

# Nehemiah: Building a City Within the City, week 7

## Wealth and Worship (Nehemiah 5:1–13)

April 15, 2007

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*... if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him?*

— 1 John 3:17

Thus far in Nehemiah's efforts to build both a great city and a great church as a city within that city, opposition has come externally. But in this section of Scripture we discover that perhaps the greatest and most likely threat to God's mission for His people is internal sin by those who claim to be worshipers of God. This principle is incredibly important because, much like Judas who was one of Jesus' own disciples, Satan can and often does work through those who are in positions of spiritual influence among God's people to cause the greatest amount of division and destruction (e.g., Acts 20:28–30).

Furthermore, much like Judas, the sinful undermining of Christian unity and witness to an unbelieving world is rooted in financial greed. For this reason, Scripture has more than eight hundred verses on the subject of money. Jesus also had much to say about money. Roughly 25 percent of all His teaching was about money, including that money is a revelation of our heart's priorities and that someone cannot worship both God and money (Matt. 6:19–24).

Greed is not only a grievous sin against God, but also a painful sin against Christian unity and love. God's people do not merely have spiritually connected lives, but also financially connected lives, as they transact business and exchange goods and services with one another. Practically, those with wealth and power must be careful not to take advantage of fellow Christians and thereby make a mess of the lives of their brothers and sisters while also defaming Jesus' name among the non-Christians who are watching to see if Christian love is fact or fiction. Indeed, as Christians we are to love people and use money, rather than love money and use people. The only two options are to worship our wealth or worship with our wealth. The Bible speaks of four kinds of people in regards to wealth:

<b>1. Righteous Rich</b> People who become rich because God has blessed them, they have worked hard, invested smart, and have not obtained wealth through sin. Also people who spend their money righteously through tithing, sharing, caring for the needy, etc. Examples include Abraham, Job after he was restored, and Joseph of Arimathea.	<b>3. Unrighteous Rich</b> People who become rich through sin and spend their money in a sinful way. Examples include Pharaoh, Judas Iscariot, the rich young ruler, and those charging excessive interest in Nehemiah 5.
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## **2. Righteous Poor**

People who are poor because they are righteous, are righteous despite being poor, and act righteously with their money though they are poor. Examples include Jesus, the widow who gave her mite, orphaned children, and the working class poor in Nehemiah 5.

## **4. Unrighteous Poor**

People who have no money because they do not work, do not spend wisely, and do not tithe to God. Proverbs speaks a lot about a man who does not work and therefore shall not eat, sluggards, and Paul says that any man who does not provide for his family has denied his faith and is worse than an unbeliever.

Sadly, our culture tends to look only at issues of poverty and wealth, rather than at righteousness and unrighteousness. In Nehemiah 5, those who are rich are acting in a way that is unrighteous or sinful against their righteous but poor fellow church members. In that day, it was not unlawful for Jews to loan money to one another, but they were not to act like money lenders and charge interest (Deut. 23:19–20). They were to treat one another with love even in the matter of taking security (Deut. 24:10–13; Ex. 22:25–27) or making a brother a servant (Lev. 25:35–46). Both the people and the land belonged to the Lord, and He would not have anybody using either one for personal gain in a sinful manner. Furthermore, the “Year of Jubilee” (Lev. 25) required that every fiftieth year, all debts be forgiven, all land be restored to its original owners, and all servants be set free as God’s way of caring for the poor.

Yet the unrighteous rich in Nehemiah’s day did not share God’s heart for their poor brothers and sisters and many troubles ensued. The economic hardship became so dire that even the normally silent wives were compelled to speak out in protest on four accounts. First, some people were facing starvation in light of a food shortage. Second, some people had become so desperate that they had leveraged all of their possessions (fields, vineyards, houses) and risked losing literally everything. Third, to make matters worse, some of the poor were also unable to pay their taxes to the government, which put them in great legal peril. Fourth, in an effort to stave off financial ruin, some families had sold their own children into slavery to pay off their debt. As a result, some of God’s people were bankrupting and enslaving fellow church members while they were all working together to rebuild the city and their church as a witness of God’s love.

Upon hearing of the great injustice, Nehemiah was angry. Some commentators have wrongly criticized Nehemiah for his anger, as if anger was somehow an emotion unfit for the godly. But God Himself has a righteous anger (Deut. 13:17), as did Jesus during His earthly life (John 2:14–22). Indeed, much anger is not righteous, but a righteous anger is a gift from God given to compel us to action. This is precisely what happened with Nehemiah.

As a wise leader, rather than lashing out in anger, Nehemiah spent an unspecified amount of time thinking and praying through his response. While some matters are trivial enough that a leader must dismiss them and proceed with their mission, this situation struck at the very heart of the kind of people they were going to be and therefore merited Nehemiah’s immediate attention. Nehemiah boldly confronted the most rich and powerful members of their church and city, named their sin, and called them to repentance. Even though they were

not technically breaking the laws of their nation, they were acting sinfully according to God's laws and found themselves guilty and without defense.

Rather than merely allowing the guilty to repent, Nehemiah demanded that they also practice restitution, a Christian practice that sadly has not been as widely practiced in our age as it should be. If those who had taken advantage of their brothers and sisters merely repented, the practice would have stopped, but apart from restitution, the victims would have still remained in dire poverty with devastated lives. It is often not enough to simply say that we are sorry to God and others for our sins, but also repay what we have stolen and restore what we have destroyed. Apparently, Nehemiah was himself guilty of this same sin to some degree (5:10), and rather than defending himself or acting hypocritically, he led through his own example of repentance and restitution. A leader must model godly virtues, such as repentance and restitution, and not merely demand it of others while acting hypocritically.

In repentance, the unrighteous rich publicly agreed to Nehemiah's counsel. He responded by inviting God to curse them if they failed to keep their word. God's people responded in worshipful gladness to God for the justice and mercy they had received.

In conclusion, the big idea of this section of Scripture is that God's people must treat one another with fairness and grace when it comes to business dealings. While we must obey the laws of our nation and state, as well as follow wise and prudent business practices like contracts and the like, we must never forget that as we do business together, we are also bearing witness to non-Christians about the gospel of Jesus Christ. We are revealing whether God or money is our functional god and greatest priority. Thankfully, God's people in Nehemiah stopped worshiping their money and started worshiping with their money so that God's love, mercy, and grace were made visible through their wealth.

**Verses for next week:** Nehemiah 5:14–19