

Ezra and Nehemiah

Violating the Spirit of the Law

Lesson #5 for November 2, 2019

Scriptures: Nehemiah 5; Exodus 21:2-7; Micah 6:8; Deuteronomy 23:21-23.

1. This lesson is based on the story recorded in Nehemiah 5. Have you ever been tempted to do something that was legal but not, strictly speaking, honest? Or, not ethical?
2. Almost from the beginning of time, humans have struggled with the question of wealth, poverty, and the gap between the rich and the poor. Jesus stated, “You have the poor with you always.” (Matthew 26:11, *NKJV**) Does that give those who have more money or power the right to abuse them? That surely would not be a Christian thing to do.
3. Nehemiah 5, the main subject of our lesson for this week, follows a very clear structure:
 - I. People’s troubles and complaints and Nehemiah’s decisive actions (*Neh. 5:1-13*)
 1. People’s reasons for grievance (*Neh. 5:1-5*)
 2. Nehemiah’s anger and rebuke (*Neh. 5:6-7a*)
 3. Nehemiah’s call for a public assembly, and his charge against leaders (*Neh. 5:7b-8a*)
 4. Leaders’ silence (*Neh. 5:8b*)
 5. Nehemiah’s admonishment of leaders to walk in the fear of God and to return properties to people and repair the losses (*Neh. 5:9-11*)
 6. Leaders’ positive response (*Neh. 5:12a*)
 7. Oath of leaders, Nehemiah’s symbolic action, and people’s grateful praises to the Lord (*Neh. 5:12b-13*)
 - II. Nehemiah’s 12 years of diligent and unselfish ministry (*Neh. 5:14-16*)
 - III. Nehemiah’s daily generous supply for numerous people and visitors (*Neh. 5:17, 18*)
 - IV. Nehemiah’s prayer for mercy (*Neh. 5:19*)—*Adult Teachers Sabbath School Bible Study Guide** 65-66. [Italic type is in the source.][‡]
4. This story occurred in the middle of a great national effort to rebuild the walls around Jerusalem. It would seem that everyone was working together, and things were going well. But, that was not the whole picture.

Nehemiah 5:1-5: ⁵ Some time later many of the people, both men and women, began to complain against their fellow-Jews. ²Some said, “We have large families, we need corn to keep us alive.”

³ Others said, “We have had to mortgage our fields and vineyards and houses to get enough corn to keep us from starving.”

⁴ Still others said, “We had to borrow money to pay the royal tax on our fields and vineyards. ⁵We are of the same race as our fellow-Jews. Aren’t our children just as good as theirs? But we have to make slaves of our children. Some of our daughters have already been sold as slaves. We are helpless because our fields and vineyards have been taken away from

us.”—American Bible Society. (1992). *The Holy Bible: The Good News Translation** (2nd ed., Nehemiah 5:1–5). New York: American Bible Society.

5. Why do you suppose this issue came up at that time? Why had it apparently not been aired in public earlier? Is it possible that those who were being misused—even abused by others more powerful or rich—had been afraid to speak out until they saw that Nehemiah was the kind of leader who would stand up for justice?
6. While we do not know all the details of what was going on in the world at that point in time, here is a hint:

It appears that the main culprit of the trouble was a famine and tax payments that caused the poorer families to seek help from their neighbors. The Persian government required a tax of 350 talents of silver annually from the province of Judah (see *note on Neh. 5:1-5 in the Andrews Study Bible, p. 598*). If a person couldn't pay the designated portion of the mandatory tax, the family would usually mortgage their property or borrow money first. If, however, they couldn't earn the money the next year, then they had to do something about the debt they now owed. Usually debt slavery was the next option. They had already lost their land, and now they had to send someone from the family, usually children, to be in the service of the creditor in order to work off the debt.—*Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide** for Sunday, October 27. [Italic type is in the source.][‡]

7. While it is true that people often get themselves into financial difficulties or other problems because of their own behavior, there are also times when things or events such as famine and taxes occur that are completely out of their control and can create serious problems.
8. In our day, the very idea of slavery seems repulsive. But, in ancient times, debt-slavery was a fairly common occurrence and provided a way for someone to deal with a debt that they could not otherwise pay. But, remember that every 7 years, debts were to be forgiven.

