

Nehemiah 5

Verses 1- 5

Now there was a great outcry of the people and of their wives against their Jewish brothers. ² For there were those who said, “We, our sons, and our daughters are many; therefore let’s get grain so that we may eat and live.” ³ And there were *others* who said, “We are mortgaging our fields, our vineyards, and our houses so that we might get grain because of the famine.” ⁴ There also were those who said, “We have borrowed money for the king’s tax *on* our fields and our vineyards.” ⁵ And now our flesh is like the flesh of our brothers, our children like their children. Yet behold, we are forcing our sons and our daughters to be slaves, and some of our daughters are forced into bondage *already*, and we are helpless because our fields and vineyards belong to others.”

Now there was a great outcry of the people and of their wives against their Jewish brothers.

The problem here is not foreign adversaries but fellow Jews. The nobles and the leading people were taking advantage of the poor to a degree that indicates they had no concept of the Law governing how fellow Jews were to treat each other.

² For there were those who said, “We, our sons, and our daughters are many; therefore let’s get grain so that we may eat and live.”

1. Some families that could not afford enough food to feed their families.

³ And there were *others* who said, “We are mortgaging our fields, our vineyards, and our houses so that we might get grain because of the famine.”

2. There were some Jews who had been compelled to mortgage their properties.

⁴ There also were those who said, “We have borrowed money for the king’s tax on our fields and our vineyards.”

3. Those that had to borrow money at to meet the Persian king's property taxes

⁵ And now our flesh is like the flesh of our brothers, our children like their children. Yet behold, we are forcing our sons and our daughters to be slaves, and some of our daughters are forced into bondage *already*, and we are helpless because our fields and vineyards belong to others.”

The fields and vineyards of some had already been mortgaged so what they produced went to the lenders. The only option left for the poor was to sell their sons and daughters as servants.

Taking advantage of the poor is always wrong but doing it during hard times, the famine, adds to ones guilt.

Verses 6 - 8

⁶ Then I was very angry when I heard their outcry and these words. ⁷ So I thought it over and contended with the nobles and the leading people, and said to them, “You are lending at interest, each to his brother!” Therefore, I held a great assembly against them. ⁸ And I said to them, “We, according to our ability, have redeemed our Jewish brothers who were sold to the nations; now would you even sell your brothers that they may be sold to us?” Then they were silent and could not find a word *to say*.

⁷ So I thought it over and contended with the nobles and the leading people, and said to them, “You are lending at interest, each to his brother!” Therefore, I held a great assembly against them.

Nehemiah was angry, but wisely counted to 10 before he spoke. By taking time to think about how he should handle the problem he avoided alienating the rulers and nobles who needed to change their ways.

This was a violation of God's law.

See Exodus 22:25

²⁵ **“If you lend money to My people, to the poor among you, you are not to act as a creditor to him; you shall not charge him interest.**

Were the nobles and leading people ignorant of the law or did they know the law but decided to ignore it? In either case their hardness of heart had very real consequences for the poor in the land.

⁸ And I said to them, “We, according to our ability, have redeemed our Jewish brothers who were sold to the nations; now would you even sell your brothers that they may be sold to us?” Then they were silent and could not find a word to say.

When Jewish slaves were offered for sale in Gentile markets other Jews would pay the ransom price and give them their liberty. But these nobles and rulers were selling their fellow Jews to gentile masters thinking other Jews (those who keep the law and had a heart) would buy them back. This was so offensive it's surprising that Nehemiah could contain his anger.

Nehemiah prevented any public opposition by the rulers and nobles by confronting them before a general assembly of the whole population. This was very clever on his part.

Verses 9 -13

⁹ So I said, “The thing which you are doing is not good; should you not walk in the fear of our God because of the taunting of the nations, our enemies? ¹⁰ And likewise I, my brothers, and my servants are lending them money and grain. Please, let's do without this interest. ¹¹ Please, give back to them this very day their fields, their vineyards, their olive groves, and their houses, as well as the hundredth *part* of the money and of the grain, the new wine, and the oil that you are charging as interest from them.” ¹² Then they said, “We will give *it* back and will require nothing from them; we will do exactly as you say.” So I called the priests and made them take an oath to act in accordance with this promise. ¹³ I also shook out the front of my garment and said, “So may God shake out every person from his house and from his possessions who does not keep this promise; just so may he be shaken out and emptied.” And all the assembly said, “Amen!” And they praised the Lord. Then the people acted in accordance with this promise.

