

Greedy Oppression

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[0:00] Amen. And there was a great outcry of the people and their wives against their Jewish brethren.

For there were those who said, We, our sons and our daughters, are many. Therefore let us get grain that we may eat and live. There were also some who said, We have mortgaged our lands and vineyards and houses that we might buy grain because of the famine.

Then were those who also said, We have borrowed money for the king's tax on our lands and vineyards. Yet now our flesh is as the flesh of our brethren, our children as their children.

And indeed we are forcing our sons and our daughters to be slaves. And some of our daughters have been bought into slavery. It is not in our power to redeem them, for other men have our lands and vineyards.

And I became very angry when I heard their outcry in these words. After serious thought, I rebuked the nobles and rulers and said to them, Each of you is exacting usury from his brother.

[1:32] So I called a great assembly against them, and I said to them, According to our ability, we have redeemed our Jewish brethren who were sold to the nations. Now indeed, will you even sell your brethren, or should they be sold to us?

Then they were silenced and found nothing to say. Then I said, What you are doing is not good. Should you not walk in the fear of our God because of the reproach of the nations, our enemies? I also with my brethren and my servants am lending them money and grain. Please let us stop this usury. Restore now to them, even this day, their lands, their vineyards, their olive groves, and their houses, also a hundredth of the money and the grain, the new wine and the oil that you have charged them.

So they said, We will restore it, and will require nothing from them. We will do as you say. Then I called the priest and required an oath from them that they would do according to this promise. Then I shook out the fold of my garment and said, So may God shake out each man from his house and from his property who does not perform this promise, even thus may be shaken out and emptied.

[2:46] And all the assembly said, Amen, and praised the Lord. Then the people did according to this promise. In chapter 4, we saw how Nehemiah faced two common forms of opposition.

He first dealt with ridicule. That's the easiest of all forms of opposition. Once he handled the ridicule, then he had to deal with the threat of violence. The threat of violence is the path often taken when ridicule fails.

Nehemiah overcame the ridicule by recognizing it for what it was. It was a weak attempt to get him to stop the rebuilding effort. He followed up then in two ways.

He took the matter to God in prayer, and he looked to God for vindication. Then the second way he followed up is that he kept building. Nehemiah overcame the threat of violence by practical means such as arming his workers, posting guards, keeping the people in the city at night where they would be safe, and establishing procedures for unexpected attacks.

We saw last week that these devices were successful. His enemies were frustrated, and the work kept advancing relentlessly. We just saw, though, in the first 13 verses of chapter 5, that Nehemiah had to face a new type of opposition next.

[4:07] And that opposition consisted of greedy oppression. We'll see that this opposition was even worse than what we saw in chapter 4. We'll break the 13 verses into three sections tonight, starting with verses 1 through 5.

And in those verses, we'll see the internal exploitation. The internal exploitation is what we see in verses 5, 1 through 5. Here are those verses again.

Nehemiah wrote, And there was a great outcry of the people and their wives against their Jewish brethren. For there were those who said, We, our sons and our daughters, are many.

Therefore, let us get grain that we may eat and live. There were also some who said, We have mortgaged our lands and vineyards and houses, that we might buy grain because of the famine. There were also those who said, We have borrowed money for the king's tax on our lands and vineyards. Yet now our flesh is as the flesh of our brethren, our children as their children.

[5:10] And indeed, we are forcing our sons and our daughters to be slaves. And some of our daughters have been brought into slavery. It is not in our power to redeem them, for other men have our lands and vineyards.

The first sentence of verse 1 shows why this opposition was even worse than the opposition in chapter 4. Who was the source of the opposition here in chapter 5? Well, this new opposition came from within.

It arose because of wrong conduct by some of the Jewish people themselves. I thought you were going to say it was the wives. No, I wasn't going to say that. I'm following the scripture here.

It had been true of Israel before this because during the days of the monarchy, the Jewish states had been opposed by their pagan neighbors.