Nehemiah 5:6-8: ⁶ When I heard their complaints, I was angry ⁷and decided to act. I denounced the leaders and officials of the people and told them, “You are oppressing your fellow-Jews!”

I called a public assembly to deal with the problem ⁸and said, “As far as we have been able, we have been buying back our Jewish relatives who had to sell themselves to foreigners. Now you are forcing your own relatives to sell themselves to you, their own people!” **The leaders were silent and could find nothing to say.**—*Good News Bible.*^{*†}

9. What guidance had God given to the children of Israel about slavery of other Hebrews?

Exodus 21:2-7: ² “If you buy a Hebrew slave, he shall serve you for six years. In the seventh year he is to be set free without having to pay anything. ³If he was unmarried when he became your slave, he is not to take a wife with him when he leaves; but if he was married when he became your slave, he may take his wife with him. ⁴If his master gave him a wife and she bore him sons or daughters, the woman and her children belong to the master, and the man shall leave by himself. ⁵But if the slave declares that he loves his master, his wife, and his children and does not want to be set free, ⁶then his master shall take him to the place of worship. There he is to make him stand against the door or the door-post and pierce his ear. Then he will be his slave for life.

⁷ **“If a man sells his daughter as a slave, she is not to be set free, as male slaves are.”**—*Good News Bible*.^{*†}

10. Unfortunately, in the ancient world, the custom of selling oneself or a family member and even a child into slavery for a period of time to pay for debts was fairly common. In His instructions in Exodus, God was putting a limitation on how lengthy that slavery could be.
11. Another part of the problem that was affecting the Jewish people in Nehemiah’s day was the problem of lending for interest.

Although lending was permitted by the law, charging interest was not (*for biblical regulations against usury, see Exod. 22:25-27; Lev. 25:36, 37; Deut. 23:19, 20*). And yet, the interest that the lenders charged was small compared to what the nations around them charged. They were asked to pay 1 percent every month. **Mesopotamian texts from the seventh century show interest of 50 percent for silver and 100 percent for grain annually. Thus, the 12 percent interest per year was low compared to the practice of the countries in Mesopotamia.** But overall, according to God’s Word, the only thing the creditors did wrong was to charge interest (*Neh. 5:10*), and surprisingly, the people didn’t even mention that in their grievance. Everything else was within the social norm as well as within the provisions of the law. So, why is Nehemiah “very angry”? Remarkably, he doesn’t act right away but gives the matter some serious thought.—*Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide*^{*} for Monday, October 28.[†] [Italic type is in the source.][‡]

12. These commands make it very clear that while it was quite acceptable to lend money to a fellow Jew who was in need or in trouble, they were not allowed to charge interest for what they had lent.
13. Unfortunately, such oppressive measures often happen during times of economic hardship. That makes a bad situation worse.

Micah 6:6-8: ⁶ What shall I bring to the LORD, the God of heaven, when I come to worship him? Shall I bring the best calves to burn as offerings to him? ⁷ Will the LORD be pleased if I bring him thousands of sheep or endless streams of olive oil? Shall I offer him my firstborn child to pay for my sins? ⁸ **No, the LORD has told us what is good. What he requires of us is this: to do what is just, to show constant love, and to live in humble fellowship with our God.**—*Good News Bible*.^{*†}

14. These verses make it very clear that **true followers of God are to do the right thing even if it is not required by the law.** How many times did Jesus disobey the law?

Nehemiah 5:9-12: ⁹ Then I said, “What you are doing is wrong! You ought to obey God and do what’s right. Then you would not give our enemies, the Gentiles, any reason to ridicule us. ¹⁰ I have let the people borrow money and corn from me, and so have my companions and the people who work for me. Now let’s give up all our claims to repayment. ¹¹ Cancel all the debts they owe you—money or corn or wine or olive oil. And give them back their fields, vineyards, olive groves, and houses at once!”

¹² The leaders replied, “We’ll do as you say. We’ll give the property back and not try to collect the debts.”

