

Sermon Outline

“Building Unity Through Generosity”

Nehemiah series, part 5 – Nehemiah 5:1-19 – Ben Wikner – February 27, 2011

Main Idea: The gospel calls us to build unity through generosity.

Outcry of the Poor (verses 1-5)

1. God’s people have been hard at work rebuilding the wall of Jerusalem. It’s an all-consuming, all-hands-on-deck project. That meant that many had not done their normal work of planting and harvesting. In addition, there has been famine, taxation and a generally hard life.
2. The people are over-stretched and exhausted. As is so often the case, it is the poor and the disadvantaged who suffer the most in such times. They cannot feed their families and are on the brink of ruin.
 - a. Some of the needy have mortgaged their land in order to buy food and seed for their fields. Loans are being made to “help” those in need. But in so doing, lenders are squeezing profits out of their brother’s misery and humiliation, and making a bad situation even worse for them.
 - b. Even more troubling, the loan repayments have caused many to give themselves or their children to economic enslavement. Some have even given their daughters away to be a wife to the lender as payment.
3. The poor are powerless and the situation is only getting more desperate. Greed, oppression and indifference have prevailed among the people of God. And Nehemiah was righteously angry.

The Wrathful Response of Nehemiah (verses 6-13)

1. What informs Nehemiah’s anger is God. His anger is over the *injustice, oppression, and disunity* in the body. He is outraged by the abuse of the poor and needy among God’s people, and this *by God’s people*.
2. Below is the Old Testament background for Nehemiah’s indignation:
 - a. God forbids usury: God’s Word strictly forbade the charging of interest to a needy brother (see Lev. 25:35-37, 39-40).
 - b. God redeems his people: God redeemed his people out of the slavery, bondage and oppression they suffered in Egypt. God is in the business of setting free the captives, not in placing them in oppressive economic bondage.

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- c. God established the year of Jubilee: The year of Jubilee was established in Leviticus 25 as the crown of the sabbatical pattern that God imposed upon Israel under the Law of Moses. Every 49 years property was returned and economic slaves set free (see Lev. 25:10). In verse 11, Nehemiah requires all property to be returned and debts annulled, which means all slaves freed. Basically, Nehemiah directs an impromptu Jubilee and makes the Jews swear with an oath that came with curses to anyone who failed to comply.
3. In the midst of rebuilding, God's people need renewal and revival. But division, oppression, and indifference halt the work. Nehemiah saw that clearly, was outraged and took action to remedy the disunity among God's people.

The Personal Example of Nehemiah (verses 14-19)

1. Because Nehemiah feared the Lord and was a man of integrity and grace, he did not conform to the cultural norms of selfish advancement and personal enrichment of those in authority. Rather he singularly glorified God and bore witness to others by his example of sacrifice and generosity.
2. But Nehemiah points us to a greater exemplar: Jesus Christ (see Luke 4:17-21). Jesus sets us free from the bondage of sin and brings us to our year of Jubilee: all our debts are paid. We are no longer debtors to sin but have been freed by Christ's blood, the purchase price of redemption.
3. Like those in Nehemiah's day, the church can experience the broken down walls of disunity in various ways: racial disunity (black/white/Asian, etc.); maturity disunity (strong and weak); generational disunity (young and old); preference disunity (schooling, dating, worship style, etc.) and economic disunity (rich and poor).
4. With particular regard to economic disunity, the gospel calls us to build unity through generosity. But generosity requires limiting wealth. Simply put, what you give, you cannot keep—thus, you end up limiting yourself. The institution of the Sabbatical year of Jubilee did this as well.

Clearly each of these [Sabbath] institutions limited the amount of material possessions one could accumulate, simply by shortening the length of time one was allowed to work... These laws were relatively unparalleled in the Ancient Near East and thus marked Israel off as a distinctive people and potentially less productive in comparison with the 'competition'... on average, each person or family had at least a once-in-a-lifetime chance to start fresh, no matter how irresponsibly they had handled their finances or how far into debt they had fallen... It supported the family, unites

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worship and social concern, and reminds one that ultimately all property belongs to the Lord. —Craig Blomberg

5. The force of God's call in Christ is to generosity and care for the poor and oppressed. God has redeemed his church, and he calls us to freedom. Unity through generosity means re-thinking (individually and as a church) giving, lending and supporting the poor and needy in the light of the gospel.

Fellowship Starters

1. What kindled Nehemiah's anger in Nehemiah 5:1-10? To what did he call the Jews in response (see Nehemiah 5:11-13)?
2. Who are the spiritually and financially needy in your life? Are there practical ways to invest in their spiritual growth or assist them with their finances?
3. In what ways does the church experience the broken walls of disunity? What are the effects of disunity? How does the gospel enable restoration and maintenance of unity (see Eph. 4:1-3)?
4. How might the Lord be calling you to do your part in building unity in the church through generosity? What might that look like practically?

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