

Nehemiah 5 Be Weird For God

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In general the wealthier a nation or a region is, the less violent crime is experienced there.

Similarly, the more the education you have, and the more money you earn, the less likely you are to get a divorce.

So, it seems like, wealthier people, more educated people, are better people – that somehow all that money and education has taught them how to get along. Right?

Not at all. Here's what actually happens – the more money there is, in a nation or a region, in a department or program, or in a marriage or family, the less need there is for conflict, because multiple people can do what they want.

When there's enough to go around, everything's good.

When there's not enough to go around, people will fight over what can be had. It's scarcity that breeds conflict.

So, if there's enough for you to have what you want, and for me to have what I want, there's no need for us to fight. But, *that doesn't mean we agree about everything*, it doesn't mean we have the same values, goals, or hopes for life, it just means you can pursue your desires and I can pursue mine without conflict.

If there is enough money in the marriage for you to do things your way, and me to do things mine, we're OK. You can buy the new gizmo you want and I can still get the nice purse I want. I may not totally agree with your purchase, but it's not worth fighting over. We're all still going to eat tonight, and tomorrow, and next week.

But what if there isn't enough money to go around? Now conflict begins to surface – but here's my point – that conflict, that disagreement, was there all along. It only rises to the surface when there's not enough resources to go around. We fight because only one of us is going to be able to get our way, or because neither of us can get our way, and we're bitter.

This could apply to time too; when we both have plenty of time, things are fine. But if our schedules start to get crammed full and now you don't have enough time to stop and pickup the dry cleaning because you're doing this or that or we can't agree on a night to have so and so over, now we start to have problems.

It becomes more and more apparent that what you want to do and what I want to do are different, and we're having trouble making room for both. But listen, once again, most of the time, *the differences were already there*; scarcity just brought them to the surface.

This morning in Nehemiah, we're going to see that scarcity in the land exposed conflict among the people. But, we're also going to see how that conflict was resolved – and I'll tell you this – it wasn't by simply adding more money so that everyone could get what they wanted, *it was by getting everyone to agree on what they should be doing*. How do you do that? Well, we'll see.

You remember that Nehemiah is a man, a Jew, who was working for the King of the Persian Empire – he was on the king's personal staff – he was not a priest, or a prophet, he was a professional – like most of you, working for the central government of his day. But God gave him a burden to rebuild the city of Jerusalem – a city that had been destroyed in 586 BC by the Babylonians. And so, God used Nehemiah's position and his prayers to gain favor with the king who agreed to send him back with permission to rebuild.

Last week we saw him organizing the people to do the work of rebuilding the city's walls. That didn't go over so well with some of the other groups in the region though, and so eventually Nehemiah had to establish a guard force and as they worked with their hands to rebuild the city they strapped swords to their sides just in case.

This week, we won't read anything about external opposition – instead, we'll see it rise up from within.

1 And there was a great outcry of the people and their wives against their Jewish brethren.

2 For there were those who said, "We, our sons, and our daughters *are* many; therefore let us get grain, that we may eat and live."

3 There were also *some* who said, "We have mortgaged our lands and vineyards and houses, that we might buy grain because of the famine."

4 There were also those who said, "We have borrowed money for the king's tax *on* our lands and vineyards. 5 Yet now our flesh *is* as the flesh of our brethren, our children as their children; and indeed we are forcing our sons and our daughters to be slaves, and *some* of our daughters have been brought into slavery. *It is not in our power to redeem them, for other men have our lands and vineyards.*"

It turns out that though they're all wearing the same jersey, they're not all on the same team. They were all Jews – but some of them were making life difficult for others. There was a vast divide between the haves and the have-nots. And the have-nots are complaining about it to Nehemiah.

They had a lot of mouths to feed, and a lot of taxes to pay. So they mortgaged their lands and their vineyards to some of the wealthier Jews, but then a famine came through and their crops and fields weren't producing, so they haven't been able to pay their mortgages.

