

God wants generosity and justice in his church

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[0 : 00] So please keep your Bibles open. You'll want to look at them as we get into this text.

We've been learning lessons week by week from the life of Nehemiah. And this week, I hope we'll see that God wants generosity and justice in His church. But let's begin here with the reality that sometimes the eyes of the world are on a particular city. This year, even Gorgie has been going global. The eyes of the world, or at least the footballing world, has been on Edinburgh. There's been TV in America and Brazil and Nigeria and in Europe, all asking the question, could hearts finally do it? Could they break the domination? Could they win the title after 66 years? And we know the answer. Sometimes the world is focused on a particular city. There is an event that takes on historic significance. Maybe again in our own city, we remember the Queen lying in state. Or perhaps we think of the Paris Olympics that just recently happened, or even the terror attacks in New York. There are times when the world's eyes are on a particular city. Here we are in the story of Nehemiah, and the rebuilding of Jerusalem's walls has very much put this city under the spotlight. So we know the king of Persia is aware, and he supports the rebuilding project. But we've also been hearing, and we thought about it especially last week, that enemy nations have also been paying attention. And by God's design, Jerusalem is the city of God. It is designed as the center of true worship. It was designed so that other nations would be attracted to the glory of the one true and living God, like moths drawn to flame.

Remember, Jesus said to his disciples and to the church, you are the light of the world. But what happens if the church's light goes out?

So we need to think about the importance of God's city and God's church, and what it means for Nehemiah chapter 5. In God's plan of salvation, there is this principle where God chooses one for the sake of many. God chose one man, Abraham, and said, from your family will come blessing to all nations. God chooses one nation, Israel, to be a blessing to all the nations. And he chooses one city, Jerusalem, where worship will be focused, where he will be said to dwell, where his glory should be on display.

So the city of Jerusalem matters. And in the same way, God chooses the church. People like us, chosen and set apart to become together, as it were, a little colony of heaven, an alternative society, a place of goodness and love and justice and mercy, a place that's so focused on God and his Savior, Jesus, that others are compelled and drawn in.

[3 : 49] But that's not the scene that we encounter in Nehemiah chapter 5. And what we have, rather, is here is Nehemiah, and he kind of acts like the new sheriff in town, if you like old western movies.

You know, he comes to clean up the town from the outlaws, from the oppression, from the injustice that he sees in the streets. And he shows in his own way of life generosity and justice.

And he does it all for the sake of God's kingdom and God's glory. And what we need to see today, as we're gathered here in this place, is that when it comes to church and when it comes to worship, it's what's on the inside that counts.

God's kingdom and grace. God's kingdom and grace. Not nice buildings and secure walls. Not coming to worship at a surface level. God is looking for lives that love Jesus, that are transformed by him so that we live for God's glory in a way that makes a difference to the people around us. So two things that we'll see. First of all, number one, God's servant challenges injustice in God's church.

First 13 verses. The key word for us to think about at this stage is outcry. Notice the outcry of God's people. Verse 1, now the men and their wives raised a great outcry against their fellow Jews.

[5 : 27] And the section concludes verse 6 with Nehemiah. I heard their outcry in these charges, and he's very angry. So there is a protest. There is a complaint. So why is this complaint being

made? Well, what's happening is as people have been called to this great rebuilding work, as they're sorting through the rubble, as the wall is getting higher, at the same time, a great social and moral and indeed spiritual problem is being brought to light. And in the first few verses, we discover three kinds of people who are suffering while they're serving God, and so they raise a complaint. In verses 1 and 2, it's families that are coming to complain. We and our sons and daughters are numerous.

To eat and stay alive, we must get grain. They're not able to work their normal jobs. They've left things behind. They've sacrificed, and now whole families are feeling the cost. And so there's an outcry.

Verse 3, we discover others who are mortgaging their fields and their vineyards. So perhaps they live outside of the city, and they've come to work on the wall. So they've left their place behind. There's famine in the first place, but if they're not there, then there's no harvest, and there's no income, and so they're needing to mortgage their fields. And they are suffering, and so there's outcry.

