

Staying on Mission
Nehemiah 5-6
Rev. Brian Bill
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Generosity Video

There's something contagious about generosity, isn't there? Don't you love their love for kids? God moved Jacob and Maggie to give generously to children in need and to help save children in the womb.

Calendar Adjustment for Grow Time

As a church we share a similar passion for the next generation and have given priority to the nursery and preschool area in our new redesign. By way of reminder, here's what I shared three weeks ago...

Over the last couple months, the deacons and staff have come up with an even better solution so we don't have to add a complicated and costly addition. Guided by Aspen, we've been able to identify a solution that will steward our resources better. We've also figured out a way to have additional space for teenagers and the entire children's area will now be on one level.

As we've been working on the final design for our *Grow Time* project, we've had a setback but have come up with an exciting updated solution for our nursery and preschool area. I've seen a preview of the plans and can't wait for you to see them. We'll be showing a fly-through video next weekend during our services that will communicate in detail our extensive renovation plans. You'll not want to miss next weekend.

Because we want to make sure you have time to process the revised plans, we have decided to adjust our *Grow Time* calendar.

- Commitment weekend will now take place December 1-2
- Celebration weekend will be December 15-16

Speaking of children, props to Sheila Kuriscak and her team for the Fall Festival of Fun! And to Vikki Huisman, our Communications Director for getting the word out throughout the QCA community! Thanks to their efforts, we had the largest

turnout ever! We normally have around 175 but this year about 250 kids came! One of our neighbors came and brought his son. My guess is we had more people from the community than from Edgewood, which is how it should be!

Have you noticed that kids don't always get along? One day a dad heard his daughter and some of her friends arguing loudly in the backyard so he went out and firmly corrected her. "*But Daddy,*" she protested. "*We were just playing church.*" Ouch.

One pastor writes, "*The church of Jesus Christ has often been marked more by factions than by fellowship.*" It's so easy to hurt others and be hurt ourselves as seen in this cartoon [show pic].

As we come to Nehemiah 5-6, the remnant is starting to rupture because of some festering grievances that threaten to knock them off mission. The timing could not have been worse because the walls were almost finished! Nehemiah has to put down his hard hat to deal with some hard hearts. In order to keep them on mission, he turns his attention from the building of the wall to the barriers that were being put up *between* the wall workers. As excited as I am about *Grow Time*, I certainly don't want to see our renovation project create any disunity [show pic].

Edgewood has always been a church that values unity. It's my prayer we continue to do so, even as we go through this time where we hear more about finances and facilities. Paul exhorts us in Ephesians 4:3 to be "***eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.***"

Are you aware when a group of thoroughbred horses face an enemy attack, they stand in a circle facing each other, and with their back legs, kick at their foe? Donkeys, on the other hand, do just the opposite. They make a circle and face the threat while using their hind legs to kick at each other!

It's much easier to fight and resist an enemy who attacks us than it is to forgive and restore a friend who hurts us. Psalm 55:12-14 puts it this way: "***For it is not an enemy who taunts me – then I could bear it; it is not an adversary who deals insolently with me – then I could hide from him. But it is you, a man, my equal, my companion, my familiar friend. We used to take sweet counsel together; within God's house we walked in the throng.***"

Complaints Nehemiah Heard (1-5)

Chapter four ends on a note of great victory as God's people work hard in spite of all the problems they faced. The word "**against**" in verse 1 sets the tone for chapter 5. Strife was brewing, tension was mounting, and congregants were kicking at each other. The enemy couldn't stop the work by direct attack so he stirred up the people to attack each other.

In the midst of a "**great work**" in 4:19 for a "**great and awesome**" God in 4:14, in 5:1 "**there arose a great outcry of the people and of their wives against their Jewish brothers.**" This was not just a little disagreement or a minor problem. This was a "*huge despairing and wailing cry.*" They weren't crying out against the Samaritans or the Ammonites, but against their own people!

The city of Jerusalem was in ruins, taxes were high and there was a famine in the land. Most everyone had been working with all their hearts to build the walls but there were others whose alarming acts of greed resulted in widespread poverty and injustice.

