

**WHAT YOU ARE DOING IS NOT RIGHT**

Nehemiah 5:1-19 (Key verse: 9)

*“So I continued, “What you are doing is not right. Shouldn’t you walk in the fear of our God to avoid the reproach of our Gentile enemies?”*

The message is based on the book of Nehemiah chapter 5 verse 1 to 19. Key verse is verse 9, let’s read it together one more time, *“So I continued, “What you are doing is not right. Shouldn’t you walk in the fear of our God to avoid the reproach of our Gentile enemies?”*

We are continuing with the book of Nehemiah; we thank God for all the messages so far. Nehemiah continued to lead the people of Jerusalem to rebuild the wall. We have established that this construction of the wall, is an important work of God. This important work, they are carrying out for the glory of God and for their own safety. They faced much external opposition from Sanballat and Tobiah who are from without the wall. The opposition of Sanballat and Tobiah was clear and direct. They were intent on stopping the work of God. In the current section, Nehemiah faces opposition to the work of God that is from within the wall. This sort of opposition is not direct. It is subtle, and yet has far reaching effects. It creeps in, causes division and discourages people from doing the work of God.

How was this opposition introduced? Let’s read verse 1 (ask someone to read it) *“Now the men and their wives raised a great outcry against their fellow Jews.”* There was disunity among the Jews. In verse 14, we can see in hindsight, that Nehemiah was appointed governor of Jerusalem. This means that he was responsible for the welfare and well-being of the people of Judah. This is why they could come to him with their problems. There was disunity among them, and this disunity was threatening the progress of the good work that was taking place on the wall. For that reason, it had to be addressed with urgency.

Now what was the cause of this disunity? Let’s read verses 2 to 5 (let’s read them together) *“2 Some were saying, “We and our sons and daughters are numerous; in order for us to eat and stay alive, we must get grain.” 3 Others were saying, “We are mortgaging our fields, our vineyards and our homes to get grain during the famine.” 4 Still others were saying, “We have had to borrow money to pay the king’s tax on our fields and vineyards. 5 Although we are of the same flesh and blood as our fellow Jews and though our children are as good as theirs, yet we have 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.”*

From the verses we just read, the disunity is rooted in economic challenges. The people of Judah had been freed from the land of slavery. They were allowed to repopulate Jerusalem, rebuild their properties and reestablish themselves as a functioning society. However, due to their negligence of the house of God, God had struck them with a famine. (*Haggai 1:9-11*) As a result, they had limited grain, and this low supply pushed up the price of grain. Those that had large families were struggling to buy grain. Those that had fields and vineyards were mortgaging them just so that they can buy grain. (Explain mortgage) At the same time, those that had not mortgaged their properties had to borrow money to pay taxes on those properties. Finally, others had to subject their children to slavery because they could not afford to make payments on their loans. (so they had to render services in lieu of making repayments.) Well, these are common economic indicators when things get really tough; the poor suffer and the rich exploit. The only reason why there were complaints is because these things were taking place among the people of God. The rich among the people of God were exploiting the poor among the people of God.

How did Nehemiah respond to these things? Let’s read verses 6 to 8, *“6 When I heard their outcry and these charges, I was very angry. 7 I pondered them in my mind and then accused the nobles and officials. I told them, “You are charging your own people interest!” So I called together a large meeting to deal with them 8 and said: “As far as possible, we have bought back our fellow Jews who were sold to the Gentiles. Now you are selling your own people, only for them to be sold back to us!” They kept quiet, because they could find nothing to say.”* Nehemiah was enraged by these things. He was angry that the noble Jews were not only charging their own people interest, but were also trading their own people as slaves amongst

themselves. You can imagine that this reminded them of when they were still slaves in Babylon and even after they were freed, they had to sell themselves just so they may have something to eat. They knew that what they were doing was shameful and traumatic to the children of God, so they kept quite and had nothing to say when Nehemiah challenged them.

