

Nehemiah, Lesson #4

Good Questions have groups talking

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Creative element

Wear a robe as you teach. When you get to verse 13, stand up and say the words of Nehemiah and shake out your robe. This is a great biblical example, by the way, of the value of using creative elements. Read the prophets. Most of them used all kinds of creative elements. You might be tempted to think stuff like this is gimmicky, or trite, or stupid. Nehemiah didn't think so.

Nehemiah 5.1 - 16¹

ACCOUNTABILITY

- What three fellowships do we have schedule for the next three months? Who will invite every member? Who will help invite every prospect? Who will help plan the party?

OPEN

- Let's each share your name and one thing that makes you mad.

DIG

1. **As we read through section, see if you can look behind the scenes to see what is going on. What is the context?**¹
2. Overview: what is the situation here? What problem is Nehemiah facing in the chapter and why?²
3. Who is the first group to complain in verse 2?³

¹In the midst of a "great work" (4:19) for a "great God" (1:5), a "great cry" (5:1) was heard among the Jews. They were not crying out against the Samaritans, the Ammonites, or the Arabs, but against their own people! Jew was exploiting Jew, and the economic situation had become so desperate that even the wives (who usually kept silent) were joining in the protest. – Old Testament - The Bible Exposition Commentary – History.

²In chap. 4 and again in chap. 6 Nehemiah faced external opposition. In chap. 5 he had to deal with internal difficulties. The inequality and injustice that transpired during the building of the wall developed over a period of time. But the wall building and external opposition put more strain on the economic substructure of the community. The culmination of these problems may have occurred shortly before the wall was finished in August-September. This would have been near the end of the harvest, and the creditors would have required payment of capital and interest on loans. According to 4:22, Nehemiah had asked the workers to stay in Jerusalem and not return to their villages. This must have caused a shortage of workers for the harvest. The extra labor on the wall no doubt affected the efficiency of the harvest and the income many families normally would have received from working in the harvest. In short, the economic situation was more critical because the people dedicated so much labor to the wall. The completion of the wall was necessary to fulfill both the word and the will of God. In the midst of the building, however, power became a threat as the "nobles and officials" (v. 7) began to oppress the people in a variety of ways. – New American Commentary – Volume 10: Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther.

³Four different groups of people were involved in this crisis. First, there were the people who owned no land but who needed food (v. 2). The population was increasing; there was a

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4. Verse 3. Who is the second group to complain? What is their complaint?⁴
5. Still another group was complaining in verse 5. What is their deal?⁵
6. Verse 4 says, “We had to borrow money.” Who were they borrowing money from?⁶
7. What are some broad, biblical principles regarding debt? What does the Bible teach about borrowing money?⁷

³(...continued)

famine (v. 3); and the people were hungry. These people could not help themselves so they cried out to Nehemiah for help. – Old Testament - The Bible Exposition Commentary – History.

⁴The second group was composed of landowners who had mortgaged their property in order to buy food (v. 3). Apparently inflation was on the rise, and prices were going higher. The combination of debt and inflation is enough to wipe out a person’s equity very quickly. – Old Testament - The Bible Exposition Commentary – History.

⁵The third group complained because the taxes were too high, and they were forced to borrow money to pay them (v. 4). In order to borrow the money, they had to give security; and this meant eventually losing their property. The Persian king received a fortune in annual tribute, very little of which ever benefited the local provinces. Unlike our situation today, the taxes did not support local services; they only supported the king. – Old Testament - The Bible Exposition Commentary – History.

⁶The fourth group was made up of wealthy Jews who were exploiting their own brothers and sisters by loaning them money and taking their lands and their children for collateral (Lev. 25:39-40). Jewish boys and girls had to choose between starvation or servitude!

It was not unlawful for Jews to loan money to one another, but they were not to act like money lenders and charge interest (Deut. 23:19-20). They were to treat one another with love even in the matter of taking security (24:10-13; Ex. 22:25-27) or making a brother a servant (Lev. 25:35-46). Both the people and the land belonged to the Lord, and He would not have anybody using either one for personal gain.

