

Leading by example

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 30 October 2016

Preacher: Andy Meadows

[0 : 00] It's Nehemiah chapter 5. For the king's tax on our fields and our vineyards.

Now our flesh is as the flesh of our brothers. Our children are as their children. Yet we're forcing our sons and our daughters to be slaves. And some of our daughters have already been enslaved.

But it's not in our power to help it. But other men have our fields and our vineyards. I was very angry when I heard their outcry and these words. I took counsel with myself and I brought charges against the nobles and the officials.

I said to them, you're exacting interest each from his brother. And I held a great assembly against them and said to them, we, as far as we are able, have brought back our Jewish brothers who've been sold to the nations.

That you even sell your brothers, that they may be sold to us. They were silent and could not find a word to say. So I said, the thing that you're doing is not good.

[1 : 29] Ought you not to walk in the fear of our God to prevent the taunts of the nations, our enemies? Moreover, I and my brothers and my servants are lending them money and grain.

Let us abandon this exacting of interest. Return them this very day to their fields, their vineyards, their olive orchards and their houses. And their percentage of money, grain, wine and oil that you've been exacting from them.

Then they said, we will restore these and require nothing from them. We will do as you say. And I called the priests and made them swear to do as they had promised.

I also shook out the fold of my garment and said, so may God shake out every man from his house and from his labor who does not keep this promise. So may he be shaken out and emptied.

And all the assembly said, Amen and praise the Lord. And the people did as they had promised. Moreover, from that time that I was appointed to be their governor in the land of Judah, from the 20th year to the 32nd year of Artaxerxes the king, 12 years, neither I nor my brothers ate the food allowance of the governor.

[2 : 40] The former governors who were before me laid heavy burdens on the people and took from them their daily ration 40 shekels of silver. Even their servants lorded it over the people.

But I did not do so because of the fear of God. I also persevered in the work on this wall and we acquired no land and all my servants were gathered there for the work.

Moreover, there were at my table 150 men, Jews and officials, besides those who came to us from the nations that were around us. Now what was prepared at my expense for each day was one ox and six choice sheep and birds and every 10 days all kinds of wine in abundance.

Yet for all this, I did not demand the food allowance of the governor because the service was too heavy on this people. Remember for my good, oh my God, all that I have done for this people.

Do turn back in your Bibles to Nehemiah 5. Page 478.

[3 : 43] My name is Andy Meadows. I'm the youth and children's minister here. It's great to see you this morning. Let's pray before we look at Nehemiah 5.

Father God, thank you for bringing us here this morning to listen to your words. Please help us to be attentive to what you have to say. Amen. Let's start with a couple of questions.

What do you think that will most get in the way of churches getting on with gospel work? What will most hinder the building up of the people of God here in Dulwich?

Well, this is our fourth Sunday hearing from the book of Nehemiah. And it's a book primarily about the rebuilding of God's people and his kingdom.

You see, God's people have returned to Jerusalem from the exile. And a particular focus is rebuilding the wall. And last week we saw that the work began.

[4 : 47] Everyone is playing their part. But they soon faced external opposition. Is that what most gets in the way of building work? Threats from the outside world?

Well, no. Because despite the opposition, the people rallied. They rebuild the wall with a sword in one hand and a trowel in the other. Defending themselves. They would not let their enemies stop them.

But here in chapter 5, we are brought crashing down. Where not one brick is laid. What stops the work here?

What hinders it? Well, it's internal division. It's worldly thinking and behavior that has seeped into the people of God. And it's stifling the building work.

Maybe particularly in the West, we probably won't face the physical threats that other Christians face across the world. Though we might face legal threats, maybe in the future.

[5 : 49] That might hinder the work. But the big threat is internal division and injustice in the church. Well, let's see what's going on here in Nehemiah and see what it has to say for us today.

So, firstly, internal injustice. Internal injustice, verses 1 to 6. God's people are struggling. With the extra effort to build the wall, there's less manpower to grow crops and produce food.

And Nehemiah is accosted by the people and their wives. And they tell him their desperate situation. There's a few factors. Verse 2. They had big families.

We need food, Nehemiah. We can't eat bricks. Verse 3. There's a famine. Food prices have probably gone up. They're forced to sell their property for food.

Verse 4. There's taxes. They're having to borrow money to pay the king's tax. And so they end up in a desperate situation. Have a look down verse 5.

[6 : 56] We are forcing our sons and our daughters to be slaves. And some of our daughters have already been enslaved. But it is not in our power to help it. For other men have our fields and our vineyards.

