

**“No More Poor”**  
**Nehemiah 5**  
**August 30, 2020**

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**INTRODUCTION:**

Nehemiah was a very busy man. Not only did he oversee the work on the wall, but he also served as governor of this entire region (5:14). In today’s passage, a report comes to Nehemiah that causes him to drop everything in his busy schedule and attend to this urgent matter. The urgency is a new form of opposition to the work of God. Prior to this, the opposition to the work had been from the outside, from Sanballat, Tobiah and others. But here, the opposition is a much more serious matter because it arises from within. What was this urgent matter that led Nehemiah to drop everything else? There is dire poverty caused in part by injustice within the community itself.

The title for today’s sermon comes from Deuteronomy 15:4, where God promises, **“But there will be no poor among you.”** But doesn’t that contradict what Jesus said in John 12:8: **“For the poor you always have with you”**? Let’s explore this topic of poverty from Nehemiah 5 and see if the apparent contradiction might be resolved.

**I. The Causes of Poverty**

The causes of poverty are complex and varied, a complexity reflected in the Bible. There is not a single cause of poverty, but multiple causes that amplify one another. Two such causes are spoken of in Nehemiah 5. The first one is natural calamity, in this case a famine that was probably caused by drought. A famine doesn’t mean that there is no food, only that there is less of it, which results in rising prices for existing food. Those with the least money and the greatest number of mouths to feed will feel the pressure first. That is the origin of the outcry described in the first two verses. **“With our sons and daughters, we are many. So let us get grain, that we may eat and keep alive.”**

The financial pressure apparently was increased by high taxes. **“We have borrowed money for the king’s tax on our fields and our vineyards”** (v. 4). Now there is no money left, not even for something as essential as food. So this was a matter of life and death. What do you do when you have no money and are facing starvation if you can’t get any money? You borrow money, and that is where injustice comes in, the second cause of poverty in our text. Notice that the outcry of verse 1 is said to be **“against their Jewish brothers.”** What was happening here? What was the injustice?

When money was borrowed, they were required to give a pledge for its repayment. Today, we refer to such a pledge as collateral on the loan. So they pledged their fields, vineyards and houses as collateral. There is no injustice in requiring such a pledge, and the Bible does not forbid a lender from doing this. As we read on, we discover that there were two injustices in the way these loans were made.

The first injustice was the charging of interest. The Old Testament made a distinction between fellow Israelites and foreigners in this area of charging interest, allowing interest to be charged on loans to foreigners, but not to fellow Jews (Deut. 23:19-20). So Nehemiah commands them in verse 10, **“Let us abandon this exacting of interest.”** It is generally understood that the prohibition against charging interest applied only to situations of basic necessity and not to what we would classify today as business loans. So it would be wrong to charge interest to someone to buy food, but not to buy another pair of oxen to be more productive in one’s farming.

The second injustice was in seizing the mortgaged fields, vineyards and houses, which had the effect of depriving these people of the only source of income they had. With their source of income cut off, they had only one remaining option, and that was to sell themselves or their children into slavery. That is in fact what they did. **“Yet we are forcing our sons and our daughters to be slaves, and some of our daughters have already been enslaved”** (v. 5). Some commentators think that this explicit mention of daughters implies that they were being forced to trade sexual favors for leniency on the loans.

There was one more injustice Nehemiah became aware of and speaks of in verse 8. **“We, as far as we are able, have bought back our Jewish brothers who have been sold to the nations, but you even sell your brothers that they may be sold to us!”** Nehemiah and others were completely opposed to the selling of Jewish men and women as slave to Gentiles. So they began to buy them back from their Gentile owners, perhaps using public funds to do so. This group of unjust Jews saw this as an opportunity to make some money. They apparently colluded with their Gentile neighbors, arranging to buy Hebrew slaves, then agreeing to sell them to their Gentile neighbors with the assurance that they would then be bought back by Nehemiah. Undoubtedly, all parties made a profit in the transactions.