One reason for the “Year of Jubilee” (Lev. 25) was to balance the economic system in Israel so that the rich could not get richer as the poor became poorer. All debts had to be forgiven in the fiftieth year, all land restored to its original owners, and all servants set free. These wealthy businessmen were selfishly exploiting the poor in order to make themselves rich.

They were using their power to rob some and to put others into bondage. Greed was one of the sins the prophets had denounced before the Babylonian Captivity (Isa. 56:9-12; Jer. 22:13-19; Amos 2:6-7; 5:11-12). God has a special concern for the poor and will not hold those guiltless who take advantage of them. – Old Testament - The Bible Exposition Commentary – History.

⁷Romans 13:8 “Owe no man any thing, but to love one another: for he that loveth another hath fulfilled the law.”

I hate debt. I have been in personal debt two times in my life (the first time was for medical bills and the second time for taxes). In both cases, the problems went far beyond their original causes and it took several years to get out. The last time we cut back many things (sold our house and rented an old one, went to one older car, got a new job, etc.) in order to get out of debt. To this day I fight like crazy to stay out of new debt. Even the church where I pastor has no debt—not on equipment, land or buildings. My only personal debt is the house mortgage we have and current bills.

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8. How can debt keep us from the John 10.10⁸ life?
9. How has debt robbed you of joy?⁹
10. If debt robs us of joy, why is it so popular?¹⁰
11. Verses 6 - 7. What did Nehemiah feel? What did he do?¹¹
12. Is it a good thing to get angry, as Nehemiah did?¹²

⁷(...continued)

What About Romans 13:8?

However, I also hate the blatant misapplication of scripture. Some men are using Romans 13:8 as proof that any debt under any circumstances is a sin. When the Bible says, "Owe no man any thing," it must mean anything! Right? Well, not necessarily. I am even prepared to prove that these men do not mean anything in a universal sense. They are correct in opposing the evils of excessive debt and easy credit. They are correct in fighting the lack of faith that is usually the hallmark of debt-ridden believers. However, this does not justify the harm done by the serious misinterpretation of this text. Let me explain.

First, look at the text and the context. Paul says, "Owe no man any thing, but to love one another." What has Paul been dealing with in this passage? He has been dealing with the error of some believers who feel no need to pay their taxes because they are not of this world. Paul's answer is, "Render therefore to all their dues." Whether tribute, custom, fear or honor; if you owe it to them, then give it as they require. In other words, if anyone has a proper expectation of us; if we owe them—then we should pay it. This matches the teaching of Proverbs 3:27-28: "Withhold not good from them to who it is due, when it is in the power of thine hand to do it. Say not unto thy neighbor, Go, and come again, and to morrow I will give; when thou hast it by thee." Do not put someone off when it is their right and they claim it. Give them what you owe them to the best of your ability.

<http://www.learnthebible.org/Owe%20No%20Man.htm>

⁸The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full. John 10:10 (NIV)

⁹Teaching is about connecting truth to life. Talk about truth; talk about life.

¹⁰It is all about when the pain and pleasure is. Debt allows us to have pleasure now from getting stuff, and pain later in paying for stuff. There is a saying that goes, we can choose the order of the pain and pleasure of life, and, generally speaking, if we choose the pain first there is less pain and more pleasure.

¹¹Nehemiah was angry (cf. Mark 3:5) because the behavior was wrong and because he realized the danger of the community's slipping into serious inequality and upsetting the economic infrastructure. Also, the harmony among fellow members of the community was breaking down. Action had to be taken before this ruined the community. – New American Commentary – Volume 10: Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther.

¹²This was not the flaring up of a sinful temper but the expression of righteous indignation at the way the businessmen were oppressing their brothers and sisters. "In your anger do not sin" (Eph. 4:26, niv; see Ps. 4:4). Nehemiah was not a politician who asked, "What is popular?" or a diplomat who asked, "What is safe?" but a true leader who asked, "What is right?" His was a holy anger against sin, and he knew he had the Law of God behind him.