Let's read verses 9 to 11 together, *"So I continued, "What you are doing is not right. Shouldn't you walk in the fear of our God to avoid the reproach of our Gentile enemies? 10 I and my brothers and my men are also lending the people money and grain. But let us stop charging interest!"* Nehemiah was very angry at the nobles and the officials because what they were doing was not right. They did not walk in the fear of God to avoid the reproach of their Gentile enemies. God had given the nation of Israel an economic system that was equitable, graceful, and considerate; an economic system that helped the people to show care for their neighbors. This is what the word of God says, *"35 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. 36 Take no interest from him or profit, but fear your God, that your brother may live beside you. 37 You shall not lend him your money at interest, nor give him your food for profit. 38 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. 39 "If your brother becomes poor beside you and sells himself to you, you shall not make him serve as a slave: 40 he shall be with you as a hired worker and as a sojourner. He shall serve with you until the year of the jubilee. 41 Then he shall go out from you, he and his children with him, and go back to his own clan and return to the possession of his fathers. 42 For they are my servants, whom I brought out of the land of Egypt; they shall not be sold as slaves. 43 You shall not rule over him ruthlessly but shall fear your God."* (Lev 25:35-43)

This is from Leviticus 25: 35-43. This was Moses giving the people the law, preparing them for this very moment in the time of Nehemiah, and yet the nobles forgot all about it and Nehemiah sought to remind them of the way in which things should be done. We can see that Nehemiah cared for the people and yet his response to the situation was not driven by his own ideals. He wanted the people to obey the word of God. He was not simply angry that the nobles and officials exploited the poor, he was angry that they disobeyed the word of God. He acknowledges that lending to fellow Jews is good and permissible, but such lending should not be done with interest. They should lend interest free just as the law of God requires.

Thus, in verses 11 to 12, he commands the nobles and the officials to give back to the poor, their fields, vineyards, olive groves, houses and all the interest they had charged them. To which they agreed. *"We will give it back,"* they said, *"And we will not demand anything more from them. We will do as you say."* Then Nehemiah encouraged the people to keep their word by making them to take an oath before the priests and pronouncing a curse upon anyone who would not carry out what they had promised. I thought Nehemiah was a little harsh here or dramatic, but when you think about the forgetfulness of these nobles and officials and how they treated the people, it cannot be helped. And indeed, the whole assembly said, *"Amen,"* and the people did as they had promised.

The financial challenges of the poor sought to derail the work of God of rebuilding the wall. Indeed the possibility of this was high. This was the result of the nobles and the officials forgetting the word of God and giving themselves over to the environmental indicators and taking advantage of the poor. Yet Nehemiah was able to help the nobles and the officials to return to the word of God, by calling them out and reminding them of what God had commanded regarding the poor among His people. And because of his leadership and reminder, the plight of the poor was addressed and the threat to the work of God of rebuilding the wall was circumvented. Poverty can be such a distraction and a stumbling block to many things, and especially to the work of God. We have many so-called churches all over the world who have devoted themselves to targeting poverty and helping the poor. Nehemiah showed us that it is a good thing to help the poor, but he was not distracted by it. However, these other churches are so distracted that they have even changed the message of the gospel by adding an adjective and calling it prosperity gospel, which is no gospel at all. Yes, we may struggle and be poor, and we may want to be free from that. I think that is a good thing, but we should not allow ourselves to become so distracted that we miss the big picture, that there is a greater work to which God has called us. Amen! We must not dedicate our entire life just trying to get out of poverty. We should do all that is godly and righteous to get out of poverty without neglecting the work of God. Even our reason for wanting to get out of poverty should be so that we may serve God more resourcefully and effectively. Amen!?

Now, how could Nehemiah remember the word of God in that situation? How did he avoid becoming distracted by the daily hardship of the people? How was he able to remember to call the nobles and the officials back to the word of God? Verses 14 to 16 show us that Nehemiah was a graceful and compassionate governor. Unlike his predecessors, he did not eat the food that was allotted to the governor by the king. He understood very well, that such food was made available through the blood and sweat of the poor and he would not bring himself to indulge in the same. "But out of reverence to God", he acted with charity and did not lord it over the people. Nehemiah devoted himself to the work of God of rebuilding the wall. Verses 17 and 18 shows that Nehemiah was a generous man. He supported a large number of people from his own supplies and would not even use the governor's allotment to augment his supplies as he served the people. Finally, in verse 19 we see that Nehemiah believed and trusted that God would remember all that he had been doing and would reward him for all he had done.