There had been many wars. But remember, when God sent his prophets to recall the people to righteousness, it wasn't the pagans who killed the prophets. It was the Jews themselves.

[6:15] And when you think about it, we see some of the same things in church history. Church history shows that some of the most successful attacks on the church have come not from unbelievers, but from those within the church itself.

They have been from other supposed Christians who promoted heresy, or supposed believers denouncing, persecuting, or even killing other Christians. It's interesting we see how difficult this oppression was because the Hebrew word translated great outcry in verse 1 literally means to shriek.

It's a plea for deliverance from their burden. We can see there that the opposition was a major issue. We see a few groups that voice their opposition, and the first to voice their grievances are the merchants and laborers.

Those are the folks in 5.2. By their own admission, they have large families, and because they've been helping in rebuilding the wall, they've not had an income for a wall.

So without that income, they're no longer able to support their families that are dependent upon them. Their resources have been all used up. So the situation that they face is bleak.

[7:27] There's no way out of this impasse unless they get some help. The second group to voice their grievances are the farmers. We see those in Nehemiah 5.3.

Their farms are especially vulnerable to robber bands from the hill country or even the Bedouin tribesmen from across the border. It wasn't uncommon for these people to anticipate a bumper crop only to have their harvest stolen from one of those who raided their lands or plundered their villages.

In this case, however, the problem looks to have been caused by famine more than anything else because you see they mention famine there in the verse. So in these strained times, a farmer to support his family would borrow money on his fields or against his crops, and the rate of interest he had to pay was exorbitant.

If his crops failed or famine came or locusts decimated the land, the loan sharks then would take away his lands and sell his family into slavery. This was plainly contrary to the law.

That comes from Deuteronomy 23 and Deuteronomy 24. But these farmers had willingly given all they had to work on the wall, and some of the rich moneylenders had foreclosed on their mortgages and sold their children into slavery.

[8:43] The law actually permitted a man to sell himself or even his daughters into slavery, but not his sons, and if he did sell any of his family into slavery, it had to be for a limited time.

In the seventh year, all the slaves went free, and if the year of Jubilee came first, all the servitude ended. In times of drought or famine, a man's land could be mortgaged or sold, but it always reverted back to its original owner at the date of the Jubilee.

Notice, though, that verse 5 clearly says that the poor were selling their sons into slavery. They were so desperate that they intentionally were violating God's law just to try to stay alive.

The third group Nehemiah hears from are the people who are having trouble paying their taxes. Judah, like all the other Persian provinces, had to pay taxes, partly in money and partly in produce. These taxes generally weren't thought to be oppressive, but the very nature of the economy, coupled with the overbearing policy of the rich, made even the small amount of taxation a hard burden for the people to bear.

[9:56] For simplicity, we split the complaining groups into three categories, but the groups likely had some overlap. Many of the merchants doubled as farmers, too, and everyone but the wealthy likely had some trouble paying the taxes.

When the people compared themselves with those who were exploiting them, they said, in effect, we too are human. We love our children as much as they love theirs. We're willing to work, but they've made our life impossible by owning our houses, our lands, and even our crops. So they say we can't repay what we owe or redeem our children from slavery. That's a paraphrase of Nehemiah 5.5. The desperate situation we see here is rather surprising.

That's because, according to the first chapters of Ezra, those who had come back from the exile returned with many worldly goods.

Ezra gave an inventory of their positions, and he said that there were 5,400 articles of gold and silver. In addition, King Cyrus had himself opened his treasury and given back all of the articles of the temple, which Nebuchadnezzar had carried away from Jerusalem.

[11:11] Once in Jerusalem, many of the Jews were wealthy enough or had prospered enough to panel their houses, and paneling your house was a luxury reserved for the rich.

When the temple was built, we also saw that the people gave generously for its embellishment. Only 13 years before Nehemiah's arrival, a second group of exiles had returned with Ezra, and these brought additional silver and gold and freewill offerings from the people that were still left in Babylon.

