

## *“Taking and Giving”*

*Nehemiah 5:1-19*

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

Rev. Charles S. Blackshear • October 29, 2017

Last week we saw that after only a few weeks of working on the wall, Nehemiah and the Jews were opposed by their neighbors on all sides who first ridiculed them and then threatened to attack them. They were trying to get Nehemiah to stop building the wall. What we learned is that they faced two kinds of opposition. There was the *external* opposition from Sanballat and the others and then there was the *internal* opposition within the hearts and minds of each of the people working on the wall. They were tired and scared and began to talk themselves out of finishing the work.

Now chapter 5 introduces a third form of opposition. Remember, any time we're doing the work of God we will face opposition of various kinds. The book of Nehemiah dedicates three chapters to the opposition they faced. Here the opposition comes from an unexpected place—from within the community. This may be a bigger threat than their enemies threatening to kill them. The Jews had come together to rebuild the city and were working together in an unprecedented way. It looked like God's work was finally getting done. And then all of a sudden “there arose a great outcry of the people and their wives against the Jewish brothers.” The people had turned against each other.

The issue was money. It often is. If you pay attention to the news you know that both Greece and Venezuela have been in a deep economic recession, maybe even a depression. A news story from a couple of years ago highlights how desperate the situation had become in Greece. The story tells about the note a kindergarten teacher received about one of her students a few weeks before Christmas. “I will not be coming to pick up Anna today because I cannot afford to look after her. Please take good care of her. Sorry. Her mother.”

The situation in Venezuela is worse. The average wages there, at black market rates, are less than \$50 a month. Their currency has collapsed by 80 percent and inflation is out of

control. Many people find they just can't feed their families and are giving their children up for adoption or just abandoning them.

This is exactly what we find here in Nehemiah 5. Many of the people are without food. Some have mortgaged their farms to buy seed or to pay their taxes and now they can't make the payments. They have even resorted to selling their children into slavery as indentured servants. And that's not the worst of it. It turns out that it's some of their own people who are making high-interest loans, knowing the people can't afford it, and then foreclosing on the land.

Today we would call that predatory lending. The wealthy in Jerusalem were loan sharks, taking advantage of other people's misfortunes, and it was strictly forbidden by God. In Exodus 22:25, God says, “If you lend money to any of my people with you who is poor, you shall not be like a moneylender to him, and you shall not exact interest from him.” Deuteronomy 23:19 similarly says, “Do not charge your brother interest, whether on money or food or anything else that may earn interest.” God was clear. His people are to take care of each other not take advantage of one another.

When I was in college I worked for a department store in Louisiana that was owned by a Jewish family. Like most department stores then and today they offered a store credit card. But their credit card was different. They took God's Word seriously that they were not to charge each other interest and so they decided that they wouldn't charge *anyone* interest. The slogan of the company for years was, “Where all accounts are interest free.” Their business was a public expression of their faith. A similar example today would be Chick-Fil-A. It doesn't matter how badly you're craving a box of Chick-Fil-A nuggets right now, you can't have them because they take seriously the command not to work on the Sabbath.

As a follower of Jesus, your faith should make a difference in every area of your life. You

can't just say, "church is what I do on Sunday and the rest of the week it's business as usual." Committing your life to Christ is a complete change of priorities. For example, making a profit isn't bad. But it can't be your top priority in life. When Jesus was asked the most important of all the commandments he said, "Love God and love people." Both require sacrifice.

Nehemiah's first response when he heard how people were exploiting the poor was anger. Sometimes we think it's wrong to get angry and it bothers us that Nehemiah is angry. Most of the time our anger is wrong. But the Bible is clear that there is righteous anger. Injustice and exploitation should make us angry.

But Nehemiah was also smart enough not to act on his anger. The next thing he tells us is, "I took counsel with myself." He stopped to think clearly about the issue, apart from his emotions. That led him to confront the offenders. Verse 7 says, "I took counsel with myself, and I brought charges against the nobles and the officials. I said to them, 'You are exacting interest, each from his brother.'" He met with them privately at first. When nothing changed Nehemiah stopped all the work on the wall and confronted them publicly and demanded that they stop taking advantage of fellow Jews and that they restore everything they had taken unfairly, which they agreed to do.

The rest of chapter 5 provides us with a contrast to the first part. Where the first 13 verses are about people taking from others, the remainder is about giving. Nehemiah is a great leader and he leads by example. When he was appointed governor he was entitled to a generous salary and food allowance. But that money would have to come by taxing the people. Nehemiah decided he wouldn't do that to the people who were already struggling financially. Instead, Nehemiah paid all the expenses of being governor out of his own pocket, including feeding over 150 people.

Why did he do it? He certainly could have used tax money to pay for his official business but he didn't. I think there are three reasons

and you and I should work to imitate Nehemiah in these. First, he was generous. God is generous with us. That's what grace is all about. Grace is getting something we don't deserve. New life in Christ is abundant grace, amazing grace. But God is also generous in so many other ways, too. The goal of every Christian is to become more like Jesus every day and that means becoming more generous. Jesus says, "give and it will be given to you. Good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap."

The second reason Nehemiah acts the way he does is because he is compassionate. Verse 18 says, "Now what was prepared at my expense for each day was one ox and six choice sheep and birds, and every ten days all kinds of wine in abundance. Yet for all this I did not demand the food allowance for the governor, because the service was too heavy on this people." He was concerned about the burden it would place on others.

Third, everything Nehemiah did was to please God. In verse 15 he says, "The former governors who were before me laid heavy burdens on the people and took from them for their daily ration forty shekels of silver. But I did not do so, because of the fear of God." Nehemiah had such a close relationship with God that no amount of money was going to get in the way. He knew what was truly valuable.

My prayer is that each of you would know what is truly valuable. I pray that you would have Nehemiah's focus on God as the most important thing in your life, that you would make all of your decisions based on what God wants. I pray that you would have compassion for people who are struggling, whether it's financial or in some other way. And I pray that you would put your money where your heart is and be generous, not because you feel you have to be but because you want to be because God loves a cheerful giver. And finally, I pray that when you see injustice, when you see exploitation, that you would be moved to do something about it.

*Amen.*