

Nehemiah 5:1-12 [NIV]

Now the men and their wives raised a great outcry against their fellow Jews. ² Some were saying, "We and our sons and daughters are numerous; in order for us to eat and stay alive, we must get grain."

³ Others were saying, "We are mortgaging our fields, our vineyards and our homes to get grain during the famine."

⁴ Still others were saying, "We have had to borrow money to pay the king's tax on our fields and vineyards. ⁵ 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."

⁶ When I heard their outcry and these charges, I was very angry. ⁷ 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 ⁸ 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.

⁹ 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? ¹⁰ I and my brothers and my men are also lending the people money and grain. But let us stop charging interest! ¹¹ 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."

¹² "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.

You're welcome to take a Bible and turn with me, again, to the book of Nehemiah — a rather obscure little ancient history book to some and yet one that carries great lessons on being a leader, which both our national culture, and the greater Church, need so desperately today.

We need more people who will lead, not with arrogance and hubris, but with the godly mixture of confidence and humility that we see so clearly in this fellow, Nehemiah.

Such a great example of godly leadership.

Along the lines of what I said last week, while Scripture certainly does speak of spiritual gifts related to leadership, it's also true that every follower of Jesus is, to some degree, a leader — whether or not they happen to embody any certain leadership gift.

And I say that, because every Christ-follower is responsible, not just for themselves, but for other people. Followers of Jesus, by definition, bear responsibility for the well-being of others, which means that we don't have the luxury of living isolated, self-absorbed, individualistic lives.

According to the very nature of Jesus, Christians are required to be community and kingdom builders —

engaged with the world around for the sake of bringing Jesus to bear in that world, you see?

So, while every Christ-follower may not wind up being some sort of president or director or leader in some official or titled capacity, every Christ-follower *is called to lead*:

- to lead in faith
- to lead in thinking and acting "Christianly"
- to be an example to our culture of what's possible with God.

We're called to lead:

- our families
- our children —
- and all those around us to Jesus and to the hope He offers.

That's all part of the deal of following Christ — of Christlikeness: assuming our leadership responsibilities *and* embracing the fact that, in God, we have *all the resources* we need to fulfill those responsibilities.

So, it's no exaggeration to say that every Christian is a leader. Every Christian is called to lead, whether or not we like it and whether or not we want to be.

I don't imagine Nehemiah laid awake nights dreaming of leaving the palace and becoming a construction worker in the bombed-out crater that used to be Jerusalem. But that's where God put him so he could take leadership there — and, as we said last week, it was not an easy assignment.

We have this illusion that part of God's job is to make life easy for us, but that's just not so. Just because God gives us something to do doesn't mean the work will be easy. All that we're promised is that God will guide us; He will be with us; He will help us; and, He will use us somehow for His purposes and glory.

That's what Nehemiah was counting on, and especially so, I'd imagine, in the difficult times.

And he had them.

From the outside, Nehemiah and his work was repeatedly threatened by other local potentates.

But his work there was also threatened from within — and by a problem that's as old as humanity.

In every generation it seems, leaders facing crises have had to turn their attentions and energies from the battle beyond in order to deal with some in their own camp who would risk the success of the greater cause and the common good in order to exploit the crisis for their own personal profit.

We see it in our day, but it's not new. Every generation has known this. And Nehemiah's was no exception.

In the midst of this great building and security work, there arose a breach between the socio-economic classes within Jerusalem. Class warfare erupted, in other words — and for some good reasons.

One issue was that the poorer families lacked food. Partly because of a recent drought. Partly because of just the difficult conditions in general. Partly also because all the men were working on the wall and none on the farm, if you will. Maybe, because of the project, the men were disconnected enough from their homes to not even realize how bad it had gotten – until this moment.

Whatever the case, an internal crisis of hunger arose in the midst of the project.

Just what Nehemiah – or any leader – needs: injury added to insult.

But there was more to this issue.

The tragedy of the situation was exacerbated by the fact that this problem for the poorer Jews was being caused, in many ways, by the rich Jews – their own blood brothers.

The wealthy Jews were loaning money to the poorer ones to buy food and to pay their taxes to the Persians. That, in itself, was not a bad thing.

The problem, though, was that they were taking the poorer Jews' land as collateral, and once a loan was secured with property, the one who made the loan took over the property and the property's output, which left the borrower without any means of repayment.

It was a vicious cycle that eventually left the borrower destitute and hungry and indebted.

But that was not the worst of it.

With their property gone, but still hungry, the people then started selling their own children into slavery – daughters first, since sons were needed to help work whatever fields were left. And you can imagine what happens, at least to some, when girls are sold into slavery.

So, this is the picture of what was going on between the rich and the poor in Jerusalem. It was sad and tragic and not at all the way God's people were to behave toward anyone, but especially toward those in need, and especially toward one other – their own kin.

