

Poverty, Powerlessness and Personal Example

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[0 : 00] Well, thank you, my brother Waldorf. Very kind of you to remind us that we're a couple of Muppets.! Do you agree with me that one of the marks of Christian people, God's people, is love?

Would you say yes to that? Would you agree that Jesus said, a new commandment I give to you, that you should love one another? A new commandment.

To love one another. And by new he meant in the way in which I love you. Indeed, love and kindness, caring and generosity are part of our cultural morality ever since we were conquered as a country by Christianity.

But sadly, we don't see that exhibited in society today. Yet within the church, within God's people, it is essential that we live by love.

It's a brilliant witness to our watching world. You remember how Jesus said, by this all people will know that you're my disciples if you love one another. Now, it's tough following Jesus with all the opposition thrown at us from outside.

[1 : 16] That's what we learnt in Nehemiah chapter 4. The opposition was from outside. But it can be even tougher when opposition is from within. And that is the recurring danger.

No one is safe from external troubles. True. In one sense, we expect them because there's a devil who hates gospel growth. But neither are we exempt for internal explosions. They are much more difficult to handle.

And hence, the constant prayers for unity and love. Here in Nehemiah 5, we face internal troubles. The people won't behave generously and they're selfish.

They seem to take four steps forward and three back. But we're so thankful for Nehemiah's excellent leadership. Look with me at the first five verses at the complaints that he had to put up with.

Now, the men and their wives raised a great outcry against their fellow Jews. Some were saying, we and our sons and daughters are numerous.

[2 : 26] In order for us to eat and stay alive, we must get grain. Others were saying, we're mortgaging our fields, our vineyards and our homes to get grain during the famine. Still others were saying, we've had to borrow money to pay the king's tax on our fields and vineyards.

Although we're of the same flesh and blood as our fellow Jews, and though our children are as good as theirs, yet we've had to subject our sons and daughters to slavery. Some of our daughters have already been enslaved, but we are powerless, because our fields and our vineyards belong to others.

So one group was saying they were hungry in verse 2. They may have owned no land, and they didn't have sufficient money to buy food. Or maybe they had to take too much time off the building work that they were doing, building the wall, so that they could provide for their families.

Another group, verse 3, were saying that they've got to remortgage their homes in order to buy food. And what's more, there's a famine. And the third group, verse 4, were saying that they too have to borrow money at interest in order to buy food.

Indeed, they had to sell family members into debt slavery to cover their basic living costs. It seems that loan sharks were out on the make, but the tragedy is that these profiteers were fellow Jews.

[3 : 48] And no Jewish person, let me tell you, likes to get ripped off, and certainly not from fellow Jews. We all know none of us like to get ripped off, especially from our own.

So here then, amongst the people of God, building this wall, there's social and economic injustice. It's resulted in hardship, and some of the people were feeling powerless.

It's a shame, isn't it? It's a shame on God's people when it comes to this. It makes the pertinency of the comment in Acts 4, where Luke says, Do you remember that at the beginning of Acts, in the

church it started?

There were no needy persons among them. How pertinent. That's as it should be, isn't it? It's based on Moses' instructions in Deuteronomy. There need be no poor among you.

Yes, that's the ideal. True, it's the ideal. But trouble flares up. You see it in Acts 6 again, where some widows were going hungry. You know, in church life, you think you're doing well.

[5 : 06] You're making gospel progress. And then, as if out of nowhere, upflare something. Usually it's internal trouble. And what do you do? Well, look what Nehemiah did.

Verse 6 is most interesting. When I heard their outcry and these charges, I was very angry. But don't stop at the end of 6.

I pondered them in my mind and then accused the nobles and officials. So he gave careful thought to his anger. He was angry. He thought about it.

Some were ripping others off. Probably pressing for debts to be repaid too quickly. So Nehemiah exposes their shame and shames them in front of everyone in a public meeting.

Very embarrassing. Look at 7 and 8. I pondered them in my mind. Then I accused the nobles and officials. I told them, you are charging your own people interest.

[6 : 05] So I called together a large meeting to deal with them and said, as far as possible, we have brought back our fellow Jews who were sold to the Gentiles.

They were in exile. And now you're selling your own people. Not only... Now you are selling your own people. Not only for them to be sold back to us.

They kept quiet because they could find nothing to say. His request? Stop overcharging. So I continued, verse 9.

What you are doing is not right. Shouldn't you walk in the fear of God to avoid the reproach of our Gentile enemies? I and my brothers and my men are also lending the people money and grain.

But let us stop charging interest. That's it. He shames everybody. Don't charge interest. Over interest. The profiteers are to discern some of the collateral, the fields and houses.

[7 : 05] And interestingly enough, everybody agrees to this. Look at 11. Give back to them immediately their fields, vineyards, olive groves and houses and also the interest you're charging them.

1% of the money. Grain, new wine and olive oil. We will give it back, they said. And we will not demand anything more from them.

We will do as you say. That's a very good response, isn't it? And just to rub it in and make sure it happens, Nehemiah calls on the priests.

