

The Generous Governor

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: 31 May 2017

Preacher: Lee Roberts

[0:00] Last week when we looked at the first thirteen verses of Nehemiah chapter 5, we found that! the work of rebuilding the wall again had to stop. That's because justice had to be restored.

If you remember, the rich had been exploiting the poor and their greed finally precipitated! a crisis. So it required Nehemiah to step in before the elite of Jerusalem would change their ways. Nehemiah did more than just tell the rulers to do as I say but not as I do. If he'd done that, that would have really produced disastrous consequences for them. To resolve the problem, Nehemiah's own conduct had to be above reproach. In the verses that we saw last week, we saw a few times where Nehemiah compared himself to the people who were exploiting the poor. In verse 8 of chapter 5, Nehemiah said, We saw there where Nehemiah and his associates were buying back the people whom the other greedy Jews were selling into slavery. Verse 10 talked about how Nehemiah was lending money and grain to the poor without exploiting those people. The verses we looked at last week ended on a good note.

The beginning of verse 12 documented this response from the greedy people. It said in verse 12, So they said, We will restore it and will require nothing from them and we will do as you say.

[1:46] And then verse 13 ended this way. It said, And all the assembly said, Amen and praise the Lord. Then the people did according to this promise. We'll finish chapter 5 tonight by looking at verses 14-19.

So let's go ahead and read Nehemiah 5 verses 14-19. Moreover, from the time that I was appointed to be their governor in the land of Judah, from the 20th year until the 32nd year of King Artaxerxes, 12 years, neither I nor my brothers ate the governor's provisions.

But the former governors who were before me laid burdens on the people and took from them bread and wine besides forty shekels of silver. Yes, even their servants wore rule over the people, but I did not do so because of the fear of God.

Indeed, I also continued the work on this wall, and we did not buy any land. All my servants were gathered there for the work. And at my table were one hundred and fifty Jews and rulers, besides those who came to us from the nations around us.

Now that which was prepared daily was one ox and six choice sheep. Also fowl were prepared for me, and once every ten days an abundance of all kinds of wine.

[3:02] Yet in spite of this, I did not demand the governor's provisions because the bondage was heavy on this people. Remember me, my God, for good, according to all that I have done for this people.

Nehemiah never directly says it, but we get the impression from these verses that some people were questioning Nehemiah's conducts and motives. Even though the greedy people agreed to change their ways, some were probably unhappy about having to do that.

And if so, those people would have liked nothing more than to point out some character flaw in Nehemiah. We get the impression that some people were questioning Nehemiah's motives and actions because tonight's verses put the spotlight on Nehemiah himself.

That's very uncharacteristic of Nehemiah. When we saw the list of wall builders in chapter 3, we noted that Nehemiah omitted his own name from the list.

But for some reason here in chapter 5, he spends six verses talking about himself. Something had to compel Nehemiah to defend his character. Floyd Hall, a past president of Eastern Airlines, made a comment that could be applied to Nehemiah.

[4:15] Hall said these words. He said, The kind of guy who commands leadership is, first of all, the fellow who knows his business and knows it so well that he exudes confidence.

Second, he has to be a thoroughly honest person with himself and everyone else, not because some outside influence tells him, but because of an inner ethical sense that tells him right from wrong.

Finally, the natural leader must have a real appetite for accomplishment. He must have the ability to work hard for long periods of time without breaking down mentally or physically under stress.

Tonight's passage shows how Nehemiah exhibited the qualities that Floyd Hall mentions. As we look at the passage tonight, we'll split the verses into three sections.

Each section will reveal something about Nehemiah's conduct as governor. Verses 14 through 16 comprise the first section of the lesson. From these verses, we see that Nehemiah was a rare governor.

[5:18] So he was a rare governor. Listen to verses 14 through 16 again. Nehemiah wrote there, Moreover, from the time that I was appointed to be their governor in the land of Judah, from the twentieth year until the thirty-second year of King Artaxerxes, twelve years, neither I nor my brothers ate the governor's provisions.