There were four different groups of people who were involved in the community crisis:

- **People who owned no land but needed food** (verse 2).
- **Landowners who had mortgaged their property in order to buy food** (verse 3).
- **Another group complained that taxes were too high** (verse 4). They must have lived in Illinois.
- **Those with money were exploiting others** (verse 5). Are you aware Payday loans typically charge 400% annual interest or more? For two-week loans, finance charges result in interest rates from 390 to 780% APR. The wealthy wall workers were making loans with exorbitant interest rates and taking land and even children as collateral.

While it was not against God's law to loan money to one another, they were not to act like pawn shop owners or charge high interest when lending money to fellow Jews. This is clearly stated in Deuteronomy 23:19-20: "***...You may charge a foreigner interest, but you may not charge your brother interest...***"

Let's learn from the steps Nehemiah took to "***maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.***"

Steps Nehemiah Took (6-13)

Notice verse 6: ***“I was very angry when I heard their outcry and these words.”*** He was *“grieved exceedingly and greatly vexed.”* This lit him up!

While Nehemiah was very angry, verse 7 says he took ***“counsel with myself.”*** The New English Bible puts it like this: ***“I mastered my feelings.”*** The Hebrew literally means, *“My heart consulted within me, and I reigned over it.”* The idea is he took the time to bring his heart and his head together. Instead of just “going off” on the people in the heat of the moment, Nehemiah paused, took a deep breath and thought about it for a while. We would be wise to do the same.

He knew the truth of Proverbs 29:22: ***“A man of wrath stirs up wrath, and one given to anger causes much transgression.”*** One of the reasons conflict never gets resolved is because people react too quickly as stated in Proverbs 29:11: ***“A fool gives full vent to his spirit, but a wise man quietly holds it back.”***

After thinking things over, verse 7 says Nehemiah challenged the people privately and then he publicly confronted those whose selfishness had created the strife. This rebuke consisted of six different appeals:

- 1. He appealed to their love** (v. 7). Nehemiah reminded them they were robbing members of their own faith community. He uses the word, ***“brother”*** four different times in his speech. I wonder if Psalm 133:1 was echoing in his mind: ***“Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity!”***
- 2. He reminded them of God’s redemptive purpose** (v. 8). Since God’s people had been redeemed from Egypt and most recently from Babylon, it was unthinkable that fellow Jews were sending people back into bondage just to make money.
- 3. Exhorted them based on God’s Word** (v. 9a). Nehemiah calls them on the carpet: ***“The thing that you are doing is not good...”***
- 4. Told them to fear God and remember their witness** (v. 9b). Israel was to be a light to the nations but their behavior was dark and shady: ***“Ought you not to walk in the fear of our God to prevent the taunts of the nations our enemies?”*** I often think of Exodus 20:20, which comes right after the giving of the 10

Commandments: *“That the fear of him may be before you, that you may not sin.”*
When we fear God we won’t want to get near sin.

5. Used his own actions as an example (v. 10-11). Nehemiah lent money but he didn’t charge interest. He had integrity when he told the moneylenders to stop what they were doing: *“Return to them this very day their fields, their vineyards, their olive orchards, and their houses, and the percentage of money, grain, wine, and oil that you have been exacting from them.”*

6. Finally, he held them accountable (v. 12-13). The people wanted to do what was right and didn’t have to wait and think about it: *“We will restore these and require nothing from them. We will do as you say.”* Since they promised to obey, Nehemiah made them take an oath in the presence of the priests.

Nehemiah concluded with three actions in verse 13 that symbolized the seriousness of what they had decided to do:

- He shook out the folds of his robe, which symbolized what God would do if they broke their vow. Garments had lots of folds in them that would store things in. The picture is that God will shake His garment and those who go back on their word will fall to the ground.
- The congregation responded with a collective “amen” which was a solemn assent to do what had been said.
- Then they praised the Lord in unison. What began with a great cry of outrage concluded with shouts of adoration.

Their amazing response served to preserve unity among God’s people.

