

9—Nehemiah 5-6—God's People Hurting Each Other

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I. Introduction

- A. There are lots of old sayings that might describe the scene in these two chapters.
 - 1. Chapter 4 ends with dangerous threats from the nations that surround Jerusalem which led them to be holding a trowel in one hand and a sword in the other.
 - 2. Chapter 5 begins with some heartbreaking news of threats from within among their own.
 - a) To which we might say, "If it's not one thing it's another." Or, "Out of the frying pan; and into the fire."
 - (1) Now they are not only surrounded by those plotting to take their life but now they are fighting among themselves from within.
- B. We are going to talk about how God's people hurt each other today.
 - 1. The truth is, every person on this planet is a sinner.
 - a) All of us are broken, even if we are following Jesus.
 - (1) Not in the sense that by faith, we are...as Paul describes Abraham...God justifies the ungodly.
 - (2) We are simultaneously counted righteous and a sinner.
 - b) However, what distinguishes God's people from the world is that we agree with God about who we are and we are a people who repent because we know our God is merciful.
 - 2. We are going to look at how God's people hurt each other here in Nehemiah but we must also take a look at ourselves.
 - 3. We must come to realization that I still need Christ more than ever and he is sufficient to save.

II. Main Point

- A. People are great sinners and God is a great Savior.
- B. Even the people of God are sinners but if we will repent and trust in Christ he will be merciful and forgive us.
 - 1. That's not an excuse to hurt people. It is the reality of who we are and what we need.

III. Outline

- A. The Public Protest Against God's People
- B. The Righteous Anger of Nehemiah

IV. Exposition

- A. My guess is, some of these situations didn't just begin. You don't normally get to the level of outcry unless things have escalated to the point of danger and they cannot see a way forward. I've been there and you have too. We've been on both sides of this in various ways. What had only been private now goes public. A great outcry from God's people against God's people.
 - 1. In these first 5 verses, there are at least three separate but related issues.
 - a) Each are different but all three groups join together to make their voices heard.
 - b) These issues have been complicated by the exile. But on the most basic level, they ought to love their brothers and sisters particularly during this season of difficulty. And greed is always alive and well in the world, too.
 - (1) But let me say, it is not evil to be wealthy. It is evil to love wealth more than God.
 - (2) We all are mere stewards of what God has given us. The money you have is not yours. Indeed, you are not your own. You belong to Christ and that changes how we live and spend money.
 - c) But I say, complicated by the exile because the normal practice of the year of Jubilee had probably fallen out of use.
 - (1) If you are not familiar with the year of Jubilee, every 50 years all debts were cleared and property was returned within the covenant community.
 - (a) Maybe they knew when the next 50th year was supposed to be but who knows.
 - (2) There were lots of provisions for the poor among the people of God.
 - (a) They were not to glean all the way to the edge of the field (Lev. 19:9-10).
 - (b) If you forget a bundle of wheat in the field, you were supposed to leave it (Dt. 24:19).

