

NEHEMIAH

Part 4: “Holiness and the Mission of God”

Nehemiah 5

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Sunday, October 10, 2021 (Ordinary Time)

Scripture Reading

“Now there arose a great outcry of the people and of their wives against their Jewish brothers. 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.’ There were also those who said, ‘We are mortgaging our fields, our vineyards, and our houses to get grain because of the famine.’ And there were those who said, ‘We have borrowed money for the king’s tax on our fields and our vineyards. 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.’ I was very angry when I heard their outcry and these words. 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.’ And I held a great assembly against them and said to them, ‘We, as far as we are able, have bought back our Jewish brothers who have been sold to the nations, but you even sell your brothers that they may be sold to us!’ They were silent and could not find a word to say. 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? Moreover, I and my brothers and my servants are lending them money and grain. 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.’ Then they said, ‘We will restore these and require nothing from them. We will do as you say.’ And I called the priests and made them swear to do as they had promised. I also shook out the fold of my garment and said, ‘So may God shake out every man from his house and from his labor who does not keep this promise. So may he be shaken out and emptied.’ And all the assembly said ‘Amen’ and praised the LORD. And the people did as they had promised” (Neh 5:1–13).

Review

Nehemiah is a story about God’s people uniting together to accomplish something extraordinary, even in a time of great brokenness. It is one of the most inspiring and memorable stories of revival and restoration in all of Scripture.

Over the last few weeks here at Redeemer Christian Church, we have been looking to Nehemiah as a picture of what it looks like for us, as the people of God, to love our city

today. We've been asking the question of what it looks like for us to press toward restored sense of calling in a time when the public witness of the church, at large, has been tarnished by scandal and hypocrisy.

And it is particularly that last point concerning the witness and the integrity of the church that we will focus on today.

Introduction of Today's Text

Last week, we talked about how to overcome external spiritual attack against the mission of God. This week, we will look at the internal threats—the sins within—that endanger of our call as God's people.

From the time of Genesis, the people of God have been called to be a *holy* people—a people who live differently and distinctly and as representatives of the goodness of God.

In fact, Scripture tells us how the nation of Israel was called to be a kingdom of priests (Exod 19:6), who represent the glory of God to the nations. But, sadly, instead of glorifying God and living according to his ways, the ancient people of Israel chose to go the way of the nations. They worshipped idols, they walked in sin, and the society they built was replete with injustice (cf. Isa 1). And because God's people chose the *ways* of the nations, God sent his people into exile *within* the nations.

But now, Nehemiah's story is set within what is known as the post-exilic period; it is the period of time *after* the exile. The kings of Persia have allowed the Jewish people to return to their ancient homeland. They have rebuilt the temple of Jerusalem. But the Holy City itself is in shambles.

Nehemiah's mission is to unite the people of Jerusalem to rebuild the broken wall that surrounds the city, the very wall that was destroyed when the kingdom of Judah fell and the Jews were sent into exile.

However, as Nehemiah begins this project, he begins to see evidence of the *same sins* that resulted in judgment against the Jewish people.

He knows at once that it is not enough to restore the walls of Jerusalem—which were the visible *effects* of exile. He must also address the *causes* of the exile—which were the internal sins and corruptions by which the Jewish people violated their covenant with God.

In other words, Nehemiah's restoration project is more than just aesthetic. He is working towards the restoration of the integrity and *holiness* of God's people.

This all applies to us today, as well. We the church—as the continuation of the people of God—are called to be representatives of God. We, too, are a kingdom of priests, called to show the watching world a way of life that is possible only because of the resurrection of Jesus. Speaking to the church at large, the Apostle Peter says, "***But you are a chosen***

race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy" (1 Pet 2:9–10).

When we live holy lives, we are living reflections of the holiness of God. But when we are riddled with hidden sin or hypocrisy, we compromise our call, and we dishonor the name of God.

In this last season, especially in American society, there has been a great unveiling of sin within the church. There have been news stories of scandal among pastors, abuse within the church, and compromise among Christians.

More than ever, it is a crucial moment to examine ourselves, to repent of ways we have fallen short, to invite the Holy Spirit to sanctify us so that we might be effective ambassadors of Jesus.

So, with that in mind, today we are going to talk about **"Holiness and the Mission of God."** And we are going to approach this study by taking a deeper look into Nehemiah 5 and examining two different types of internal sin that the people of God have been prone toward from ancient times up until or contemporary age, as well as one solution to overcome them. The big ideas we will explore are **1.) The Sins of Compromise, 2.) The Sins of Injustice, and 3.) The Call to Radical Repentance.**

This will be a sermon filled with a lot of hard truth, just like this text is filled with lots of hard truth for the people described in Nehemiah 5. But I pray we can hear these hard words with humble hearts who are eager to respond to all the Lord would have for us today.