The Example Nehemiah Set (14-19)

In describing his own lifestyle during this period, Nehemiah’s memoirs tell us how he behaved during the 12 years he was governor in the land of Judah. In verse 15 he describes how previous governors got wealthy at the expense of the people. When comparing himself with what others did, Nehemiah stated, *“Even their servants lorded it over the people. But I did not do so, because of the fear of God.”*

Not only did Nehemiah not take when he could have; he also gave when he didn’t have to. In verses 17-18 we see he did not live extravagantly but instead lived generously by providing meals for others. He fed 150 Jewish men and also opened

his home to the heathen neighbors who lived around him. He lived on mission. Because he loved and revered God, he also loved the people he was called to serve. And he did that by modeling gracious living and generous giving.

Beth and I had a blast on Monday revising our budget and looking for other ways to give to our *Grow Time* initiative. When we were finished we were both humbled by the amount God led us to and filled with joy because God has moved us to give generously for His glory. Many of you know the joy that comes from generosity, don't you?

Principles to Ponder

Having walked through a brief exposition of this passage, let's draw out some principles.

- 1. There is a direct correlation between the effectiveness of our mission and how we treat each other.** We must *be* the church before we can build the church. We must care for one another before we can hope to reach our neighbors and the nations for Christ.
- 2. Relational problems are inevitable and we can't ignore them.** Even though it's painful and it may seem easier to avoid or deny relational ruptures, we must face conflict head-on. If we don't, we'll pay because it will go underground, grow deep roots, and bear bitter fruits.
- 3. We must take the initiative to restore relationships whether we want to or not.** Don't wait for the other person to come to you. You need to go to them. If you've been hurt, go and talk it out as Jesus commanded in Matthew 18. If you've hurt someone else, go and confess what you did according to Matthew 5. We're covered either way.
- 4. God's reputation is at stake when we have conflict.** In John 17:23, Jesus prayed that lost people would know God's heart of love when brothers and sisters in Christ are brought together in complete unity. Let's be like Nehemiah and walk in the fear of God not only to avoid the reproach of unbelievers but also to make God attractive to those who need Him.

In an old monastery in Germany, one can see two racks of ancient deer antlers permanently interlocked. Apparently the animals had been fighting fiercely, and

their horns became so tangled they could not disengage. As a result, both of them died of hunger.

Are you tangled up with someone right now? Is there strife in your life? In your home? In your workplace? With someone in the church? Don't let it fester any longer. I love how the people responded to Nehemiah's challenge in Verse 13: ***“And all the assembly said ‘Amen’ and praised the LORD. And the people did as they had promised.”***

What about you? Are you willing to make a promise to stop strife in your life – and in our church?

Chapter 5 deals with internal issues and in chapter 6 we will see some external pressures placed on God's people by Satan.

We need to be on guard as Paul says in 2 Corinthians 2:11: ***“So that we would not be outwitted by Satan; for we are not ignorant of his designs.”*** Satan is both a lion that *devours* and a serpent that *deceives*.

This deception involves at least three elements.

1. The Intrigue (1-4). Since Sanballat and his sinister buddies failed in their attempts to stop the wall builders, now they decided to concentrate their attacks on Nehemiah himself by changing their tactics and resorting to subtle persuasion. We might call this political softball.

There's not much political softball going on right now, is there? After living here five years, it just hit me we're getting double the political commercials because we're hearing from both Iowa and Illinois politicians! I sure hope you're planning to vote your values on Tuesday.

These enemies suddenly become Nehemiah's friends and invite him to a conference down on the plain of Ono. Ono is located on the seacoast near the Gaza strip. It was a beautiful resort area that was appealing for some rest and relaxation. But Nehemiah senses danger: ***“they were scheming to harm me.”*** So Nehemiah said, ***“Oh, no!”*** to Ono [come on, that's funny].

Some commentators suggest they were trying to trick him into leaving Jerusalem, where he had armed support, to come to a conference where they could ambush him. Nehemiah evidently senses this. He firmly declines, saying, ***“I am doing a***

great work and I cannot come down. Why should the work stop while I leave it and come down to you?"

