

SERMON TRANSCRIPT

05.10.2026 | Confronting Injustice | Nehemiah 5 | Dr. Ben Day, Senior Pastor

If you have a Bible this morning, let's go to Nehemiah chapter 5. If you want to use the Bible that's in the pew or the chair in front of you, that Nehemiah chapter 5 is on page 401. We're in our fifth week of walking through the book of Nehemiah. We've seen Nehemiah gather the people of God back in Jerusalem and begin the work of rebuilding the city, particularly rebuilding the wall around Jerusalem. And last week we reminded that any time we begin to follow God and live in obedience to God and do the work of rebuilding and renewal, that there is an enemy and that opposition will come. We should expect opposition from the outside, from outside of God's people because that's the way the enemy so often works. But we also need to be honest and say that our enemy is very crafty. Many times the enemy will not just use people from the outside, but even people from within our community. And so often the opposition doesn't come from without, but from within. That's what we'll see in this part of Nehemiah and what we'll see later on as well.

I mentioned to you that one of the major themes of Nehemiah's story is not just that there was a wall or a city to be rebuilt, but the people themselves needed to be rebuilt and renewed. That's what we see here, that a people who are coming together to do the work of God still needed to be rebuilt and renewed. But it's true for us today. As the people of God, we still need to be rebuilt and renewed. But thanks be to God, we have examples in Scripture of how God wants to do that in us. Through Nehemiah we have examples of how to correct wrongs and injustices like we see here even amongst the people of God. But also we have a greater hope beyond Nehemiah, the God who redeems, who transforms, a king who reigns in justice and in generosity.

Let's read Nehemiah chapter 5 and see what happens in the next part of this story. Nehemiah chapter 5, we'll start in verse 1 and read the whole chapter. It says, "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 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. 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 in 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 brought 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. I want you not to walk in the fear of God to prevent the taunts of the nations of 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've 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. Also shook out the fold of my garment 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 praise the Lord. The people did as they had promised. Moreover, from that time, I was appointed to be the governor in the land of Judah. For the 20th year to the 32nd year of our Xerxes 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 their daily ration, 40 shekels of silver. Even their servants lorded it over the people. But I did not do so because of the fear of God. I also persevered in the work on this wall. We acquired no land and all my servants were gathered there for the work. Moreover, there were at my table, 150 men, Jews and officials. Besides those who came to us from the nations that were around us. Now what was prepared at my expense for each day was one ox and six choice sheep and birds. And every 10 days, all kinds of wine in abundance. Yet for all this, I did not demand the food allowance of the governor. Because the service was too heavy on this people. Remember for my good, oh my God, all that I have done for this people.

In 1813, after winning the Battle of Lake Erie, Commander Perry made this victory message that he sent out. He said, we have met the enemy and they are ours. About 160 years later, a cartoonist named Walt Kelly made a poster for Earth Day. The poster famously said, we have met the enemy and he is us. How often could the people of God say that? We

looked last week that we know when we seek to do the work of God, our enemy, spiritual forces that are in the world, from outside the people of God to work against us. We should expect that. But sadly, what we have seen throughout history is that so often, the greatest enemy to the church, the people of God, is the people of God themselves. So often, the problems don't come from outside the community, but from within the community. This is something we are going to see throughout the book of Nehemiah. We will see examples of sin, of selfishness, of disunity amongst the people of God throughout this story. Particularly here in this part, what we are seeing is injustice amongst the people of God. That those who are in positions of power and wealth are using their power and their wealth to mistreat their brothers and sisters, the people of their own community, who have less than them.

This gives us something that we must confront with ourselves. What does it look like for injustice to happen, not just in the world, but amongst the people of God? How do we confront injustice? Throughout this book, we will consider how we address issues within the community of God ourselves, but particularly here in this passage, I want us to consider what it looks like for us to confront injustice. And thankfully, in Nehemiah, we get an example. We see how we can address this, correct this, what it looks like to actually live as God has designed us to live in justice. We also long for something more. We long for a day whenever there does not have to be any correcting of injustice because there is just justice. And thankfully, in Nehemiah, we see a better way forward, what it can look like to have godly leadership and our hope that is in a one true king who is actually both just but also generous. So that's what I want us to see in this passage, is how we notice, see, confront injustice, how we seek to live injustice in justice as God's people and how we are generous as God's people.

