

Seeing/Meeting the Needs of Others

Nehemiah 5:1-11

February 21, 2016

Christine was 19 when she first went to work at the Baptist General Conference International Headquarters. She made the observation that the men in authority, the President, and Directors of the organization, **“sometimes these men don’t come into the office until later in the day. And sometimes they leave early.”** As she described this pattern she would comment, that doesn’t seem fair.

Christine has a strong commitment to the concept of fairness. **I would point out that she doesn’t know whether they had been at meeting the night before**, and had comp time to use. Or whether they just flew into town from some travel assignment. **I also would point out that their job wasn’t to be at their desk from 9:00 to 5:00.**

One thing I think is ironic is that **due to her schedule and responsibilities**, now she is the one coming and going at all times throughout the day. And there are likely some of the workers in her **office who may wonder about the fairness of her freedom.**

On a small, and personal level we may see many kinds of **behavior and treatment of others that we my think are not really fair.** And though I would suggest that life is not necessarily fair, we generally think that it should be so.

On a larger scale, thinking about bigger issues that impact large groups of people, this basic idea of fairness becomes one that we **call justice.**

There are very many issues related to social justice in our world today. **Racism, sexism, poverty, health care, labor laws, the legal system, homelessness**, human trafficking, and displacement of large ethnic groups, **just to name a few.**

Are we aware of these kinds of issues? Do we care? Should we care? How important is fairness and justice to you?

As we come to chapter 5, **Nehemiah’s attention is shifted from the building task before him**, to the needs of the people around him. **His real passion is to improve the lives and the safety of the people of the city.** As a man of God, Nehemiah models for us the importance of standing for **fairness and justice in our world. What exactly is the Problem that Nehemiah finds?**

Material circumstances in Jerusalem were difficult. **And people are suffering.** There is famine – **Crops have not been produced as they should**, so food was beginning to be scarce. **There appears to have been a drought,**

This along with the **increase in population due to the reconstruction of the wall and revitalization of Jerusalem** caused many families to struggle to find food.

In addition, **the time off to work to rebuild the walls**, costs them productive time from work in the fields and other money making tasks. **Those who had little, now have less.** The price of food increased significantly.

Heavy taxes by the Persian rulers put an additional burden on **those who owned property.** Often the property was lost in order **to pay the taxes or other debts owed.** They sold anything they could to survive, **sometimes themselves.**

These circumstances were not fair or just. Nehemiah had a solution.

That is quality leadership. A leader is able to create and to articulate a vision of a preferred future. Here is how we can do more or better or be more effective. **But the Leader is also able to identify difficulties and problems, and then move the group towards solution of the problems.** Nehemiah's initial emotional response **was that he was angry.**

His motivation was what he saw as the **mistreatment of God's people.** Much like Jesus' response of anger when he saw the money changers taking advantage of those coming to the temple. His anger was not in defense of himself, but for others. **He knew that he needed to take a stand for doing the right thing,** for fairness and justice to God's people.

He thought about it, "I pondered them in my mind." He didn't just react from his anger, **Eph 4:26 "In your anger do not sin."** Anger isn't always sin, **but one must be careful how they respond in their anger.** Nehemiah considered possible solutions, **and then he acted.**

He calls together the nobles and the officials. Nehemiah has clout, which was helpful here. He is able to bring together those who are guilty of this activity, **and those in authority who can do something. .**

He is not afraid to speak to issues of fairness and justice. **He identifies what they are doing that is wrong.**

Nehemiah makes 2 major accusations

(Nehemiah 5:7) They are charging interest to fellow Jews, **and it is a high interest at that.**

This is wrong according to **Lev. 25:35-37**

"If one of your countrymen becomes poor and is unable to support himself among you, help him... so he can continue to live among you. Do not take interest of any kind from him... You must not lend him money at interest or sell him food at a profit."

Within the family of God, take care of one another. If God has blessed you, share those blessings with others.

