

## ESTABLISH JUSTICE IN GOD'S COMMUNITY

Nehemiah 5:1-13

We've all heard the term "oxymoron" which is related to putting two contradictory ideas together. Examples are many and varied and some of the favorites we remember have to do with things associated with the government. Combinations such as "government efficiency" or "postal service" or "effective bureaucracy" cause us to smile or may even increase our frustrations regarding how things operate today. If we put this idea into a religious context, we might have examples of a "lying Christian" or speak of someone who is "proud of their humility" and some might think that the combination of brief and sermon would be an oxymoron.

There are a lot of things in life that seem to be inconsistent. You know what I mean, things that just don't fit together. Examples might be a lung specialist who smokes, a policeman or a judge who steals, a deacon who gets drunk, a marriage counselor who cheats on his wife, a preacher who is dishonest, a Christian who continues to practice sin. The list could go on and on. The sad thing is that the list does go on and on. We know of examples such as the ones just mentioned and these are things that ought not to be – that is why we say that they are inconsistent – they just don't fit together. Another example might be a man who lends money to his brother who is out of work, has his brother put up his car as collateral and then forecloses on the loan and takes his brother's car who was using it to try to find a job. We all know that such a situation is just not right. This is somewhat like the conditions that Nehemiah found in Jerusalem as work on the wall progressed.

### A Cry for Justice – 5:1-5

<sup>1</sup>Now there was a great outcry of the people and of their wives against their Jewish brothers. <sup>2</sup>For there were those who said, "We, our sons and our daughters are many; therefore let us get grain that we may eat and live." <sup>3</sup>There were others who said, "We are mortgaging our fields, our vineyards and our houses that we might get grain because of the famine." <sup>4</sup>Also there were those who said, "We have borrowed money for the king's tax *on* our fields and our vineyards." <sup>5</sup>"Now our flesh is like the flesh of our brothers, our children like their children. Yet behold, we are forcing our sons and our daughters to be slaves, and some of our daughters are forced into bondage *already*, and we are helpless because our fields and vineyards belong to others." Nehemiah 5:1-5 (NASB95)

During the major effort to rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, an economic crisis developed. There were several groups of people affected by the crisis. There were those who owned no land who were short of food. There were landowners who were being forced to sell their land for less than what it was worth in order to buy food. There were people who had to borrow money at exorbitant rates and use their children as collateral or even sell them into slavery.

In such a society as this, men usually conducted business and were publicly visible but the women were usually in the background. This situation was so serious that women were breaking tradition and they were speaking out against those that were taking advantage of the crisis situation. A little earlier we mentioned inconsistencies and behaviors that were just not right. Here was such a situation. Those who were taking advantage of the crisis were the Jews' own countrymen – their own neighbors and fellow Jews.

Several conditions came together at the same time to make matters worse. There was a famine in the region. Some have suggested that the lack of food may have been made worse by the neglect of farming because of all the concentrated effort being put into rebuilding the wall. Another factor was that the economic viability of such agriculture economies was highly dependent on the weather. If their weather was good, then all was great and if their weather was not good, then everyone was hurting. Many of the Jews might normally have tried to leave the

area to find suitable work in areas not affected by the famine, but they were needed to work on the wall. Add to this the fact that the Persian government was exacting heavy taxes on the people and you've got a formula for economic disaster.

Those in the government of the Persian Empire were not aware or just didn't care about the economic plight of the people. They were into accumulating gold and silver which they were storing – they were not doing anything with it to help those they were governing. That doesn't seem right either. It is reported that Alexander the Great found 340 tons of gold and 1500 tons of silver at Susa.

It is difficult for us to even imagine the economic hopelessness of the people during such conditions as existed during this time. People were literally selling their children or themselves into a form of slavery (indentured servitude) in order to have food to survive. We are repulsed even by the thought of doing something like that. However, during the Great Depression, there were families who would put their children up for adoption because they could not afford to feed an additional child. My mother often commented about an acquaintance of our family who offered to adopt my youngest sister because it was evident that our family was struggling to just get by and put food on the table and pay the rent. Needless to say, my mother did not have very high regard for that person.

Nehemiah couldn't do much about the taxes and what the government was doing with the money; however, he could influence what was happening in Jerusalem.