So first, we've got to understand what's happening in this part of the story. We'll call it the sinful situation. And before I start kind of explaining or filling in those blanks for you, I just want you to see what's happening in this part of the story. So go back to the beginning of the chapter and we get a description of what's happening here in Nehemiah chapter 5. Verse 1, it says, "Now there arose a great outcry of the people and of their wives against their Jewish brothers." This word for outcry that Nehemiah uses is the same word that is used in Exodus chapter 3, when it says that there was a great outcry from the people of Israel when they were in the land of Egypt because they were enslaved and they were being mistreated. But sadly here, the outcry is not against a foreign ruler or an outside enemy that is oppressing them, but it's against their own Jewish brothers.

Why is there this outcry? Well, verses 2 through 4 start to explain it to us. It says, "Well, there are 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 are 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." So what's happening here? Well, probably what is happening is that as the people have been called together to focus on this work of rebuilding Jerusalem and rebuilding the wall, probably a lot of the work of harvesting had gone unworked or had gone neglected. So what you did is you had a lot less workers, which meant a lot less harvest. So there was some famine in the land. There was not as much grain. You might remember even Nehemiah chapter 4. Nehemiah had called people, "Don't go back to your villages, but stay here in Jerusalem and work." So while they had focused on this good work that God wanted them to do, they had neglected some of the work that they would normally do in harvesting their fields.

So what happens whenever there is less to go around? Well, when supply is low, demand goes up. If you know anything about the way the world works, often that is when you start to charge more. So most likely what is happening is as there's less to go around and people can't raise their own crops for themselves, they're having to buy and people are raising the price and they can't afford to buy just the food to eat. There's other people who have been so in debt or so behind in their harvesting that they start to mortgage out their fields just so they can buy food to feed their families. What we find out later in the story is that to get this lending, they were going to the wealthy people in Israel, and they were not only giving them money, but they were charging them a lot of interest on those loans. So now they've mortgaged out their fields all that they own, and now they are in debt to their own brothers and sisters, and they still have a king of Persia that they have to pay. His taxes are high. So now they're even more debt, they're having to pay off taxes, and so they start to sell their own children into slavery.

What we see here is a really hard situation, and what we see is that people who have means, and people who are wealthy, and people who have power are taking advantage of a hard situation for themselves. So here's the sinful

situation. I would use the word exploitation. If you want to fill in a blank, that's your first one under the sinful situation. What is happening here is exploitation. What you have is you have a really hard situation, a circumstance that has arisen because of a work that is being done, maybe other things are at play as well, but there's a hard circumstance, and it puts those who are in need in greater need. And in this moment, those who have the ability to meet those needs, rather than caring for those in need, just build up more wealth and more power for themselves. They're exploiting a hard situation, and they're exploiting those who are in need. And this, frankly, is what we see all throughout history. We see this time and time again, people exploiting certain situations and certain people for their own benefit. We still see it still happening in our day.

I mean, many of you understand the way economics work way better than I do, but from what I understand, during COVID, the wealth gap just grew significantly. From things that I read, artificial intelligence is just going to grow that wealth gap even more. It seems like the rich are just getting richer, and those in need are just facing greater need. In many ways, we should kind of expect this. It's kind of how the world works. In our sinful nature, we are so often tempted to look out for our interests rather than the interests of others. We should expect this from the world, but we should be saddened when we see this amongst the people of God. We are supposed to be different from the world. We're supposed to be set apart from the world. We're supposed to be people who don't look to our own interests, but to look to the interests of others. We are supposed to love our neighbor as ourselves. We are supposed to care for other members of our community as if they were members of our own body. But here, we see the people of God not doing that. They are just modeling what they've seen in the world. Taking advantage of people in a hard situation, and it's going to have lasting consequences. So what also is happening here is not just exploitation of a certain situation, but what's happening is oppression.