⁹ So I said, “The thing which you are doing is not good; should you not walk in the fear of our God because of the taunting of the nations, our enemies? ¹⁰ And likewise I, my brothers, and my servants are lending them money and grain. Please, let's do without this interest.

These leaders knew it was a difficult time because of the famine, and yet they choose to break the law and were charging the poor interest. This was not good and Nehemiah, a man in a position of authority, spoke out against this sin.

Please, give back to them this very day their fields, their vineyards, their olive groves, and their houses, as well as the hundredth *part* of the money and of the grain, the new wine, and the oil that you are charging as interest from them.

Several types of oppression were taking place.

1. Fields, vineyards, olive groves and homes being confiscated through foreclosures.
2. They were also charging interest, a direct violation of the law. The monthly charge of 1%, amounting to 12% a year, on the grain, the new wine, and oil was excessive.

¹² Then they said, “We will give *it* back and will require nothing from them; we will do exactly as you say.” So I called the priests and made them take an oath to act in accordance with this promise.

Nehemiah knew the character of these nobles and leaders so he made them take an oath before the priests.

Do you remember when corporate raiders were taking over companies and then dissolving the workers' pension plans so they could “legally” take the money as profit and then resold the companies to other investors? No one in congress stood up against these pirates but simply said their hands were tied. How do you think God will repay these corporate raiders for stealing from the poor and giving to the rich? Will God be pleased with those in the congress who shrugged their shoulders and pretended like they couldn't do anything to help the poor?

There were a number of faithful men in the bible that were very wealthy and no one looked on them with contempt because they used their wealth to help individuals and towns when they were struggling. Think about Job, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and King David. All of these men had their flaws but they used their wealth in a way that benefitted many others. The question we all have to answer is; do we use manna for good or for evil (our own self-interest).

¹³ I also shook out the front of my garment and said, “So may God shake out every person from his house and from his possessions who does not keep this promise

Nehemiah then imposed a second warning. God would punish and remove all violators of this promise. If the nobles and leaders were honest men would Nehemiah have needed to have them take an oath before the priests and warn them of God's judgment in this matter?

Verses 14 - 19

¹⁴ Furthermore, since the day that I was appointed to be their governor in the land of Judah, from the twentieth year to the thirty-second year of King Artaxerxes, for twelve years, neither I nor my kinsmen have eaten the governor's food *allowance*.

¹⁵ But the previous governors who were before me laid burdens on the people and took from them bread and wine besides forty shekels of silver; even their servants domineered the people. But I did not do so because of *my* fear of God.

¹⁶ I also applied myself to the work on this wall; we did not buy any land, and all my servants were gathered there for the work. ¹⁷ Moreover, *there were* at my table 150 Jews and officials, besides those who came to us from the nations that were around us. ¹⁸ Now that which was prepared for each day was one ox *and* six choice sheep; also birds were prepared for me, and every ten days all *sorts of* wine *were provided* in abundance. Yet for *all* this I did not request the governor's food *allowance*, because the forced labor was heavy on this people. ¹⁹ Remember me, my God, for good, *in return for* all that I have done for this people.

¹⁴ Furthermore, since the day that I was appointed to be their governor in the land of Judah, from the twentieth year to the thirty-second year of King Artaxerxes, for twelve years, neither I nor my kinsmen have eaten the governor's food *allowance*.

Nehemiah was governor of Judah for 12 years. During that time Nehemiah did not accept the wages of a governor because he "feared God"; meaning he knew this would put an added burden on the people who were poor and already struggling.

During the Revolutionary war George Washington built and outfitted three naval ships, at his own expense and after he became president he did not seek reimbursement. Compare that to our current president who is a well-known grifter.

¹⁵ But the previous governors who were before me laid burdens on the people and took from them bread and wine besides forty shekels of silver; even their servants domineered the people. But I did not do so because of *my* fear of God.

This is how worldly governors think and act.

¹⁷ Moreover, *there were* at my table 150 Jews and officials, besides those who came to us from the nations that were around us.

It's obvious that Nehemiah was a wealthy man but he was also a very generous man.

¹⁸ Now that which was prepared for each day was one ox *and* six choice sheep; also birds were prepared for me, and every ten days all *sorts of* wine *were provided* in abundance. Yet for *all* this I did not request the governor's food allowance, because the forced labor was heavy on this people.

Nehemiah showed compassion for the common people by not taking a salary which he deserved because he didn't want to add any additional burden to their situation.

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

Nehemiah looked for a future reward in heaven not for earthly rewards.