But the former governors who were before me laid burdens on the people and took from them bread and wine besides forty shekels of silver. Yes, even their servants bore rule over the people, but I did not do so because of the fear of God.

Indeed, I also continued the work on this wall, and we did not buy any land. All my servants were gathered there for the work. In these verses, Nehemiah highlights multiple differences between his way of governing and his predecessor's approach to governing.

These differences are what make Nehemiah so rare as a governor. First, we see that Nehemiah was a self-sufficient governor. We can tell he was self-sufficient because of what verse 14 says. Verse 14 says that neither Nehemiah nor his brothers ate the governor's provisions. As we saw from the verses, Nehemiah served as Judah's governor for twelve years.

[6:43] That was from Artaxerxes' twentieth year to Artaxerxes' thirty-second year. That ran from 444 to 424 B.C. One of the fringe benefits of being governor was a food allowance, and that was granted him by the Persian officials, and it was probably for entertaining guests.

Nehemiah refused to take advantage of that, though, even though it was rightfully his. Consider what makes Nehemiah's self-sufficiency so unusual.

Forgoing the privilege of making people pay his expenses was a great contrast to former governors, in especially two ways, according to the text. He says there that he did not charge them any taxes.

To have the people pay a ruler's expense, they would have to be taxed. But Nehemiah refused to tax the people. And we know, even in our day, this is an extremely unusual action for a ruler.

And even back in that day, the former rulers of Judah had always taxed the people. Of course, we know that governments everywhere tax the people, and they simply can't give up the power to tax.

[7:53] They have too much greed to give up that legalized robbery there. But this contrast of Nehemiah reveals character seldom seen in rulers. This would be equivalent to our president saying that he would pay for all of his own expenses without taking a salary, too.

Can you imagine what would happen if any modern-day ruler decided to do that? Another contrast between Nehemiah and his predecessors was in the lack of tyranny.

The servants of the governors before Nehemiah had a bad record of oppressing the citizenry. And servants, of course, reflect the ruler's conduct.

When a ruler oppresses his people, the servants also will oppress the people. And the oppression exercised by the servants and associates of rulers is often worse than what the ruler does himself. This was especially the case in Nehemiah's day because eunuchs and other domestics have been some of the most fearful tyrants of governors of that time period.

[8:57] Sometimes these servants and associates even coerced the citizenry into doing things on the promises of getting them favor with the governor. And so it's a subtle form of tyranny.

Government personnel often let their position go to their heads and use that to oppress the people. Forgoing the privilege of making the people pay his expenses was a choice between rights and responsibilities.

He made a great choice by choosing responsibilities over the rights. And that will be a hard choice for people in our age to accept. Think how often we hear today of people saying that they have their rights.

But Nehemiah realized that responsibility exceeds rights in both importance and priority. He had the right and the power to tax the people. But he chose not to do that because of the situation at hand. He was more concerned about his responsibilities as a ruler to seek the welfare of those in his nation than he was to seek his own rights. In the spirit of the New Testament, Nehemiah shows us that we too must be willing to refrain from what we regard as being rightly ours for the sake of others.

[10 : 10] Think about what would have happened if Nehemiah exercised his rights. If he had accepted what legitimately was his, it might easily have hindered the work of the Lord and undermined Nehemiah's influence.

Worse yet, accepting what was due him may have led him into sin. Nehemiah instead assessed the situation and found it inappropriate for him to demand the governor's pay and benefits.

Any insistence on material support would have had a detrimental effect upon him and the people. Think about what 1 Corinthians 10.12 says.

Paul wrote there, Nehemiah seems to have been living by that principle centuries before Paul wrote that sentence.

The end of verse 15 explains why Nehemiah approached things differently and it explains why Nehemiah wanted to be self-sufficient. The end of verse 15 says, Yes, even their servants bore rule over the people, but I did not do so because of the fear of God.

[11 : 22] So do you see Nehemiah's reason there for why he acted like he did? He did it because of the fear of God. So the fear of God was a great motivator for Nehemiah in his unselfish conduct as governor.

And that helps us understand why that we have so much corruption and cruelty today in contrast to what we saw with Nehemiah. There's a great lack of the fear of God from government leadership today.