- (c) There were even sacrifices that did not cost as much such as the offering of the turtledoves like the family of Jesus had to do when he was born.
- d) It's further complicated by the rebuilding of the wall and it's near or in harvest season.
 - (1) They started in what we would call August and they finish in October.
 - (a) As in the case right now in many areas of the US, normal order and laws are being set aside due to the destruction from the hurricanes.
 - i) Like a suspension of tolls for example.
 - (2) The three scenes described in verses 1-5. Each of them have to do with getting enough food to eat—one of the most basic needs we all have.
 - (a) Here are the three situations from the outcry.
 - i) One group was saying in—(Nehemiah 5:2) For there were those who said, “With our sons and our daughters, we are many. So let us get grain, that we may eat and keep alive.”
 - (1) “You shouldn’t have had so many kids!”
 - ii) Another group described their situation like this—(Nehemiah 5:3) There were also those who said, “We are mortgaging our fields, our vineyards, and our houses to get grain because of the famine.”
 - (1) “I know of some unwise financial decisions you have made” or “Did you not know you should have saved for a rainy day?”
 - iii) The final one—(Nehemiah 5:4-5) ⁴ And there were those who said, “We have borrowed money for the king’s tax on our fields and our vineyards. ⁵ Now our flesh is as the flesh of our brothers, our children are as their children. Yet we are forcing our sons and our daughters to be slaves, and some of our daughters have already been enslaved, but it is not in our power to help it, for other men have our fields and our vineyards.”
 - (1) “You got yourself into this mess and you can get yourself out of it.”
 - (b) However, there were laws concerning how the people of God were to live this out within the covenant community.
 - i) Moses wrote this in—(Deuteronomy 23:19-20) ¹⁹ “You shall not charge interest on loans to your brother, interest on money, interest on food, interest on anything that is lent for interest. ²⁰ You may charge a foreigner interest, but you may not charge your brother interest, that the LORD your God may bless you in all that you undertake in the land that you are entering to take possession of it.
 - (c) These three descriptions could have been going on prior to rebuilding the wall and some of them could have began during the rebuilding process or both.
 - i) The bills do not stop when unexpected things happen like rebuilding a wall that should not have happened because God’s people would not repent.
 - ii) I could probably point out with more detail what’s going on from the public protest but let’s just see the obvious.
 - (1) The people of God are hungry and God’s people have the means to help.
 - (2) The people of God have to pay the king’s tax because of the exile which came about because of their refusal to repent.
 - (a) They’ve had to put up their fields and vineyards as surety like our modern day title loans just to pay the tax.
 - (3) The people of God are selling themselves and their children into slavery to their own brothers.
 - (a) Certainly, there were laws in place for families to be able to pay off their debts like this.
 - (4) But let’s not forget there’s a famine too.
 - iii) The situation is somewhat abnormal but such is life. Things go bad all the time in this world. They often go from bad to worse—from the frying pan to the fire.
 - (1) Life is complicated. These are real people with real need and their outcry is legit.

- (a) But God's people should not have had to publicly protest against each other.
- (b) We are so blind sometimes to the obvious.
- (c) We are so prone to say things like—I didn't take you to raise.
- (d) Who is my neighbor? They ain't from around here.
- (e) We pay taxes to the government to take care of these things.
- (f) The law says so and so.
- (g) Really???
- (2) Love demands more from God's people.
 - (a) Without even going into the next section where Nehemiah responds CAN WE NOT SEE IT?
 - (b) It's like someone sharing a need from among us and we merely say, I'll pray for you.
 - (c) Is that not what James is saying here—(James 2:15-17) ¹⁵ If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, ¹⁶ and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled," without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? ¹⁷ So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.
 - (d) What about this from Paul in—(1 Timothy 5:8) if anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for members of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.
 - (e) Did God just simply say—I love you? Absolutely not! How can you know that God loved the world? (1 John 3:16-18) ¹⁶ By this we know love, that [Jesus] laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. ¹⁷ But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? ¹⁸ Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth.
- e) I want to try and be even-handed here. And when we talk about this, we need to see that if you are a member of UHBC, you have taken on a certain level of responsibility for the people of this church.
 - (1) Our church covenant is a list of promises that we have made to each other. In fact, we are going to start reading it every members' meeting to remind us of our promises to each other.
 - (2) But, as it says in 1 Peter, judgment begins at the household of God.
 - (a) We must take a look at ourselves and be honest.
 - (b) There are times we respond well to things and there are times we respond very poorly.
 - (c) When you are in those difficult situations yourself, try to recall how you responded to others among us when you were doing fine but they were not.
 - (d) How will the world know that we belong to Christ?
 - i) Jesus says in—(John 13:34-35) ³⁴ A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. ³⁵ By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."
 - ii) The stakes are higher! This new commandment is not love your neighbor as yourself. But rather, love one another AS CHRIST LOVED US.
 - (1) How did he love us? By laying down his life for us.
 - (2) Does that describe how you love the people in this room?
 - (3) There's plenty of neglect and hurt to go around for all of us.
 - (a) I have neglected and hurt you.
 - (b) You have neglected and hurt me.
 - (c) We have done this to each other.
 - (d) There are likely past things long before I got here that have never been resolved and they stand undone.
 - (e) We could all be very specific about how that has happened.
 - (f) We must do better.