And then there's another group in verse 4 and 5, and they're suffering under harsh taxation. Persian kings loved to tax their empire. So there was this at least 20% taxation, and they're really struggling. And they're being forced to sell their family members into slavery, but now they've got no resources to ever rescue them from that situation.

They have no land. They have no land. It's all been mortgaged away. And so there is an outcry that comes up because while they have sacrificed in order to serve God, others have taken advantage. Others are exploiting them, and they're guilty of social injustice. Some things I suppose that we need to see in where our world is different from the Old Testament world in our day. We are used to companies lending money for profits. We know credit card companies. That's just the world that we live in. But in the Old Testament, people lent money to show compassion, or at least that's how it ought to be. That love for neighbor always had an economic component, always had a mercy component built in.

[8 : 08] And again, it's important for us to see that while in our day, typically we tend to operate, and this includes our finances, we tend to operate as individuals, unless we borrow from the bank of mom and dad, I guess. In the Old Testament, care for the family included a financial support system with this web of interconnected relationships and support. So maybe if you know the Old Testament, you'll know of the kinsman redeemer. I get in trouble. I can't pay my debts. I sell my land, or I sell myself. One of my family members can pay the price to redeem me.

In Nehemiah's day, what are we seeing? We're seeing that compassion is lacking, and they're giving for profit. The family of Israel, they're not acting as family at all.

They're gladly exploiting others for their own gain and profit. I scanned the news this week, and we could do this on any given week, guarantee, and we will see story upon story of injustice. So there was a big BBC investigation, and they tracked down the identity of someone who was central to a people trafficking network.

Taking 15, 20,000 pounds, claiming that they would get safe transport to the UK. Stories of injustice like that, they make our blood boil, don't they? And rightly so.

We are made in God's image, and we are made to show care for fellow image bearers. We want to see mercy and kindness be done. Now, it'd be really easy to take a passage like Nehemiah 5 and rail against the injustice that we see in the world, and the Bible would do that, but we need to recognize that the point of Nehemiah 5 takes it much closer to home. Because the problem of people not showing compassion and kindness, it's not the enemies we met last week. This week, it's a problem within the church. It's people who are living in the city who are exploiting others in the city. And so we have this reality that while the city walls might be starting to look really good, God's Word here is lifting the lid. And this covenant community is breaking covenant. This people who've been called to be a light to the world, they're living in darkness. And that outcry of the people secondly leads to the outrage of God's servant. Now, there it is in verse 6, when I heard the outcry in these charges, I was very angry. So we've been getting to know Nehemiah for the last, I guess this is the last month or so. And what we've seen week by week here is someone who cares deeply about God's glory. He cares about the state of God's church. He sacrifices and serves to advance God's kingdom. And so we know, don't we, he's going to take action.

[11 : 25] Follow the action. Follow the action, verse 6 to 9, he hears the outcry and he feels it. He feels that righteous anger when people are being abused and exploited. Verse 7, he ponders, so he

stops to reflect. And we've seen he's a man of prayer, so absolutely he's going to be praying at this point.

Then comes action. Verse 7, he accuses the nobles and officials. So often it's the haves, that persecute the have-nots, isn't it? And then he calls this meeting. He accuses them, you're charging your own people interest, and I call together a large meeting to expose the problem.

That's one of the reasons why I think we love Nehemiah. Here he is this time, he's standing up for the little guy. But again, we see he's standing up for what's right. He's standing against injustice. The same kind of reasons why so many people are drawn towards Jesus. Even people who aren't Christians find this aspect of Jesus' heart and character so compelling. But let's use verse 9 to show why Nehemiah rightly feels this outrage. There's three reasons within verse 9. The first reason is that it's just wrong. I continued, what you are doing is not right. You know, fundamental, sort of bedrock to Old Testament law. Love your God, love your neighbor. Love your God by loving your neighbor. We could go to Exodus 12. We could go to Leviticus 25, Exodus 22 rather, Leviticus 25, and you'd see long, lengthy, detailed lists of what does social justice look like when you're dealing with those who are weak and poor. Or listen to the wisdom of Proverbs 14 verse 31 and apply it to what we see in Nehemiah 5. Proverbs 14. Whoever oppresses the poor shows contempt for their maker. Not just contempt for the person, but contempt for the person who made them. But whoever is kind to the needy honors God. When we hold back good, when we can show it to someone, it's wrong. When we pass by trouble. Like those first two characters in the Good Samaritan story, cross to the other side because it's more convenient. It's wrong. When and if the church is not a place where the needy, where the poor can come and feel cared for, it's wrong. It's contempt for them and it's contempt for God.

