

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

(May 27, 2018)

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Mission, Fueled by a Vision

(Studies in the Old Testament book of Nehemiah)

Everybody, OFF the Wall!

(Nehemiah 5:1-19)

Study #8

Introduction: In the absence of love...

Over the last several weeks, we've heard Nehemiah's call, "*Everybody, to the wall!*"

By those words, he was calling his fellow Jews to the work of God in their day of rebuilding the wall around Jerusalem. Each one of them had a place on the wall to build and they were all to work hard.¹

Nehemiah's call to the wall speaks to us, today. Only, our "wall", the work of God in our day, is Jesus' Great Commission. Being "on the wall" in 2018 means that we are taking next steps with Jesus and helping others take their own spiritual next steps.

The dream is that of every one of us is hard at work, fully involved in Jesus' great work. No sideline sitters or bench warmers.

¹ In recent weeks, we have watched the Jews rush to rebuild the wall and the gates around Jerusalem, walls and gates which had lain in ruins for one hundred and forty years. Jerusalem had been destroyed in 586 BC by the Babylonians under King Nebuchadnezzar. Following months of praying and planning, Nehemiah travelled from Susa, the winter capital of the Persian Empire, to the once-great Jewish capital, Jerusalem. He arrived with a vision of leading the people to restore Jerusalem, a vision the people embraced. When they saw Nehemiah's enthusiasm, they put their hands to the work with, "*Let us arise and build.*"

Your place on the wall might be here, in the church. It is certainly at home. It will involve the place where you work, and may stretch to your neighborhood, or into the larger community.

In every place where we might be involved in Jesus' mission, that is our place on the wall. And we all have a place on the wall.

The dream in the 5th century, BC, and in 2018 is that God's people would all be "on the wall." But, there came a day in Jerusalem's building program when Nehemiah ordered, "*Everybody, OFF the wall.*" - and we wonder why he would ever give that order?

Last Sunday, we saw the work continue despite outside opposition from enemies' threats, bullying, and efforts to intimidate.

Why a work stoppage now, when the project is over half-way finished, when they are so close to the finish line?

One time, when Jesus was tangling with some of His opponents, He said this, referring to Satan,

[Matthew 12:25]...“Any kingdom divided against itself is laid waste; and any city or house divided against itself will not stand.”

Today, we find that what is true about Satan's kingdom is also true about the kingdom of God.

The work of God can withstand terrible pressure from outside. In fact - and not to romanticize persecution! - Jesus' church is often healthiest in places where it is suffering because of external pressure.

But the work stops - the work MUST stop - when there is internal division and where love has died. When relationships between the workers aren't right, it's time to climb down off the ladders, get off the wall - and fix what's broken.

Tragically, as we open our Bibles to Nehemiah, chapter 5, we are confronted with an outbreak of love-less exploitation. God's people are hurting God's people.

We're going to spend enough time looking at the text to understand what, exactly, was going on.

Mandatory Work Stoppage (5:1-13)

The Anguished Cry of the Poor (vv. 1-5)

The haves vs. the have-nots (v. 1)

[1] Now there was a great outcry of the people and of their wives against their Jewish brothers.²

The building project was moving forward at a great pace, so this outcry could not have come at a more inconvenient time.

But Nehemiah instantly saw the gravity of the situation. The complaints being raised represented a need so great that it had to be dealt with. Now.

So, what's the problem? Well, all the "**outcries**" were coming from the poor and were directed against the rich.

The complaints of the poor (vv. 2-5)

Lack of access

[2] For there were those who said, "We, our sons and our daughters are many; therefore let us get grain that we may eat and live."

The poorer Jewish workers didn't have the means to feed their families. They didn't own property, and our world of money sitting in bank accounts didn't exist. They had no ability to set aside an emergency fund.

² In telling the story, Nehemiah uses the term "brethren" five times to emphasize the family bonds that exist among God's people. Unfortunately, in what we see today, those bonds are aren't honored.

They had it rough. They were hungry. Their children were hungry. And they saw some of their fellow Jews - with whom they were laboring shoulder-to-shoulder on the wall - with all the food they and their kids needed.

It was a desperate situation, and there were other sufferings, too. They told Nehemiah about it.

Lack of cash on hand

[3] There were others who said, "We are mortgaging our fields, our vineyards and our houses that we might get grain because of the famine." [4] Also there were those who said, "We have borrowed money for the king's tax on our fields and our vineyards."

Something has recently changed that has gotten these people into financial trouble.

Formerly, they had been making ends meet. They owned homes and farms. Now, they're having to sell their assets to get grain to feed their families.

There's no doubt in my mind that the reason they're not making it is because they're giving all of their time and energy to working on the wall. And now, without income, they were losing their homes.

With what we have heard so far, we are sad. But what we read next takes us beyond "sad" to "mad" because what these folks were facing was far worse than suffering from a natural disaster (and yes, there was a famine).

Lack of justice

[5] "Now our flesh is like the flesh of our brothers, our children like their children. Yet behold, we are forcing our sons and our daughters to be slaves, and some of our daughters are forced into bondage already, and we are helpless because our fields and vineyards belong to others."

Here is what happened.

A poor family had to borrow money from a family with means so that they could grain and pay taxes. Then, because of the famine, the poor family defaulted on the loan.

Unfortunately, after having already given the wealthy family their property and their possessions, the only collateral the poor family had left to offer was their children. And the wealthy Jews took the poor Jewish family's children from them and made them slaves.

It would be like you, taking out a loan with USAA or Frost Bank, and then falling behind in payments. You are soon hopelessly in arrears.