It's the other way of thinking about this sinful situation, the other blank if you want to fill it in, that there is exploitation of a hard circumstance that leads to oppression of those who are without. It's taking advantage of people who don't have power, don't have means, in ways that's going to have lasting effects, generational effects. I mean, listen to verse 5, the way that people talk about what's going on. They say, "Our flesh is as the flesh of our brothers. Our children as their children." Like, we come from the same bloodline. We're basically related. But yet, we're forcing our sons and our daughters to be slaves. Some of our daughters have already been enslaved, but it's not in our power to help it, for other men have our fields and our vineyards. We've got children being enslaved to their own relatives, to their own people. And notice how the people describe it. They say, "It's not in our own power to help it."

Here is a description, a definition of oppression. Oppression is when those who have power don't use it to help those who don't have power, but to take advantage of people who don't have power. They say, "We don't have the power to control this. We don't have our fields anymore. We're now in debt. And so now we're selling our kids into slavery. And what kind of effects will this have? How long will this last?" This is how injustices get built into cultures, into systems, because it has generational effects. Again, we see this all the time in the world, but to Nehemiah's point, this should not be amongst the people of God. This is a big topic, one that we can't cover fully, I think, today. We're just trying to get through understanding this portion of Nehemiah's story. But what we do see here is something we have to consider in our own lives.

At first, we've got to consider it amongst the people of God, our community. I mean, the way this is being described here is this is happening amongst the people of God. And we've got to consider, is this happening in our churches, in our Christian communities? We think about confronting injustice following Nehemiah's example. It has to start in the house of God. Are there places where we are just looking out for ourselves and not for others within our own community? Are there areas where people are in need and yet we are just building up more wealth and comfort for ourselves? How is God calling us to change just within our own Christian community? But beyond that, there are certainly greater, I think, implications. Yes, this is happening amongst the people of God. This is also happening at a society level. We as the people of God, we need to seek biblical justice to happen amongst our people, but we should also seek to have biblical justice happen in our world at large. We should seek there to be justice and we should confront injustice in any way we can. Speak against it, act against it, meet needs where you can personally, vote against it, write policies. Whatever we have the opportunity to do, we should confront injustice and seek out justice in our world.

This is where Nehemiah gives us an example. We're going to have to move quickly. There's so much more that we could talk about with this, but I just want to see, I think, a really helpful example from Nehemiah, what it looks like to confront injustice and to begin to pursue justice in our community and in our world. First, we see that to confront injustice, we need to be passionate yet thoughtful. What does it look like for us to follow Nehemiah's example and for us to have a what we'll call the righteous response? We need to be passionate yet thoughtful. You see, injustice is a problem to be solved, but it's also a sin to be lamented. So it's something that should break our hearts, but it's also something we must think through. Consider how we can right these wrongs. This is what we see again in Nehemiah. Listen to how Nehemiah responds when he hears this great outcry of the people. He says, "I was very angry when I heard their outcry in these words. I took counsel with myself and I brought charges against the nobles and the officials. I said to them, you are exacting interests, each from his brother, and I held a great assembly against them."

Nehemiah is angry, and he's right to be. It is good for us to be angry against sin. There's something righteous to be angry against unrighteousness. Jesus gives us an example of this. What we see is he turns over tables in the temple. He confronts injustice in his own day. It is good for us to be angry, but even righteous anger can lead to unrighteous actions if we're not careful. Nehemiah says he is angry, but then he says, "I took counsel with myself." From what we've seen from Nehemiah in these first few chapters, it probably means that he spent time in prayer. Not just thinking, but considering what God's word says and what God would have him say in this moment. But then he doesn't just kind of lead a revolt of the people, but he goes to those who are in power and who are committing this sin, and he confronts them. This is the second part of confronting injustice. We need to be passionate, yet thoughtful. We need to be courageously clear.

