

WEDNESDAY BIBLE FELLOWSHIP

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STUDY NOTES ON NEHEMIAH

Chapter 5: Internal Conflict

Chapter four ended on a note of great victory. The people of God were doing the work of God, and they did it despite all obstacles. First the enemy tried derision, then he tried discouragement, then he tried danger, but they worked with a sword in one hand and a trowel in the other, and they would not let their enemies stop them. But in this section, chapter five, there is no mention of working on the wall, indicating that the work had stopped. The work stopped because of *strife among God's people*. The enemy could not stop the work of God by direct attack, but the work stopped when God's people weren't unified and working together. Nehemiah teaches us how to handle the clear and present danger of internal conflict whether it is in your marriage, your business, or a church.

As Jesus said in Mark 3:25, "If a house is divided against itself, that house cannot stand." (Mark 3:25, NIV)

What is the reason for strife among the people?

Money problems (5:2-5). Most of the time money problems affect a building project because there isn't enough money to do the work. But the job of rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem seems to have been paid for by the king of Persia, who provided the necessary building materials for Nehemiah (Nehemiah 1:8) and sent him with royal guards (Nehemiah 1:9). Nehemiah's money problems were different; they were money problems among the people that harmed the unity among the people of God.

Nehemiah sensitively reacted to the complaints. "When I heard their outcry and these charges, I was very angry. I pondered them in my mind and then accused the nobles and officials. I told them, "You are charging your own people interest!" So I called together a large meeting to deal with them." (5:6-7)

Just look at the problems that had cropped up: First of all - There was famine. There were big mortgage payments. There was high taxation and increasing debt. Children were being sold into slavery. Finally, there were high interest rates caused by greedy relatives. As will be indicated in Nehemiah 5:11, *the hundredth part*, the rich were taking advantage of the crisis to make money off the poor, charging 12% interest a year.

With verse 7, we see the root cause of the conflict, which was selfishness. Those who had were taking from those who didn't. While everybody else was struggling to make ends meet, these people were trying to make a profit at the misfortune of other people. Do you know what was wrong with them? They had never moved from a 'What's in it for me?' mentality. They had both money and food. They were loaning the money at exorbitant interest rates and selling the food at inflated prices. Above that, they were holding the mortgages of homes and

farms and using the children of the families as collateral. No wonder Nehemiah was catching it from all sides!

Now learn this: **the building of the wall did not create these problems, it revealed them.**

It isn't unusual for money problems to create strife and completely disrupt what God wants to do. If Nehemiah and his people did not find a way to do what God wanted them to do with their money and money problems, the work of God would be stopped - without a single arrow being fired by the enemies of God.

We sometimes want to separate what we do with our money from our walk with God. This is a huge deception from Satan. Buying a house is a spiritual decision, not just a financial one. Taking a job, choosing a career, deciding how much money you should make - all these are matters that will directly affect your walk with God, both now and in the future. And if we don't handle our money with the right heart, and make financial decisions with an eye to eternity, we can make mistakes that will affect the work of God in our lives for years and years.

Also, essential to handling our money with the right heart before God is being a giver. Being a giver to the work of the Lord helps us to always remember that God and His kingdom come first.

Nehemiah was getting an ear full and it should have been expected because this was a situation where change was taking place. Walls were being rebuilt that had been lying in rubble for hundreds of years. People had left their farms and their work to come and do something that everyone said could not be done. It caused problems for some of the people. In fact, in any transition, change is going to be harder on some people than others. Quite frankly, anytime an organization goes through change, somebody is going to feel neglected. It is not hard to tell who those people are, because they will tell you, but I want to say again, that is not all bad.

I had to learn as a leader that there is a difference between negative criticism and legitimate complaints. Legitimate complaints need to be listened to and looked into. These were legitimate complaints.

Strongly Respond With Concern.

There were two things that Nehemiah could not do. First of all, he could not ignore the problem because it wasn't going away. On the other hand, he could not abandon the vision. He had to finish the wall. Notice how Nehemiah responded both carefully and yet decisively.