Moses expressed this kind of holy anger when he broke the stone tables of Law (Ex. 32), and

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13. Why didn't Nehemiah know about the problems sooner?¹³
14. Verse 7. Why was it important that Nehemiah ponder these things in his mind before he accused the officials? What is the lesson for us?¹⁴
15. Verse 9. Have you ever been called upon to confront as Nehemiah does here? Who has a story?¹⁵

¹²(...continued)

so did Jesus when He saw the hardening of the Pharisees' hearts (Mark 3:5). – Old Testament - The Bible Exposition Commentary – History.

¹³Why didn't Nehemiah know about this scandalous economic problem sooner? Probably because he was so immersed in the one thing he came to do—the rebuilding of the walls—that he had no time to get involved in the internal affairs of the community. His commission as governor was to repair the walls and restore the gates, not to reform the community. Furthermore, Nehemiah had not been in the city long enough to learn all that was going on.

It is important to note that the building of the wall did not create these problems; it revealed them. Often when a church enters into a building program, all sorts of problems start to surface that people didn't even know were there. A building program is a demanding thing that tests our faith, our patience, and our priorities; and while it brings out the best in some people, it can often bring out the worst in others. – Old Testament - The Bible Exposition Commentary – History.

¹⁴Nehemiah again served as an example of one who considers things carefully before acting. He was facing a conflict between social classes, which he solved on the basis of principles taught in the Pentateuch, especially the sense of community equality and the importance of the covenant. E. A. Martens points out that the covenant formula (e.g., Lev 26:12, "I will walk among you and be your God, and you will be my people") "envisages a people; not an individual, but a community." Individuals, while important, were expected to act for the benefit of the group. McConville observes that the Book of Deuteronomy characteristically refers to fellow Israelites as "brothers" ('āḥîm) "regardless of social status or tribal divisions." This included kings and priests (e.g., Deut 1:16; 3:12–20; 10:9; 15:3–11; 17:15; 18:2). This, together with the "tendency to speak of Israel as a single whole," had a "levelling function in Israel." This relationship of a unified people bound to God by covenant meant, according to Tollefson, that "relations between Jews should never be treated purely as business transactions, but rather as spiritual service that is pleasing to God and blessed by Him." That such is also the case in the church is suggested by 1 Cor 6:1–11. – New American Commentary – Volume 10: Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther.

¹⁵Nehemiah's statement, "What you are doing is not right," is an example of how a leader can assume the role of a moral teacher. The "officials and nobles" (v. 7) had done wrong, and Nehemiah confronted them with the truth, not with what was pleasing to them. The primary problem was that what was happening would obstruct their ultimate mission to the Gentiles. To "walk in the fear of our God" is a concept taken from the wisdom literature of the Old Testament (e.g., Proverbs, Job) and means "to live in awe of and devotion to God and with kindness and integrity toward men" (cf. Deut 10:12; 2 Chr 6:31; Lev 25:36; Neh 7:2). Such a life-style would be a witness to the Gentiles and would fulfill the election of Israel (Gen 12:1–3; Isa 42:6–9). –New American Commentary – Volume 10: Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther.

16. Verse 12. Why did Nehemiah make them take an oath? Why not just take their word for it? What place does oath taking have in the Christian life?¹⁶
17. Verse 13. What is this shaking of the robe about?¹⁷
18. Verse 14. Why didn't Nehemiah eat the food allotted to the governor? What do learn about following God from this?¹⁸
19. What do we learn about leadership from verse 16?¹⁹
20. Overview: what do we learn about following God from this chapter?²⁰
21. How can we support one another in prayer this week?

1. Now the men and their wives raised a great outcry against their Jewish brothers. 2 Some were saying, "We and our sons and daughters are numerous; in order for us to eat and stay alive, we must get grain."

3 Others were saying, "We are mortgaging our fields, our vineyards and our homes to

¹⁶The brokers promised to obey, so Nehemiah had them take an oath in the presence of the priests and the other officers of the city. This meant that their promise was not only between them and their neighbors, but between them and the Lord; and this was a serious thing. "When you make a vow to God, do not delay in fulfilling it. He has no pleasure in fools; fulfill your vow. It is better hot to vow than to make a vow and not fulfill it" (Eccl. 5:4-5, niv). – Old Testament - The Bible Exposition Commentary – History.