### Taking a Stand – 5:6-11

<sup>6</sup>Then I was very angry when I had heard their outcry and these words. <sup>7</sup>I consulted with myself and contended with the nobles and the rulers and said to them, "You are exacting usury, each from his brother!" Therefore, I held a great assembly against them. <sup>8</sup>I said to them, "We according to our ability have redeemed our Jewish brothers who were sold to the nations; now would you even sell your brothers that they may be sold to us?" Then they were silent and could not find a word *to say*. <sup>9</sup>Again I said, "The thing which you are doing is not good; should you not walk in the fear of our God because of the reproach of the nations, our enemies?" <sup>10</sup>"And likewise I, my brothers and my servants are lending them money and grain. Please, let us leave off this usury. <sup>11</sup>"Please, give back to them this very day their fields, their vineyards, their olive groves and their houses, also the hundredth *part* of the money and of the grain, the new wine and the oil that you are exacting from them." Nehemiah 5:6-11 (NASB95)

Sometimes it seems that those in charge are the last to know what is going on. This is because those in lesser positions of authority try to "protect" them from bad news because they might over react and make things worse. If you have someone who is a genuine leader, then this is a gross mistake. When Nehemiah finally did find out about the matter, he took action. He was angry and rightly so.

Our tendency, when we hear of all the things that were going on such as extra work on the wall, bad weather, and high taxes, is that we want to blame the suffering and difficulty that people were having on these external things that are outside of the control of all those involved. There was another group of people affected by these external happenings that we did not mention earlier. This fourth group was the noblemen of Judah who had options that they could exercise because of their resources, wealth, and their influence. The choices they made actually made the condition of the people worse by what they did.

The so-called noblemen were guilty of taking advantage of their fellow Jews. These people who had wealth were usually chosen to help govern the people and they had used their positions to help themselves rather than the greater population.

This sound very familiar to what is happening today in our nation. It is not uncommon to find Governors, Senators and Congressmen who have their hand in the "cookie jar" and are getting rich at the expense of those who actually pay taxes. It would be good to have a

Nehemiah who would call them together and tell it like it is.

When these people heard the charges against them they had nothing to say – they knew what they were doing was wrong and they had no excuse. These noblemen knew they were violating God’s law about charging excessive interest for money loaned to fellow Jews. What they needed was a spiritual leader to take a stand in the matter and declare the wrongness of what they were doing. We, as 21st Century Christians, need to hear our spiritual leaders telling us on a regular basis what is right and what is wrong according to the word of God. These constant reminders can help us identify the objectives and goals that should be giving us direction in the way we live and what we do. Without knowing the goals we will drift away and find ourselves wandering around without direction and purpose in life.

Obviously, knowing what is right and what is wrong – having a knowledge of good and evil – is not sufficient to cause a person to do the right thing. Why do you think they would ignore what God said about charging interests on loans to their fellow countrymen? We could easily argue that they thought that the possibility for immediate financial gain provided a benefit that was thought to be of greater overall value than what they might lose when God’s judgment would be applied to them. Perhaps they even thought that God’s judgment would not apply to them. After all, this was happening at least a hundred years since Zerubbabel had led nearly fifty thousand people back to Judah from Babylon. Do you think they were ignoring what had happened to Judah one hundred seventy years ago when they went into captivity? Yes! They had apparently already forgotten the lessons of history.

Nehemiah could have appealed to fear and their own selfish personal ambition of avoiding the disasters similar to what had happened to their forefathers; however, that might not have worked since the results would have seemed to be too far in the future to appeal to most of them. This would be like an evangelist trying to get people to live a better life in order to avoid going to hell. How well does that work for most people? In a world driven by immediate gratification and little concern for long-term consequence, that is usually not very effective.

The appeal that Nehemiah made was first of all to their relationship with God. We cannot show proper reverence to God if we are bringing reproach upon His name from the enemies of God by our bad behavior that is contrary to what is commonly thought of as being decent and fair.

Have you ever heard anyone make an appeal for Christians to be obedient to the word of God because “sinning” creates a “bad witness” and brings criticism to Christianity, to Christ and to God? Such an appeal is similar to what your mother told you was a good reason to behave yourself when you were out “in public” because it would hurt the reputation of your family. We would agree that bad behavior that is in violation of God’s will in our lives or that violates common decency does show disrespect for ourselves, for our family, for our community and for our God.

Nehemiah cast this concern in terms of the witness that the Jews were creating among the Gentiles. Even the heathen nations would recognize that what was happening in Jerusalem was wrong! Sometimes Christians get caught up in doing things that are so obviously wrong that even those that have no interest in spiritual things can recognize them as wrong.

Was Nehemiah expecting too much of these noblemen? Would we lend money to someone without charging them interest or even with no expectation of getting it repaid? Sometimes, we may need an example of someone doing the right thing to give us the confidence that we can make such sacrifices without harming our future. The second appeal that Nehemiah made was for them to follow the example that he and his family were doing to help the people

through the difficult times. It would have been “reasonable” (but wrong) for Nehemiah to have done what the others had done, but he did **not** charge interest or take property as collateral for the money and grain he had loaned to those in need.