And so he has this righteous outrage because their actions are wrong. But there's a second reason, and it's to do with worship. Look again at verse 9. Shouldn't you walk in the fear of our God?

[14:49] The way that we revere and honor God should influence the way we live out our relationships. John Goldingay, the Old Testament scholar, puts it this way. The way people deal with the poverty of their neighbors is an aspect of how they live in reverence for God. You can't separate your economic policy from the way God expects people to treat each other. Read the Old Testament. Read the New Testament as well. Read the Old Testament and it becomes really clear. God is holy and God is a holy hatred of sin. Get to the prophets and we discover God really hates sin within His church. Those lips that worship God while hearts are far from Him. Take a look at a prophet like Isaiah. Isaiah chapter 1.

Isaiah's prophecy does get to comfort eventually, but it begins with judgment on Jerusalem, which has become like Babylon. Like Babylon it's become, like sin city. And in the middle of Isaiah chapter 1, God says some things that sound shocking. He says to the people, stop bringing to me your meaningless offerings. Stop bringing your sacrifices. He says to them, your festivals I hate with all my being.

It's like he wishes the doors of the church were slammed shut so they wouldn't come in and bring their worship. Why? Because their worship is a sham. And so he says to them, before your worship is going to be acceptable, you need to learn to do right. Seek justice. Defend the oppressed. Plead the case of the widow. Think about Jesus. Who did Jesus reserve His harshest words for? He was never the prostitutes.

He was always the Pharisees. The self-righteous, self-serving, complacent religious leaders. Jesus would say to them, you're devouring widows' houses, and all the while you're offering up pretty prayers. God is not impressed. And so God, Old Testament and New Testament, He exposes superficial worship offered from unfeeling hearts, where there is no love for God or neighbor in the way that we use our resources, our time, our money, our kindness.

So it's wrong. It's got a worship component. The third reason that Nehemiah is rightly outraged is because of the impact on their witness. Look how verse 9 ends, shouldn't you walk in the fear of our God to avoid the reproach of our Gentile enemies, to avoid being a stench in their noses. The problem here is that the city of God has become just like the world. There is no distinction.

[18:26] Ray Ortlund says, what the world most needs is the church so obviously saved that the church is an alternative to convert to. That's a really important guiding principle for us. Our aim is not to be like the world, and our aim is not even to be liked by the world.

Rather, our aim is to be totally different in an attractive and compelling way in our way of life and love and service. And Nehemiah is outraged because Jerusalem as a city is supposed to represent

God in the world. It's supposed to reveal something of the glory of God to the world. And that's true for any Christian, that we are to be a mirror on God's character. And so Jerusalem right now is saying to the world, God is like this. God is unjust. God is unkind. God is uncaring. And so in the way that they are living, they're not bearing a good witness to God. They're giving the nations a reason to say, I knew we were right to ignore the God of the Bible, the God of Christians. Failure to treat others well. Especially as we have it here in Nehemiah 5. Failure to treat other believers well. It's an insult to our maker and a major blot on our testimony. And again, Jesus captured this in his ministry. Remember the day that Jesus came to clean the house. Remember the day that Jesus came to his father's house, to the temple. The temple that was supposed to be the center of worship.

[20 : 30] The place where sacrifice could be offered, where you could meet with God. But that place of worship, it had become a den of robbers. And so Jesus, the servant of God, he's outraged. And so he takes some cords and he makes a whip and he drives out the money changers and the people buying and selling animals. He throws them out. Why? So that it could once again be a house of prayer for all nations.

That the church exists to worship God and to let the world know who our God is and the good news of our God. And so Jesus, the servant of the Lord, he hated and he challenged the injustice and the oppression that he saw in the church of his day. And so the Bible is very clear and God is very clear that our everyday religion must impact our everyday relationships. That our experience of God's grace must then produce by response generous justice.

before we leave this section, we must let God's word examine us.