They are helpless. The debt trap has taken its toll. The poor got poorer. Borrowing more and more money to stay alive and lose their land. And when you couldn't pay in money or property, you paid in people.

They are selling their children into slavery. They are in a shocking situation. But it's made even more shocking because of the cause of the problem.

You see, the focus of the outcry is not against God because of the famine. It's not against the king for the tax. It's not against Nehemiah for his extra effort to build the wall. But verse 1.

Now there arose a great outcry of the people and of their wives against their Jewish brothers. You see, they were supposed to care for one another, look out for another.

[7 : 58] But God's people are taking time out to rip one another off. The poor in God's community are going to the rich for help. And the rich use the vulnerability to make more money.

They were like loan sharks, acting as Wonga.com to their fellow believers. A thousand percent APR. And when they couldn't pay the loans, they called them in.

And knew they'd have to pay in property and their children. Now, we might expect this attitude in the world. In a dog-eat-dog business environment.

But this worldly attitude, when it seeps into the church, the people of God is a real threat to unity. And the rebuilding of God's people. And so to put Nehemiah into its Bible timeline.

They're back in the land, rebuilding the walls. But they haven't changed much, have they? In fact, when we read passages like Amos 2, we see that one of the reasons they were sent into the exile is because of this injustice of how they treated each other.

[9 : 03] Their back, but their hearts are the same. Oppression and exploitation. They had promises, spoken to Jeremiah, that Jeremiah had plans, God had plans to prosper his people when he brought them back.

Doesn't look that way. There's going to be peace. Time of hope. Doesn't look that way, does it? They're exploiting others for selfish gain.

Their building work has stopped. Their sin still needs to be dealt with. Ultimately, they need a saviour. Well, Nehemiah 5 can feel far removed from us.

These verses show us one way gospel work is hindered. From within the church itself. Through our own worldly thinking and behaviour. And all through the New Testament, this is the case in the church.

That Jesus got angry when he saw injustice happening. Paul's letters, we see the church at Oswald itself. In 1 Corinthians, you'll remember last year, that the church were taking each other to court.

[10 : 11] Paul tells the Ephesians not to give the devil a foothold in how you treat one another. Internal injustice and favouritism, rife in the book of James. It's all over the New Testament.

Internal division stopping gospel work. And so for us today, we are not immune from facing internal injustice ourselves.

Because this is what the hearts of people are like. Both on a wider scale, but also locally here too. There'll be people who identify as Christians and yet use their position to mistreat their Christian brothers and sisters for their own selfish gain.

We think of the televangelist who preaches a prosperity gospel like the aptly named Creflo Dollar. God is there to bless you financially and give you good health and prosperity and happiness, providing that you give to me in my ministry first, of course.

The minister who has voted out of the congregation, the church, for faithfully holding to the Bible. I've got a friend who's going through that nasty process at the moment, facing injustice from elders who are not about gospel work.

[11 : 27] The church or church minister facing injustice from the denomination hierarchy. Maybe you've felt something like this in the past. Because when the church has injustice, it's divided.

It's through our worldly thinking and gospel work is hindered. Not a brick will be laid. And on a broad scale too, we see in these opening verses that being one of God's people does not exclude us from the harsh realities of this life.

God's people are back from the exile. The building work is going on. And yet they're finding themselves in hardship, debt, and family pressure. So might we.

And over the next few months and years with Brexit and other factors, people within our congregation and our Christians we know may struggle. People might lose their jobs and struggle to make ends meet.

Well, how should we react then? Not by giving them high interest loans. By looking to relieve the burden. And so there's this internal justice going on with the people of God.

[12 : 43] And Nehemiah is rightfully livid. Have a look, verse 6. I was very angry when I heard the outcry and these words.

He's angry at the mistreatment and exploitation of their poor brothers. Poor brothers. And so he calls an extraordinary general meeting. And there Nehemiah seeks to right the wrongs.

That's the second thing to see this morning. Writing wrongs. Verses 7 to 13. Nehemiah gathers the people together and he acts as prosecutor and pinpoints two charges.

And he exposes the sin of the nobles and officials. Verse 7. The wealthy were demanding interest from loans to their poor brothers and they were selling their poor brothers into slavery.

Now Nehemiah didn't fly off the handle straight away. It seems like he pondered these things. And it may be in the case that he turned to God's law. Now turn back to Leviticus chapter 25, page 124.

[13 : 50] It seems to me that Nehemiah had Leviticus 25 in mind in this meeting. Leviticus 25 verses 35 onwards.

If your brother becomes poor and you can and cannot maintain himself with you, you shall support him as though he were a stranger and a sojourner and he shall live with you. Take no interest for him or profit, but fear your God that your brother may live beside you.

