

## Nehemiah: Building a City Within the City, week 8 Humility and Hospitality (Nehemiah 5:14–19)

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*Remember for my good, O my God, all that I have done for this people.*

— Nehemiah 5:19

In the previous section of Nehemiah, we learned that due to high taxation and a famine, financial hardship had come upon many of God's people. Furthermore, the unrighteous rich were taking advantage of the righteous poor (their fellow church members) by charging high interest rates on loans and then taking their fields, vineyards, houses, and children when they defaulted on their debts. Worse still, even the great leader Nehemiah had succumbed to the temptation to increase his own wealth through unjust means. Thankfully, Nehemiah both repented of his own sin and made restitution, while also compelling everyone else who was implicated in the injustice to do the same. The next short section of verses reveal that Nehemiah's repentance was in fact genuine, as demonstrated by his ongoing life example.

### **A godly leader puts the mission above their personal interests.**

It was customary in that day for political leaders, like Nehemiah, to collect additional taxes from their people to increase their own personal wealth. Some of this money was arguably justified and included such things as a personal salary, living expenses, a personal staff, and a generous budget. It was also customary for a man in Nehemiah's position to purchase as much land as possible because he knew that its value would only increase as the wall, city, and church were rebuilt. Nonetheless, Nehemiah did not raise any taxes for himself or purchase any land. To do so would have harmed his pastoral witness to the poor, from whom he would have amassed his wealth. The result was that Nehemiah willingly denied many of his own personal interests for the sake of the mission.

### **A godly leader must make great financial sacrifices to begin a new work.**

Not only did Nehemiah forego the usual wealth given to a man in his position, he also paid for all of his personal, political, and ministry expenses out of his own pocket. This included formal dinners with choice meats and wines for no less than one hundred and fifty dignitaries and other people of note, as Nehemiah ministered to the richest and poorest members of his city. To be able to do so, he must have been a rather affluent man and stands as an example of someone who was both righteous and rich. He gained and spent his money in ways that honored God and helped people.

### **A godly leader must be willing to give their life to a cause if they hope to succeed.**

Nehemiah devoted twelve years of his life to this project. He demonstrates the simple but important leadership principle that real change takes time because there are no shortcuts to success. The great writer on pastoral leadership Eugene Peterson rightly calls this kind of leadership "long obedience in the same direction."

### **A godly leader often opens their home to practice hospitality.**

Among his requests to the king, Nehemiah asked that a large home be built for his personal use. While some would criticize him for such a request, we now see that he used it as his base of operations and welcomed one hundred and fifty people there every evening for dinner as a lavish demonstration of hospitality. Nehemiah modeled to the entire city the ministry of hospitality—a ministry that is so important God even designated a spiritual gift for its execution (Romans 12:6a, 13). It is one way that the character of God and the gospel of Jesus are made visible.

The one true God is an eternal community of Father, Son, and Spirit (Matthew 28:19) and we were made in His image and likeness for friendship and community (Genesis 1:27), which explains why it is not good for us to be alone (Genesis 2:18). But because of sin we are separated from God and each other and are strangers to God (Isaiah 59:2; Ephesians 2:12; 4:18). Through Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection, however, we are welcomed into friendship with God as Christians and into friendship with fellow Christians as the Church. Likewise, when we welcome strangers to become friends, we are living out the doctrines of the gospel and showing God's grace and love for people.

Building upon Nehemiah's example, the New Testament says that church elders are to practice hospitality (1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:8) and that their example is to be followed by all Christians (1 Peter 4:9). Furthermore, hospitality is meant to be extended to family (1 Timothy 5:8), friends (Proverbs 27:10), Christians (Galatians 6:10), and non-Christians (Leviticus 19:34).

In *Bowling Alone*, Harvard professor Robert Putnam chronicles the national demise of hospitality, community, and friendship over the past twenty-five years:

- The social activity of playing cards together is down 25 percent.
- The frequenting of bars, nightclubs, and taverns is down 40 percent.
- The number of full-service restaurants is down 25 percent and the number of bars (including coffee) and luncheonettes is down 50 percent, but fast food outlets are up 100 percent, as more people eat alone and eat more meals in their car.
- Having a social evening with someone from your neighborhood is down 33 percent.
- Family dinners are down 33 percent.
- Having friends over to your home is down 45 percent.
- From 1985 to 1999, the readiness of the average American to make new friends declined by nearly 33 percent.

In Seattle especially, the need for hospitality is dire. With more people moving in to the area and a high percentage of singles, the isolation and loneliness factor for many is very real and painful. Curiously, we see many lonely people gathering at coffee shops with their headphones on ignoring one another; even though there is a craving for hospitality, there is apparently a lost memory of how to practice it. Hospitality is an ever timely gift to the city.

### **A godly leader stores up their treasures in heaven.**

Jesus Himself taught that the treasures we amass on this earth will one day disappear, but through good works done out of a heart of love for God in light of

His grace to us, we can store up eternal treasures in heaven (Matthew 6:20; Luke 18:22). Nehemiah prays for just that—that God would remember his life and service when he arrives home at heaven one day.

In conclusion, Nehemiah emulates the same principles as the greatest leader in the history of the world, our Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus humbly entered history to suffer and die and thus put the mission of our salvation above His own personal interests. Jesus left the wealth of heaven and made great sacrifices to minister free of charge while on the earth, and He lived a life of poverty as a result. Jesus gave His life for the cause of our salvation because that is what success required. Jesus often enjoyed hospitality during His life on the earth; He ate the Last Supper with His disciples and instituted The Lord's Table for us to partake of until we are welcomed into His eternal heavenly home to enjoy the Wedding Supper of the Lamb (Revelation 19:6–9), which will have the best meats and wines (Isaiah 25:6). On that day, Nehemiah and those who serve God faithfully as he did will also be rewarded according to their deeds on earth (Matthew 25:31–46; Luke 19:17–19; Romans 2:6–11; 8:1; 14:10–12; 1 Corinthians 4:5; 2 Corinthians 5:9–10; Colossians 3:25; Revelation 11:18). In this we see that God honors the humble who give their lives to Him and to others.

**Next week:** Nehemiah 6:1–14