

Internal Conflict Comes Calling – Nehemiah 5:1-19

Scripture Reading: Nehemiah 5:1-5

Introduction

They say that only two things are certain in this world, death and taxes

But if you've spent much time in and around churches, you would probably add church conflict to that shortlist of certainties

Conflicts arise in churches for all kinds of reasons:

Personal preferences, changes in the church, resistance to or even rebellion against established authority, cultural influences, insecurities, and occasionally, though rarely, churches even face conflict over theological and doctrinal issues

Pastor and author Thom Rainer once asked people to send him their examples of church fights they had witnessed and he published a list of 25 of the silly things that were reported

They included such gems as:

- An argument over the appropriate length of the worship pastor's beard
- A 45-minute dispute in a business meeting over whether to purchase a file cabinet with 2, 3, or 4 drawers
- Another church fought over which picture of Jesus to hang in the foyer
- An argument over what type of green beans the church should serve at church supper and another over whether deviled eggs were appropriate
- A disagreement over whether to call the meal a "potluck" or a "pot blessing"
- Then there were the members of one church who left the church because they switched to brewing a stronger blend of coffee

We laugh at examples like that but disunity in the church really isn't a laughing matter – no matter what the cause

Because, when God's people are busy fighting with each other they aren't fighting their real enemy and they aren't getting God's work done

That's why the Bible speaks a great deal about maintaining unity and peace in the church

Like in **Ephesians 4:3** which says we should be *"eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace"*

Or **Romans 14:19** where Paul writes: *"So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding."*

And Peter writes in **1Peter 3:8** – *"...all of you, have unity of mind, sympathy, brotherly love, a tender heart, and a humble mind."*

Then he writes in verse 11 that whoever wants to enjoy God's blessings [**1Peter 3:11b**] must *"seek peace and pursue it"*

And there are many other examples we could look to but, clearly, his children living in peace and unity with one another is important to God

Nehemiah 4 ended on an up note as the opposition that started as a whisper campaign of mockery and escalated to threatened violence had been overcome and the work on the wall was continuing

But Satan is nothing if not determined and he wasn't about to be defeated without a fight so he had to find another way to try to disrupt and perhaps halt the work altogether

And since external attacks hadn't succeeded he now turns to provoke conflict within the Judean community itself in Chapter 5

Although church conflicts have many causes and all of them would benefit from the principles we'll see today, the catalyst for this particular internal conflict was the same as in many church fights today – money

If you're taking notes, we will begin by looking at the source and nature of **the conflict**, **Nehemiah's response** to it, and **the people's reaction** to Nehemiah's proposed solution

We are introduced to the conflict in verse 1 of Chapter 5 with the words “*Now there arose a great outcry of the people and of their wives against their Jewish brothers*”

I. The Conflict

There is scholarly debate as to the timing of this conflict and whether it actually occurred in the interim between the events of chapters 4 and 6 or whether it happened some time later and Nehemiah included it out of sequence

If it happened in the order in which it’s presented, it means that while external threats couldn’t stop construction on the wall, the internal conflict seems to have brought the work to a screeching halt

As Nehemiah presents it, there was a **three-fold problem** that led to the complaint

First, the people were numerous and the men weren’t able to work to provide for the needs of their families and one reason for that may well have been because every waking moment was given to building the wall or standing guard

Imagine the conversations that were held when they were finally able to take a break and head home for a bit only to be confronted by hungry kids and “hangry” wives

Then there was a famine underway which, obviously, led to a scarcity of food and higher prices causing some to have to mortgage their property to have money to buy whatever food was available

And then there was the ever-present problem of property taxes levied by the Persian king – taxes that were based on the potential of the land and not the actual produce of it – that still needed to be paid in spite of the famine

That meant that some of them had to borrow money to pay the taxes and some were in default on their payments meaning they had to put themselves and their children into debtor’s servitude to the lenders to pay of their debt

The Judeans were in a difficult situation to be sure and they had to wonder what good was a wall if they all starved to death or were forced into never-ending debt servitude while building it

But the reason they were angry with each other is that the lenders to whom they owed money were their fellow Jews

And as we read the account we get the sense that the wealthy Jews were either oblivious to the dire straits of their fellow Jews or callously exploiting them for personal gain

So, we have a classic case of class warfare between the haves and the have-nots suddenly erupting in a great outcry that reached the ears of Nehemiah

Money problems are rarely *only* money problems and it’s not hard to imagine the hurt that would be felt in thinking that your suffering was being increased by your brother

It’s a sure-fire recipe for discouragement – discouragement with the church’s people, the church’s leaders, and even discouragement with God himself

After all, if you can’t find compassion and kindness and mercy and grace in the church, why bother with it?