But they still have a lot of mouths to feed, and they still have to pay the taxes. So now they're getting foreclosed on and had to sell their children into slavery with no means to earn them back, and at that point, you're stuck – poverty has latched onto you like a nasty parasite and there's no escape--you have no way to make any more money and your debts just continue to rise. You understand why there was a great outcry? Can you feel the hopelessness? I mean, this is the kind of thing that sparks revolutions.

So, how did it happen, how did things get this way? Well, for one there was the taxes, and there was really nothing anybody could do about that. Second, you had the famine, and again, there was really nothing anybody could do about that – life is rough sometimes, and there's no easy way out. No matter who you are, pain, difficulty, and suffering will find you. There will always be a season in everyone's life where things are rough.

But those are all external issues – those are things on the outside of your life – things that you ought to be able to band together with the people you love, the people you are closest to and fight your way through. Unfortunately for these guys, their kinfolk only made the situation even worse.

You see, some of the Jews were in positions of power and influence – they were nobles and rulers, and instead of using their position and power to help others, they used them for their own benefit – they saw this time of economic difficulty as a time to get ahead.

And apparently they were well within their rights – in a minute Nehemiah will confront them, but when he does, he doesn't say it's illegal, he simply says it isn't "good." He doesn't order them to change, but he strongly suggests they should. In their greed they had forsaken mercy. Selfishness is a slippery slope and you make all kinds of excuses to justify it.

You don't have to raise any hands, but let me ask, how many of you have had arguments because of money?

- inheritance
- bills
- big purchases (husband vs. wife; teens vs. parents)
- work projects

When there's plenty to go around, there's peace. But when everyone wants more, there's war.

As Christians, we need to manage our money so our money doesn't master us.

Being on top of your finances is the second best thing you can do for your marriage. Money matters ARE spiritual matters – how you spend your money shows what you really value and what you really worship. Where your money is, there your heart is too.

The nobles and rulers back in Jerusalem were piling up the cash next to their own hearts instead of using it to help others. And that was causing problems in the city, apparently enough to bring the construction on the wall to a halt.

They should have been banded together, facing outward, to guard against their enemies and encourage each other through the famine, but instead they were facing inward and struggling with each other.

Brothers and sisters, your family, your company, and your nation, can't make any forward progress when it's busy fighting each other – when it disagrees about its priorities.

So, Nehemiah takes action.

6 And I became very angry when I heard their outcry and these words. 7 After serious thought, I rebuked the nobles and rulers, and said to them, "Each of you is exacting usury from his brother." So I called a great assembly against them. 8 And I said to them, "According to our ability we have redeemed our Jewish brethren who were sold to the nations. Now indeed, will you even sell your brethren? Or should they be sold to us?"

Then they were silenced and found nothing *to say*. 9 Then I said, "What you are doing *is* not good. Should you not walk in the fear of our God because of the reproach of the nations, our enemies? 10 I also, *with* my brethren and my servants, am lending them money and grain. Please, let us stop this usury! 11 Restore now to them, even this day, their lands, their vineyards, their olive groves, and their houses, also a hundredth of the money and the grain, the new wine and the oil, that you have charged them."

12 So they said, "We will restore *it*, and will require nothing from them; we will do as you say."

Then I called the priests, and required an oath from them that they would do according to this promise. 13 Then I shook out the fold of my garment and said, "So may God shake out each man from his house, and from his property, who does not perform this promise. Even thus may he be shaken out and emptied."

And all the assembly said, "Amen!" and praised the LORD. Then the people did according to this promise.

So, do you see what Nehemiah says? He points out to them how they are headed in a different direction than everyone else. He says that he and others have actually been working to redeem Jews who had been sold into slavery. They've been trying to take care of everyone, rally everyone, get as many people as possible working to rebuild for the common good, and this selfish group was busy looking out for themselves.

Fortunately, after Nehemiah confronted them, the nobles repented. You remember we talked about repentance in an earlier study – that means they didn't just feel bad, that would be remorse – they actually did something about it, they made restitution. To repent means to be headed in the wrong direction, to admit it, and then to turn around and begin to head in the right direction. And that's what these guys did - they turned around in both their actions and attitudes and there was proof – they gave things back.

