

Selfishness Hinders Service

Text: Nehemiah 5:1-19

Introduction:

1. This chapter: The work of God is obstructed by internal problems. In the previous chapter there was opposition from without, now there is hindrance from within.
2. The work of the wall and its associated battles, did not create the problems. They simply revealed the problems that were already there below the surface. “When extra effort is put forth in the Lord’s work, sin problems (such as this greed) will be revealed; for stress always reveals where weakness is. Many church people appear to be fine church members until extra commitment is required. Then we discover where sin problems exist that were hitherto not evident among the members. Of course, some prefer not to see the sin problem but rather prefer to blame the extra work for the Lord as the problem. The devil loves to get us to blame God for the devil’s evil doing. So be careful that you do not become critical of the work at church and think that it is the problem when the real problem is the sin in the heart of the people who are causing problems in the church.” John Butler
3. The Christian has an enemy without (Satan & the world) but he also has an enemy within (self)
4. Selfishness and greed at the heart of the problem confronting Nehemiah in Chapter 5. “Selfishness means putting myself at the center of everything.” (Wiersbe)

I. The Exploitation of the People (Vs. 1-5)

A. Their Pain (Vs. 1)

1. “great cry” = public outcry
2. “people and their wives” = included the wives. Wives were feeling the pressure due to their husband’s commitment to the work
3. “their brethren the Jews” = the source of their pain and grief. Identified in Vs. 7 as the ‘nobles’ and ‘rulers’. The source of the problem were the people who had money and position!

B. Their Problems (Vs. 2-5)

1. Their borrowing (Vs. 2-4)
 - a. For food (Vs. 2-3)
 - b. For taxation (Vs. 4)
 - c. Vs. 11 indicates the rate of interest that was being charged – “the hundredth part” which would amount to 1%. Charged on a monthly basis, this would be 12% per annum.
 - d. The workers were not remunerated for their labors on the wall. Much sacrifice had to be made to serve as they had to leave their regular occupations as tradesmen, craftsmen, laborers and farmers for the duration of the project.

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- e. Note: In times of intense spiritual labor & its associated battles, there are those who seek to use the situation to their personal advantage rather than making a sacrifice themselves.
- 2. Their bondage (Vs. 5)
 - a. Sons and daughters enslaved
 - b. Lands and livelihood taken

II. The Exposure of the Perpetrators (Vs. 6-13)

A. There was Righteous Anger (Vs. 6-7a)

- 1. His anger was from a right motive (6)
 - a. Anger is a right response to evil. Nehemiah's anger is not due to selfish motives. He is vexed over the grievous damage being cause the people of God through the selfishness and greed of wicked rulers.
 - b. Illustrations: Christ's anger at those who used the temple as a place of commerce and Moses' breaking of the two tables of the law (Ex. 32)
- 2. His anger was measured (7a)
 - a. Nehemiah was in control of his emotions, not the other way around.
 - b. Nehemiah didn't act on impulse. He paused to gain his composure and give a thoughtful response. Prov. 16:32 *"He that is slow to anger is better than the mighty; and he that ruleth his spirit than he that taketh a city."*
 - c. Nehemiah was angry at evil enough to act! Our problem today is that we are often so passive towards sin in the camp we get angry at those who dare to get angry at the sin!!!

B. There was Rebuke (Vs. 7-10)

- 1. The place of rebuke (Vs. 7)
 - a. "a great assembly" = the congregation of the people of God. Nehemiah confronted their sin publicly.
 - b. Some things need to be resolved on a one on one basis (Matthew 18) but public sins are to attract a public censure.
 - c. 1 Tim. 5:20 *"Them that sin rebuke before all, that others also may fear."*
 - d. 1 Cor. 5:4 *"...when ye are gathered together"*
- 2. The points of the rebuke (Vs. 7-10)
 - a. He appealed to the Scriptures (Vs. 7)
 - i. The actions of these men were a direct violation of the O.T. commandments. Selfishness will cause you to trample the Word of God under feet.
 - ii. Deuteronomy 23:19-20 *"Thou shalt not lend upon usury to thy brother; usury of money, usury of victuals, usury of*

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anything that is lent upon usury: Unto a stranger thou mayest lend upon usury; but unto thy brother thou shalt not lend upon usury: that the LORD thy God may bless thee in all that thou settest thine hand to in the land whither thou goest to possess it.” See also Leviticus 25:35-43

- b. He appealed to his personal example (Vs. 8, 10)
 - i. Nehemiah and his team had sacrificed to redeem Jews in slavery to the heathen. While Nehemiah was seeking to free the brethren, they were enslaving them for personal gain! (Vs. 8)
 - ii. Nehemiah could have used his position to legitimately tax the people but he chose not to.
- c. He appealed to their testimony (Vs. 9)
 - i. “fear of God” = a powerful regulator of behavior. “...by the fear of the LORD men depart from evil.” (Prov. 16:6)
 - ii. “reproach of the heathen” = if they had feared the LORD, they would have been more concerned about their testimony before the heathen. How often the Name of Christ has been brought into disrepute due to Christians mishandling finances!

C. There was to be Restitution (Vs. 11-13)

- 1. The timing of the restoration - immediately (Vs. 11a)
- 2. The extent of the restoration (11b)
- 3. The commitment to restoration (Vs. 12)
- 4. The warning to reinforce restoration (Vs. 13)

D. There was Rejoicing (13b)

- 1. The people respond ‘Amen’ which means they gave their assent and approval to the course of action prescribed by Nehemiah
- 2. The people’s cry of anguish turned into an anthem of praise.

III. The Example of the Person in Charge (Vs. 15-19)

In contrast to the nobles, Nehemiah was a truly selfless leader.

A. The manifestation of his selflessness (14-18)

- 1. He did not take advantage of his position (Vs. 14-15)
 - a. “bread of the governor” = the lawful food allowance allocated by Persian officials and financed through taxation of the local community
 - b. He didn’t exact what was his rightful due (Vs. 14). Nehemiah did not put his personal rights ahead of the needs of others. Remember joy is Jesus first, others second, yourself last!
 - c. This stood in contrast to former governors where even their servants ruled in a harsh and cruel manner (Vs. 15)
- 2. He involved himself in the work (Vs. 16)

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- a. Nehemiah and his men set a good example and worked alongside the common people.
- b. They did not make financial gain their goal.
3. He was generous and hospitable to others (Vs. 17-18)
 - a. Some estimate this amount of food would feed over 500 guests.
 - b. One very simple yet important part of our giving is to open our table to the brethren.

B. The motivation of his selflessness (15b, 18b, 19)

1. A reverence for God (15b)
 - a. Nehemiah's vertical attitude towards God regulated his horizontal actions towards men.
 - b. The fear of the Lord is a powerful antidote to sin.
 - c. "The remarkable thing about fearing God is that when you fear God you fear nothing else, whereas if you do not fear God, you fear everything else." (Oswald Chambers)
2. A compassion for God's people (18b)
 - a. Nehemiah was not detached from the sufferings and burdens of the people. He had a tender heart to the needs of those God had called him to lead.
 - b. 'compassion' = A suffering with another; painful sympathy; a sensation of sorrow excited by the distress or misfortunes of another; pity.
3. A desire for God's approval (19)
 - a. Nehemiah's close walk with God again highlighted. He was a truly spiritual leader.
 - b. Nehemiah's first concern was to have the approval of God and that made him a good leader of men.

Conclusion: Are we living for self or for others? What is our attitude towards finances? Is it one that reflects a biblical mindset and heart or that of the world?