It is difficult for someone who is humble to hold himself up as an example to follow, but difficult situations call for hard choices to be made. Nehemiah completed this appeal by “requesting” the noblemen to stop charging interest and give back the collateral so that the people could have a chance to survive during the hard times.

### Action Promised – 5:12-13

<sup>12</sup> Then they said, “We will give *it* back and will require nothing from them; we will do exactly as you say.” So I called the priests and took an oath from them that they would do according to this promise. <sup>13</sup> I also shook out the front of my garment and said, “Thus may God shake out every man from his house and from his possessions who does not fulfill this promise; even thus may he be shaken out and emptied.” And all the assembly said, “Amen!” And they praised the LORD. Then the people did according to this promise. Nehemiah 5:12-13 (NASB95)

Nehemiah wanted them to correct their behavior; however, he did not want them to just stop doing what was wrong but to begin doing things that were good. The fact that they lent money to their fellow Jews was good. In fact, Nehemiah had also lent money to people. The thing that needed to stop was the excessive interest and the foreclosures, and the holding of land that the people needed to make a living. He was not satisfied to just tell them to do it. He wanted a commitment from them. We all believe that God wants a commitment from us to follow Jesus and a resolve to be obedient to His laws.

The seriousness of their commitment was emphasized by the solemn warning that Nehemiah had given them that was stated in the form of a “curse” (opposite of a blessing). He, in effect, told them that the way they treated others would be the way they could expect to be treated. This is essentially what we call the golden rule. All of us would do well to keep that in mind as we interact with others.

The plight of the poor did not end when the wall in Jerusalem was finished. We have that problem with us even today. We don’t see it so much in this land of plenty, but it is there. The abject poverty of the third world countries is something that most of us cannot comprehend without having been there to see it. We, as Christians, have an obligation not only to refrain from doing anything that would increase the hardship of the poor; but, we also have a responsibility to find ways to help the less fortunate. We ought to be setting the example for the world when it comes to respect, dignity, and kindness toward other people. Unto whom much is given, much is required.

Throughout this discussion, we have talked about expectations or the objectives that we should have and we see that there are consequences (positive and negative) that result from obedience or disobedience. What we have **not** addressed is the root motivation for doing what we do. Possibilities of what motivate us may start with craven fear (avoid going to hell for all eternity) and selfish personal ambition (see Deuteronomy 28 – do what is right and prosper, do what is wrong and fail.) We hear this type of motivation expressed in words such as “we need to do this because God commanded it.” This is not a statement of motivation but is a description of the goal that we should be accomplishing. We also hear Malachi 3:10 quoted that states that the consequences of tithing are that God will abundantly bless those who tithe. If our motivation is simply to be blessed, then that borders on selfish personal ambition. What is different about being motivated by craven fear and selfish ambition compared to what motivates pagans who worship idols or worship the stars?

A better motivation that we saw in Nehemiah’s appeal was reverential fear of God that is

born out of a relationship that is similar to what we have in an idealized family setting. Just as children are to respect or honor their parents, Nehemiah appealed to the people to not do something that would be disrespectful to God by bringing reproach upon His character. We can agree that “honoring God” is a much nobler reason for obedience and following Godly precepts than “craven fear and selfish ambition.”

We could go so far as to make an argument that “having God honored and respected” is an outcome or consequence of the obedience of God’s people. Why would we want that to happen? In other words, what is our motivation for desiring this consequence?

Would I obey God’s commands if there were no consequences (either positive or negative) for doing so? Would I obey God’s commands if there were no possibilities of anyone knowing that I was sinning and, therefore, no harm would come to God’s reputation from others and He would not be dishonored? If we remove those “consequences,” then what remains for our motivation to be obedient?

In John 8:31-32, Jesus said (paraphrasing) “continue in My word and you will know the truth and the truth shall make you free.” Some have said that “freedom is life governed by truth and motivated by love.” Do we see where this is leading? The highest or noblest motivation that we can have is unselfish, self-sacrificing love. This kind of love finds its source in the character and nature of God. The statement that we “love God because He first loved us” is not so much about motivation but is more related to ability to love in the way God loves us.

Can we now go a step beyond questions of motivation and see that since we are being transformed into the very character and nature of Christ (Romans 8:29) then what we do is not so much a matter of what motivates us but is primarily dependent on our new, transformed nature which is Christlike? Since Christ is the express image of God and since God is love, then the ultimate explanation of “why we do what we do” comes down to “who we are.”