- (g) We need to look inside our hearts and examine ourselves and we all will find fault in there. If you can't see anything, that's a problem.
 - (h) We all may have excuses. Some of them might be legit.
 - (i) But like our text this morning, if they start talking about excuses we all know what that means—love demands more of than that.
- B. After seeing the outcry of God's people against God's people—we now see the response of Nehemiah which is some healthy righteous anger.
 - 1. In verse 6, I think the New Jerusalem Bible puts the order and emphasis in the right place—(Nehemiah 5:6) When I heard their complaints and these words I was very angry.
 - a) So, if we are going to love one another that doesn't mean that we have to abandon the truth.
 - (1) Paul says in—(1 Corinthians 13:4-8) ⁴ Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant ⁵ or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; ⁶ it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. ⁷ Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. ⁸ Love never ends.
 - b) In verse 7 it says that Nehemiah took counsel with himself.
 - (1) He has proven to be a man of God which means he knows God's word therefore he knows how the Lord expects him to respond and he seeks to gladly obey.
 - (2) Anger was very appropriate here. We should be angered by injustice. We should desire what God says is right and good.
 - (3) I take this to mean he needs to think about how to respond according to the God's word.
 - (a) I say that because he does that very thing when he brought charges against the nobles and officials.
 - (b) There in verse 7 he responds along the line of Deuteronomy 23 that I quoted earlier.
 - i) There were exacting interest from their brothers which they should not have been doing.
 - ii) So, not only are they breaking God's law but they are continuing to do so during a famine and while they are building a wall under threat of war during harvest season.
 - iii) Most of these cannot return home due to the circumstances. Their crops are in the field with no one to harvest.
 - iv) Again—life is really hard at times. It seems unfair. It's not unfair.
 - (1) If we want what's fair, we all deserve death, hell and the grave.
 - (2) By the law, we are guilty and justice is due.
 - (3) But by love, God gave his only Son that whoever believes in him might not perish but have eternal life.
 - (4) Jesus was the only one that did not deserve death but he took it for us.
 - c) Why is Nehemiah concerned about the unrighteousness he sees among the people of God?
 - (1) Notice there in verse 9—(Nehemiah 5:9) So I said, "The thing that you are doing is not good. Ought you not to walk in the fear of our God to prevent the taunts of the nations our enemies?"
 - (a) Is this not what Jesus was saying in John 13 that I quoted earlier?
 - (b) How will the world know that we belong to Christ? How will the nations around Jerusalem know that Israel is indeed God's people when they do not do what he says?
 - i) Well, the world charges interest. Usury is everywhere. Title loans are on every corner.
 - ii) The world sues one another. But we should not.
 - iii) I mean—is our faith alive or dead? The way we know that is through evidence.
 - (1) Fruits of righteousness or evil?
 - (2) Fruit of the Spirit or the flesh?
 - (3) My guess is there's both in us.
 - (4) There's evidence against us and for us.
 - iv) Nehemiah gave evidence of righteousness there in verse 10 where he had been lending money and grain to those working among them.

