

Witnesses Against Them: Nehemiah 5

Nehemiah 5:1-19 And there was a great cry of the people and of their wives against their brethren the Jews. {2} For there were that said, We, our sons, and our daughters, are many: therefore we take up corn for them, that we may eat, and live.

Pastor Gene Getz writes¹:

"Up to this point Nehemiah's challenges as a spiritual leader focused primarily on those outside of Judah. But before the walls were finally rebuilt, he encountered the most difficult and intense kind of problem almost every spiritual leader has to face sometime—problems within."

How terrible it is when God's people begin to war from within! The Church always expects confrontation from the outside - but we never expect that which is worst - fire from the inside. What caused this problem? We read:

{3} Some also there were that said, **We have mortgaged our lands, vineyards, and houses, that we might buy corn, because of the dearth.** {4} There were also that said, **We have borrowed money for the king's tribute, and that upon our lands and vineyards.**

The Jews were taking advantage of one another. Rather than work together to accomplish the **Kingdom work of God** some of the richer Jews were loaning money to the poorer Jews amounting to **the hundredth per month, or twelve percent annually**. This is totally against the teachings of God's Word. You see, when Israel came into the Promised Land God gave every tribe (except for the Levites²) a portion of the land. Every Jew was a landowner, and could sell or buy land as he desired. However, *no Jew was allowed - according to Law - to charge interest to a fellow Jew*. God said:

Exodus 22:25 **If thou lend money to any of my people that is poor by thee, thou shalt not be to him as a usurer (loan agent who charges interest), neither shalt thou lay upon him usury.**

Leviticus 25:35-43 **And if thy brother be waxen poor, and fallen in decay with thee; then thou shalt relieve him: yea, though he be a**

1. What is the worst trouble that can strike God's people?

2. What were the rich Jews guilty of doing to the poor Jews? _____

3. Why do you think God forbade the Jews from *usury* or *loaning money to make money* from one another?

(see Exodus 22:25; Leviticus 25:35-43; Numbers 18:20-21)

4. What group of Jews were *not* given land when they entered Canaan? Why not?

¹ Nehemiah, Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament page 683

² The Levites' portion was the Lord. Numbers 18:20-21 And the LORD spoke unto Aaron, Thou shalt have no inheritance in their land, neither shalt thou have any part among them: I am thy part and thine inheritance among the children of Israel. {21} And, behold, I have given the children of Levi all the tenth in Israel for an inheritance, for their service which they serve, even the service of the tabernacle of the congregation.

stranger, or a sojourner; that he may live with thee. {36} **Take thou no usury³ of him, or increase: but fear thy God; that thy brother may live with thee. {37} Thou shalt not give him thy money upon usury, nor lend him thy victuals for increase. {38} I am the LORD your God, which brought you forth out of the land of Egypt, to give you the land of Canaan, and to be your God. {39}** And if thy brother that dwelleth by thee be waxen poor, and be sold unto thee; **thou shalt not compel him to serve as a bondservant: {40} But as a hired servant, and as a sojourner, he shall be with thee, and shall serve thee unto the year of jubilee: {41} And then shall he depart from thee, both he and his children with him, and shall return unto his own family, and unto the possession of his fathers shall he return. {42} For they are my servants, which I brought forth out of the land of Egypt: they shall not be sold as bondmen. {43} Thou shalt not rule over him with rigor; but shalt fear thy God.**

There is to be a dignity and a love between people of the same family, and the Jews were all rescued from Egypt by the same loving God. For this reason God demanded that every Jew treat his fellow Jew with the utmost of respect. Jews were not supposed to charge interest to fellow Jews. If money or land was borrowed it returned to its rightful owner on the year of Jubilee - the fiftieth year. A Jew could willingly be a servant to another Jew, but could not be forced into slavery. If a Jew sold himself into slavery then, on the seventh year, his freedom was returned. This is not what was happening. Read on ...

{5} Yet now our flesh is as the flesh of our brethren, our children as their children: and, lo, **we bring into bondage our sons and our daughters to be servants, and some of our daughters are brought unto bondage already: neither is it in our power to redeem them; for other men have our lands and vineyards.**

How sad that is! The poorer Jews were forced to **bring into bondage their sons and daughters**, and they **had no power to redeem them**. The Israelite was a farmer, and their means on making profit was the land that God gave them. Because **other men had their lands and vineyards** they could not raise the funds necessary to redeem their children. A people that should be joyously unified because God joyously unified them found themselves in bondage - and in despair.

What was Nehemiah's response?

5. God's people should _____ and _____ one another.

3 נֶשֶׁק, neshek, neh'-shek, From H5391; interest on a debt: - usury.