Other gifts from Babylon seemed to be arriving regularly, too. So what changed this situation so that by the time we reach Nehemiah 5, we see that the people are so poor.

Perhaps the famine started that downward spiral. The problem had as much to do with the people themselves, though, as the natural conditions. The sequence looks to be something like this.

First, they had a lack of adequate food. Then they mortgaged the fields for short-term cash to buy grain and pay taxes. Then they lost those fields because they couldn't pay back what was borrowed.

[12:22] And then they were forced to sell their sons and daughters into indentured servitude or outright slavery just to stay alive. Think about how the sequence is similar to what we see today.

Many people find themselves in desperate situations just because they're unable to repay loans. For the people of Nehemiah's day, the wall building aggravated the problem of the poor, but we shouldn't blame the wall building for causing the problem.

The wall building was necessary. It was the greed that was wrong, and the greed was the root of the problem. When people put extra effort forth into the Lord's work, we often see sin problems such as this greed, and that sin and stress always reveals where the weakness is in people.

In verses 6 through 11, Nehemiah steps in to address the desperate situation. So we've seen the internal exploitation. Verses 6 through 11 document the angry confrontation.

The angry confrontation is your second point. Listen again to that angry confrontation from Nehemiah.

[13:37] These are verses 6 through 11. And he said, And I became very angry when I heard their outcry in these words. After serious thought, I rebuked the nobles and rulers and said to them, Each of you is exacting usury from his brother.

So I called a great assembly against them, and I said to them, According to our ability, we have redeemed our Jewish brethren who were sold to the nations. Now indeed, will you even sell your brethren, or should they be sold to us?

Then they were silenced and found nothing to say. Then I said, What you are doing is not good should you not walk in the fear of our God because of the reproach of the enemies, the nations. I also, with my brethren and my servants, am lending them money and grain. Please let us stop this usury. Restore now to them, even this day, their lands, their vineyards, their olive groves, and their houses, also a hundredth of the money and the grain, the new wine and the oil that you have charged them.

We can see from these verses that Nehemiah was angry. In fact, the New King James says he's very angry. He was angry because the behavior was wrong, and because he realized the danger of the community slipping into serious inequality and even worse economic conditions.

[15:02] Also, the harmony among the fellow members of the community was continuing to break down. He knew he had to take action before this ruined the entire community. Some commentators criticize Nehemiah for his anger here.

Even some English Bible translations try to soften the wording of the verse where it says he was very angry. Scripture is clear, though, that anger for the right reasons is justified. Ephesians 4.26 tells us, be angry and do not sin. Jesus himself showed anger when appropriate. That's why we have to realize that a great difference exists between righteous and unrighteous anger.

We're frequently angry only in the unrighteous sense when something is offensive to us personally, but we need to be warned against unrighteous anger. At the same time, though, we need to be angry when righteous anger is appropriate.

And we see that Nehemiah expresses righteous anger in verse 7 when he confronts the nobles and rulers for exacting usury. Usury, of course, is charging excessive interest.

[16:15] That's bad enough in itself. The nobles and rulers made it even worse because they were exacting usury against their own brethren. Deuteronomy 23.19 says, you shall not charge interest to your brother, interest on money or food or anything that is lent out at interest.

Deuteronomy 23.19 that we just read prohibited the Jews from charging other Jews any interest.

The nobles and rulers' sin was compounded because they were charging excessive interest.

We'll see from verse 11 Yeah, that does happen some today, too. We'll see from verse 11 that the nobles and rulers appear to have been charging about 1% interest per month.

So that would equate to 12% annually, of course. Interest itself is not evil. God allowed the Israelites to charge interest on loans to foreigners.

And in fact, interest is a legitimate business practice at times. When somebody borrows money to advance his business, the one who loans the money should get a chance to receive some of the share of the increased profits made possible by the loan.

[17:26] But this wasn't the situation in Nehemiah's day. The people in Nehemiah's day had borrowed money to buy food in order to stay alive. They weren't going to profit from getting this loan.