First of all, he was royally "ticked off". As the pastor, I can relate to why he was angry, because what made him angry was the threat to the unity of the body. Proverbs 6:16-19 tells us there are seven things that God hates. This is the last one. "A trouble maker in the family." (Proverbs 6:19, MSG)

Nehemiah transforms his anger into action. He goes directly to the source of the problem. He doesn't gossip about it. He doesn't talk to a third party. He goes directly to the people who are causing the problem. Those were the nobles and the officials - in other words, the people with the bucks. I don't want you to miss the tremendous courage that Nehemiah displayed by

confronting the very group that could shut his vision down and run him out of town in the process.

That is what makes a true leader. The willingness to do what is right regardless of the consequences. You see **a diplomat asks, 'What is safe?' A politician asks, 'What is popular?' But a leader asks, 'What is right?' Leadership is not a popularity contest.** If you were trying to please everybody, you are not in God's will for your life. I've learned, sometimes the hard way, when you try to please everybody, you wind up pleasing just about nobody and you wind up displeasing God.

Do you see how Nehemiah took these people back to the big picture? He reminds them of the reason they were rebuilding the wall to begin with. They were rebuilding the wall to restore Jerusalem as God's city and God's people as a light to the nations. One of the real keys to staying united in what we do is to keep remembering why we do it.

Surely Resolve the Conflict.

The work does not begin again until the problem is fully and finally solved. "What you are doing is wrong. Is there no fear of God left in you? Don't you care what the nations around here or our enemies think of you? I and my brothers and the people working for me have also loaned them money. But this gouging them with interest has to stop. Give them back their foreclosed fields, vineyards, olive groves, and homes right now. And forgive your claims on their money, grain, new wine, and olive oil." (5:9-11) They said, "We'll give it all back. We won't make any more demands on them. We will do everything you say." Then I called the priests together and made them promise to keep their word. Then I emptied my pockets, turning them inside out, and said, "So may God empty the pockets in the house of everyone who doesn't keep this promise - turned inside out and emptied." Everyone gave a wholehearted "Yes, we'll do it!" and praised God. And the people did what they promised. (Nehemiah 5:9-13, MSG)

Now at first blush that seems so neat, so clean cut, and yet we know that thorny issues and difficult problems are not usually solved so easily and so quickly. How in the world did Nehemiah get the people to obey him so fast and so harmoniously? Well, the secret is in the rest of the chapter.

Lead by example.

Nehemiah had position, power and privilege, but he refused to use his position for his personal gain. He refused to use his privilege to have more. For example, verses 14 and 15 tell us that he had a huge expense account. He could have charged thousands of pounds on his credit card for the best food and drink in the country, but he didn't. He did not force his people to pay for his pleasure with higher taxes.

The most important thing you can do to influence other people is to walk the talk. If people see a connection between what you say and what you do, they will follow you anywhere. Nehemiah was determined to do right, be right, act right, and stay right.

There are two things that motivated him that ought to motivate us. First of all, the fear of God. It says in verse 15, “But because of my fear of God I did not act that way.” (Nehemiah 5:15, NLT) Nehemiah never forgot it was God that called him. It was God that blessed him. It was God that used him and it was God that could take his hand away from him. He was also motivated by his future with God. This is why in verse 19 he says, “Remember me, my God, for good, according to all that I have done for this people.” (Nehemiah 5:19, NKJV) That is such a great statement. God will not remember the goods we earned, but He will remember the good we did. Hebrews 6:10 says, “God is always fair. He will remember how you helped his people in the past and how you are still helping them. You belong to God and he won’t forget the love you have shown his people.” (Hebrews 6:10, CEV)

Now I want to leave this message with two very practical applications for all of you who are here at Christ Church and all Christians. We can rebuild any walls if we stay together. We can handle anything on the outside if we will stay together on the inside. When you hear rumours, negative talk, unfair criticism, you can throw two buckets on that fire - a bucket of gasoline or a bucket of water. Your job description for the next twenty years is this. **“Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.”** (Ephesians 4:3, NIV)

Finally, we can all set an example and we can all be an example for somebody else and that is what gives you influence. General George Patton was leading a group of soldiers during World War II when they came to a river. It was cold, it had been snowing, and the soldiers began to mumble and grumble that it was impossible to cross the icy river with all of their gear. General Patton listened for a moment, grabbed a soldier’s gear and his gun, waded out into the water, swam across the river, climbed out on the other side, glared at them from the opposite bank for a few minutes, got back in, swam back and then said to the soldiers, “Do you think you can do it now?”

Do what is right out of a love for God and a holy fear of God. Together, we can face any clear and present danger.