{6} And I was **very angry**⁴ **when I heard their cry** and these words. {7} Then I consulted with myself, and I rebuked the nobles, and the rulers, and said unto them, Ye exact usury, every one of his brother. And I set a great assembly against them. {8} And I said unto them, We after our ability have redeemed our brethren the Jews, which were sold unto the heathen; and will ye even sell your brethren? or shall they be sold unto us? Then held they their peace, and found nothing to answer.

Nehemiah was *enraged*. Some of his Jewish brothers were bound in slavery to Gentile/ Babylonian owners, and Nehemiah paid their ransom in order to get them to Jerusalem to do this great work of God. Now that these workers are in Jerusalem working together on the wall rather than *share every man with his brother* some of the well to do Jews are putting their redeemed brethren *back into bondage*. What an awful thing!

Nehemiah said "**I set a great assembly against them**". He called the people together to witness against what these rich Jews were doing. People who were not guilty of *usury* were called to witness against these people to shame them, to cause them to repent, and to get them back on track doing the work of God.

{9} Also I said, It is not good that ye do: **ought ye not to walk in the fear of our God because of the reproach of the heathen our enemies?** {10} I likewise, and my brethren, and my servants, might exact of them money and corn: I pray you, **let us leave off this usury.** {11} **Restore, I pray you, to them, even this day, their lands, their vineyards, their oliveyards, and their houses, also the hundredth part of the money, and of the corn, the wine, and the oil, that ye exact of them.**

Nehemiah demanded that the guilty parties *cease and desist from loaning money at interest*, and demanded that the rich Jews **restore the livelihood that they had taken from their fellow Jews**. Notice what Nehemiah used as the reason for this. He said in **verse 9**:

"**...Ought ye not to walk in the fear of our God because of the reproach of the heathen our enemies?**"

The unbeliever is watching you. What do they see in your life, dear Christian? Do they see someone who loves God with all their heart, and loves his fellow man? Do they see an obedient believer? One day Jesus was asked the question, "What is the greatest commandment in

6. What was Nehemiah's response when he heard what the rich Jews were doing to their brethren? _____

What did Nehemiah do to rectify the situation? _____

7. When Nehemiah told the rich Jews to restore all they had taken from the poorer Jews, what was his argument?

(see Matthew 22:37-40; John 13:34-35)

4 מְאֹד, m'ôd, (pronounced *meh-ode'*) + חָרָא, chârâh, (pronounced *khaw-raw'*) = vehemently or exceedingly glowing/ enraged, overwrought.

the law?" Jesus replied:

Matthew 22:37-40 ... Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. {38} This is the first and great commandment. {39} And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. {40} On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.

Here is the all of true religion distilled down to its core. **Love God, Love one another.** The follower of Christ should be an example of love. Jesus even clarified this truth farther when He said:

John 13:34-35 A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another. {35} By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another.

You cannot be a disciple of Christ if you do not love. Christianity is not about keeping rituals - its about *love*. **Israel was a nation of slaves bound to Egypt when God, in His great love, freed them through Moses. The local Church was a nation of slaves bound to sin and this world when God, in His great love, freed us through Jesus Christ.** As Christ gave to you, so should you give to others. If you are truly born again then *you are not to demand usury from your brothers or your sisters*. Let's look at some practical application of this principle.

1. God has forgiven you much. You, in turn, must be willing to forgive your fellow believers much. Jesus explained this principle in a parable. He said:

Matthew 18:23-35 Therefore is the kingdom of heaven likened unto a certain king, which would take account of his servants. {24} And when he had begun to reckon, one was brought unto him, which owed him ten thousand talents. {25} But forasmuch as he had not to pay, his lord commanded him to be sold, and his wife, and children, and all that he had, and payment to be made. {26} The servant therefore fell down, and worshiped him, saying, Lord, have patience with me, and I will pay thee all. {27} Then the lord of that servant was moved with compassion and loosed him, and forgave him the debt. {28} But the same servant went out, and found one of his fellow servants, which owed him a hundred pence: and he laid hands on him, and took him by the throat, saying, Pay me that thou owest. {29} And his fellowservant fell down at his feet, and besought him, saying, Have patience with me, and I will pay thee all. {30} And he would not: but went and cast him into prison, till he should pay the debt. {31} So when his

8. God has _____ me much, therefore I must forgive my _____ much. (See **Matthew 18:23-35**)

fellow servants saw what was done, they were very sorry, and came and told unto their lord all that was done. {32} Then his lord, after that he had called him, said unto him, O thou wicked servant, I forgave thee all that debt, because thou desiredst me: {33} Shouldst not thou also have had compassion on thy fellow servant, even as I had pity on thee? {34} And his lord was wroth, and delivered him to the tormentors, till he should pay all that was due unto him. {35} So likewise shall my heavenly Father do also unto you, if ye from your hearts forgive not every one his brother their trespasses.