I called in the priests and made the leaders swear in front of them to keep the promise they had just made.—*Good News Bible*.*

15. After reproaching the leaders and the rich people among them, Nehemiah could have felt like he had done his duty. But, he did not. He wanted to make sure that the problem was rectified. So, he called a general assembly. We do not know how many people actually came; but, Nehemiah was counting on the presence of a large group of people to add weight to his demands that the problem be fixed. Clearly, in this case, it worked. The leaders replied, “We will do as you say.” How did those people get that way?
16. As we read through Nehemiah 5, it becomes apparent that some Jews had even been sold as slaves to foreigners. Fortunately, Nehemiah, along with others, had gone to some effort to buy back all the Jews who were enslaved to foreigners. This was a great effort and, obviously, was according to God’s plan. Then Nehemiah said: “How can you buy Jews back from foreigners only to enslave them or others like them yourselves!”
17. Fortunately, Nehemiah, himself, had been setting an excellent example by lending people money and grain and not charging interest. He had also helped to buy back Jews who were enslaved by foreigners. In light of all this, it would have been very difficult for those leaders abusing their fellow Hebrews not to comply with Nehemiah’s demands. Example leads!
18. Do situations like this discussed in Nehemiah 5 happen today? Have we done wrong to anyone else, even accidentally? Have we always done our best to make it right?
19. Nehemiah took another step in his effort to make sure everything was done correctly.

Nehemiah 5:12-13: ¹² The leaders replied, “We’ll do as you say. We’ll give the property back and not try to collect the debts.”

I called in the priests and made the leaders swear in front of them to keep the promise they had just made. ¹³Then I took off the sash I was wearing round my waist and shook it out. “This is how God will shake any of you who don’t keep your promise,” I said. “God will take away your houses and everything you own, and will leave you with nothing.”

Everyone who was present said, “Amen!” and praised the LORD. And the leaders kept their promise.—*Good News Bible*.*

20. He called together the priests and made the leaders swear in front of them. Obviously, Nehemiah was taking every step possible to make sure that all those who had done wrong corrected the error.
21. But, why did he pronounce a curse? What does that mean? Once again, there were very clear Old Testament instructions about how vows were supposed to be used. See Numbers 30:2; Deuteronomy 23:21-23; Ecclesiastes 5:4-5; Leviticus 19:12; Genesis 26:31.
22. In the New Testament, Jesus told us not to use very many oaths. He said that *yes* should mean *yes*, and *no* should mean *no*. That would be wonderful if everyone did it. But, how often do our words disagree with our behavior? How many people, like Gandhi, have been turned off from Christianity by behaviors which they do not think are Christian?
23. We as humans are distinct in the animal world because of our ability to speak. Speech is a very powerful gift that God has given us. Every word we utter should be uttered with care and concern for others and the impact that those words might have. Are we always careful in what we say? And the way we say it? And when we say it?

Nehemiah 5:14-19: ¹⁴ During all the twelve years that I was governor of the land of

Judah, from the twentieth year that Artaxerxes was emperor until his 32nd year, neither my relatives nor I ate the food I was entitled to have as governor. ¹⁵Every governor who had been in office before me had been a burden to the people and had demanded forty silver coins a day for food and wine. Even their servants had oppressed the people. But I acted differently, because I honoured God. ¹⁶I put all my energy into rebuilding the wall and did not acquire any property. Everyone who worked for me joined in the rebuilding. ¹⁷I regularly fed at my table 150 of the Jewish people and their leaders, besides all the people who came to me from the surrounding nations. ¹⁸**Every day I served one ox, six of the best sheep, and many chickens, and every ten days I provided a fresh supply of wine. But I knew what heavy burdens the people had to bear, so I did not claim the allowance that the governor is entitled to.**

¹⁹ I pray you, O God, remember to my credit everything that I have done for this people.—*Good News Bible*.*†

Who prepared all that food?