The loan was simply for their own survival. Those who loan here are in a much different situation than when loaning to someone who's going to use the loan to advance profits.

In Nehemiah's time, the loan really should have been a gift out of charity or compassion. When you look at it, though, Nehemiah's rebuke apparently has no effect on the leaders of the people.

They give him no reason to think at first that they will change their conduct. In fact, they stay silent. So this gives evidence of their stubborn refusal to compromise. The priests who should have challenged their conduct have long since been won over to their side.

And nobody has stood up to them in recent years to tell them that their business practices are not in accordance with God's word. Also, there are many and they are united, so Nehemiah needs their help if he is to continue rebuilding the wall.

[18:35] It would have been easy for Nehemiah just to try to ignore this and hope it went away on its own, but instead we see how Nehemiah is a man of principle. He knows that if the people don't live in accordance with the teaching of God's word, they won't enjoy God's blessings.

So he realizes that he'll only weaken his position by restating his point. So instead, he convenes a great assembly against the people who are charging the usury. Think about what happens when he does this.

To do the assembly, he has to stop the work on the wall. So then, in the presence of all of the people, he challenges the nobles to return to the Lord and order their lives by the standard laid down in God's word.

In his rebuke, he shows that a leader should set the example for his people. And centuries before Jesus spoke the words, Nehemiah actually followed the principles of church discipline described in Matthew 18.

Listen to what Jesus said in Matthew 18, 15-17. He said, Moreover, if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone.

[19 : 46] If he hears you, you have gained your brother. But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church.

But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector. We see that Nehemiah first confronted the people directly.

When that failed, he took it to the broader group. Speaking to the broader assembly, Nehemiah contrasted his behavior with the behavior of the sinning leaders. Look what Nehemiah wrote in Nehemiah 5.8.

He said, Then it goes on to say, Then they were silenced and found nothing to say.

The greedy people had been enslaving their own people through foreclosure on loans, but Nehemiah and some others were busy putting out their own money to free other Jews who were in bondage to foreigners.

[20 : 56] So you had one group selling the Jews into slavery and Nehemiah and his camp trying to buy them back. So you had the greedy people enslaving others to make money while Nehemiah and the others were spending money to set the people free.

So think about the contrast between the behavior of these two groups. Presenting the contrast actually intensified the rebuke to the greedy people. It showed just how wicked and cruel and inconsistent the greedy were acting.

Sometimes it helps in rebuking sin to focus on the opposite of sin. It's easy for us to get upset about what the greedy people were doing because, after all, we would never dream of making money by selling people into slavery.

But here's something to think about. How often do we see God's people living the opposite of how they should be living? Comparing themselves to the evil way the world behaves, they don't seem so bad, but they need to be shown holy ways to compare to their own evil ways.

And when they compare their ways to holy ways, you can see just how ugly their sin really is. It should remind us that the Christian standard is God's standard rather than the world's standard.

[22 : 12] The end of verse 8 has the sinning rulers and nobles' reaction, they said nothing.

Perhaps we should give them credit for at least having enough sense to avoid trying to justify their behavior even more.

Nehemiah doesn't stop, though. He presses on in verses 9 and 10. He says, Then I said, What you are doing is not good. Should you not walk in the fear of our God because of the reproach of the nations, our enemies?

I also, with my brethren and my servants, am lending them money and grain. Please let us stop this usury. The evil of the greedy Jews was seen by their adversaries.

The situation in Nehemiah's day was similar to the situation in our day. When we have sin in the church, do unbelievers notice that and see that? Just think how often we see scandal in the church brought out in the newspaper and on the internet.

The world generally knows all about sin in the church. Some in the church fear that when the church deals with sin publicly, it reveals the church's dirty linens to the world.

[23 : 25] But the world already knows about the church's dirty linens. Dealing publicly with known church sin tells the world that the church is remaining true to its stand against ungodliness.