Nehemiah shows us that we need to be courageously clear. It does take courage to call anybody out in their sin. To call anyone out and what they're doing wrong will often take a great deal of courage. It often will take more courage when you're speaking to people who have positions of power or of influence. Now make no mistake, Nehemiah is a man of power and of influence himself. He is a cupbearer to the king. He's got money to lend out, we find here. I mean, he's leading the people. He's got the resources. We find out he's going to become governor of the whole region. So I'm not trying to say he's some lowly person speaking truth to power. It's more of like a peer-to-peer courageous clarity. But isn't that sometimes actually even harder? mean, is it sometimes even harder to see the problems with people that are like you? Is it sometimes even harder to be clear and confront sin, that is, at maybe your level?

Nehemiah has to have some courage here as he confronts the nobles and the officials because these are people that are helping fund and enact the work that he is trying to do. His project is going to get finished and he goes to them and he calls them out and listen to how clear he is with them. Verse 8, he says to them, "We, as far as we are able, have brought back our Jewish brothers who have been sold to the nations, but you even sell your brothers that they may be sold to us." First he just describes what is happening. He's very clear about what is going on. It says they were silent and could not find a word to say. Then he gets even more clear, "The thing that you are doing is not good." He describes what is happening and then he names sin for what it is. What you are doing in this situation is wrong. Then he tells them even why it is so wrong. "Ought you not to walk in the fear of God to prevent the taunts of our nations and our enemies." He says, "You are taking advantage of your brothers and sisters, not living as God has commanded you to live, not following his guidance and his design for our community. You are not living in fear of him and what you are doing is you are bringing reproach upon his name."

When you are mistreating our brothers and sisters, you are giving people, our enemies, a reason to doubt our God because we are no different from the world." This is what makes injustice such a problem. Yes, it is a sin against image bearers of God, but it also defames the glory of God. It detracts from his holiness as we just sang about when we do not model his holiness in our lives. Give people reason to doubt the church, God's work here because we are not acting any different from the world. It is very clear with them about what is going on, about why it is wrong. It is very clear with them about what they should do next and that is the third step of confronting injustice. Passionate yet thoughtful, courageously clear. Third, guided by God.

If we are going to confront injustice in our community, in our world, we should be thoughtful and our thoughts should be directed and guided by God. Earlier I was talking about the ways that we would consider how to apply this and I just used the phrase "biblical justice". That is probably a big term that I should define at some point, but I won't today just for the

sake of time. But there is just so much of us to understand what biblical justice means. In short, what I am saying is it is a form of justice that is guided by God. Not what we feel like is right, not just what our world tells us is right, but what does actually God say in his word? And in this case, God had given specific instructions that Nehemiah can turn to and he can tell the people, this is what it looks like to be guided by God. Listen to Leviticus chapter 25, what God tells his people in his law to them. Leviticus 25, 35-38, he says, "If your brother becomes poor and cannot maintain himself with you, you shall support him as though he were a stranger and a sojourner. He shall live with you. Take no interest from him or profit, but fear your God that your brother may live beside you. You shall not lend him your money at interest nor give him your food for profit. I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt to give you the land of Canaan and to be your God." God told his people what to do and they are not doing it here. He says, "When you find somebody in need, you take care of them. You don't loan to them at an interest in which they are just going to owe more back to you, but because you fear God, you care for your brothers and sisters."

Now again, sometimes when we think about confronting injustice and enacting it in our world, it could be a bit more that we have to think through because there's not maybe specific commands that we can just turn to in our society, but there's a lot of Biblical principles. Just start with loving our neighbor as ourselves. Just start with caring for those in need. To lift up those who are oppressed. Pastor Clark just read from us earlier, a God who is just and who hears the cries of his people, who cares for the orphan and the widow. We have certain principles given to us in Scripture to know what does it look like to pursue Biblical justice, to be guided by God as we seek to do this. Nehemiah, he just tells them exactly what God has told them to do and he calls them to do it. He says, "Return to them. All this interest that you've been taking away, I and my brothers and our servants, we've got means and we've been loaning it out to people in need, but we've not been charging interest." So he tells them to return it back. Return it to the people that you took it from and thankfully, these nobles and the officials, they actually listen.