Nehemiah sees through their scheme by refusing their invitation four different times. You, too, may experience continuing pressure to change your mind and go along with something that is wrong. Maybe a boyfriend or girlfriend is urging you to cross a moral boundary. Let me say again because you're not going to hear it from our culture – sex outside of biblical marriage between one man and one woman is sin.

Some of us give in to repeated pressure. We might decline the first invitation but find our defenses weakened as the enticements continue. But Nehemiah persists in his refusal because he knows what his priorities are.

I read years ago of a missionary in China whose abilities were so outstanding that an American company tried to hire him. They offered him an attractive job with a salary to match, but he turned it down. He told them that God had called him to be a missionary. He thought that would end the matter, but instead they came back with a better offer and an increase in salary. He turned that down too, but again they came back, doubling the financial package. Finally he said to them, *"It's not your salary that's too little. It's the job that's too small!"*

When intrigue doesn't work, the enemy next uses innuendo.

2. The Innuendo (5-9). Have you noticed that trouble is never far away? After dealing with one situation, another often comes up. When the enemy cannot accomplish his purpose by offering peace, he switches back to sinister threats in verses 5-7: ***"In the same way Sanballat for the fifth time sent his servant to me with an open letter in his hand. In it was written, 'It is reported among the nations, and Geshem also says it, that you and the Jews intend to rebel; that is why you are building the wall. And according to these reports you wish to become their king. And you have also set up prophets to proclaim concerning you in Jerusalem, 'There is a king in Judah.' And now the king will hear of these reports. So now come and let us take counsel together."***

This arm-twisting tactic is designed to pressure Nehemiah to yield to their request, and thus fall into their trap. But he resists because he sees it for what it really is, an enticement based upon lies. Note that it was an "unsealed letter." In our day it would be like posting something untrue on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.

God's people are surrounded by anti-semitic enemies who want to take them out. We should be concerned by the rising level of anti-semitism in the world today. The massacre of 13 Jewish people at the Pittsburgh synagogue was absolute and unbridled evil. This animosity goes all the way back to the Amalekites in the Old Testament, runs through Hitler's extermination of 6 million Jews and is increasingly evident today around the world. We must stand with Jewish people and against all kinds of racism, any hints of white supremacy and hatred.

Have you noticed that rumors regularly cite people of distinction as sources? That's what happened here – *“and Geshem also says it.”* Someone said t gossip is news you have to hurry to tell somebody else before you find out it isn't true!

Nehemiah responded three different ways – he denied the rumor, he prayed to God for strength, and he went back to work. Look at verse 8: *“No such things as you say have been done, for you are inventing them out of your own mind.”*

And then, as was his practice, he responds with another “popcorn prayer” in verse 9: *“For they all wanted to frighten us, thinking, ‘Their hands will drop from the work, and it will not be done.’ But now, O God, strengthen my hands.”*

Their tactics were to get the people to think Nehemiah had some hidden motive for rebuilding the wall, hoping the workers would thus become discouraged and quit. He took care of his character and trusted God to take care of his reputation.

3. The Intimidation (10-19). Once again the enemy switches his methods, this time from innuendo to intimidation in verse 10: *“Now when I went into the house of Shemaiah the son of Delaiah, son of Mehetabel, who was confined to his home, he said, ‘Let us meet together in the house of God, within the temple. Let us close the doors of the temple, for they are coming to kill you. They are coming to kill you by night.’”*

What he says sounds logical but Nehemiah detects that something is wrong. He knows he is not permitted to go into the temple, for only priests could enter the holy place. Numbers 18:7 warns that to go into the temple can lead to death and in 2 Chronicles 26, King Uzziah was struck with leprosy because he entered the temple.

So he answers in verse 11: *“Should such a man as I run away? And what man such as I could go into the temple and live? I will not go in.”* He realizes that a

prophet who was really from the Lord would say nothing contrary to God's commands.

Brothers and sisters, be careful of those who claim to be prophets, or have a “*word from the Lord*” or who might even say, “*God told me...*” Let's be discerning, church. Jesus tells us in Matthew 7:15 to “***watch out for false prophets.***”

In verse 3 he said, “***I cannot come down.***” Now he says, “***I will not go in.***” He says, “*Oh, no*” to Ono and “*no way*” to Shamay (Shemaiah)!

