another. God's people were supposed to live distinctly and set apart from the surrounding nations. As a light to the world, God has always wanted his people to reflect his character and values. When that happens, people are drawn to God by our lifestyle. Not just what we say, but what we do and how we live.

So, when it comes to money God said, *"If you lend money to one of my people among you who is needy, do not treat it like a business deal; charge no interest"* (Exodus 22:25). Then later, in Leviticus, God clarifies, *"If any of your fellow Israelites become poor and are unable to support themselves among you, help them as you would a foreigner and stranger, so they can continue to live among you. Do not take interest or any profit from them, but fear your God, so that they may continue to live among you. You must not lend them money at interest or sell them food at a profit. I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt to give you the land of Canaan and to be your God. "If any of your fellow Israelites become poor and sell themselves to you, do not make them work as slaves. They are to be treated as hired workers or temporary residents among you; they are to work for you until the Year of Jubilee"* (Leviticus 25:35-40).

God wanted to meet all his people's needs without them charging interest from fellow Jews or enslaving them. They could lend money to a non-Jew. They could even charge non-Jews interest. They could lend money to a Jew but not charge them interest. And it is clear that no Jew should ever enslave another Jew.

Because they were disobeying God's Word, Nehemiah got angry. This is what I would call righteous anger. Aristotle once wrote, "Anybody can become angry, that is easy, but to be angry with

the right person and to the right degree and at the right time and for the right purpose, and in the right way, that is not within everybody's power and is not easy."

I think the Bible would agree with that. Psalm 4:4 says, "***Be angry, and do not sin. Meditate within your heart on your bed, and be still***" (NKJV). We know that Jesus, when he arrived in Jerusalem and saw the swap meet going on at the Temple, got really angry. He flipped over the tables of the money changers and dove sellers and said, "***It is written,***" he said to them, "***My house will be called a house of prayer, but you are making it a den of robbers***" (Matthew 21:13). We should get angry about injustice, poverty, oppression, slavery, and sin.

Nehemiah gets angry, but then he does what many of us need to take note of: he stops and thinks about the problem—"I pondered in my mind." In anger, Nehemiah didn't write a passive aggressive note on Facebook that leaves us all wondering if he is talking about me. He didn't send a scathing email. He literally "gave himself advice." When I am faced with a conflict, all too often I talk to myself about the problem, worry about it, and work myself up. Instead, like Nehemiah, we need to learn the art of giving ourselves advice. I like to call this preaching to ourselves. When I get all worked up, I need to preach to myself and remind myself who I am as God's child and what the Word of God says about me and the problem. Stop talking to yourself and learn how to preach to yourself. Nehemiah found a way to cool down after becoming angry. How are you at that?

After calming down, Nehemiah confronts the sin. He wastes no time and immediately confronts the sin head on. Just to be clear, he confronts **sin**, not his convictions or his preferences. Some of us are really good at confronting our convictions or our preferences. Nehemiah doesn't confront a Christian who sees an R-rated movie. He's not confronting someone he sees enjoying a cold beer. He doesn't address the Christian who gets a tattoo. He doesn't start a fight on Facebook about vaccinations. He confronts **sin**. He does that by first addressing those who were the main source of the problem: nobles and officials, those with deep pockets. After confronting the main source of the problem, he then gathers everyone and says, "You're charging interest, that's wrong! You're enslaving Jews, that's wrong! You look more like the pagan nations surrounding us than the people of God, that's awful!" He confronts the issue publicly because it affected everybody.

What Nehemiah does next I find so incredibly inspiring. Nehemiah confesses his own sin. Did you catch that? In verse 10 he humbles himself and says, "***I and my brothers and my men are also lending the people money and grain. But let us stop charging interest!***" Nehemiah was man enough to tell everyone that he too was part of the problem. I think one of the most difficult parts of any conflict is seeing our part in it. Since the

Garden of Eden, we have refined the art of passing the blame. I remember one time I got out the orange juice from the fridge and dropped it and it spilt everywhere. My immediate response was, "Missy!" She was right there and said, "Why are you blaming me?!" Honest truth I said, "Because you bought the orange juice!" Then we both laughed at how ridiculous I was being. But that's the human heart. We need to take the log out of our own eye before we bring up the speck in our brother's eye.

