

NEHEMIAH 5

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Beloved congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ:

Introduction. We saw last time how Nehemiah was called to deal with pressure from the outside, the threats of Sanballat and the conspiracy of the peoples around Judah to stop the building of the walls of Jerusalem. That threat was countered with prayerful measures: the building of the wall continued.

We are faced in chapter 5 with a much different problem, perhaps one that is even more serious: a threat from the inside. Internal division is always more dangerous than outside pressure. And this is especially true when it comes to economics, to money, to the distribution of wealth in the congregation of the Lord.

We read that there came a great outcry, a massive protest from the side of the poor. The cause of this outcry might have been that there was some kind of famine in the land at this time (verse 3). At such times the poor become poorer while the rich can maintain their standard of living and even capitalize on the troubles by exploiting those who have little or nothing. But there is more at stake here than a famine.

I cannot get away from the impression that the outcry of the poor is somehow also related to the building of the wall of Jerusalem. That

makes it Nehemiah's responsibility, for he was the one who ordered the rebuilding of the wall in the first place, and he had to deal with the "fall-out" that the project caused.

Because the people were called to build the wall, they could not attend to their daily work, and that meant that they lost their income; always a serious matter, but even more so in times of scarcity and famine. With no money coming in they had to borrow to stay afloat financially. But there were fellow-Israelites who took advantage of this situation, and Nehemiah had to deal with this for the LORD's sake.

You probably wondered how all the people who were rebuilding the wall were at the same time providing for the needs of their families. Well, they tried, but it was not working. The people were sinking deeper into debt, and the proper love that should be manifest in the church was not shown. So, understandably, it led to a great outcry. The message of our text is this:

The LORD demonstrates through Nehemiah the power of Christian love in dealing with Israel's poverty.

We will see:

- 1. the lack of love evident.**
- 2. the demand for love expressed.**
- 3. the power of love experienced.**

1. It says in verse 1, "Now the men and their wives raised a great outcry against their Jewish brothers." "The men" should be taken to mean the men (the people) who are involved in rebuilding the wall. And then especially the common men, many of whom already were poor and who now became even needier. Notice also that their wives receive special mention. That is understandable, for the wives stayed at home to take care of the children, and they were the first ones to be confronted with the effect of poverty: they could not even feed their children.

It's fine and dandy that their men go to help rebuild the wall. All the people – also the wives – are prepared to sacrifice something for the

sake of the LORD. Israel's women know of the great struggle for survival in a hostile environment. But the situation becomes so desperate that these women speak out in strong protest.

And then we must read carefully: they are not protesting against the fact that times are tough. Tough times don't last, tough people do. Their anger is not directed against the LORD. Nor is it a protest against Israel's enemies. It is against their Jewish brothers. That's the real issue in the text. They are incensed at the way their own brothers are treating them in these difficult circumstances.

From the text we discern three groups of people. We also note three types of complaints, all, however, going back to a common issue. The first group is made up of wage-earners, people who depend from day to day on what they receive for the number of hours worked. These are the real poor. Since they are working for Nehemiah they do not have any income, and whatever money was saved up is soon gone. Their complaint is: we and our sons and daughters are numerous; in order for us to eat and stay alive, we must get grain (verse 2). Note well: they are not asking for money, but for food. They need to eat, but no one supports them.

The second group seems to be a little better off, for they have "fields, vineyards and homes," but they also carry great financial burdens. They say: we have mortgaged our fields, vineyards and homes to get grain during the famine (verse 3). Some explainers suggest that this famine took place during Nehemiah's time, but it can also have been a famine that occurred before he came on the scene. There was a famine, and these people borrowed money on their property and thus managed to survive, but now with the work on the wall, the daily tasks were not done and they could not make their payments anymore, and as a consequence they stood to lose their properties. The Jews who held the mortgages were calling them in, and when the people could not pay, their land was confiscated.

The third group has yet another problem. These people had already mortgaged their land to the hilt. But they had to pay, besides the high mortgage rate, the imperial tax on their properties. Heavily mortgaged

land is still taxable. The “king’s tax,” as it was called, was very high, and it had to be payed. There’s no escape from the tax man, as we all know very well especially during this time of the year. In order to pay this tax, they had only one way left open: sell their sons and daughters into slavery. They say (verse 5): “We are powerless, because our fields and our vineyards belong to others.” They cannot borrow more money on their property, and they cannot pay the tax which is necessary as long as they live and work that property. The only alternative is: sell their children into slavery! This complaint must have been extra painful for Nehemiah, because he, being appointed as governor by Artaxerxes, was responsible for the gathering and sending of the imperial tax.