- d) Let's just say that the Holy Spirit has convicted you of something this morning and if he hasn't I might be concerned. But if so, how should we respond?
 - (1) The simple answer is confess your sins to the Lord and turn back to Christ.
 - (2) Nehemiah tells the offenders there in verse 10—Let us abandon this exacting of interest. Return to them this very day their fields, their vineyards, their olive orchards, and their houses, and the percentage of money, grain, wine, and oil that you have been exacting from them.
 - (a) These are easy to see. Sometimes repentance isn't that easy. Sometimes the offense happened years ago.
 - i) We might struggle with the details of how it all went down and the best thing we can do is admit it to the person—I don't remember everything but I want to seek your forgiveness.
 - ii) In our text, that would not have been sufficient. To merely say I'm sorry to your own brothers and sisters who were hungry and homeless would have been evil.
 - (1) In verse 12 they respond—We will restore these and require nothing from them. We will do as you say.
 - (a) Nehemiah had likely heard this before. He calls in witnesses—the priests—and made them swear to do as they had promised.
 - (b) Nehemiah follows the way God speaks in such situations with a curse on them if they do not do what they promise.
 - (2) There needs to be more public accountability within the church.
 - (a) Indeed, that's what the last step of church discipline is in Matthew 18.
 - (b) Oftentimes, people get pushed into silence from subtle threats behind closed doors.
 - (c) The notorious claim, "They said" has been used as leverage.
 - (d) There are times when that works but we not use that as leverage if you cannot name names.
- 2. The second half of chapter 5 unpacks the choices Nehemiah made that were very different than the others. You might read this section and think—he is just boasting about himself but we've already heard Nehemiah confessing his sin in this book.
 - a) Within the time frame of this scene, what has been discussed the first 13 verses landed within the rebuilding of the wall which only took 52 days.
 - b) As we see there in verse 14, Nehemiah was the governor from the 20th year to the 32nd year of Artaxerxes the king—12 years.
 - (1) He and his brothers did not eat the food allowance of the governor during those 12 years.
 - (2) He did not lay heavy burdens on the people nor take from them for his daily ration of 40 shekels like the former governors did.
 - (3) He did not lord it over them.
 - (a) But why? It says there at the end of verse 15—because of the fear of the God.
 - i) What is the fear of God?
 - (1) Is it not the conscious realization that God is God and he knows everything we do?
 - (a) He not only hears the things we say, but he knows our motives that usually remain hidden from others.
 - (2) It is as J.I. Packer said, "Not until we have become humble and teachable, standing in awe of God's holiness and sovereignty...acknowledging our own littleness, distrusting our own thoughts, and willing to have our minds turned upside down, can divine wisdom become ours."
 - (3) The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge and wisdom.
 - c) An amazing work of God's grace is seen beginning there in verse 16.
 - (1) He did not give up on rebuilding the wall even under multiple threats.
 - (2) He did not acquire land and his servants were gathered for the work.

- (3) He fed some 150 men at his table.
 - (a) One ox and six choice sheep per day.
 - i) 12 years times 365 days is a lot of beef on his own dime.
 - ii) Yet...even with many Jews, officials, and those who came from the nations, he did not demand the food allowance of the governor.
 - iii) Why? Last time I asked the question it was because of the fear of the Lord.
 - (1) This time it says there in verse 18—because the service was too heavy on this people.
 - (2) I would argue that they are the same.
 - (3) Paul would forgo funding from some churches for similar reasons.
 - d) Nehemiah ends by saying to the Lord—Remember for my good, O my God, all that I have done for this people.
 - (1) Whatever you think about this statement—the truth is that we will be judged not on what we say we believe but what was evidenced through what we did.
 - (2) We are saved by faith alone but faith is never alone. A dead faith with no evidence cannot save.
- 3. Let's end by asking a few questions
 - a) Did Nehemiah need salvation or was he good enough?
 - b) Did Billy Graham need salvation?
 - (1) We often hold up people like this as if their deeds caused God to favor them and save them on the basis of their works.
 - (2) However, those works are to be evidence of faith.
 - c) Have we hurt each other?
 - (1) Is there evidence of it? Yes.
 - (2) Have we loved each other as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her?
 - (3) Do we die to self when needs arise within the church?
 - (4) Will we gladly forgo our own plans to help someone among us?
 - d) I certainly hope we will.
 - (1) But you and I will not do that perfectly. In fact, we haven't.
 - (2) But Jesus did. And if you will trust in his perfect obedience you will be saved from the wrath to come.
 - (3) Jesus did not owe us anything and furthermore, we didn't deserve anything from him.
 - (4) However, Christ who did not deserve death took death for us that we may be forgiven and counted righteous by faith in him.
 - (5) If that is true of us, let us live in a manner worthy of the gospel.