And we see that by how the modern day nations rule their people. Where the fear of God is present, though, rulers will be considerate and have character in their performance.

Where the fear of God is lacking, the rulers will likely be cruel, greedy, and oppressive to the people. And in verse 16, Nehemiah shows us the results of being motivated by the fear of God.

He says, Indeed, I also continued the work on this wall, and we did not buy any land. All my servants were gathered there for the work. So that's the second rare thing about Nehemiah.

[12 : 28] And that is that Nehemiah was a working governor. So Nehemiah was a working governor is what goes in your next blank. We know that Nehemiah oversaw the building of the walls, and he was right out there with the workers.

He did not order and plan the walls and then grow on a vacation somewhere while the others did the work, and he got all the glory. His servants also were never exempted from working on the walls just because they were employed by the governor.

The action of Nehemiah would be a great encouragement to the other workers. Seeing Nehemiah and his servants out working on the walls would let them know that Nehemiah really was supporting their labor.

Think about how many ill feelings would be eliminated if rulers used their authority to help the people rather than to exempt themselves from the work.

And Nehemiah understood that. So rather than pursuing leisure, he actually worked himself. Nehemiah was very single-minded.

[13 : 31] We've seen that as he's been working on the wall through these chapters. He concentrated on one thing and one thing only. That gives us an example of an important principle of success.

When you think about all the things that have been written about how to make it to the top, very seldom do you see somebody say how important single-mindedness is. But without singleness of purpose, there really can be no adequate leadership.

If a leader is more interested in himself and his personal ventures than he is in his work, his employees will soon learn about that and they will lack the motivation and their objectives will become unclear.

Of course, that will lead to a decline in morale, creativity will wane, and the best-laid plans will start coming apart at the seams. The same thing applies, too, to pastors and church leaders.

Believers can be sidetracked by some worthy social cause or other activity, and when this happens, they soon forget the singleness of purpose which made the Apostle Paul what he was, for example. [14:39] Paul said this in Philippians 3, 13 and 14. Brethren, I do not count myself to be apprehended, but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

Does this mean that business managers or church leaders must work 24 hours a day, 7 days a week? Answer to that is no, not really, but it does mean that leaders must have well-established priorities and concentrate on doing first things first.

When they have personal integrity backing that up and they're dedicated to the task at hand, that's when they're going to succeed. So we've seen that Nehemiah was a rare governor because of his self-sufficiency and willingness to work.

In verses 17 and 18, we learn more about why Nehemiah could be so self-sufficient. We see that he also was a rich governor. So he also was a rich governor.

In verses 17 and 18, Nehemiah wrote, At my table were 150 Jews and rulers, besides those who came to us from the nations around us.

[16:01] Now that which was prepared daily was one ox and six choice sheep. Also fowl were prepared for me, and once every 10 days an abundance of all kinds of wine.

Yet in spite of this, I did not demand the governor's provisions because the bondage was heavy on the people. Nehemiah was supporting the officials and employees of the government as well as Jews who migrated to Judah.

As governor, he had to take care of them until they could be settled in Judah. Also as governor, he had to entertain visitors and official guests from other parts of the Persian Empire.

In the ancient Near East, it was customary to calculate a king's establishment not by the quantity of money he had, but by the quantity of provisions that he used.

So verse 18 tells us the quantity of daily provisions for Nehemiah and the people that he fed. The cost to supply one ox, six sheep, and some poultry every day had to be pretty large.

[17:05] Even so, Nehemiah paid for that cost out of his own pocket. Verse 18 also tells us why Nehemiah refused to have his expenses paid by the people.

He said that the bondage was heavy on this people. Think about how that differs from the greedy Jews that we saw last week. Unlike the greedy Jews who cruelly used misfortunes of others to have gain for themselves, Nehemiah did just the opposite.

He saw the heavy burden upon the people because of their stressful conditions, and to help alleviate their problems, he refused to charge the people taxes, and he even paid his own expenses.

So he dug into his own pocket to pay his expenses rather than burden the people. Compassion for the people is what guided his government, and he genuinely felt for the people's problems.