You shall not lend him your money at interest nor give him your food for profit. I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt to give you the land of Canaan and to be your God.

There's the background. Leviticus 25 speaks directly into the situation of Nehemiah 5. How should they have dealt with their Christian brothers who are struggling? With generosity.

Why? Because God has dealt generously with them, bringing them out from slavery. Why shouldn't they be sold as slaves? Well, they're God's people to serve him and no one else.

[15 : 06] And yet the cutthroat business attitude you expect to see on The Apprentice on a Thursday night has seeped into the people of God here. And they were silent. Do you notice that?

They were silent. It's a quick meeting. There's no negotiation here. Some of you may wish you had Nehemiah chairing your meetings.

You might get stuff done. The silence showed their conviction of sin. In righting wrongs and calling people back to God, Nehemiah first exposed their sin.

So back in Nehemiah 5, verse 9. So I said, the thing that you are doing is not good. Ought you not to walk in the fear of our God to prevent the taunt of the nations, our enemies?

Nehemiah connects their exploitation of the poor to the fact they just don't fear God. They're not bothered about living God's way. He exposes the root sin of the heart.

[16 : 10] These nobles and officials care more about economics than they do ethics. They have no reverence for God's honour and instead their hearts are full of selfish gain. They disregard what God said and they act just like the world acted.

And the honour of the Lord is a big issue in the book. It's the lack of honour due to God that meant that Nehemiah wept in chapter 2. It's what really bothers him.

And so it's clear here that a saviour is needed. Because fixing the problem of the walls does not fix the problem of the heart. Because the lack of fear of God is the real problem.

And that's something only God can fix. And he does so in the Lord Jesus. And even for us now we're still tempted to be driven by this selfish attitude rather than the fear of God.

Relationship with others at school, at work, at church become about serving my own needs rather than serving the needs of others. And it flows from how we treat God.

[17 : 24] Because we treat others generously because God has treated generously with us. Next week we'll be sharing a Lord's Supper here at church which we do so celebrating unity that we share in the Lord Jesus.

And we do so with careful consideration of how we are treating others. So maybe over this week in preparation we can be thinking are we walking in the fear of God?

Am I seeking to love God and to love others? Are there grievances within the church family that need to be addressed and repented over? Because this is what the human heart is like.

First their sin is exposed and then well gloriously comes changed thinking and behaviour. Have a look verse 11. 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've been exacting from them.

Then they said we will restore these and require nothing from them. We will do as you say. And I called the priests and made them swear to do as they had promised.

[18 : 40] they're cut to the heart. What happens? They'll change thinking and behaviour. They have to give the money back. It's a complete change of heart.

We think of Zacchaeus the costly giving back of four times what he took. And how amazing is it that these novels and officials are not outside the bounds of truth given us from God.

Verse 13 How does this section end? All the assembly said amen and praised the Lord and the people did as they promised. That is amazing news for us here this morning.

Especially if you're looking into the Christian faith. For all of us have that root sin in our hearts of turning away from God and turning to ourselves and being selfish. Being a realist Nehemiah calls for the priests.

The promise is turned into an oath and it gives them a visual aid. Verse 13 He shakes his coat and stuff falls out. You know the bits that you keep in your pockets you know the loose change the receipts the oyster card they all fall to the ground and what's going on?

[19 : 48] Well he's giving he's telling them what will happen if they fail to live with the fear of God before their eyes. They fail to keep their promise if they do not walk in the fear of God. Well this is what God will do.

They will be judged and removed from sharing the blessings of God's people and they won't get to live in God's kingdom. And so we need to heed these warnings today.

If you're not a Christian we'll need to take this seriously. It's the lack of the fear of God that keeps people out of the kingdom of God. But forgiveness is on offer.

If these people who are forcing their brothers into slavery can receive forgiveness and return to God's community well and so can we. So can anyone really. And how then do we respond to injustice with the church?

Well by seeking to right the wrongs. To respond like Nehemiah with righteous anger and call the church to repentance according to God's word.

[20 : 52] And if we are guilty ourselves well then we too need to repent. All to further the building of God's kingdom. Internal injustice but then there's a break in the story as well.

Because the people turn back to God and there's an extract out of Nehemiah's memoirs. Why has he written this here? That's the big question. Is he gloating?

Is he being boastful? Well no. He's likely placed it here to give us a contrast against the oppression of the nobles and officials. So that's lastly Nehemiah's example.

Nehemiah's example verses 14 to 19. Here we see Nehemiah's climbed the career ladder. He's reached governor and he's there for 12 years.