God's word did its work in the hearts of the people in Jerusalem. So when he tells them in verse 10 to stop charging interest, in verse 11 to give them back their fields, verse 12, we will give it back. End of verse 13, the whole assembly said, Amen, and the people did as they promised. God's word has that transforming power. And so we need to make time to stand before the mirror of God's word to ask questions of our dealings with other people. Do we share God's heart for justice and mercy?

[22 : 32] Do we seek to show special care and attention to the weak and to the poor and the needy and the vulnerable? Do my financial decisions and spending habits, do they just take into account me or my family or do they take into account the needs of others? If God's word were to examine us, where would our sin raise an outcry? So we need to stand before the mirror of God's word, but also we need to go under the scalpel of God's word. You know, Jesus, the great physician, why does he, why does he expose us to the word of God? Why does he, he wound us? He wounds that he might heal.

And so by his spirit, he would expose ways in our own hearts in which we sin against our good and holy God by sinning against our neighbor. He wants his word to cut deep beneath our self-righteous exterior that we might come to him for healing and for change. So that's the first thing that we see, is that God's servant challenges injustice in God's church. The second thing we see, and this is much more briefly, verses 14 to 19, is that God's servant practices generosity towards God's church. So the focus shifts in verse 14 onwards from focusing in the city on all that was wrong, on those rich people that were exploiting others, as if the camera pans over to Nehemiah's house and Nehemiah's dealings, and they become an alternative and a beacon of light. And Nehemiah provides for us another powerful and compelling picture of a sacrificial and generous servant of God.

So the one thing that we see about Nehemiah is that he was clearly rich. He was really rich. But that's not what defines him. Look at verse 16. We find a man who is devoted to the work on the wall. He's devoted to God's work. Listen to him in verse 19. He prays, remember me with favor, my God. His reward that he looks for is from God. It's eternal. And because of that, he feels free to use his resources generously, cheerfully, sacrificial to bless and not burden others.

It's a compelling pattern. I'm sure I've mentioned this probably many times before, but I love the story of the early church and the Roman Empire, those first centuries. You look at the individual portraits or the collective witness and you see, here's what sacrificial generosity and care can do in a society when ordinary men and women live these extraordinary lives because of God's extraordinary grace, such that the attention of the emperors was had. The church was hated often by the emperors, but they could do nothing to stop the movement of God. And the church became known for certain things.

[26 : 06] They became known for the truth that they cared for their own poor and suffering people, but they also extended care to those outside of the church. Rome wasn't doing that, but the Christians were.

They were noted for their generosity towards those others ignored and abandoned. Children, babies, left in the street to die, would be gathered in and adopted by Christians. And that was noticed. Women flocked to the early church. And do you know why? Because it was an alternative. They were so used to being used and abused and treated as property, but in the church, they found dignity. Here is a place where we are invited to learn and we can worship together with men and we can serve. And the church was valued by wider society because they provided hospitality. And they provided medical care for the sick and for the dying. And the Roman Empire was changed. Because people were changed by God's grace and they passed it forward. And God always wants his people to be radically different. To be so transformed by his saving love that God's church becomes the safest place in the world. And the best place in the world to be. So that the world would sit up and take notice.

Two examples that we see in Nehemiah's life here as the servant of the Lord. First, in verses 14 to 16, did you notice that he refused to claim his rights? The rights that he could claim as the governor. [27 : 49] For 12 years, we're told in verse 14, neither I nor my brothers ate the food allotted to the governor. So he had every opportunity to take some silver, to take some food, to take some wine, but he will not.

And he tells us why. Verse 15, early governors, they placed a heavy burden on the people and their assistants also lorded it over the people. But out of reverence for God, I did not act like that. He knew the people were already paying a high cost in sacrificing to build. So he's not going to add to it. And he will absolutely not lord it over other people. In fact, look at what you see in verse 16. Instead, I devoted myself to the work on this wall. All my men were assembled there for the work. We did not acquire any land. Nehemiah is one with his people. Nehemiah is a wealthy leader, but he rolls up his sleeves to get involved in the work side by side, shoulder to shoulder with the others. It's a striking contrast to what we normally see. Think about any president or prime minister or CEO. We're used to a great divide and to see them with all their privilege.