This touches one of the central biblical teachings about justice. In his commentary on the book of Proverbs, Bruce Waltke summarizes what it teaches about being righteous or just. “The righteous are willing to disadvantage themselves to advantage the community; the wicked are willing to disadvantage the community to advantage themselves.” The ones Nehemiah rebukes here have obviously been disadvantaging the community in order to enrich themselves. They are guilty of an injustice.

## II. The Church's Response to Poverty

What would Nehemiah have them do to right these wrongs? This brings up the bigger question of what God requires of us in this effort of addressing poverty and pursuing justice. The first and most obvious thing is to stop their unjust practices. They are to stop charging interest on the loans, return the interest already collected, and return the collateral they had been keeping. This return of the collateral would allow these poor borrowers to be able to work again and eventually return to a sustainable living.

What does it mean to act justly in addressing poverty? That is a big topic, but I think we can see three principles in our passage. The three are equity, proximity, and priority. Let's start with equity. Many have pointed out how the Bible requires equity, not equality. Equality means that everyone has equal resources. Equity means that everyone has equal opportunity. The fact is that there will always be inequalities of money. The Bible says, **"The Lord makes poor and makes rich"** (1 Sam. 2:7). As Christians, our efforts should be aimed at equity, not equality. That's why Nehemiah insists on the return of the fields, vineyards, olive orchards and houses to the poor. Having access to these will allow them the opportunity to work their way out of severe poverty.

The second biblical principle, proximity, is one that is seen here in the priority given to helping their fellow Jews. Proximity means that the closer the need, the greater the responsibility we have to address the need. By "proximity," I don't mean just geographical proximity. It can also involve relational proximity. It is clear in our text that Nehemiah gave priority to helping fellow Jews. And he saw the lack of doing so as a threat to the glory of God because it would lead to the taunts of the nations (v. 9).

This emphasis on proximity in addressing poverty is found throughout the Bible. For example, Galatians 6:10 says, **"So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith."** Priority is to be given to fellow believers. An even higher priority than fellow believers are family members. In 1 Timothy 5, Paul is giving instruction on how the church should help needy widows. He says that the first obligation for helping a widow belongs to her own family. He even adds the strong statement that **"if anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for members of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever"** (1 Timothy 5:8). The church should step in only when the family is unable or unwilling to do so. Two well-known New Testament passages that urge ministry to the poor show this same principle of proximity. In the story of the rich man and Lazarus, found in Luke 16, the rich man was in close proximity to the poor man, Lazarus. He failed to help a man who was right at his doorstep. Or consider the parable of the Good Samaritan. There was proximity in the fact that the priest and the Levite came upon him

and passed him by. In the sovereignty of God, they came close to a man in need and hardened their hearts against him.

This principle of proximity is a big help to us as we sort through the many requests for assistance pressed upon us almost every day. In our information age, we are made aware of significant and genuine needs all the time. Because we have only so much time and money, it is easy to get so overwhelmed by all this that we are paralyzed and do nothing. This is where it is helpful to prioritize. God is not asking you to solve all these problems. He is asking you to address the ones closest to you. So I have a greater obligation to help my own mother than I do to help your mother. And I have a greater obligation to help your mother than the mother of someone outside the church. I think this is what helps us resolve the apparent contradiction mentioned earlier. When the Bible says, **“But there will be no poor among you”** (Dt. 15:4), it is speaking about God’s people. We should make sure that the basic needs of those within our church family are met. That is an achievable goal. And when Jesus says that we will always have the poor among us, he is teaching that poverty will not be able to be eliminated in the world as a whole until his return.

One final principle about acting justly to address poverty is that it should be a priority for us. It was a higher priority for Nehemiah than building the wall. As Matthew Henry points out, even if “Jerusalem’s walls [were] ever so high, so thick, so strong, the city could not be safe while such abuses as these were tolerated.”

### **III. Choosing Poverty**

One of the challenges in addressing poverty is that it almost always requires those with resources to give away some of those resources. In the last paragraph of our chapter, Nehemiah tells us of his personal practice regarding this. As governor, he had the right to collect taxes to provide for the needs of the governor’s staff. Though former governors had done so, Nehemiah decided not to collect these taxes, at considerable cost to himself. He tells us what this required. His own staff consisted of 150 men. In addition, there were always dignitaries and diplomats from other regions who had to be housed and fed. Nehemiah was not unaware of the cost he bore in providing for this out of his own funds. **“Now what 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”** (v. 18). That meant 365 oxen and 2,190 sheep every year. Obviously, Nehemiah was a wealthy man. But he was a wealthy man willing to be made less wealthy to a significant degree by the needs of others.