And notice the poignant note about the “daughters” in verse 5: some of our daughters have already been enslaved. This suggests more than just having to work for others, for female slaves were often also sexually abused by their masters. And this happens, as they complain, “although we are of the same flesh and blood as our countrymen and although our sons are as good as theirs . . .” Jews are abusing Jews! Not enemies or aliens, but brothers of the same house. Some of the Jews took advantage of the new situation, the need to build the wall, in order to enrich themselves at the expense of their brothers.

Now it is important to note that the law of Moses prohibited slavery of one Jew by another (Exodus. 21 : 2 – 11; Leviticus 25 : 39 – 43). Had Israel not been redeemed from slavery out of Egypt by the LORD so that they would be a free people under God? Yes, Jews could pay a debt through working for another Jew as a “hired hand,” but they were not to be regarded and treated as slaves.

These types of situations undoubtedly were happening before Nehemiah came, but now through the building of the wall the problems were severely aggravated, and this led to a great public outcry. The people simply cannot bear it anymore, and the frustration builds to the point where some kind of conflict or rebellion looms. The net result is: the building of the wall will cease, not because of the hatred of the enemy, but because of the *lack of love* within Israel.

For what else is all this than lack of love? The law of God – also when it comes to asking interest, or taking physical labour as payment for a debt – demands understanding of and love for one another. The rule was: you shall not take any interest from someone who is poor, for that's how you keep him poor. Your purpose may not be to exploit the poor, but to redeem them. When there are those who cannot feed themselves, you give them food, as much as they need, for there shall be no beggars in the land of the covenant people of the LORD. You do not take advantage of any of your brethren. Indeed, even strangers and foreigners had certain rights when they lived among God's people, let alone fellow countrymen, brothers and sisters.

It is a lack of love which becomes evident in these socio-economic problems. They are treating one another as heathen, as strangers instead of brothers and sisters. And the worst is that they use the work of the LORD to further their selfish interests. In doing so they in fact jeopardize the work of the Lord!

Now comes the real shocker: if there is such a lack of love for each other, there must also be a deep lack of love for the LORD Himself. For are the two not similar? You shall love the LORD your God . . . and a second is like it: you shall love your neighbour as yourself. Lack of love for the neighbour in general, and especially for those of the household of faith, is a sign of lack of love for the LORD Himself. All sin against the second part of the law (what duties we owe our neighbour) flows forth out of sin against the first part of the law (how to live in relation to God).

Earlier, in Nehemiah 3, we saw how all people together put their shoulders to the task of building the wall. What an expression of the communion of saints, we said then. But now we read that behind that visible show of unity lies lack of love, evil exploitation, which leads to great turmoil. It may look nice – all those people building together – but looks can be deceiving. In fact, brothers are treating each other as slaves, and the service of the Lord has become impossible because of this attitude. It is not very pleasant, is it, when the Bible allows us to look behind the scenes.

It struck me, as I was working with this text, that in fact our Lord Jesus Christ encountered the same kind of situation years later when He ministered in Galilee and Judah. The rich were exploiting the poor, there were beggars everywhere. The letter of the law was strictly maintained, but the love demanded in the law was not shown. Christ Himself said: God demands compassion, not sacrifice. What good is all outward religiosity if it is not a matter of having a new heart filled with love for God and compassion for the neighbour? People simply did not care about or for each other. Is that the communion of saints? Is that really the people of God, the body of Christ?

The service of the Lord is demanding. The principle is that we all act and give according to our blessings so that everyone can serve the LORD with gladness. When that principle is not honoured, a deep dissatisfaction takes root within the communion of saints, and the result is that God's work does not progress. Those heavily burdened become even more burdened, until they collapse.

2. Love is lacking. But that does not do away with the *demand* for love. In the verses 6 – 11 we read about this demand and how it is expressed by Nehemiah.

His first reaction is to become very angry (verse 7). It is a spontaneous and a righteous anger, a holy indignation against the manner in which God's children are being treated. Now you know that when someone becomes angry, he is in a dangerous situation. For anger is often an opening for the devil to slip through. When we begin to lose it, then the devil begins to win it.

But notice how Nehemiah acts in this sad and grave situation. I can only point to a few items here. First of all, it says in verse 7 that Nehemiah, though he was very angry, did not go off the deep end, so to speak. Anger is no excuse to act irrationally and uncontrollably. It says: I pondered them (the charges) in my mind . . . Nehemiah carefully thought the matter over. I see here the guidance of the LORD. This type of situation, if not carefully and wisely handled, can easily cause further alienation. The rich become defensive and the poor become militant,

and a deadlock results. Nehemiah seeks a good way to tackle this problem. Anger-management specialists tell you to count to ten, but Nehemiah must have counted to a thousand, at least. First think very carefully what you are going to say, and how it must be said.