The solution works in our own relationships: if we begin to get off track, if there's friction and frustration, we can restore unity by coming back to a common agreement on where we're going; by remembering that we ought to be on the same team, headed in the same direction.

But how do we do that? How do we know what direction we ought to be headed? Simple. We follow the right leader – in this case Nehemiah stepped in to remind them of the right direction and points to his own example.

14 Moreover, from the time that I was appointed to be their governor in the land of Judah, from the twentieth year until the thirty-second year of King Artaxerxes, twelve years, neither I nor my brothers ate the governor's provisions. 15 But the former governors who *were* before me laid burdens on the people, and took from them bread and wine, besides forty shekels of silver. Yes, even their servants bore rule over the people, but I did not do so, because of the fear of God. 16 Indeed, I also continued the work on this wall, and we did not buy any land. All my servants *were* gathered there for the work.

17 And at my table *were* one hundred and fifty Jews and rulers, besides those who came to us from the nations around us. 18 Now *that* which was prepared daily *was* one ox *and* six choice sheep. Also fowl were prepared for me, and once every ten days an abundance of all kinds of wine. Yet in spite of this I did not demand the governor's provisions, because the bondage was heavy on this people.

Nehemiah said, "Look at me, guys. I have the highest position of all – can I remind you, I was sent by the King? Wanna see the letters he signed? Oh, and did I mention it was all GOD's idea!?! But I haven't been using my position for selfish gain. I've been using it to help others. I could be collecting more money, but I'm not. This isn't the time or the place for that – there are people here who need our help and I'm afraid of what God might do if I turned selfish all the sudden."

In other words, if I can say it this way, Nehemiah was consciously, intentionally, weird for God. He lived by a different standard than the other nobles – his life looked different, and notice, his wallet looked different too.

Doing what was right, doing what helped others, doing what he felt was pleasing to God cost Nehemiah in terms of real personal comfort and real material gain.

But look what he is able to say:

19 Remember me, my God, for good, *according to* all that I have done for this people.

Aren't we living for more than this earth? Nehemiah thinks so, and once again he shows that *the work he is doing on earth is **driven by** what he believes about Heaven*. He's loving others **because** he loves God and he's asking God to remember that.

In the process, Nehemiah is giving everyone the tiniest little foreshadowing of what Jesus would do in this same city less than 500 years later.

Jesus is fully equal with God – He had every right to come to earth and demand the royal treatment, but He didn't. At great personal expense – indeed, at the ultimate personal expense, He set aside His rights and redeemed us who had been sold into the slavery by sin.

Turn with me to **Philippians 2**:

3 Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. 4 Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others.

5 Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, 6 who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, 7 but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men.

8 And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross. 9 Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name, 10 that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, 11 and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Jesus set aside all His royal privileges for the sake of serving God and helping us – His actions on earth were driven by the truths of Heaven.

So I want to challenge you – are you following His leadership? Have you gotten off course by following your own desires? Is there any conflict in your life that could be reduced or completely wiped out by simply coming back in line with the direction He's headed?

It might not do anything about the enemies that surround you, or about the famine in the land, but what could it do for those you are closest too?

And, how might God want to use you if you were willing to be weird for Him? If instead of exercising all the rights and privileges of your position in the family, or in the company, you willingly, intentionally, set them aside for the sake of helping others? What would that look like as it played out in your life?

Think about that as we prepare to take communion this morning – to remember what Jesus gave to save us from sin. Just like these poor Jews, the Bible says if you are slave to sin there is no way to redeem yourself – “the wages of sin is death” - you're stuck, and there's no earning your way out - you have to be ransomed, and that's what Jesus did “the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus.” He paid our debts in full and gave us back our lives, not only for this life, but for all of eternity – so let's celebrate that.

Communion is for all Christians to share and remember what Christ has done, if you're not a Christian, you can become one today – if God has been working on your heart lately and you want to respond to Him now pray, and then receive the elements as they pass by.