The people were in despair and ready to be at one another’s throats and Satan was having a field day

He was able to use this perfect storm of a financial crisis to divide the people and that was a more potent threat to God’s work than anything that Sanballat, Tobiah and their cronies could accomplish

We have no mention of the wall and its reconstruction in Chapter 5 so, if this account happened in the order we have it would we would naturally conclude that the work was brought to a halt by the crisis

Either way, it was critical that Nehemiah deal with the issue so that the people would become unified once more

So let’s look at how he responded once he became aware of the problem

II. Nehemiah's Response

We see Nehemiah's initial response in verse 6 [**Neh. 5:6**] – he got angry

Much of the time, perhaps even most of the time, our anger is sinful

When wounded pride or unsatisfied selfishness are the cause of our anger then it's very clearly wrong so whenever we are angry about some wrong that is committed against us we do well to examine our motives

But all anger isn't wrong and there are times when the only righteous response is anger

Now, what we do with our righteous anger could also be righteous or it could be sinful so we have to be sure our righteous anger spurs us on to righteous action

But the point is, not all anger is sin and Nehemiah's anger was righteous anger at the injustice that was being done

He was likely angry at the greed that was on display for all to see leading to derision by their enemies and over the division that was caused, and over the work on the wall being stopped

But he was also angered by the lack of respect for God evidenced by the behavior of the lenders

Although he doesn't spell it out in direct terms, the Mosaic Law prohibited a Jew from loaning money at interest to a fellow Jew who was in need as we see in **Exodus 22:25** which says –

If you lend money to any of my people with you who is poor, you shall not be like a moneylender to him, and you shall not exact interest from him.

Or **Leviticus 25:35-37** –

If your brother becomes poor 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 from 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.

And we can look at **Deuteronomy 23:19-20** which says –

You shall not charge interest on loans to your brother, interest on money, interest on food, interest on anything that is lent for interest. You may charge a foreigner interest, but you may not charge your brother interest, that the Lord your God may bless you in all that you undertake in the land that you are entering to take possession of it.

Clearly, the Law prohibited, at the very least, taking advantage of the poor through charging them interest on a personal loan which would only serve to put them deeper into debt

It seems that this prohibition would have been in force and therefore the lenders were ignoring the Law and showing no fear of God which would have been reason enough for Nehemiah to be angry

Still, Nehemiah was wise enough to restrain himself from acting out of anger and, as we see in verse 7 [**Neh. 5:7**] he took time to think about the matter and cool off before he confronted the ones who were taking advantage of their brothers

That way, he was able to give a reasoned, thought-out response to the charges rather than a heated reaction

We aren't told whether those who were being harmed by the lenders enforcing the terms of their agreements confronted those who were harming them as we see in Matthew 18 or whether they just made a public outcry or whether they came directly to Nehemiah with their complaint as their first step

But we do see Nehemiah first go to the lenders privately to confront them first before calling for a "great assembly" against them – presumably the great assembly was due to a lack of success in the private meeting

And in verse 8 [**Neh. 5:8**] we see him level an additional charge–

We, as far as we are able, have bought back our Jewish brothers who have been sold to the nations, but you even sell your brothers that they may be sold to us!

Redeeming an Israelite who had been sold to a foreigner was something normally done by a blood relative but here we see that Nehemiah and some other were using money to buy the freedom of Judeans who had been sold as slaves
And he reveals that rather than being a chastisement to those who were selling their brethren into slavery, they saw this arrangement as a profitable enterprise

The rich were getting richer at the expense of the community as a whole and when Nehemiah laid out the facts in public the offenders fell silent and couldn't say a thing in their own defense

And Nehemiah continued by pointing out the obvious – that what they were doing was not good – and how it gave their enemies ammunition

In verse 10 [Neh. 5:10] Nehemiah reveals that he and his brothers – by which he likely means his governmental assistants – had also been lending the people money and grain but, presumably without interest

Otherwise, his anger against the others wouldn't make any sense

Jumping down to verses 14-18, we also see that Nehemiah laid aside his rights as a government official and, rather than take advantage of his position, he covered his own expenses

As governor, Nehemiah was expected to feed the officials who served with him and to entertain foreign guests and he was allowed to tax the people to cover those sizable expenses –

His predecessors had levied a tax of 40 shekels or 1 pound of silver per official per day

But Nehemiah was himself wealthy and he recognized that the people would be overburdened by such heavy taxation so he set aside his rights and covered the expense himself

And in verse 15 [**Neh. 5:15**] Nehemiah reveals that he conducted himself as he did not just because he cared about the people but also because of his fear of God

Nehemiah was living his life not to enrich himself in worldly good but to earn God's approval

And we see him ask God again [**Neh. 5:19**] to be just and to remember the good he had done for his fellow Jews when it came time to hand out heavenly rewards

Nehemiah's motivation was that he wanted to hear the words, "Well done" from his Lord

So we see that Nehemiah had set an example of godly lending and godly living

And he called for the others to stop charging interest on loans and to return everything they had taken including the interest they had charged up to this point and to stop enriching themselves at the expense of their brothers

The rich had fallen silent upon hearing Nehemiah's indictment against them but it remained to be seen how they would react to his suggestion because his suggestion was going to hit them where it hurt – right in the wallet

III. The People's Reaction

It's really a shame but the most common reaction to a confrontation over wrongdoing by church leadership today is typically anger and defensiveness and many people simply leave to join another church or quit church altogether

It's a rare believer who listens to a rebuke, honestly and thoughtfully considers it, owns their error, and repents of it

Perhaps it's an unavoidable consequence of our religious freedom in this country where we have an abundance of churches to choose from but I personally know folks who have bounced from church to church with their problems each time they've been confronted about them

They have no understanding of **Hebrews 13:17** which says –

Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.