¹⁷To make the agreement thus sworn to still more binding, Nehemiah confirmed the proceeding by a symbolical action: Also I shook my lap, and said, So may God shake out every man from his house, and from his labour, that performeth (fulfilleth) not this promise, and thus may he be shaken out and emptied. לַפָּנִים means the lap of the garment, in which things are carried (Isa 49:22), where alone the word is again found. The symbolical action consisted in Nehemiah's gathering up his garment as if for the purpose of carrying something, and then shaking it out with the words above stated, which declared the meaning of the act. The whole congregation said Amen, and praised the Lord, sc. for the success with which God had blessed his efforts to help the poor. And the people did according to this promise, i.e., the community acted in accordance with the agreement entered into. – Keil and Delitzsch Commentary on the Old Testament - Commentary on the Old Testament – Volume 4: Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, The Book of Job.

¹⁸D.L. Moody said, "A holy life will produce the deepest impression. Lighthouses blow no horns; they only shine." In our day of public scandals in almost every area of life, especially the political, how refreshing it is to meet a man like Nehemiah who put serving the people ahead of getting gain for himself. – Old Testament - The Bible Exposition Commentary – History.

¹⁹Lead by example.

²⁰Nehemiah never read Philippians 2:1-13, but he certainly practiced it. During his first term of twelve years as governor, and then during his second term of office (Neh. 13:6-7), he used his privileges for helping the people; he did not use the people to build a kingdom for himself. In that day, most officials exercised their authority in order to promote themselves and protect their personal interests. They had very little concern for the needs of the people. As children of God, our example is Jesus Christ and not the leaders of this world (Luke 22:23-30). "A cross stands in the way of spiritual leadership," writes J. Oswald Sanders, "a cross upon which the leader must consent to be impaled" (Spiritual Leadership, Moody Press, 1976; p. 105). – Old Testament - The Bible Exposition Commentary – History.

get grain during the famine."

4 Still others were saying, "We have had to borrow money to pay the king's tax on our fields and vineyards. 5 Although we are of the same flesh and blood as our countrymen and though our sons are as good as theirs, yet we have to subject our sons and daughters to slavery. Some of our daughters have already been enslaved, but we are powerless, because our fields and our vineyards belong to others."

6 When I heard their outcry and these charges, I was very angry. 7 I pondered them in my mind and then accused the nobles and officials. I told them, "You are exacting usury from your own countrymen!" So I called together a large meeting to deal with them 8 and said: "As far as possible, we have bought back our Jewish brothers who were sold to the Gentiles. Now you are selling your brothers, only for them to be sold back to us!" They kept quiet, because they could find nothing to say.

9 So I continued, "What you are doing is not right. Shouldn't you walk in the fear of our God to avoid the reproach of our Gentile enemies? 10 I and my brothers and my men are also lending the people money and grain. But let the exacting of usury stop! 11 Give back to them immediately their fields, vineyards, olive groves and houses, and also the usury you are charging them--the hundredth part of the money, grain, new wine and oil."

12 "We will give it back," they said. "And we will not demand anything more from them. We will do as you say."

Then I summoned the priests and made the nobles and officials take an oath to do what they had promised. 13 I also shook out the folds of my robe and said, "In this way may God shake out of his house and possessions every man who does not keep this promise. So may such a man be shaken out and emptied!"

At this the whole assembly said, "Amen," and praised the Lord. And the people did as they had promised.

14 Moreover, from the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when I was appointed to be their governor in the land of Judah, until his thirty-second year--twelve years--neither I nor my brothers ate the food allotted to the governor. 15 But the earlier governors--those preceding me--placed a heavy burden on the people and took forty shekels of silver from them in addition to food and wine. Their assistants also lorded it over the people. But out of reverence for God I did not act like that. 16 Instead, I devoted myself to the work on this wall. All my men were assembled there for the work; we did not acquire any land. Neh 5:1-16 (NIV)