He was genuine himself. His compassion for the people was real, and he would sacrifice for them. Nehemiah illustrated the principle of Psalm 37, 26.

[18:12] That verse says, The wicked borrows and does not repay, but the righteous shows mercy and gives. Nehemiah also reminded us of 1 John 3, 17.

1 John 3, 17 says, But whoever has this world's goods and sees his brother in need and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him?

We'll take an intentional side trip here to consider how Nehemiah's actions foreshadow Christ's actions. Nehemiah's actions benefited a subset of people for a limited time.

Jesus' actions benefit all believers for eternity. Nehemiah also deserved the benefits of his office, but he willingly chose to forgo them.

Jesus, the God of the universe, deserved to be worshipped, but he too willingly set aside his privileges. Nehemiah made personal sacrifices for the good of his countrymen.

[19:15] Jesus gave the ultimate sacrifice to redeem his people. So you can see some parallels there between Nehemiah's actions and Jesus' actions.

But Jesus' actions, of course, demonstrated the love of God on a much bigger scale. We'll see another similarity to Jesus as we look at the last section of our passage from Nehemiah tonight.

But let's go back to our passage in Nehemiah 5 and look at verse 19 now. So far in tonight's passage, we've seen a rare governor and a rich governor.

In verse 19, we see a remembered governor. A remembered governor. And that is past tense on that one as well.

We'll talk about why that is in a minute. Verse 19 is a short prayer. Nehemiah prayed, Remember me, my God, for good.

[20 : 13] According to all that I have done for this people. This prayer is the first of four similar prayers we'll see in the book of Nehemiah. The other three prayers like this come in the book's final chapter.

So we're several weeks away from that. We'll get to that when we look at chapter 13. Some people criticize Nehemiah for asking God to remember his good works.

That criticism, though, is unwarranted. Nehemiah's prayer here reveals his desire for divine reward and approval. Seeking the praise of men will often corrupt, but seeking the praise of God will only purify.

We adjust our conduct to please the one that we want to please. So when you ask God to look upon your works for approval, you will be careful that your works are according to his holy standards, not the unholy standards of the world.

A man of God must sometimes declare his integrity against the oppositions and insinuations of his enemies. And in such cases, he can, without presumption, expect God to vindicate his faithfulness to God.

[21 : 26] J. Vernon McGee put it like this. He said, Nehemiah was a wonderful man. His concern was for his people, but they would forget him.

It is a sad thing, but many a famous person has learned that the world forgets. People have short memories, but Nehemiah asked God to remember him.

He said, Remember me, my God. How wonderful to know that while God does not remember our sins, he will always remember our good works.

Consider that last sentence one more time. How wonderful to know that while God does not remember our sins, he will always remember our good works.

Several places in Scripture show us that God remembers our good works. We'll look at just a couple of cross-references to remind ourselves of that. Listen to Hebrews 6.10.

[22 : 27] Whoever wrote Hebrews said this. He said, Listen to that verse one more time.

For God is not unjust to forget your work and labor of love which you have shown toward his name in that you have ministered to the saints and do minister. When we studied the Olivet Discourse a few months ago, Jesus himself showed us that he remembers our good works.

Matthew 25, 34 through 40 are the verses where Jesus said these words. It's the familiar passage that says, Then the king will say to those on his right hand, Come, you blessed of my father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.

For I was hungry and you gave me food. I was thirsty and you gave me drink. I was a stranger and you took me in. I was naked and you clothed me.

I was sick and you visited me. I was in prison and you came to me. Then the righteous will answer him saying, Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you or thirsty and give you drink?

[23 : 48] When did we see you a stranger and take you in or naked and clothe you? Or when did we see you sick or in prison and come to you? And the king will answer and say to them, Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these, my brethren, you did it to me.

Earlier, when we were looking at how Nehemiah's self-sacrificing conduct foreshadowed what Jesus would later do, I said we would see one more parallel between Jesus' actions and Nehemiah's actions.

We see from verse 19 that Nehemiah trusted God to provide a just reward even if people treated Nehemiah poorly. Listen to how Peter summarized Jesus' conduct as he faced his human accusers.

