



With so many people in and out over this summer season, I'll give you a brief recap this morning so you're in the loop: Over the past five weeks we've been looking at God's word from the Old Testament book of Nehemiah. So far we've seen the following:

- Nehemiah was faced with a problem that broke his heart. The capital city of God—Jerusalem—stood with broken walls and ruined gates. The city was a disgrace and God's reputation was suffering.
- Nehemiah prayed for four months, received a vision from God to go to Jerusalem himself and lead a rebuilding project.
- The people of Jerusalem agreed to Nehemiah's plan to rebuild the wall.
- We learned how vitally important every person is in God's work.
- Last week we learned anytime you attempt something great for God, you will experience opposition. The opposition last week was external: the enemy nations tried to stop God's work.

This week God's work of rebuilding the wall will face a more powerful form of opposition. It's so powerful that it stops the construction on the wall surrounding Jerusalem. Nehemiah has to put down his hard hat. Think about it this way: The opposition we're going to look at today is able to accomplish what the external enemies could not.

You might be wondering, "What could be so strong and effective that it was able to stop God's work?" And a more personal question for us to consider is: "Is it possible that we, God's people on the peninsula, could experience something today that could threaten to stop God's work also?" Absolutely! But the threat won't come from the outside. It will come from the inside. The threat is self-destruction.

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" (Nehemiah 5:1–5).

A Deep Divide

There's a word in verse 1 that sets the tone for chapter 5; it's the word "against." Strife was brewing; tension was mounting. Although the Israelites were rallied around a great wall-rebuilding work for an awesome and great God, "the men and their wives raised a great outcry against their fellow Jews."

To understand this conflict, we need to see the bigger picture. Not long before this, the Israelites were consumed with building really nice houses for themselves, while God's temple stood in ruins. God sent Ezra and the prophet Haggai to confront them and lead them to rebuild His temple. God used a famine to get their attention. *"I called for a drought on the fields and the mountains, on the grain, the new wine, the olive oil and everything else the ground produces"* (Haggai 1:11).

The effects of this famine were a hardship and it's still being felt. Since there wasn't enough food, people were mortgaging fields and homes; borrowing money from the rich and selling their kids as slaves to other households. Add to this situation this wall-rebuilding project. It's placing a strain on an already difficult social situation. With the increased number of people living and working around Jerusalem, people aren't working their crops and the density of their population has skyrocketed.

And it makes sense that the people who felt they'd been mistreated would look around at their co-workers, their countrymen, and grumble, "That's the guy I had to sell my daughter to." "That's the guy who's charging me exorbitant interest." Nehemiah is not going to take a casual approach to this problem.

When I heard their outcry and these charges, I was very angry (v. 6).

This lit him up! It wasn't that Nehemiah had a short fuse or a bad temper. This is what the Bible calls "righteous anger," just like Jesus was filled with holy rage when he saw the Pharisee's hard hearts in Mark 3:5 and when he cleared out the Temple in Luke 19. Nehemiah is very angry because God's people are acting like the world and it's threatening self-destruction. What did Nehemiah do?

I pondered them in my mind (v. 7a).

The Hebrew literally means, "My heart consulted within me." The New English Bible puts it this way: "I mastered my feelings." Instead of just "going off" on the people in the heat of the moment, Nehemiah paused, took a deep breath, and thought about it for a while. He did what the Proverbs instruct us to do: ***"Better a patient person than a warrior, one with self-control than one who takes a city"*** (Proverbs 16:32).

After Nehemiah calmed himself down and pondered the injustices, he acted.

...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" (verses 7b–11).

In response to this worldly behavior, Nehemiah instructs everyone to give back the fields, vineyards, houses and interest immediately. In some respects, this makes no sense at all. But understood the right way, it makes all the sense in the world.

Here's what I mean. This doesn't make any sense at all if you are going to conduct your life according to the normal business practices of the world. Returning interest and collateral on loans is foolish and potentially reckless. It's normal and fair to charge interest on a loan. As a lender, you are risking the money you loan. So there's a reward given; we call that interest. It's normal and fair to put up property as collateral when loans are made, again to protect the money that is being loaned. In the Ancient Near East, it was also normal and fair to sell your children as slaves to someone else's household. Kids were like items of collateral.

If you are going to conduct your life according to the normal business practices of the world, Nehemiah's instructions to the Israelites makes no sense at all. But understood in the right way, Nehemiah's instructions make all the sense in the world. What do I mean? ***"Do not charge a fellow Israelite interest, whether on money or food or anything else that may earn interest. You may charge a foreigner interest, but not a fellow 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"*** (Deuteronomy 23:19–20). Chuck Swindoll summarized it this way, "No Jew was ever

to enslave another Jew. Such action was evidence of an absence of love and concern for his brother. Their family love was to supersede love of money."

The nobles and rulers in Jerusalem violated this. They have taken advantage of people and failed to love them. Nehemiah not only confronts them on this behavior, it appears that he himself has also been charging interest too.

Everyone is called to give everything back. This is a bold move. But there's more than financial shenanigans going on here. We're getting a glimpse into the nature and character of God. God wanted his people to relate and interact with one another in a way that went beyond normal and fair.

God has an amazing plan! He has called a special group of people out of the world. He gave them a brand new way to relate to one another. He has given them access to his supernatural power to accomplish His plans. God doesn't want his people to act like the world anymore, and every time the Israelites tried to accomplish God's work with worldly actions, the work failed!

Remember Achan? He was part of the conquering party over the city of Jericho in Joshua 6. The city had been conquered. He was walking through a house and he saw a beautiful robe from Babylon, 200 shekels of silver and a bar of gold. He wanted them and he took them.