And with his position came certain privileges. Perks of the job. Now I remember when I worked for Tesco as a sixth former one of the perks was owning a Tesco privilege card.

[21 : 58] I got 10% off everything in store. It was brilliant. I even wrapped it up for my mum one Christmas. It was the gift that kept on giving for her. And she got 10% off her shopping every week. It was fantastic.

But Nehemiah's privileges as a governor were a bit more substantial than 10% off in Tesco. A generous food allowance. The best wine. A big salary. But all these expenses and these perks came at the expense of the people.

They had to fund it. And so voluntarily he gave them up. He put them aside. What motivated this self-sacrificial leadership?

Why was Nehemiah different from his predecessors? Well because of the fear of God. The fear of God that the noble officials lacked and Nehemiah had in abundance.

Have a look at verse 15. The former governors who were before me laid heavy burdens on the people and took from them for their daily ration 40 shekels of silver.

[23 : 07] For even their servants lorded over the people but I did not do so because of the fear of God. That is what should have motivated the wheeler dealers in verse 9.

Nehemiah is moved by a genuine love of people and a genuine love of God and he laid aside his privileges and he selflessly served those who were hungry and hurting.

And doing so he follows those greatest commandments didn't he? What did Jesus say? The greatest commandments love God love your neighbour. And then we see Nehemiah's evangelism strategy verse 17 Moreover there were at my table 150 men Jews and officials besides those who came to us from the nations that are around us.

Nehemiah holds evangelistic dinner parties it's a large table sure 150 people and he's using his privilege and position to serve to further the work of God's kingdom.

His lifeline has been so attractive that people from the surrounding nations are there. Well then this comes as a great challenge to us.

[24 : 23] Are we prepared to lay aside our rights and privileges to serve the building of God's people? Now we each need to discern how we can best sacrificially use our influence our resources to further gospel work.

And it's encouraging to see that at Grace Church as we've already prayed people who give up their time to serve with the teenagers on a Sunday night with the children on a Sunday morning leading growth groups people who sacrificially give support to the vulnerable both here and wider afield.

And if we're supporting if we are serious about supporting gospel ministry both locally and globally then it will cost us. It will cost us our time and energy and our prayers to pray for our mission partners.

It will cost us in our wallets as well. Now we have teenagers here in the lucrative babysitting industry and it's a lot of direct competition and it's for a direct word for you guys.

Babysit for other people on a Tuesday night so other people can go to growth group and prayer meeting. That is a great thing and that serves to build up the church. And whilst you are entitled to be paid I'm going to get flack for this why not offer to sometimes do it for free?

[25 : 49] Or give the money away to church or another charity that supports gospel ministry. Giving away your rights to serve to help others build up the church.

And if you don't babysit then why not come to the prayer meeting yourself? Sacrificially giving up your right to relax to come and pray for the building up of the church.

And we all need to discern how we can best build up the church with the resources God has given us. Well as we close one big way for gospel work to be hindered is through internal injustice.

Through the lack of fear of God in our hearts which means we are divided and exploiting others. We're not united under God's words.

But when we seek to fear God and honour his name we can be generous with the vulnerable and sacrificially support gospel ministry. God's people are back in their land they're rebuilding the walls but it's plainly obvious they need a saviour.

[26 : 59] Their hearts need fixing. And Nehemiah isn't him. But his example here foreshadows the work of the greatest servant the Lord Jesus Christ our saviour.

Through him our selfishness and our sin is dealt with. because in Jesus we have someone who was in the form of God and yet did not count equality with God something to be grasped.

He made himself nothing. He took the formant of a servant being born in the likeness of men. Jesus got righteously angry he overturned the tables in the temple he was angry at the mistreatment of God's people and he sought to build God's kingdom.

He exposed the sin of the hearts of the people and called them to repentance and ultimately he laid aside his heavenly privileges humbled himself by becoming obedient to death on a cross all so we can be forgiven.

And now he is exalted in the highest place as Philippians 2 continues that a name above every name and the people all over the nations are called to repent and trust in him and getting a seat at that heavenly banquet that one day we can join in.

[28 : 23] Let's pray. Heavenly Father we thank you for Jesus we thank you of how he came to serve us we thank you that he did not lay on his privileges but came down from heaven to die for us we thank you that he is the one who deals ultimately with our hearts and Father please help us to have that same mindset of Nehemiah and of Jesus sacrificially serving your people please help us Father to identify where we have been neglectful and not and using others selfishly and we thank you for the forgiveness that we have in Christ Amen