So they keep their attitudes and their issues and they carry them from church to church leaving damage in their wake and never growing in godliness

But that isn't always the case and we see in our passage that the rich folks, the nobles and rulers, humbly accepted Nehemiah's rebuke and his suggested solution

Look with me at verse 12 [**Neh. 5:12**] where the guilty said –

"We will restore these and require nothing from them. We will do as you say."

It's clear that they now understood their guilt before God and wanted to make it right

Removing this source of wrongdoing was a huge victory for the people and for Nehemiah because it removed a source of contention and a reason for the taunting of their enemies but even more so because it restored God-honoring attitudes and behavior to the community

And it allowed the work on the wall to continue free from internal controversy and the disunity it caused

But Nehemiah once again shows wisdom in understanding human nature and how easy it is to have good intentions that go awry

So he had the wealthy take a vow before the priests that they would actually do what they said they would do

He held them publicly accountable before God and man and he performed the symbolic action of shaking out the fold of his garment to represent what would happen to those who failed to do as they swore an oath to do

In Nehemiah's day, the folds of their robes above the belt served as the modern equivalent of pockets and people would tuck the valuables they carried with them into the folds

So shaking out the folds was intended to symbolize the loss of everything of value one had

And Nehemiah proclaimed that anyone who broke their promise would rightly lose all they had as a matter of God's judgment and punishment

Accountability is a practice that far too many people balk at believing that it isn't nice – that it's piling on or demanding a pound of flesh from the guilty

But trust is a valuable commodity that, once lost, should be hard to regain and requiring steps of accountability is a biblical concept

Hebrews 10:24-25 tells us that one of the benefits of being a part of a church family is mutual accountability –

And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.

As does **Colossians 3: 16** which says –

*Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and **admonishing one another** in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God*

And **Proverbs 27:17** –

Iron sharpens iron, and one man sharpens another.

The life of a Christ-follower is an ongoing struggle and the forces we contend with are spiritual so we should welcome accountability in our daily walk and especially when we have sinned and desire to live a life of repentance

But as we see from the Colossians passage, accountability isn't tit for tat retaliation or rubbing someone's nose in their sin but based in the Word of God and born of the desire to see the person succeed

Nehemiah knew that a public vow before God would serve as a further motivation for the wealthy wrongdoers to keep their word and succeed in their struggle with greed

Conclusion

It's interesting that Nehemiah doesn't cite the Mosaic Law and tell the lenders that what they were doing by charging interest was unlawful in that sense

Rather, he appealed to the overarching principle of acting with kindness and bending over backwards to not cause harm to others – even to the point of hurting oneself if necessary

Community and unity are important values to God and Nehemiah here calls on the wealthy to look upon their less fortunate countrymen as brothers and to act accordingly – to behave as family

Since Nehemiah doesn't go to the letter of the Law to indict the lenders there is a good chance that the agreements they had with the borrowers were actually legal and binding – they might well have been able to point to the letter of the law and protested that their loans and the consequences were permissible

But this passage shows us that, as Christ-followers, we aren't permitted to hide behind the letter of the law if doing so inflicts harm on others or if we're violating the spirit of what God's Word says and using technicalities to deflect from our wrongdoing

In fact, we should seek to suffer harm to ourselves before we would inflict harm on someone else

We see this principle in **Philippians 2:3-8** – let's look at that passage together –

Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

Notice that God's Word doesn't say to ignore your own interests but rather to take the interests of others into account also – to think about the other guy and actually put their welfare above your own being willing to yield for their sake

That's really the principle that Nehemiah appealed to isn't it?

He asked the lenders to forgo the profit that was likely rightfully theirs for the sake of the less fortunate among them And he set the example by giving sacrificially and by not taking advantage of his situation by snatching up land and profiting from interest on the loans he made

Nehemiah could have undoubtedly increased his wealth while in Jerusalem but he chose to deplete it and look to God for reward in heaven rather than earthly wealth

This account was about a financial concern that was causing division but we would err if we were to see it only in terms of money because disunity in the church takes many forms

But most of them have the same origin found in our personal preferences not being honored or our ego being bruised or things like that

And in this passage we see how to handle the conflicts that Satan loves to use to hinder the church's effectiveness to bring about a God-honoring resolution

First, we must make our complaints known to the right people – those who can actually do something about them

It's amazing how often we are quick to talk to everyone about our problem except those who could fix it

Second, we need to respond biblically in solving the issue without reacting in anger or sweeping the matter under the rug hoping it will get better on its own

Then all parties involved need to commit to submitting to biblical principles and authorities and determine to respond appropriately to resolve the conflict as God would have us do so that unity will prevail and God's work can proceed

Let's pray