A servant owed a great Lord much. That Lord, in compassion, forgave the servant his debt. But following his release from debt the servant went out and found someone who owed him something. When the borrower (who owed him a whole lot less) could not pay the servant had him cast into prison. Jesus said "His Lord was very angry, and delivered him to the tormentors, till he could pay all that was due him. Likewise shall the Heavenly Father do to each of you if you do not forgive your brother their trespasses". We as Christians have been forgiven much. We offended Eternal God by our lifestyles, and even now walk in darkness when we should not. And yet God *for Christ's sake* loves us and forgives us. He expects us to love and forgive one another.

2. True Christians do not wish to harm their partners in the faith.

The way your treat your fellow Christian shows whether your are saved or not. The Apostle wrote:

1 John 4:20-21 If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar: for he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen? {21} And this commandment have we from him, That he who loveth God love his brother also.

If you say "I love God" then the Lord says it is *impossible* for you to carry and harbor hatred against fellow believers. The Bible tells us that:

Psalms 89:7 God is greatly to be feared in the assembly of the saints, and to be had in reverence of all them that are about him.

God's people love one another and love God.

3. True Christians are used of God to produce the Fruit of the Spirit. The Bible says that:

Galatians 5:22-26 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, {23} Meekness,

9. True Christians do not wish to _____

(see 1 John 4:20-21; Psalm 89:7)

10. True Christians are used of God to _____

(see Galatians 5:22-26; Galatians 5:19-21)

temperance: against such there is no law. {24} And they that are Christ's have crucified the flesh with the affections and lusts. {25} If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit. {26} Let us not be desirous of vain glory, provoking one another, envying one another.

It is contrary to the work of God in the Christian's life for believers to attack believers. Those who evidence the **works of the flesh**:

Galatians 5:19-21 Now the works of the flesh are manifest, which are these; adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness, {20} Idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, variance, emulations, wrath, strife, seditions, heresies, {21} Envyings, murders, drunkenness, revellings, and such like: of the which I tell you before, as I have also told you in time past, that they which do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God.

Shall **not inherit the Kingdom of God**. People who wallow in these sins are not of the Household of faith. And finally

4. True believers want to work together to advance God's Kingdom on the earth. Jesus told His disciples to pray, saying:

Matthew 6:9-10 After this manner therefore pray ye: Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. {10} Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven.

Christians want to advance God's Kingdom on the earth. They have a common goal, just as Nehemiah and his workers had a common goal.

Psalms 34:15-16 The eyes of the LORD are upon the righteous, and his ears are open unto their cry. {16} The face of the LORD is against them that do evil, to cut off the remembrance of them from the earth.

Woe be unto those who stand against the work of God! Those who have no love for their brothers and sisters in this Work may one day hear the Lord say:

Matthew 25:41-46 Then shall he say also unto them on the left hand, Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels: {42} For I was hungry, and ye gave me no meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me no drink: {43} I was a stranger, and ye took me not in: naked, and ye clothed me not: sick, and in prison, and ye visited me not. {44} Then shall they also answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee hungry, or athirst, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and did not

11. True believers want to work together to _____

(see Matthew 6:9-10; Psalm 34:15-16; Matthew 25:41-46)

minister unto thee? {45} Then shall he answer them, saying, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye did it not to one of the least of these, ye did it not to me. {46} And **these shall go away into everlasting punishment: but the righteous into life eternal.**

Rather than be involved in Kingdom work they were constant sources of strife in God's Church and in God's Israel. On that day of Judgment the Lord will separate the wheat from the chaff, and those who are evil shall go forth to **everlasting punishment - but the righteous into life eternal!**

{12} Then said they, We will restore them, and will require nothing of them; so will we do as thou sayest. Then I called the priests, and took an oath of them, that they should do according to this promise. {13} Also I shook my lap, and said, **So God shake out every man from his house, and from his labor, that performeth not this promise, even thus be he shaken out, and emptied. And all the congregation said, Amen, and praised the LORD. And the people did according to this promise.** {14} Moreover from the time that I was appointed to be their governor in the land of Judah, from the twentieth year even unto the two and thirtieth year of Artaxerxes the king, that is, twelve years, I and my brethren have not eaten the bread of the governor. {15} But the former governors that had been before me were chargeable unto the people, and had taken of them bread and wine, beside forty shekels of silver; yea, even their servants bore rule over the people: but so did not I, because of the fear of God. {16} Yea, also I continued in the work of this wall, neither bought we any land: and all my servants were gathered thither unto the work. {17} Moreover there were at my table a hundred and fifty of the Jews and rulers, beside those that came unto us from among the heathen that are about us. {18} Now that which was prepared for me daily was one ox and six choice sheep; also fowls were prepared for me, and once in ten days store of all sorts of wine: yet for all this required not I the bread of the governor, because the bondage was heavy upon this people. {19} Think upon me, my God, for good, according to all that I have done for this people.

12. Those who are incorrigible, and stand against Kingdom work, were to be

What do you think Nehemiah meant by that? _____