1 Peter 2.23 says this about Jesus. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return. When he suffered, he did not threaten, but committed himself to him who judges righteously.

That last bit is what we really want to see in parallel to what we see from Nehemiah. Jesus committed himself to him who judges righteously. Here in Nehemiah 5.19, Nehemiah did exactly the same thing.

[25 : 11] Nehemiah prayed that God would remember him for all the good works that Nehemiah had done for the people. Did God grant Nehemiah's request to be remembered?

I said we would talk about why it's a remembered governor, past tense, and that's because God certainly did grant Nehemiah's request. Many centuries after Nehemiah did these things, people worldwide see through Scripture that God remembered Nehemiah's good works.

The Holy Spirit included Nehemiah's good works in Scripture, and that gives us yet another indication that Nehemiah made his request with proper motives. Nehemiah supported himself rather than charge the people with his maintenance.

He refused to take advantage of his position to acquire land or feather his nest for the future. Instead, his time was devoted to making Jerusalem safe for his brothers, not building his own personal fortune.

He supplied his own table, and he welcomed strangers to share in his hospitality. He did all this because he feared God. If God kept track of his sacrifices, that was going to be good enough for Nehemiah.

[26 : 29] Matthew Henry summarized verse 19 like this. Nehemiah mentions his work to God in prayer, not as if he thought that he had hereby merited any favor from God as a debt, but to show that he looked not for any recompense of his generosity from men, but depended upon God, only to make up to him what he had lost and laid out for God's honor.

And he reckoned the favor of God reward enough. Nehemiah reckoned the favor of God reward enough. How much more content could we be if we are able to do the same thing?

Tonight's passage reminded us of several qualities in Nehemiah that are worth emulating. Even though Nehemiah knew how to take definite action and exert courageous leadership, he was still dependent upon God.

He was an example of generosity, and he also set an example of unselfish service. Nehemiah had a practical, vital, and effective relationship with God.

He was motivated by his knowledge of who God is and strengthened by the assurance of what God can do. This relationship with God brought all of his life into conformity with God's truth.

[27 : 51] It gave Nehemiah an inner honesty which drew men to him, and his integrity formed the basis of all his relationships. It also gave him a balanced perspective on the world and his place in it.

That's why he could relinquish his rights for the sake of the people and the work. His success came from his integrity and his single-mindedness. He could forgo temporal advantages because he sought God's approval alone.

He was satisfied with the knowledge that his reward would come from the Lord. What Nehemiah did here contrasts to what others before him had done.

We saw in verses 1 through 13 last week that they had been selfish. He was unselfish. They were out for what they could get for themselves. He was out for what he could give to the people.

They were thinking of themselves. He was thinking of God and God's people. Nehemiah contrasts his own fear of God with their lack of this fear, and he contrasts his behavior with that of governors who had preceded him.

[29 : 00] He had not come for self-serving reasons, but to serve others. His table was heavily loaded with provisions and wonderful food and wine, but not at the expense of others.

Instead, he managed not to use the provisions he might have exacted from the people as their governor because he knew that their troubles were many, and all in all, he desired the sense of God's pleasure.

Nehemiah refused to take the perks that might rightly have come to him because of his office. Those were taxes and the good life. On the contrary, he lived out of his own means and used his personal abundance to feed those who were less fortunate.

Those who were associated with him followed the same pattern. They gave and worked too, and therefore he was a magnificent example of servant leadership, and it was all because Nehemiah feared God.

That should be our pattern. It's also the pattern of Jesus who did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. If we follow that pattern, we'll be able to say, as Nehemiah does in closing, remember me, my God, for good, according to all that I have done for this people.

[30 : 22] Let's close in prayer. Father, we thank you for the opportunity to get together tonight and study your word. Help us learn from Nehemiah's example and always strive to be more and more like him in our dealings with others and our dealings with you.

Help us remember that reward from you is more than reward enough. Be with us as we continue to go through the week and help us as we move forward. In Jesus' name we pray.
Amen. Thank you.