Nehemiah gets angry. He cools down and thinks about the problem. He then confronts the sin. He also confesses his own sin. And finally he makes things right. In verse 11 he says, "Give it all back immediately." Then in verse 12 the people obey and say, "We'll do it!" But then, something really interesting happens. Nehemiah calls in the priests to witness it all. Nehemiah says, "Hey pastors, get over here, bring your notary ledgers with you. I want to put this in writing!" Why does Nehemiah do this? Because again, he knows the human heart. He knows our tendency to disobey. To put things off in order to make just a little more money. I know a lot has changed today, but that's just how it was back then! Nehemiah does this to ensure accountability. If you know God wants you to do something, ask a trusted friend to keep you accountable to do it.

Before we move on, I want you to see one more thing. Did you notice, in this chapter, there is not one mention of the wall? In order to address everyone publicly, he had to pull them off the wall. External opposition didn't stop the rebuilding of the wall; internal opposition did! External opposition unites people together; internal opposition divides us. I'll be honest with you, there have been a few times when I have wanted to quit being a pastor and quit working for CPC. Believe it or not! And in almost all those times, it was conflict within that discouraged me. What about you? Is there conflict in your family? At your job? In your school? Your community? Jon Foreman, the lead singer for Switchfoot sings, "Is this the world you want? You're making it. Everyday you're alive."

Nehemiah acknowledges the problem, confronts the problem, makes things right, and then in the last six verses of this chapter tells us how he lived as an example of generosity. Let's read verses 14–19.

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.

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.

Remember me with favor, my God, for all I have done for these people.

Living as an Example

It's pretty amazing that Nehemiah fed 150 people every single night! Can you imagine the bill from Costco? Even though he had the right, as Governor, he didn't take a dime of the money from the King. Is Nehemiah bragging about what he does for the poor? He brings all this up, not to brag, but to show how he personally was caring for the poor. He's saying, "Do what I say and what I do." When Nehemiah asked people to pray, he prayed. When he asked God's people to build the wall day and night, he was right there working alongside them. When Nehemiah told them to trust God, he trusted God. Now, Nehemiah is saying that it is all their job to help care for the poor. Leading by example, he shows them exactly how he is doing that. Apostle Paul reminds us to do the same, *"Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ"* (1 Cor 11:1). Nehemiah wasn't perfect; he was like us; had areas in his life where he needed to align "what we say" with "what we do." Where does that realignment need to happen in your life?

So what does all this mean for us today? I think this passage is about much more than feeding the poor. Yes, that is important. We too should live lives of generosity like Nehemiah. But, at the

core this passage is about how Israel will learn to obey God and live as his chosen people. God is more concerned about how they treat one another inside the wall than with the wall being rebuilt. God doesn't need a wall to protect his people, he can do that fine on his own. How will God's people deal with conflict and sin? Conflict doesn't have to be an awful and dreadful thing. For the follower of Christ, conflict is an opportunity to glorify God, serve others, and create Christlike transformation in our own lives.

The New Testament gives us clarity on how to resolve conflicts. Matthew 18:15-17 says, *"If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over. But if they will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses. If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church; and if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector."*

Later, Apostle Paul adds to this and in Galatians 6:1-2 he writes, *"Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently. But watch yourselves, or you also may be tempted. Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ."*

And one more, Ephesians 4:15, *"Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ."*

Conflict is an opportunity to glorify God, serve others, and create Christlike transformation in our own lives. In closing, let me ask you:

Who do you need to lovingly confront?

Who has been trying to confront you?

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.