They hear this word from Nehemiah. They receive it well. They respond well. They decide to return all that they have taken. They seem to be committed to caring for people. This is the final step that I would say. And what does it look like to confront injustice? We need to be committed to care. And here's what I mean when I say committed to care. Nehemiah hears from the officials, the leaders, that they are going to respond well. They're going to repent and return this interest that they should not have taken in the first place. They're going to do the just thing. And then he makes sure that they're actually going to do it. Verse 12, "They said to him, 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." Even carries out this ritual of helping them see if they do not keep these promises, of caring for the people that they have the ability to help and to bless what God should do to them, the judgment that will come upon them. Nehemiah is showing here, if we're going to confront injustice, we can't just settle for right words. We need to see right actions. We need to see things that actually are good and caring for people, to be committed to it and what happens and the fruit that is born. Nehemiah wants to see this not just be said, but actually be done.

So again, I think this must start within us, just as the people of God, then work its way out to our world. Where do we see our community? Where do we see our city not living in God's design for justice? What would it look like for us just to be guided by God? To confront it in our own lives, in our own church, where we're not meeting the needs of those around us. We're not caring for those who have less than we do. What does it look like to live in God's justice? But thankfully, Nehemiah also gives us this final section of the chapter in which he's not just confronting injustice and just seeking to right a wrong, but he's showing us a better path forward. He talks about when he became governor of this region. He says that he was governor for 12 years. I doubt that's the original timeline he gave Artaxerxes. Remember back in chapter 2 Artaxerxes said, "How long are you going to be gone?" I doubt he told him 12 years. This is probably later on, they built the wall and he went back and checked in as a cup bearer and he came back and now he gets the opportunity to lead here for 12 years.

What we see in Nehemiah is an example of what it looks like for someone who has leadership and power and influence to lead in a godly way, to lead in justice and even in generosity. We should consider, where do we have opportunities for influence, power? Where can we make a difference? What does it look like for us not just to right wrongs and seek to live just lives, but also to live in generosity as Nehemiah does? Yeah, we may not be governors of a whole area, but can we walk with him on this better path forward? If we're going to, we need two things. The better way that Nehemiah shows us here is one, driven by a fear of God. If we're going to be people who live this out, we've got to be compelled by,

motivated by, driven by a fear of God. You know, one of the challenging things about getting into a position of power or influence is that often there's not a lot of people over you to hold you accountable. Oftentimes those with means, those with wealth, those with power do what they want because no one is there to check them. I mean, imagine if Nehemiah had not been there, these nobles and these officials and these leaders probably would have just continued in their sinful ways. That's why the more power, the more influence, the more leadership you have, the more you have to be driven by a fear of God. Nehemiah has already talked about that. Leviticus chapter 25 talked about a fear of God. Nehemiah says, "Shouldn't we have a fear of God in the way that we're treating people?" And he describes his own leadership as being driven by a fear of God.

Look at verse 15. It says, "The former governors who were before me laid heavy burdens on the people and took from their daily ration forty shekels of silver. Even their servants lorded it over the people, but I did not do so because of the fear of God." Nehemiah knew when nobody else was watching, God was watching. He knew when nobody else had the power to stop him or to hold him accountable, God did. And out of the fear of God, he lives, he leads in a generous way. It says, "I forsook some of the things that I could have claimed for myself because I did not want a heavier burden on this people." He is driven by a fear of God and he is marked by a generosity to people. And this is the second part of a better path forward. That we would be, when we have opportunities to have influence, power, whatever that might look like, to not just be people who live out justice, but to be people who are generous, to be driven by a fear of God and to be marked by generosity to people.