When Nehemiah heard of all this, it provoked within him a strong response. We see, there in verse 6, that Nehemiah admits, *"When I heard their outcry and these charges, I was very angry."*

He was super upset, and he had a right to be, not just for the sake of the starving and the enslaved, but because of what all this was saying about the moral and spiritual fiber of his people – and especially of the wealthy, the nobles, and supposedly the people of standing in the community.

Nehemiah had a right to be angry.

But – and here's the first lesson of good leadership – notice that Nehemiah did not act in the anger he felt. Verse 7 there tells us that Nehemiah took some time and *"...pondered these things in (his) mind."*

Another translation says, *"After thinking it over."*

Another says, *"I mastered my heart,"* or, *"I took counsel with myself."*

Very wisely, Nehemiah stopped and thought through all the ramifications and nuances of what was going on and how they should inform the action he should take – which is a practice of good leadership that is often overlooked.

Especially in our day of instant messaging, constant communication, and the cultural demand for lightning quick turnaround times on everything including decisions, that pause to take time to really think through our responses does not always happen. And because of that, emotionally-driven but information-lacking decisions are frequently made that usually do more harm than good and leave even more of a mess to clean up.

Nehemiah did not do that. He chose rationality over emotion, because good leaders know that situations are rarely as simple as they might seem.

So, what could Nehemiah do to help this?

Of course, he could not do anything about the drought. He could not do anything about the famine.

He could not do anything about the Persian taxation.

He could, however, do something about the way the wealthy were treating the poor, but that would take great wisdom, because Nehemiah needed the whole community; in fact, he needed the help and support of the wealthy in a number of ways.

The fact is, the community needed each other. They needed to be unified if they were ever to finish the wall and secure Jerusalem, let alone be the example of holiness God made Israel to be to the world.

You see, in situations like this, it's so easy to appeal to one side: to the biggest, to the richest (or maybe to the ones who demonize the rich), to this color or to that color of person, to this nationality or that.

In our system, our leaders appeal to the group they think can deliver the most votes to their door.

And the outcome of that sort of thing, as we've seen, is deep, deep division.

Nehemiah had no intention of demonizing one group and further dividing the whole. To Nehemiah, the issue was about correcting the wrong and doing the right – while, at the same time, keeping the whole together.

Unity – not at the expense of truth, but maybe at the expense of manner.

We tend to forget, but Nehemiah did not, how important the unity of His people is to God. Based on Jesus' own words and prayers, we know how important the unity of the Church is to Him.

This is something all Christians should remember, especially in our day, when we're so quick to divide into sides and camps.

Nehemiah factored this into his response.

So, what was his response?

Again, it wasn't really the loans that were so bad. It was how the land was being taken as collateral, making the borrowers unable to ever extract themselves from slavery.

This is what drove Nehemiah's three charges against the wealthy Jews – the creditors – there in verse 9.

First, he says they were doing something that was "not right."

Second, he tells them that they are acting in ways that are not appropriate for people who fear God.

And third, he tells them that what they were doing was shameful because it was giving foreigners cause to ridicule their nation – their people.

They were bringing shame on Israel and, by extension, on God, because they were mistreating the most vulnerable among their own nation and family.

There is a special kind of shame in taking unfair advantage of vulnerable people—even when it may be entirely legal to do so.

Nehemiah points out how terrible a thing it is to knowingly act in ways that squash others—and especially the weakest among us. That sort of thing is directly opposite the character of God.

We see this same thing in the Apostle Paul, when he tells the Corinthian Christians how important and Christ-like it is to take special care of the weaker parts of the body.

Doing that is just part of God's character.

God intentionally does good for the poor and vulnerable. God's heart goes out especially to the poor and the vulnerable.

But these wealthy Hebrews were doing just the opposite, which then raises to Nehemiah the spiritual question, "What does that say about your spiritual health—about your relationship with God—if you're doing just the opposite of what God would do?"

You see, this is where Nehemiah moves from governor to preacher, and he does so because the situation was no longer about legality.

This was about what is suitable for men and women of God. It was about choosing to live on a higher plane and to act out of conviction rather than their legal "rights."

Could the God whose signature act was delivering His people from Egyptian slavery ever be pleased with a group of His own people who, by their actions, were keeping another group of His people enslaved?

That was Nehemiah's core question.

What was the outcome?

Well, the scene sort of reminds me of Peter's sermon in Acts 2 where the people realized the effects of their sin, and so they were, the text says, "*cut to the heart*," and they asked, "*What must we do?*"

That seems to be the effect Nehemiah's words had on those rich, Jewish nobles and officials. They were ready to do whatever Nehemiah asked, which is significant, because he asked quite a lot.