What motivated Nehemiah’s generosity? He tells us in verse 15 that it was the fear of the Lord. He took seriously everything God said. God’s words meant something to Nehemiah. He must have been aware of Proverbs 14:31 –

**“Whoever oppresses a poor man insults his Maker, but he who is generous to the needy honors him.”** Perhaps he was also aware of verse 21 earlier in that chapter: **“Blessed is he who is generous to the poor.”**

This helps us understand his concluding prayer. **“Remember for my good, O my God, all that I have done for this people.”** This is not an expression of works righteousness, but one of trust in God. He wasn’t saying, “Now that I’ve been so generous, God, you owe me.” He was simply praying the truth of another proverb. **“Whoever is generous to the poor lends to the Lord, and he will repay him for his deed”** (19:17). Nehemiah is reflecting a biblical principle that is throughout the Bible. The principle is that God does reward faithful generosity. Some unscrupulous and heretical preachers abuse this principle for selfish gain. They teach that you can get rich by giving to them. That is not what this means. Nehemiah prayed, “Remember for my *good*.” God knows how to bring good to us. Many times, the good he brings to those who are generous is not more money, but blessings far better than that. He brings such blessings as joy, gratitude, contentment, and rich relationships, blessings that no amount of money can buy.

Sometimes he does bring money as one of these blessings, when he knows that to do so won’t bring harm to our souls. My uncle and grandfather owned the only full-service grocery store in a town in the far northeastern corner of Alabama. For years, they would sell people groceries on credit, charging no interest as long as the bill was paid within thirty days. They didn’t want people to go hungry just because of a temporary cash-flow problem. Most people paid on time, but, of course, there were a few who never paid. When my uncle sold the store, he took a job as the chief loan officer of the local bank. All of a sudden, those coming to him for a loan who had not paid the money they owed him were more motivated to pay. God provided in a way he could not have foreseen. He was simply trying to help people.

## **CONCLUSION:**

Nehemiah reminds us of Jesus. He was far richer than Nehemiah, possessing all the riches of heaven and earth. Yet he gave it all up and lived the life of a poor man. Here’s what the apostle Paul taught about that. **“For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich”** (2 Cor. 8:9). In this story of Nehemiah 5, we are the poor ones sold into poverty. But now, through the generous sacrifice of our Lord Jesus, we are brought to dine with him at his table. This reminds us that there is something worse than death, and there is something better than the alleviation of poverty. Jesus provides both deliverance from the judgment that is worse than death and the full life that is better than the alleviation of poverty.

**Small Group Discussion Questions**  
**Nehemiah 5**

1. Have your views on poverty changed any over the years? If so, how?
2. Two causes of poverty are mentioned in Nehemiah 5: natural calamity and injustice. What are some examples of each of those in our day? Can you think of other causes of poverty?
3. Have you ever experienced a time of poverty in your life? What was that like?
4. Three elements of justice in addressing poverty can be seen in Nehemiah 5: equity, proximity and priority. Equity means fairness, which describes equal opportunity rather than equal levels of wealth. How might we apply that in our day?
5. Proximity means that the Bible calls us to care first for those closest to us, either relationally or geographically. How might we apply that in our day?
6. Nehemiah was obviously a very wealthy man who gave generously of his wealth to help the poor in the land. He is a type of Christ, who had all the wealth of heaven and earth, but who left it for our sakes. Do you ever feel guilty about having wealth? Is it a true guilt or a false guilt?
7. Is there anything in your life that might make your children or those closest to you think that money is too important in your life?
8. Reflect on Nehemiah's closing prayer: "Remember for my good, O my God, all that I have done for this people" (v. 19). Have you seen God bring good to you as a reward for generosity? Is there anything wrong with having that as our motivation?