24. Nehemiah served as governor of Judea for 12 years. Considering what it says in verse 14, it is likely that these verses were penned after he had returned to his job as wine taster for the emperor or even after he returned later for a second term as governor.
25. Considering the funds Nehemiah needed to provide to regularly feed at his table 150 of the Jewish people and their leaders and noting what that must have cost him, it is suggested that he must have been very wealthy. Did he accumulate all that wealth from the time he was working as a wine steward? Apparently, he did not demand the normal taxes that a governor was allowed to collect. Perhaps, he had other people working for him who helped to support this heavy expense. The prophet Malachi served about this same time.
26. Nehemiah was not the first one to go beyond the legal requirements and return to the poor and needy what was ethically right. Consider the story of Abraham after Lot and others from the cities in the Jordan valley were captured and taken prisoner along with all their wealth by their enemies from Mesopotamia. (See Genesis 14.) Abraham insisted that, as far as possible, all the recaptured goods should be returned to their original owners.
27. Clearly, Nehemiah like Abraham before him put the Lord and the Lord's work before his own personal gain or advantage. Abraham used his 318 warriors to conquer the enemies.
28. Read Philippians 2:3-8. With the example of Jesus before us, how could we ever abuse others, especially at a time when they are hurting financially?

As Nehemiah heard of this cruel oppression, his soul was filled with indignation. "I was very angry," he says, "when I heard their cry and these words." He saw that if he succeeded in breaking up the oppressive custom of exaction he must take a decided stand for justice. With characteristic energy and determination he went to work to bring relief to his brethren.—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings** 648.2.

Jesus proceeded to lay down a principle that would make oath taking needless. He teaches that the exact truth should be the law of speech. "Let your speech be, Yea, yea; Nay, nay: and whatsoever is more than these is of the evil one." R.V.

These words condemn all those meaningless phrases and expletives

that border on profanity. They condemn the deceptive compliments, the evasion of truth, the flattering phrases, the exaggerations, the misrepresentations in trade, that are current in society and in the business world. They teach that no one who tries to appear what he is not, or whose words do not convey the real sentiment of his heart, can be called truthful.—Ellen G. White, *Thoughts From the Mount of Blessing** 67.3-68.1.†

29. What we need to remember in all of this is that selfishness is the essence of Satan's kingdom. He thinks of no one but himself. How often do we follow his example?
30. Many of the prophets of the Old Testament spoke out against injustice. For example, consider **Isaiah 58:3-12**.
31. Have you ever wanted to speak up on behalf of someone who was suffering injustice, but you were afraid to do so because in doing so you would have to speak against those in positions or wealth or prestige?
32. One of the challenges of this lesson is understanding human anger. Nehemiah was very angry when he found out what was happening. Moses had been very angry when he realized the people were dancing around and worshiping the golden calf. (Exodus 32:19,22).
33. But, God's *anger* is mentioned a number of times in Scripture as well: For example, see Exodus 4:14; Exodus 32:10-11; and Numbers 11:1,10,33.
34. Does God ever lose His temper? Are His emotions ever out of control? Surely, every Christian would have to answer, "No" to these questions. So, what are we talking about? For a more detailed analysis of *God's wrath* as described throughout Scripture, see our handout. Go to www.theox.org, open the Teachers Guides section, then go to General Topics, and look for "God's Wrath or Anger as Described in the Book of Judges and Other Books in the Bible." Or, go directly using the following URL:
https://www.theox.org/images/uploads/bbk/KHart_BTGG_PDF_Gnrl_Gods_Wrath_or_Anger_16.pdf
35. But, Nehemiah did not act rashly. He carefully thought through the issues and "pondered in his heart" what should be done.
36. Could it be true that indifference against evil is one of the worst sins. God had spelled out very clearly earlier in their history how He expected the Hebrew people to treat widows and orphans and even the foreigners living among them. See Deuteronomy 10:18; 14:29; 24:19; 27:19; compare Zechariah 7:10.
37. In this chapter Nehemiah clearly practiced the Christian principles as expressed in Mark 10:43-44. Are we following Jesus's example?
38. Can you think of a time in your life when you had to do something very challenging or distasteful in order to properly take care of your family or loved ones? What could we do for the people in our area to help the poor, marginalized, or hurting? Are there injustices being done in your home? At work? At school? Or, among your friends?

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