Exposition

1.) The Sins of Compromise

The people of Judah have fallen on hard times. Famine has come, the economy is in recession, and many people are desperate. But in their desperation, they have made some truly *heartbreaking decisions*. Some have sold off the right to their ancestral lands. Some have even sold their children into slavery.

These are objectively terrible things to happen: losing your home and land is tragic; giving your own child up to be a slave is even worse. But from a Jewish perspective, this situation was an absolute *travesty* that struck at the very core of what it meant to be the people of God.

The Promised Land what a gift from God himself. It was the blessing that God had promised to Abraham, the ancient ancestor of the people of God (cf. Gen 15:7). To live in the Promised Land; to be free in the Promise Land; to pass on your inheritance to your

children and your children’s children within the Promise Land was the dream that all Jewish people shared—it was a dream central to the identity of God’s people.

God had set his people free from slavery in Egypt. He had given his people the Promised Land. Thus, for a Jewish person to forsake their inheritance in the land and to enslave themselves or their children was, in effect, *a reversal of the Exodus*—it was a rejection of God’s redeeming work of deliverance.

This is important because both the terms “inheritance” and “freedom” are Old Testament concepts that take on new meaning later on in the New Testament. For example, in the Old Testament, the term “inheritance” refers to one’s portion in the Promised Land. But in the New Testament, “inheritance” is most often associated with one’s place “in the saints” (Eph 1:11, 14, 18); that is, in Body of Christ, the church. Likewise, in the Old Testament, “freedom” meant being literally delivered from the bondage of a human slave master. However, in the New Testament, “freedom” means being delivered from the bondage of the spiritual power of sin, and experiencing the liberty to a life of righteousness unto God (cf. Rom 6:15–23; Gal 5:1, 13).

Today as well, it is sadly possible to discard the inheritance purchased for us in Christ. It is possible for us to trivialize the privilege of what it means to be a part of the church and belong to the people of God.

In the same way, it is sadly possible to subject ourselves to the slavery of sin, when Christ bled and died so that we might be free from sin. It is sadly possible to live in such a way that is not only detrimental to our faith and witness, but also in a way that is detrimental to our children and the generations that will follow us.

In fact, in a recent 2019 study, LifeWay Research surveyed a couple thousand young adults who had grown up in the church but since left the church. That survey indicated that for nearly one out of three young adults who had left the church, one of the driving reasons was perceived *hypocrisy* among Christians.¹

In other words, there are thousands of young people in our nation who have left the church—not because *they* don’t take the Bible seriously. They are leaving because they don’t think *Christians* are taking the Bible seriously.

That statistic should give us pause. When we compromise with sin, we compromise our witness and negatively impact the generations that come after us.

Compromising our integrity is not worth the temporary thrill of immoral pleasure. Compromising our integrity is not worth making a little more profit in our business. Compromising our integrity is not worth a little more political power. Our witness, our inheritance, our freedom is worth so much more.

¹ <https://www.tennessean.com/story/news/religion/2019/01/15/lifeway-research-survey-says-young-adults-dropping-out-church/2550997002/>

As the Apostle Peter once wrote, “...but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since it is written, ‘You shall be holy, for I am holy’” (1 Pet 1:15–16).

Christians are not saved *by* our good works. But we are saved *for* good works (Eph 2:10). Christ did not die and rise again for us to live lukewarm lives of compromise. He died and rose again so that we could live lives that display a radical freedom from sin.

So, with that said, let embrace our inheritance in the saints. Let us embrace our freedom in Christ, which enables us to love God and our neighbors with no limitation. Let us choose costly faithfulness and character over convenience and compromise. Let us display to the world a way of life that testifies to the resurrection of Jesus!

However, going back to the story of Nehemiah, it must be said that many of the compromises that some of the people had made were not entirely their fault. Many of these actions were not done out of desire but *desperation*. They were done in response to the injustice they were suffering. That leads us to the next point.

2.) The Sins of Injustice

Chapter 5 begins with an outcry of the poorer members of the Jewish community against the wealthier members of the Jewish community. The word “outcry” (הִקְרָעָה) in verse 1 is a very powerfully charged word. It’s the same word used of Abel’s blood crying out from the ground after Abel was murdered by his brother Cain in Genesis 4 (Gen 4:10).²

Prior to Nehemiah’s arrival, the wealthier nobles and officials profited off the desperation of those who had suffered from the economic downturn of this period.