And then we read that he first calls a meeting of the nobles and officials. Note that also. It's called: the direct approach. Do not speak to all kinds of people who have nothing to do with the conflict, do not call everyone together to argue endlessly and arrive at some kind of a stalemate. No, go to those people who are first responsible. Nehemiah doesn't pit the nobles against the poor, he first calls a meeting that is of a private nature. He speaks confidentially with the nobles and officials. He doesn't publicly lambaste them, but speaks to them privately. He's not a union leader who seeks to exploit public sentiment, but a communion builder who directs himself to people who are first responsible.

And what does he say? Is he going to use very "diplomatic" language and make a backroom deal? Isn't that often how it goes? Give a little now, to take more later? Not at all. What is remarkable is that Nehemiah really blasts the officials and nobles for their policies and practices. Sin is never to be covered up in the church, for there is no favouritism with God. He says to them: you are exacting usury from your own countrymen! That's the charge which must be dealt with.

Usury. It was – and all the nobles and officials knew it – forbidden by the LORD. Reasonable interest, yes, usury, no. Usury does not only mean here exorbitant rates but also claiming the neighbour as slave and confiscating his possessions. I found somewhere this translation: you are acting like pawnbrokers, that is like people who feast off the misfortune of others by taking their possessions and charging on top of that exorbitant rates. Usury is a sign of lack of love, and the LORD forbids it.

Nehemiah will have told the nobles and officials that this matter has to be resolved publicly. So the next step is to call another meeting (verse 7, end), one with the perpetrators, with the victims, and with the arbitrator, Nehemiah. All the parties involved are now present.

The first thing that Nehemiah does in this meeting is remind the nobles and officials, in the presence of the people, of the deep *kinship* they have together. He says first: as far as possible we have bought back our Jewish brothers who were sold to the Gentiles. Notice the “we.” Some of these very same nobles and officials had been involved in redeeming their own people from Gentile slavery. This is said in favour of the nobles. You must always – when dealing with someone’s faults and sins – remember also the good he has done. The exiles still in Persia, the nobles in Palestine, all did their utmost to free Jewish slaves. Let us, says Nehemiah, not forget this. We have in the past stood together as *one people*.

But this shows then all the more how sad it is that subsequently things went wrong. How contradictory to free your brother from heathen slavery only to make him your own slave. On the one hand they were building the communion by redeeming Jewish slaves, while on the other they were breaking the communion by virtually making these brothers their slaves. “Now you are selling your brothers only for them to be sold back to us!” What are you, slave-traders, like the heathen? How can we as family of God, as brothers and sisters, deal with each other in this way? Do we not destroy the very communion we are seeking to build?

That’s powerful language. What can you answer to this? Notice how the text says: they kept quiet because they had nothing to say (verse 8, end)! I was happy to read that. This silence is in a sense an admission of guilt. There is no excuse for this awful and ungodly practice. Don’t ever try to defend your sins; if you feel incriminated, admit it, and if you have nothing to say, indeed be quiet. This “silence” speaks loudly.

Now Nehemiah is encouraged to continue. The LORD grants this opportunity to pursue the matter properly. First he tells them to walk in the fear of the *LORD*. This sin – as all sin – is first against the Lord Himself. They had better begin to fear the LORD truly. Then he adds: “Shouldn’t you walk in the fear of our God to avoid the reproach of our Gentile enemies?” Is it not terrible that the enemies can say: you are not one ounce different from us, you’re actually even worse, for we do not

treat our own kind that way! The Name of the LORD has become a laughingstock, and Israelites cause Gentiles to scoff at Israel. Indeed, sometimes there is more gross sin in the church than there is in the world. And we make the Lord's Name a laughing stock.

Verse 10 presents a problem to some explainers. Nehemiah, they believe, admits some of his own guilt as well when he adds: "I and my brothers and my men are also lending the people money and grain. But let the exacting of usury stop." A good leader, I read somewhere, must also publicly admit his own faults. True. But Nehemiah is not admitting to any sin in this respect. He simply says: to lend money and grain – and require repayment in due time – is fine, but this *usury* has to stop. I take it then that Nehemiah and his men were in this respect an example. Indeed, how could Nehemiah become so angry about the practices of the nobles if he and his men engaged in the same sin? That would have been hypocritical. He says instead: follow our practice and example; lend and help, sure, but no usury.