(5:8) They are also causing the permanent slavery of other Jews. This goes against **Lev. 25:39, 40** "If one of your countrymen becomes poor among you and sells himself to you, do not make him work as a slave. He is to be treated as a hired worker or a temporary resident among you; his is to work for you until the Year of Jubilee." **Then his is set free.**

You guys are over here making a bundle. You aren't thinking about God's rules and values for living. You are not thinking about how your decisions are impacting others, **especially those who are your brothers and sisters.**

They should be interested in fairness and justice. His solution was for them to obey the word of God And to treat others with fairness.

How effective was his solution, and his inspiration?

(5:8) "They kept quiet, because they could find nothing to say."
They knew they were wrong.

(5:12) “We will give it back,” they said. “And we will not demand anything more from them. We will do as you say.”

Nehemiah addressed the issues successfully. What is learned?

1. People are important

People matter. The impact on people is generally more important than the task at hand. **There may need to be an adjustment to our plans, so as to treat others fairly.**

We should always be aware, how people are doing. This is especially true **for those we work with in ministry**. It is also true for people we work with, **who are a part of our family, those who are our friends**, anyone with whom we cross paths.\

2. Determine to stop injustice

(5:10) “Let the exacting of usury stop!”

(5:11) “Give back to them immediately their fields, vineyards, houses...”

This is an imposing lesson. There is a great deal of injustice and unfair practices that we see, maybe on a daily basis. It is not always simple to know what is right, fair and just. **We can’t do it all. But we can do something.**

Don’t go through life with blinders on. **Look around, be aware, seek to understand what is happening.** We don’t have to look far to find issues of fairness and justice. Have compassion and passion, which are godly characteristics. **Be involved in some areas of Justice Issues.** On what do you take a stand?

3. Our solution needs to be based on God’s truth.

His word, His commands, His principles & values. We need to know His word, we need to increase our understanding, and application.

Commit yourself to bring the light of God’s truth into some area, or areas of injustices and unfairness.

4. Declare your plans for correction in a promise before God. Take actual steps to do something.

“We will do as you say.” “He summoned Priests, Nobles & officials, take an oath before God.” (5:12)

(5:13) – “Shake out the folds of his robe, God will shake out every man who does not keep this promise.”

Sometimes we have good intentions, but have difficulty following through. Commit it to God, and understand how serious is the issue, **then do something about it!**

In Chuck Swindol’s classic commentary, “Hand me another brick,” he describes the following event:

Back in 1958 a small community in northeastern Pennsylvania **built a red brick building that was to house their police, fire and city hall.** They were proud of that building; it was a result of sacrificial giving and careful planning.

This was a big event for the small community.

Within less than two months, however, **they began to notice some ominous cracks on the side of the building.** Sometime later, it was noticed that the windows would not shut all the way, and **the doors wouldn't close correctly.**

Eventually, **the floor shifted and left ugly gaps in the floor covering and corners.** The roof began to leak. Within a few more months, it had to be evacuated, **to the embarrassment of the builder** and the disgust of the taxpayers.

A firm did an analysis and **found that the blasts from a nearby mining area were slowly but effectively destroying the building.**

Imperceptibly, **down beneath the foundation,** there were small shifts and changes taking place **that caused the whole foundation to crack.**

You couldn't feel it or even see it from the surface, **but quietly and down deep there was a weakening.**

A city official finally **had to write across the door** of the much loved building, **"Condemned. Not fit for public use."** Ultimately, the building had to be demolished.

This tragedy has been repeated in buildings and lives all over the world, all throughout history. **The foundation can shift and crack** for an almost infinite variety of reasons.

Sometimes we are the ones responsible for Unfair or unjust behavior.

Perhaps you are involved right now **in the beginning of foundational cracks.**

It is easy to **rationalize the truth and to ignore the painful realities** of compromise and wrong behavior.

If you don't take godly and God honoring steps to live God's way, **and if you don't make an effort to care about the welfare of others, and work towards fairness,**

You may become an **empty shell, drawn from God's values and priorities,** and far from His perfect will in your life.

Are there areas that you must consider to adjust your behavior and the treatment of others?

Where are the issues of fairness and justice intersecting with your life? **Where are you taking active steps to defend others, to speak up for fairness and justice?**