It was wrong for them to sell their land and their children. But the reason they were forced to such a horrendous decision is that they had become inescapably indebted to the wealthy. When famine struck the land, the poorer Jewish farmers received predatory interest-based loans in order to pay their taxes. When the loan payments could not be made, they lost their homes, their land, and even their children.

When Nehemiah hears that this stuff has been going on behind the scenes. He has to step away and compose himself because of the overwhelming anger and righteous indignation he feels (Neh 5:6–7). But, then, he immediately and publicly confronts the officials.

He says, “*God has graciously brought our people out of exile and into our Promised Land, and how do you guys respond? You are profiting from the suffering of your own people! You are holding debts against your own extended family! Do you not see how these actions shame the people of God before the nations?*”

² John Goldingay, *Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther for Everyone*, Old Testament for Everyone (Louisville, KY; London: Westminster John Knox Press; Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2012), 104.

Nehemiah has a right to be outraged. He is personally sacrificing a lot to restore the walls of Jerusalem and to make life better for those who have returned to the land of Judah. However, he now sees that not only are the people of God suffering from external threats, they are also suffering from lawless evil they are inflicting on one another.

The actions of the nobles are the very definition of *injustice*. These actions are specifically forbidden in the Old Testament law. Exodus 22:25 clearly 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*” (Exod 22:25).

Now, here is an interesting side note. In the ancient world and into the medieval era, the practice of making money *from money* was a universally hated sin named “usury.” In fact, in his poem, *The Inferno*, the medieval Christian poet Dante describes usury as a perversion of nature and an act of violence against God. He even places usurers in a lower rung of hell than adulterers, heretics, and murderers!

Now, the reason I say that is an interesting side note is that which our ancestors considered an act of violence against God is now an unavoidable part of our global economy that we are all a part of.

If we take Scripture seriously, this presents a moral quandary—one that I do not have the answer for. However, what I will say is that this should provoke us to ask some hard questions like, “*What does it look like to live justly in an unjust world? What does it look like to practice business with integrity when the practice of taking advantage of others’ weaknesses is often profitable? What does it look like to cultivate families who resist the gravitational pulls of greed and consumption?*”

What we can say for certain is that God is just and he wants his people to be for justice. God cares for the poor, and he has always called his people to care for the poor.

This is why the people of God have a deep history when it comes to issues of justice. Our Bible is the book that first said men and women are created in the image and likeness of God (Gen 1:16, 28). Our tradition is the one who said men and women were equal in dignity. Our faith is the faith set forth the idea that *all people* have intrinsic worth—no matter their age, race, or income—because of the image of God.

For this reason, Christians started the first hospitals, built the first orphanages, and were the first to give education to children who did not come from aristocracy. Christians were at the frontlines of the abolition of slavery and women’s suffrage. And today, you will find many Christians who are seeking justice for refugees, for the unborn, and for victims of human trafficking.

Christians are to give relief to those in need and be about the restoration of human dignity where it has been robbed. This is the work of justice.

Justice is not a new word, and it is certainly not a word that can be owned by one side of the political spectrum. Justice is part of Christian history and the heritage of the church.

When Christians bear witness to justice, we are showing the world a glimpse of the kingdom of God. We are giving a preview of the world to come, when Jesus is king and sin is vanquished.

But conversely, when we make ourselves complicit with wickedness, underhanded ways, and injustice, we dishonor the name of God before a watching world.

3.) The Call to Radical Repentance

Nehemiah's response to these sins is not simply to *shame* the people of Jerusalem. He calls them to specific acts of repentance that restore the fabric of community among the people of God.

This repentance is displayed in three primary ways: *radical forgiveness, radical generosity, rooted in the fear of the Lord.*

First subpoint: *radical forgiveness.* The poor of Jerusalem owe significant debts. This situation has been financially lucrative for the individuals who have lent money and claimed land. But now, that situation must change.

Nehemiah calls the nobles to forgive their brothers' debts, restore their land, and commit to require *nothing* in return. This action is deeply and personally costly for those who are forgiving debts. But this act of forgiveness radically reshapes and has a restorative effect on the life of the community.

So, too, the Christians are called to realize that we are a forgiven people. Due to our sin and rebellion, we owe a cosmic debt to God. But Christ has paid that debt in giving his life for our sake. We, in turn, are called to forgive one another when it is costly.