Failure to fight evil within God's camp tells the world that his people are hypocrites and it brings shame on God and God's work. That's a reminder to us that we need to be careful how we behave before unsaved people.

The world watches us carefully and our behavior will either honor God or dishonor God. The Jews were building the walls for all their adversaries to see and the Jews claimed that God was helping them in that effort.

But their greedy ways betrayed their faith and brought a great reproach upon God and the dishonor sin brings upon God is really what makes sin so bad. Nehemiah again uses himself and his colleagues as examples in verse 10.

Nehemiah points out that he, his brethren, and his staff are lending money and grain without exacting usury. Some Bible translations and commentary suggest that Nehemiah was admitting his own guilt of charging interest on his loans.

[24 : 40] That, however, seems inconsistent with his high leadership qualities and his charge to the nobles and the officials about their guilt. That's why it's much more likely that he was lending money

without interest.

After urging the rulers and nobles to stop the usury, Nehemiah makes one more request. Look at verse 11 again. Nehemiah exhorts the rulers and nobles to give back what they've taken, including interest.

He says, Restore now to them, even this day, their lands, their vineyards, their olive groves, and their houses, also a hundredth of the money and the grain, the new wine, and the oil that you have charged them.

The greedy Jews were told that they needed to do more than simply to cease practicing their evil habits. They were also to make amends for the evil that they'd done in the past.

Giving back what's been taken benefits both the victim and the sinner. It's easy to see the benefits to the victim. Restoring to the wrong that which was taken is only proper.

[25:49] It's true justice. So this order from Nehemiah provided justice for the victims. Once again, we see Nehemiah's concern for the victims. We saw it in the calling of the public assembly and now we see it in the restoration of what was taken from them.

That's really the only way to deal with evil. It's little justice or encouragement to the victim if there's no restoration. If courts are to be a court of justice, they must provide for the restoration to the victims.

But the restoration also benefits the sinner. Think about why that is. It's a little less obvious. But the restoration proves the genuineness of the repentance of the evildoers.

Many people are sorry for their sin because they got caught. But that's not true repentance. True repentance actually will restore what it wrongfully took from others.

Remember the story of Zacchaeus. When Zacchaeus, the tax collector, invited Jesus into his home and heart, he immediately began to talk about restoring what he'd wrongfully taken in the tax collecting.

[26:57] The talk of restoration by Zacchaeus gave evidence that he was genuine in his acceptance of Jesus Christ. In fact, Christ, who certainly never declared anyone saved unless they genuinely repented, followed that talk of Zacchaeus with the words, Today salvation has come to his house.

According to Nehemiah 5.11, how soon did Nehemiah want the victims to be restored? Right away, yes.

Nehemiah informed the greedy Jews that they must begin this restoration even this day. Delay would only add to the wrong. Delay would add to the injury of the victim so the evil had to be stopped immediately.

Always when men are dealt with about their sin, God orders repentance now, not later down the road. Never does God encourage us to delay the forsaking of our sin.

In the first eleven verses of the chapter, the rulers and nobles have been silent. In verses twelve and thirteen, they finally break their silence. We see that Nehemiah's rebuke hit home.

[28:11] In these verses, we see the genuine affirmation. The genuine affirmation shows that the sinners will do as Nehemiah requested.

Listen to verses twelve and thirteen one more time. So they said, we will restore it and will require nothing from them. We will do as you say. Then Nehemiah says, I called the priests and required an oath from them that they would do according to this promise.

Then I shook out the fold of my garment and said, so may God shake out each man from his house and from his property who does not perform this promise. Even thus, may he be shaken out and emptied.

And all the assembly said, Amen, and praise the Lord. Then the people did according to this promise. The greedy people's affirmation showed recognition of the evil of their ways.

The promise recognized that what they did was wrong. In their promise, they pledged to undo their wrong. Some people admit they're wrong, but they continue their evil ways.

[29:21] These greedy Jews were repenting with sincerity because they were changing those ways. The affirmation showed regard for both Nehemiah and the poor people too.