Nehemiah lived a life that reflected the spirit of the law of God, he was generous and compassionate, and he trusted God and did all things for the glory of God. He did not expect to receive rewards from any other but God himself. For that reason, he was able to direct all of his life towards pleasing God and not himself. I think that is why he was different, looking forward to the reward that God promises, he was able to avoid charging the people of God interest and exploiting them. Because he sought reward from God, he was able to defend the people of God and preserve their image before their Gentile enemies.

In concluding,

Nehemiah was the governor in Jerusalem and he helped the poor. He did this to ensure that the internal struggles amongst the people of God do not interfere with the work of God. Moreso, he did this because he wanted the people to revert back to the economic system that God had given them. A system that operated with love for the neighbor, with grace, consideration and care. A system that allows the Gentile enemies of the people of God to look upon the children of God and marvel at what love with which they entreat one another. Amen! Finally, Nehemiah could do all these things because he trusted God, and believed that God would reward him for all he had done.

Some of you may contest that I am quoting the following verse out of context, but indulge me for this purpose. Jesus said, "*The poor you will always have with you,*" (Mat 26:11) Indeed, we do have the poor, and most and other times, we are the poor. Amen! At the same time, we are no governors and we do not have limitless resources. So what are we to do with this passage? The timeless principle that we must draw here transcends money and resources by far, "*walk in the fear of our God to avoid the reproach of our Gentile enemies*" this has to do more with how we treat one another than whether we give each other things or not. It has to do with always being mindful of how our conduct will reflect the estate of the children of God to the world outside. I have always been grateful for the relationships I have built in the previous years with my brothers especially, Khomo, Desmond and Steve. Well, they are no governors and they're certainly not rich. However, I have enjoyed many occasions in which they afforded the grace of being poor to them. Dealing with me with utmost love, respect and care. I mean, even now, I stay at Khomo's house and I don't think the rent I'm paying is quite enough to cover the benefits I'm receiving (I'm not suggesting anything with that on the rental amount. 😊) They are no governors, but yet, they know how to help the poor. So if anyone thinks that I am generous, that I care about people and try to be there for them, these guys have a lot to do with that. Amen! That is what we are talking about, "*walk in the fear of our God to avoid the reproach of our Gentile enemies.*" It's the small things. How we deal with the brethren should remind them of the love of God and how much is that love with which He has loved us. Amen!

Finally, our paragon of virtue and our God, Jesus Christ, who is also our hope and our righteousness. He said in the beatitudes, "*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*" (Mat 5:3) We know that "*All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,*" (Rom 3:23) God has a currency that He requires in order to gain entry into heaven. Therefore, the whole world piles at the pearly gates and desire to enter. But unfortunately, no one possesses the currency required to enter. Thus all are poor and destitute in the eyes of God. That is why the singers sing, "Nothing in my hands I bring, simply to thy cross I cling." And another says, "Le ge nka tlisha digauta tsa lefatshe ka moka, di ka se ntlhatswe, goba dia mpholosa." Or as Spurgeon puts it, "Thou high and holy One, who shall be permitted to have fellowship with thee? The heavens are not pure in thy sight, and thou chargest thine angels with folly, who then of mortal mould shall dwell with

thee, thou dread consuming fire?" The whole world is the poor before God, and none has the currency required to pay for entry into heaven. God did by sending Jesus Christ so that by dying on the cross, He may become our currency with which we may buy the favourable and benevolent countenance of God and entry into heaven. This is the core of our hope and the rock upon which our confidence is anchored. We may be poor and needy materially, but we must not forget that Jesus Christ has delivered us from our true poverty and defends us where we couldn't defend ourselves. We may have certain financial limitations and challenges in this world and we may be poor, but we must not forget our great hope of triumphalism. We must not be distracted from doing and pursuing the work of God by these things...let us focus on Him who alone was able to make us rich before God. Amen!

I will end with a quote from the book of revelation, hopefully this will paint some picture of the riches of the sure hope we possess, *"3 And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. 4 He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away." 5 And he who was seated on the throne said, "Behold, I am making all things new." Also he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true." 6 And he said to me, "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give from the spring of the water of life without payment."* No amount of money can afford anyone to obtain and drink from the water of life. Yet, the Alpha and Omega declares concerning His children, *"To the thirsty I will give from the spring of the water of life without payment."* That is our hope and inheritance.

Amen!