In a world driven by cancel culture and endless outrage, we are called to be agents of radical grace and forgiveness. We are called to do this even unto our enemies. But where we must start is with one another. As the Apostle Paul commands us, *"Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you"* (Eph 4:32).

Another act of repentance comes in the form of *generosity* that Nehemiah practices himself. In fact, in the paragraph of verses right after our primary passage, we learn that Nehemiah has been promoted to being the official governor over the region of Judah. However, we also learn that previous governors had themselves laid heavy burdens of taxation upon the people of Jerusalem. Look at the text beginning in verse 14: *"Moreover, from the time that I was appointed to be their governor in the land of Judah, from the twentieth year to the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes the king, twelve years, neither I nor my brothers ate the food allowance of the governor. 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. Even their servants lorded it over the people...."* (Neh 5:14–15b).

Nehemiah has not personally sinned. But because of the way others in his position have abused their authority, he chooses to adopt a radically new approach. He does not receive the governor's food allowance. He did not receive profit. As the wall is being rebuilt, he pays for his own expenses. Even more, he generously provides for his leaders and the workers of the wall. We learn later on that there were 150 people at his table, for whom Nehemiah personally picked up the tab (Neh 5:17). Now, I don't know about you, but I don't think I could afford to foot the bill for 150 people.

So, too, God's people today are called to be a radically generous people. In a culture that is defined by consumption and getting all that we can get, we are called to be those who willingly give our time, our talent, and our treasure for the sake of God's kingdom. We are called to generously sacrifice time to serve one another. We are called to give financially see the work of God go forward.

What you give and how much you give is a matter between you, God, and your conscience. But the pattern we see modeled in the New Testament is that, as a people, we are called to give generously, joyously, sacrificially, and consistently. We give not to get, but rather to display the beauty of the one who gave his life for us.

Finally, all of what Nehemiah does and all of what he calls the people of Jerusalem to do is rooted in the fear of the Lord. When he calls out the sins of the nobles, he says in verse 9, "Ought you not walk in the fear of our God?" When he refuses to use his position as governor to take advantage over those he rule, he state his reason clearly, "But I did not do so, because of the fear of God" (Neh 5:15b).

We, too, are called to live in the fear of the Lord. Now, the fear of the Lord is not to live as if we are scared that God might be irrational, untrustworthy, or petty with his power. Far from it. To fear the Lord is to live in an ever-present awareness of God goodness and glory. To fear the Lord is to live as those who are awakened to the truths of God's holiness, power, and justice. To fear the Lord is to live in an awestruck conviction of God's holy reality all around us.

To fear the Lord is to *love* the Lord with all of our heart, soul, and might (Deut 6:5).

And what today's passage reminds us is that our love of God is often revealed by our love for one another. Likewise, our lack of love of God is often revealed by our lack of love for one another.

Conclusion

People of God, we are called to be faithful in a world where compromise is easy and faithfulness is costly. We are called to be a people who embody justice in a world that thrives on injustice. We are called to be radically gracious, radically generous, and radically convinced of the glory of our God. We are called to be holy.

Be we do not do this alone. Like the people of Jerusalem could look to Nehemiah, so too, we look to our true and better Nehemiah.

We look to Christ, who was faithful to the point of death on a cross. We look to the one who forgave his enemies and generously gave his life for our sake. We look to the Son of Man who has defeated death, ascended to heaven, and who will come to judge the living and the dead!

Our world is built on corruption, compromise, and ruthless selfishness. It is a place where the vicious win through the power of violence and greed. Against this way of life, the message of the cross looks absurd and weak. Yet, the truth of the cross has forever changed history. And the one who conquered by the cross will, one day, make all things new.

May we live holy lives in light of Christ, our holy king!

AMEN.

Gospel Community Discussion Starters

- 1.) Read Nehemiah chapter 5. Summarize the major events in this passage in your own words.
- 2.) A dominant theme of this passage relates to Nehemiah confronting sins among the Jewish people that threaten to compromise their mission. What are the internal sins that the church of today is particularly tempted toward? Why should we care about preserving our sense of holiness as the people of God?
- 3.) One major threat to Jerusalem is injustice toward the poor. Why is injustice such a threat to the people of God? While “justice” and “injustice” can be unfortunate buzzwords among political pundits today, why should Christians care about a biblical understanding of justice?
- 4.) Nehemiah calls the people of Jerusalem to repentance. The keys aspects of this repentance are radical forgiveness and radical generosity, both of which are rooted in the fear of the Lord. How do you see this reflected in the text? What do these actions look like for the people of God today?