The greedy Jews readily submitted to Nehemiah's authority. Their promise said that. Many problems would be resolved in our society today if people gave due respect to authority, so we can learn a lesson from the Jews in that regard.

The promise by the greedy Jews also showed that they now would regard compassionately the needs of the poor. Knowing that words are cheap and easy to say on the spur of the moment under public pressure, Nehemiah made the guilty leaders take another step.

He made them take an oath affirming that they would do what they said. The priests witnessed the oath-taking, and Nehemiah visualized for them the grave consequences that would come if they lied to God.

Shaking out the folds of his robe, which served as pockets, he asked God similarly to shake people out of his house, and he wanted him to shake out every person who failed to keep the oath.

[30 : 29] The unselfish leadership and courageous action of Nehemiah bore fruit. Not only did the offenders do as they promised, but they also restored unity, and they praised the Lord.

We can tell that from the end of verse 13, it says, the people did according to this promise, and that's the statement that shows that the affirmation was genuine.

The affirmation was more than just words. It was more than just a formal ceremony. It was actually followed by action. The people's response is gratifying.

They know that Nehemiah is on their side. His handling of the situation is just and equitable.

Inspired by his godly qualities, they give expression to sincere praise.

Think about how the day has turned around. A day that began with oppression and sorrow ends with rejoicing and praise to God. The rejoicing itself is commendable.

[31 : 30] That's because few people remember to give praise to God after the deliverance comes. The oppressed Jews were an exception, though. They had grateful hearts, and those hearts praise God.

Praise to God also comes when sin is properly dealt with and forsaken. And if sin had been properly dealt with in our churches today, like Nehemiah fought the greed in Israel, the churches would be more godly and would give more praise to God.

That's because sin silences praise, but when we silence sin, then we're free to begin praising again.

The astonishing thing about this chapter so far is that Nehemiah succeeded.

We know that he faced stiff opposition because the nobles and rulers didn't respond when he approached them the first time after he'd exposed the wrong that they did and challenged them to repent.

But when he really challenged them in front of the congregation, they did repent. So these verses contain important principles for today's leaders. Today, we live in an era of continued depersonalization.

[32 : 39] People feel more like things than individuals of worth. In our economy, we see corporations exploit those whom they hire, and the primary concern seems to be with pleasing the stockholders in a lot of cases.

The same thing can be true of the church, though, because those who willingly give of their time and ability and of their income and resources often have more and more demands made of them. And often they get less and less appreciation. By contrast, though, managers and church leaders who have the ability to keep their personnel happy also have more efficient and more productive groups.

The key to this kind of effective leadership is found in Nehemiah's example. We notice several things from Nehemiah. First, we notice that the people came to Nehemiah at a most inopportune time.

He was busy rebuilding a wall that was necessary for their protection, but yet he was willing to quit to handle the problem. Others might have become disgruntled because of the complaining spirit that he had to deal with.

[33 : 48] Nehemiah, however, shows us how to handle this kind of situation because he was prepared to stop and listen. He saw the complainers as people and not statistics, and the people were more important to him than his production and his rebuilding schedule.

Second, he probed beneath the surface to address the real cause of their predicament. Had he not done so, he would attack the fruit of the problem and left the root untouched. It was the greedy oppression rather than the famine that was the root cause of the problem and if Nehemiah had ignored this oppression it would have only paved the way for more oppression to pop up in different forms later on.

When he attacked the real issue Nehemiah was able to rectify the problem and get the community back on track. Finally! Nehemiah evaluated the problem in the light of the word of God and called upon the leaders to conform to God's revealed will.

Nehemiah's secret of success is really no secret after all. He was close to God. Nehemiah had his priorities right and he set a consistent example.

Those who were associated with him followed the same pattern they gave and they worked. It's a magnificent example of servant leadership and it was because Nehemiah feared God.

[35 : 21] As Proverbs 9.10 says the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom and the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding and Nehemiah certainly showed his wisdom from the fear of the Lord.