And he adds to this the demand for restitution (verse 11): "Give back to them immediately their fields, vineyards, olive groves and houses, and also the usury you are charging them – the hundredth part of the money, grain, new wine and oil." Notice that: give it all back, a hundred percent restitution. That is the full demand of love.

You just cannot say: well, I'm sorry, I will not do it again. No, in the communion of saints we go one step farther: we give back what we have unlawfully taken. Love restores, returns, for the full hundred percent. I wonder if we understand the depth of this demand. If we have cheated anyone (especially within the church) asking more than we should have, we must make full restitution. Otherwise there can be no real reconciliation and restoring of fellowship. Love requires not half-way measures.

3. Now we also see in this text the victory of love, and how love is experienced. One might expect the nobles and officials to say: Sorry, what's ours, is ours; we'll tone it down from now on, but restitution – no, that goes too far. A done deal is a done deal. But they do not say

this. Instead they are willing to make restitution (verse 12): we will give it back. They add: "And we will not demand anything more from them. We will do as you say." They will give full restitution and stop their awful practice. They will follow Nehemiah's instructions to the letter.

What else is this than the powerful working of the Spirit of the LORD? People will not do this on their own. It reminded me of the time after Pentecost, when no one in the congregation said that what he possessed was only his own, but everyone used his gifts for the benefit of the entire church. Not one was needy among them. It is the Spirit of God alone who can break open our hearts so that we show and experience the love of God in Christ among one another. Indeed, we see here a foreshadowing of the grand fellowship and care of the New Testament church, as we read of it in Acts 4.

Now the remarkable thing is that Nehemiah does not stop at his point. He doesn't say: okay then, the matter is settled, you've all heard this pledge, let's get on with our work. Instead, he now summons the priests. Verse 12 (end): he makes these nobles swear an oath in the presence of God's servants! Why an oath? Because Nehemiah knows the nature of his people. It is easy to promise something, but it is much harder to do what you have promised, especially when it comes to money. Many nobles could still in an underhanded way side-step their obligations. So he does not just take their word, but makes them swear an oath in the presence of God's priests, that is, before God Himself. Nehemiah understood human nature.

And he adds to this a symbolic gesture. He shakes out the folds of his robe (verse 13). It's like emptying his own pockets. There's nothing hidden. And he says: so may God shake you out, clean you out, if you do not keep this promise! Indeed, those who do not give what they should will themselves be cleaned out, shaken out by God.

All this shows us how serious the matter is. It still is, today. When Ananias and Saffira pretended to have given all and yet held back, they were indeed shaken out. You cannot function in the church of God's love if you serve only your own interest. You must extend open and forthright love to all brothers and sisters in the service of the Lord. You

must *give* rather than take. That is the style of Jesus Christ. He constantly gave all, even His own life, so that we would withhold nothing from each other. With Him no one was needy. He provided for His apostles and all who followed Him. He even said that once: when I sent you out, did you have any need or want? They said: no. Christ took care, takes care of His own. Our task now is to experience together this love of Christ in mutual help and service.

When we build the church today, we may not let some be unduly burdened while others simply care only for themselves. When the rich get richer and the poor get poorer in the church, something is drastically wrong. The love of Christ is not being experienced. Only together can we truly build. Rich and poor must make proper sacrifices. None of us should suffer want because of the need, for example, of supporting the ministry and the schools, for this is our communal task. This is the reason why, to use a concrete example, the Timothy School Board lowered the general fee for membership, so that everyone who has income can participate, and those who were being burdened too heavily can be relieved. Otherwise there will be an outcry also here by those who simply cannot meet the obligations. We can only maintain these things if we all do our share!

Well, we read in verse 13, "At this the whole assembly said 'Amen,' and praised the LORD." Everyone committed himself. We will do it together. A loud and clear 'Amen' resounded from all the assembly. They praised God, because love in action is His gift to His people. "And the people did as they had promised." If ever there is a need to say 'Amen,' it is when these very practical, financial matters are discussed and resolved. Say "yes," and act accordingly.

The net result? They kept building, together. The unity of faith and purpose was restored. Everyone could work and eat, and no one was left without proper care. It is remarkable that in the church of Pentecost this very element comes so strongly to the fore. Acts 4 : 34: there were no needy persons among them. Sure, some had more than others, for so it always is. But none had want, for so it must always be in the church where we are members of Christ and one another. It is in these matters that we show whether we are a true church of Christ or not. A church

of Christ, who gave everything for us, that we might give all for one another in the gathering of that great assembly which no one can count. How could we act otherwise than our Lord Jesus? Having experienced His love, we also experience the love of one another, and so are blessed. For no one who seeks first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, said the Lord Jesus, will suffer want.

AMEN.