But here we have a great pattern of humble service. So he doesn't claim his rights. And secondly, positively, he will practice generous hospitality. Verse 17, furthermore, 150 Jews and officials ate at my table, as well as those who came to us from the surrounding nations. Each day, one ox, six choice sheep, and some poultry were prepared. And every 10 days, wine of all kinds. Imagine the scene every day. There's 150 for sure, but then others are being added to the king's table. Not to the king, to Nehemiah's table. There's the high officials, but there's also the other guys who are coming from other nations. And everybody is getting included in this feast, this moment of lightness and joy and hospitality and feasting in the midst of all the heavy demands of building. Now, I'm going to guess. I don't need to guess. I know that none of us has this level of disposable income or oxen or poultry. Okay, so we need to do two things. We need to see, first of all, Nehemiah is absolutely a unique picture of God's servant leader, but he's also a pattern in our own way with our own resources we're called to follow. So let's begin with the pattern of sacrificial generosity for the church. John Piper, he wrote of the church learning to adopt a wartime mentality with our finances, being really careful in our spending because we know we're in battle and we want to be strategic. To use our resources in such a way that people might say, our God is good.

[31 : 01] That we would use what God has given us wisely so that glory would come to him. That we'd be thinking about how can our resources help God's kingdom to be advanced. We'd think about our time and our food and our money to think, how can my brothers and sisters in Christ be blessed through what God has given me to steward. Like Old Testament Israel, the church is bound together as a covenant community, bound together in and by Christ Jesus, and we are called to live in such a way that by this, all men would know that you are Jesus' disciples. We'd love one another.

Remember Jesus' parable, Matthew 25, of the sheep and the goats. And as he's giving a reward to his sheep, those who were said to have fed the hungry and clothed the needy and visited those in prison, and they say, Jesus, we never did that for you. And Jesus said, whatever you did for the least of these, you did for me. Everything that we do for a brother and sister in Christ becomes for us an act of worship for our Lord and Savior. The pattern of Nehemiah calls us to a way of life that makes room for others, ready to draw the wider community into the community of God.

So a simple thing like a community day at the end of the month becomes a really important and easy way for us to do that, to welcome people in, to spend time together, and to offer friendship and food in Jesus' name. So there is a pattern that we need to work out in our own lives of what does sacrificial generosity and mercy look like for me? But let's close with the picture of God's true servant leader, because we need to see that Nehemiah is a type of Christ for us. Nehemiah was concerned for God's kingdom and glory. Jesus was supremely concerned for God's kingdom and glory. That's why he came and became one of us. That's why he suffered and died there on the cross. Nehemiah was concerned for the needs of others. Jesus was passionately concerned, concerned for the needs of the poor. Remember all those woes that he issued on the rich oppressors. Remember every miracle that he did.

For those despised and ignored and recognized that Jesus came to meet our greatest need in poverty, our spiritual need, our sin that separates us from life with God.

Just like Nehemiah, Jesus too would prepare a great feast. Remember him feeding over 5,000 in the wilderness and recognized he did that because he was moved with compassion.

[33 : 51] And so he fed hungry stomachs and he fed hungry souls with the word of God, with the word of life. And Jesus, we know he didn't lord it over us, but rather the Son of Man came to serve and to lay down his life as a ransom for many. Jesus, we know, was supremely rich.

Glory of heaven, yet for our sake he became poor so that we, through his poverty, through his sacrificial death on our behalf, through his poverty, we might become rich. Before we need anything else, we need the saving work of Jesus in our lives. We need to come to him in faith and repentance.

And knowing him as saviour and friend, our hearts are set free. Set free from the need to live for money, to grasp hold of money, so that we can live for him and his reward.

So may it be that as we know God's love in our hearts, that we be moved with kindness and generosity, out of gratitude to God for giving us Jesus, to meet the needs of those around us.

Because Nehemiah 5 reminds us that while God hates injustice in the church, he loves sacrificial generosity that gives him glory. Let's pray.