Nehemiah is forsaking things that he could claim for himself. He's not just doing what is just or what is right in terms of following the exact letter of the law, but he is going above and beyond to not put heavy burdens on the people, to not weigh them down, to be generous towards them. It says in verse 18, "There was prepared at my expense for each day was one ox and six-choice sheep and birds, and every ten days all kinds of wine in abundance." People like Nehemiah probably. I mean, he is leading out in such a way in which he is feeding people, taking care of those who are around his table. "Yet for all this I did not demand the food allowance of the governor because the service was too heavy on this people."

Seems that Nehemiah actually cares about the people that he is leading. "Oh, that we would find more Nehemiahs to elect in our country." "Oh, that we would find more Nehemiahs to put into positions of leadership and power in places where we are." People that are driven by a fear of God, but people that actually care about people, marked by a generosity to people. What is driving all of this in Nehemiah's heart? He ends the chapter by saying a quick prayer, "Remember for my good, oh my God, all that I have done for this people." You know, you could read this last section and you could think, "Why does Nehemiah include this in here?" Is he just bragging? Does he just want people to know, "Look at how good and godly of a governor I was?" I honestly think what Nehemiah is seeking to do is he is seeking to honor the Lord. Seems to be that his honest desire is to bring glory to God, to bring good to the people of God. Seems to be that that's his prayer here at the end, that God would see what he is seeking to do, and that it would bring him glory as he does good for the people.

Why does Nehemiah have this mindset? I really think it's because Nehemiah believes that the good hand of God is upon him. You go back to chapter 2, that phrase that we saw there, that Nehemiah sees that all this is happening only because God's grace is upon him. He only has the position that he has as a cupbearer to the king, he only has the resources that he has because God's good hand is upon him. I believe he is seeking to honor God and honor the people that God has placed under his leadership because he believes God has been gracious to him. He is seeking to be a steward over the resources and the positions God has given him. Isn't that what God told his people to do in that passage in Leviticus 25? He said, "Care for the people that are in need. Don't take advantage of them. Show them grace." Why? Because once you were enslaved in Egypt and I showed you grace, once you were not cared for and I cared for you. I brought you out of the land of Egypt, gave you this promised land, should you not show that same care to others. See, people who have received grace will be people who show grace.

And if Nehemiah has got a reason for this, don't we have so much of a reason more? Isn't our reason for being generous with those around us even greater? Because God did not just save us from a foreign land, he saved us from death. God did not just bring us out of slavery to an outside country that was oppressing us, he brought us out of our slavery to sin.

When Jesus came, he also confronted injustice. But he did not do so by just telling people to pay back what they owed, he did so by paying the debt himself. What we remember, what we celebrate as we gather around the table this morning, is that Jesus' body was broken and his blood was shed to pay our debt. Jesus enacted justice on the cross by doing what we should have done, paying the debt that we should have owed. But even more than that, he did not just do what was just, but he was generous, gracious to us. That in giving his body, he not only paid our debt, but he gave us a way that we can be renewed and rebuilt as the people of God. Nehemiah's prayer, "Remember me for good, O my God." God remembered Jesus Christ. He did not leave him in that tomb. He raised him on the third day. We don't just remember that Jesus' body was broken and his blood was shed, we remember that he got up from the grave. And that he's not just the governor of Jerusalem, he's the king of the whole world. He's a king that reigns in justice and in generosity, and he calls us as his people to do the same. And by pouring out his grace upon us, he gives us the ability to do the same.

See, in Nehemiah we have an example, but in Jesus we have power. In Jesus' grace that he has bestowed upon us, in his spirit whom he has given us, he gives us the ability to be rebuilt and renewed, so we don't have to look like the world. We don't have to just look out for our own interests. We don't have to just do what's good for us. We can care for those around us. We cannot just be people who are just, but we can be people who are generous because God has been generous to us. So we gather around the table this morning as we look to the cross and to the empty tomb. Let us remember that we have a just and generous king that we worship and that we serve, that we pledge allegiance to. We allow him to rule over us, reign over us in the way that we live our lives, that we might be people who confront injustice, who live in justice, who are generous with those around us.