We see in verse 11 there, he tells them, "*Give back to (the poor) immediately their fields, vineyards, olive groves and houses, and also all the money you've made off of their grain, wine and oil.*"

That was his solution: give all you've taken as collateral and anything you've made off their property back to them.

Now, notice a couple of things here:

He does not seem to say they had to forgive their loans. He says they have to give back their ability to repay their loans.

Also, notice that Nehemiah doesn't quote any legal requirement for doing this, because there was none, best we can determine.

And, he does not set this down as some new legal standard that would regulate all future financial transactions.

This was not an appeal to law.

This was, rather, an appeal to do what was best for the community in this specific circumstance. Nehemiah asks them to do what would restore health and unity in light of the unique and very difficult situation they were in together.

This was a request based on applying God's character to this instance.

It was outside the legal realm.

This was in the realm of mercy, you see?

It was doing something beyond the law for the good of a weaker brother.

And it was a big request. This was a major financial concession for the wealthy. Nehemiah knew that.

But he also knew the fact is that sometimes God asks us to give up big things for His sake.

So, Nehemiah asked.

And the—maybe surprising but at the same time pleasantly reassuring—response came in verse 12 there, when the nobles said, "*We will give it back—and we will not demand anything more from them. We will do as you say.*"

Responses like that are almost a shock to our systems. We are so enmeshed in a world of rights and legalities that you almost never hear of people willing to give up their rights for the sake of others, which is a shame, because that's one of the foundational principles of Kingdom of God people. That's one of the key ways God's people are to reveal God and how He is to the world, you see?

This is what the Apostle Paul takes nearly three chapters to say in First Corinthians, where he talks about his right to do all sorts of things: to eat meat and be married and get paid for his work and on and on.

Yet he concludes that sometimes we're called upon to forego our rights for the sake of the best for our brothers and sisters in faith.

That's Nehemiah's message here too.

At worst, the nobles felt shamed into doing it.

I'd rather think the best: that they were spiritually mature enough to listen to Nehemiah, realize this was a spiritual mandate for them, and happily do as they were asked.

It seems that way to me, although I'm not sure it seemed that way to Nehemiah, since the next verse talks about how he then "*summoned the priests and made the nobles and officials take an oath to do what they had promised.*"

Maybe Nehemiah didn't think they'd follow through—we just don't know.

But in the end, things turned out for the best for all involved, and God was pleased and blessed their efforts.

Theologian Gary Smith writes, "Nehemiah was a revolutionary leader. He gave everything and asked for nothing for himself. What a refreshing perspective—and what a precedent he set for leaders today. This is an

account that ought to be required reading for all Christian workers, television evangelists and politicians.”

And I’d expand that to say it ought to be required reading for all who follow Jesus, regardless of their role or title, because while every Christian (in our culture, gratefully) has legal rights, God may ask any Christian in our culture to give up their rights from time to time for the sake of the good of the whole.

Now, when the cause is wrong or merely self-serving or political, to relinquish rights is irresponsible.

But when the cause is just – when it leads to health and unity and peace, to temporarily give up our rights reflects the character of Jesus, you see, *“who, though in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be held on to; rather, He made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death – even death on a cross.”* (Phil. 2:6-11)

That sort of self-sacrifice can’t be forced.

It has to arise out of the will of the individual – the decision to be merciful and to do God’s will, even at personal cost.

So, here’s the question: Is God asking you to give up some right that is legitimately yours for the sake of the good of others – especially the poor or vulnerable, especially those of the family of faith?

If He is – oh, be careful how you answer Him.

What good might He want to do through us?

How might He want to reveal Himself to the world through us, in this most unexpected way?

We won’t know until we say “yes” to Him.

He waits for our “yes” today.

That’s part of being a godly person – a godly leader.
That’s part of what it means to follow Jesus.

Prayer:

Lord, help us to hear the voice of Your Spirit in our day as clearly as those nobles in Jerusalem heard Nehemiah’s voice: about when and how You call us, in some situation – in some moment – to give up our rights so that others will benefit, and so a watching world will see Jesus in us.

Father, You know this is touchy for us here in America, because we enjoy more rights than probably anyone in any nation of history – and there are those in our day who are trying to take them away.

This is precisely why we need Your help, Lord, in discerning Your voice from the voices of earthly powers. Because You who have given liberty and freedom and rights, You have all authority to suspend them for the greater good and for Your glory. So, help us to know when it’s You who is speaking, and help us to work with You, and never against You, in these things.

Closing Song: *Make Me a Blessing*

Benediction:

May the Lord keep us from ever taking unfair advantage of others, and may He help us hear His voice, and, as He calls, to follow Him in giving up ourselves – in showing mercy – and so revealing His nature, His character, His Son, in our world.