Having right priorities gave Nehemiah the courage to do the right thing. Courage isn't the absence of fear but instead *it's the tenacity to do what is right no matter how much we're afraid.* It's not just a matter of saying ‘no’ to distractions. We have to first say ‘yes’ to the right things, so our priorities match up with God's priorities.

Nehemiah meets this attack of the enemy by going to prayer once again in verse 14: “***Remember Tobiah and Sanballat, O my God, according to these things that they did, and also the prophetess Noadiah and the rest of the prophets who wanted to make me afraid.***”

This brings us to the end of this first phase of Nehemiah's work in verses 15-16: “***So the wall was finished on the twenty-fifth day of the month Elul, in fifty-two days. And when all our enemies heard of it, all the nations around us were afraid and fell greatly in their own esteem, for they perceived that this work had been accomplished with the help of our God.***” Even their enemies had to admit that God was at work! The walls were in ruins for more than 100 years and were renovated in only 52 days!

What a beautiful picture of the power of unity and witness in a community! Even their foes must agree that God is at work among them.

Action Steps

Here are a couple next steps from this chapter.

1. Let's make this month *Go-vember.* Let's determine to go with the gospel. Practice saying, “yes” to God's priorities. The best way not to be distracted is by being *attracted* to those things that are on the heart of God.

2. Let's also call the month *No-vember*. Practice saying, “no” to the devil’s distractions. Take some time right now and ask the Holy Spirit to identify those things that are distracting you from God’s priorities. Is it a relationship? An activity? Your money? Your possessions? Your thought life? Your career?

Conclusion

The enemy will try to distract you. But while he blasts away, God is building His kingdom. Satan is subtle but our Sovereign is sufficient.

This weekend is the International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church. Hebrews 13:3 urges us: ***“Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them, and those who are mistreated, since you also are in the body.”***

We rejoice that Pastor Andrew Brunson was released from prison in Turkey last month. We also praise God that Asia Bibi, a Pakistani Christian, has been released after eight years on death row for allegedly blaspheming Islam.

While that’s good news, there are many grave matters of concern.

- Since 1990, at least 65 people have been killed in Pakistan over claims of blasphemy against Islam.
- A Baptist missionary father of 8 was killed in Cameroon this past week. They had only been in the country for two weeks.

In addition, according to opendoorsusa.org, every month...

- 255 Christians are killed
- 104 Christians are abducted
- 66 churches are attacked
- 160 Christians are detained without trial and imprisoned

If you want to learn more about the plight of the persecuted and how you can help, go to persecution.com.

We are connected to the nations and to our neighbors. We are to live as one with Christians in other countries and we are to live in oneness with Christians in our church. Satan attacks from the outside and he also tries to get us sideways with

each other. In light of what our brothers and sisters are going through, how can we live in conflict with other Christians?

As we celebrate the Lord's Supper, let's think about the word *communion*. "Comm" means we are together and "union" means we are united in Christ.

When Paul wrote to the Corinthian believers he appealed to them to make sure they were living in harmony with one another. This caution is timely for Christians today as well.

Please close your eyes as I read 1 Corinthians 11:17-22, 27-28: ***"But in the following instructions I do not commend you, because when you come together it is not for the better but for the worse. For, in the first place, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you. And I believe it in part...When you come together, it is not the Lord's supper that you eat. For in eating, each one goes ahead with his own meal. One goes hungry, another gets drunk. What! Do you not have houses to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I commend you in this? No, I will not...Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord. Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup."***

Examination and Confession Time

Listen now to verses 23-26: ***"For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, 'This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.' In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.' For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes."***

Communion

As we take the elements, could you hold the juice in your right hand? As you look at the cup be reminded that Jesus shed His blood for you. Do an inventory of your relationship with God and with others. If you have any unconfessed sin, confess it now.

As you hold the bread in your left hand, be reminded that Jesus gave His body for you and that we are part of the worldwide body of Christ. 1 Corinthians 12:26 says: ***“If one member suffers, all suffer together.”*** Pray for our persecuted brothers and sisters.

Closing Song: “In the Light of Your Glory”