Look at verse 12. Then I summoned the priests and made the nobles and officials take an oath to do what they had promised. I also shook out the folds of my robe and said in this way, may God shake out of their house and possessions anyone who does not keep this promise.

So may such a person be shaken out and emptied. And at this the whole assembly said, Amen and praised the Lord and the people did as they had promised.

[8 : 09] That's very interesting, isn't it? Nehemiah has to call in the priests to ensure that everything will be carried out properly. He shakes out his robe like the prophets did of old showing God's curse if they broke their faith.

Now there are some people who say, Nehemiah, you're acting all on your own here. You haven't called in any of your leaders. You're doing this in a very heavy-handed manner. Yes, it certainly was a very forceful approach.

And there are rare times when you cannot call all the leaders together and come to some agreed approach. Maybe time isn't on your side. But here is a man who is God's leader. Here is a man who can see a way forward.

Here is a man who is angry and acts quickly and gets everybody to agree. Notice those phrases in 12. We will do as you say. Look at the Amen at the end of 13.

The whole assembly said, Amen, agreed. And they praised the Lord and they did as they had promised. Notice too how the action was controlled by the phrase, the fear of the Lord.

[9 : 16] Did you see that in verse 9? So I continued, what you're doing is not right. Shouldn't you walk in the fear of our God? The fear of the Lord. That becomes the whole basis for acting in line with God's will.

We do everything we can in the fear of the Lord. That means openly knowing that God is our witness. For Nehemiah, fearing God meant he wouldn't crush or destroy the people.

another. We must be aware though of the devil's schemes.

[15:06] Those hurled at us from outside are easier to see. But how do we tackle trouble within? Nehemiah, I think, has four positives to say to us.

First of all, we need good, clear leadership. All Christian communities need good, clear leadership. We thank God for our pastor and our elders.

They're our leaders. We promise that we will pray for them, that we will act lovingly towards them as they do towards us and wisely. Good, godly, wise leadership leadership is crucial all round.

And if you want to see how it's done, look at the Lord Jesus. Secondly, they and we, that's the Nehemiahans, as it were, and we, are to live under the fear of the Lord.

He is utterly, utterly sovereign. And together, like we've done this morning, we bow down before him in worship. we live under the fear of the Lord.

[16:21] We live to please him, not to be afraid of him, but to please him. We know that he's watchful eyes on us wherever we are, and we're pleased about that. He's looking after us and caring for us.

We live under the fear of the Lord. Thirdly, I think the chapter tells us practice generous hospitality. I was just thinking this myself, or Daphne and I were thinking it together during the week. How many different homes have you eaten in? How many different people have been into your domain? There's nothing like eating together to get to know one another. And therefore, you pray for the people that you meet. Practice generous hospitality.

And one negative, I think, implied in the text is this. There is no place for what we call entitlement. There are no people of God who are better than other people of God.

[17:27] Of course, I'm Jewish, as you know, and you're Gentile. What's the implication? Yes, you see, we're equal. Not I'm better than you or you're better than me. No place for entitlement.

Our world is full of entitlement. People at the bottom of the scale, demanding all the benefits they can get. People at the top, telling everybody else what to do. We're full of a world of entitlements. No, no entitlement amongst the people of God. That's what you see here. That's what you see in Nehemiah, giving up all the governor ideas that he could have.

We all work together for God's glory, with equal status before God. No one has a superior status. Now, this is our longing, isn't it? To see the people of God acting like that.

But until Jesus returns, our hearts and our minds are still twisted. And we need help from scripture and from one another to act like this. Yes, Nehemiah is a great leader.

[18:28] He's a great model for us. He acts in the most godly manner, with much wisdom. And the people follow him. Imperfect though he is, he's a really good leader. And therefore, Nehemiah points us to the Lord Jesus Christ.

He's the perfect leader. He's the perfect example. But more than that, Jesus is our standing man. He does for us what we cannot do for ourselves. He takes our sin upon himself and dumps it in the deepest pit.

Nehemiah couldn't do that. But Jesus can and Jesus does. And that's why we bow down to King Jesus and why we honour him. That's why we gather around like this morning to hear him speak to us through his words.

That's why we want the world to know that there is a perfect godly leader who can take us into the presence of God and fit us for a new world. Church is really the practice run.

Life in glory is our goal. Would you agree? Let's pray together. Heavenly Father we thank you for the lessons we learned from these ancient Jews who wanted to please you and do your will but sadly well and truly mucked up.

[19:45] They are so like us. We bless you for godly Nehemiah. We thank you for our own pastor and our own leaders. Make us, all of us, more godly each day we pray, more humble, more willing to flex and to please you we ask.

Take away from us the idea of one upmanship or entitlement and burn into our hearts a love for one another and a willingness to serve. Fill us we pray with your Holy Spirit this morning.

Bend our wills we ask that Jesus may be front and centre of all that we think and do. For we pray in his most glorious name. Amen.

Over to you brother Waldorf.