It was normal and fair according to the practices of the world for warriors to take plunder from conquered cities. But God had instructed them to take nothing as plunder. God wanted them to go beyond normal and fair. As a result of Achan's action, the work of God failed. When they attacked Ai, a small weak city, the army of God was defeated. Whenever God's people act like the world, we self-destruct.

That's happening to the wall-rebuilding project in Nehemiah too. The sin of the Israelites is impeding the work God wants to accomplish. There's not one mention of the wall being worked on in Nehemiah 5, not one. If you recall, going back to chapters 1 and 2, the name of God was being ridiculed among the nations because there was no wall around Jerusalem. It was a disgrace! God wanted the wall to be rebuilt in order to display his glory and his power. So he gave Nehemiah the vision to rebuild this wall. And now, because they were acting like the world, internal conflict has stopped the work of God.

This is not the way God designed his people to function. After Nehemiah confronts everyone let's see how they reacted.

"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 (verses 12-13).

This is a beautiful moment. If this were a movie, music would be playing, the camera would zoom in on the bad guys as they said, "we'll give it back," and we'd get a tear in our eye!

At the beginning of this chapter we saw that, 1) When God's people act like the world, we will self-destruct. Now we're seeing that, 2) When God's people operate on grace, forgiveness and charity, we will accomplish God's work. People are returning the interest, the land and the slaves. They are canceling debts. People are admitting that their actions were wrong. They are promising to never do that again.

This looks like grace, forgiveness and charity. Nehemiah called the people of Israel to conduct themselves according the nature and character of God. And they did! They went beyond normal and fair. The people have made amends and righted wrongs. Another quote from Chuck Swindoll is insightful, "True repentance for wrong always inspires a desire to provide restitution. This is not an attempt to buy forgiveness or to throw money at a moral problem. It's a sincere desire to reverse – as much as possible – the damage one has caused."

Now they are ready to return to the work God had called them to: rebuilding the wall around Jerusalem. This is an awesome, God-honoring moment. This foreshadows how God will reveal more of his kingdom values and ethics when Jesus comes to earth.

In his book *The Upside Down Kingdom* Kraybill writes,

This Kingdom that Jesus ushers in overturns the old ways.
As we read of Jesus' life in the Gospels,
Good Guys turn out to be Bad Guys.
Those who think they are headed for heaven land in hell.
Things are reversed.
Paradox, irony and surprise permeate the teachings of Jesus.
They flip our expectations upside down.
The least are greatest.
The immoral receive forgiveness and blessings.
The foolish shame the wise.
It's better to give than receive.
Enemies are forgiven.
We're told to turn the other cheek.
Jesus' death makes eternal life available.
Things aren't the way we expect them to be.

Jesus is completely upturning the world order. He's saying, "I'm bringing a brand new kingdom that will completely replace the old." Tim Keller says, "Jesus Christ brings the most radical revolution because the pattern of values, power, and product of His

kingdom are utterly different. Every kingdom has certain values. There are always certain things you put on the top and certain things you put below. Certain things appear to us as good—our priorities. Other things do not seem very good. These are things we avoid and stay away from."

Values of the world are things like power, comfort, success and recognition. Those are very different from the values of Jesus' upside-down kingdom. Jesus Christ lived a life touching the lepers, giving himself to the poor, dying on the cross, coming as a poor man, riding into town on a borrowed donkey, eating his last meal in a borrowed room, being buried in a borrowed tomb, and giving up everything. Michael Wilcox wrote about this in a commentary on Luke: "In the life of God's people, it will be seen first of all a remarkable reversal of values. The people of God will prize what the world calls pitiable, and suspect what the world thinks desirable."

Why would you value weakness? Who would do that? Why would you value sacrifice and give back property and interest? Why would you value tears as described in the Beatitudes? What Jesus holds as true goes absolutely against the values of the world. So why should we follow him? Well, in the Beatitudes, Jesus says that his followers are "blessed," which means they are deeply satisfied. The followers of Jesus are so deeply satisfied with the embrace of Jesus, the grace and forgiveness he offers, that they are freed from the temporal and fleeting power structures of the world. That's why a follower of Jesus Christ embraces upside-down values.

In other words, the mark of what makes you a Christian is a reversal of values. The things that the world considers pitiable we prize. All because God's people operate on grace, forgiveness and charity. We are simply following our King, Jesus, who fully ushered in a radical redefinition of how his people should operate.

Did Nehemiah know all of this? No, but he knew some. And he led God's people to operate on grace, forgiveness and charity. Look how he modeled this as he described his behavior during the 12 years he lived in Jerusalem in the concluding verses of Nehemiah 5.

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 (verses 14–19).

Nehemiah chose to show love and concern for his people instead of looking after himself. He went beyond normal and fair. What a great example of sacrificing, serving and placing the work of God before his personal interests.

How are we to apply this to our lives? As God's people, living right here on the peninsula, we have been given a job to do as well: to make and mature more followers of Christ. And we need to be careful that we don't operate like the world as we are trying to do this work. If we do, we threaten to put a stop to God's work.

The Apostle Paul described "living according the values of the world" as this:

- Sexual immorality
- Greed
- Idolatry

- Anger
- Slander
- Gossip
- Filthy language
- Bitterness

These are dangerous and corrosive behaviors that threaten to stop God's work. As we recognize worldly behavior in our life, what should we do? Confess them as wrong and change our behavior. It's as simple as that. *"As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath. But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved ... Go in his peace, his forgiveness and build God's kingdom"* (Ephesians 2:1–5).

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