So, the bank takes all your possessions, including your home. That doesn't quite cover what you owe, SO THEY TAKE YOUR BABY.

Small wonder that Nehemiah was *"very angry."*

The Voice of Advocacy (vv. 6-11)

Emotion (v. 6)

[6] Then I was very angry when I had heard their outcry and these words.

It wasn't the famine. Famines happen. Tornadoes and floods and hurricanes happen.

Houstonians don't name their sons "Harvey" anymore, and families in New Orleans still don't name their daughters, "Katrina". But natural disasters don't prompt rage.

And it wasn't the poverty, either. Poverty is an ever-present reality in this world.

No. Nehemiah was infuriated because of the unjust exploitation of the poor by the rich. He was *"very angry"* because the rich were taking advantage of their neighbors who were already suffering.

Confrontation (v. 7)

The accusation

[7a] I consulted with myself and contended with the nobles and the rulers and said to them, "You are exacting usury, each from his brother."³

There's the problem. It's usury. That's why the poor kept falling behind and were never able to get back on their feet.

Usury refers to the practice of a lender charging a (usually high) interest rate on a loan to a borrower. We Americans understand the concept, even if the term sounds funny.

But, there were clear instructions in the Old Testament Law about the practice of usury. Chief among these was that Jews were not to charge fellow-Jews interest when they loaned out money.⁴

So, these wealthy Jews were breaking God's Law by charging interest.

We think, *"But that's what lenders do."*

Our economy runs on debt and interest. And, frankly, lots of people do OK with it. Some, who are wealthy, can even leverage their indebtedness and make a profit.

But, the poor generally can't. Debt destroys the poor, bit by bit.

So, the Mosaic Law said, **"No."** No interest could be charged by Jew against Jew. And the reason charging interest was prohibited was because it violated love.

³ Or, as The Message has it, *"Each one of you is gouging his brother."*

⁴ [Deuteronomy 23:20] *You may charge interest to a foreigner, but to your countrymen you shall not charge interest...* Again, see especially, Exodus 22:25 - *"If you lend money to My people, to the poor among you, you are not to act as a creditor to him; you shall not charge him interest."*

The poor are always the least able to repay an interest-bearing loan. They can never catch up. And that is exactly what was happening in Nehemiah's Jerusalem.⁵

The public assembly (v. 7b)

So, calling the people in the city together in a very public setting, Nehemiah **[7b]...held a great assembly against them.**⁶

To this point, nothing has stopped the work. Not threats and bullying from enemies. Nothing. But here, when injustice and exploitation of the poor surfaces, (i.e. - lovelessness), Nehemiah announced, *"Forget the wall. There is something going on that is so wrong we've got to deal with it. Now."*

A lack of love is a problem of such magnitude that the work of God cannot move forward until it is dealt the death blow.

Nehemiah has pointed out the sin. But, he's not content to simply point it out. Things are going to change. And he has the moral authority to demand change because of the way he has behaved.

Here's where we get our first glimpse of the kind of man Nehemiah was.

The impact of a positive example (vv. 8, 10a)

Nehemiah, redeemer (v. 8)

[8] I said to them, "We according to our ability have redeemed our Jewish brothers who were sold to the nations; now would you even sell your brothers that they may be sold to us?" Then they were silent and could not find a word to say.

⁵ The similarities between what was happening in Nehemiah chapter 5 and what happens in our own society with respect to loans and interest/usury could not be more striking. We can't miss the potential harm suffered by taking out loans at interest. Solomon was spot on when he wrote that the borrower is slave to the lender. (Proverbs 22:7)

⁶ To be clear, the **"them"** are the rich who were harming the poor.

This is a reference to a practice that we know many Jews in Nehemiah's day followed.

While he was living in Susa, serving in the king's court as a cupbearer, Nehemiah was sending money back to Jerusalem to purchase the freedom of Jews were being held in slavery.

Unbelievably, here in Jerusalem, wealthy Jews were forcing their poorer brethren back into slavery.

The wealthy oppressors were shamed when they heard Nehemiah. They **[8b]...were silent and could not find a word to say.**

But Nehemiah's not finished. He piles on. Not only had he been helping while he was in Susa, he continued to love and serve the people now that he was in Jerusalem.

Nehemiah, benevolent banker (v. 10a)

[10a] "And likewise I, my brothers and my servants are lending them money and grain."

While the wealthy were taking the have-nots to the cleaners, Nehemiah - and others - were lending money and grain at *no interest*.

The love that he was showing to the needy, not the fact that he was the governor, gave him the bully pulpit to speak.

Now, there is one more thing I want us to notice here.

There's no question but that Nehemiah was deeply concerned for the poor. But, he knew that there was more at stake in this lack of love than the welfare of the have-nots.

The impact of a negative example (v. 9)

[9] Again I said, "The thing which you are doing is not good; should you not walk in the fear of our God because of the reproach of the nations, our enemies?"

The reputation of God was being dragged through the mud by the injustice and lovelessness of Jew against Jew. What would outside observers think when they learned what the rich Jews were doing to the poor Jews? *“They are just like us.”*

Why would any Persian, Canaanite or Egyptian be drawn to trust the God of Israel when His followers behaved so badly?

This is tragic, because the reason God had chosen Israel in the first place had been that they would be lights to the nations, attracting the world to the one true God. But, now, in addition to the harm they are causing the poor, they’re being terrible witnesses.

After pointing out the damage that has been done, Nehemiah brought the meeting to a close. He’s got a plan.

Action plan (v. 11)

[11] *“Please, give back to them this very day their fields, their vineyards, their olive groves and their houses, also the hundredth part of the money and of the grain, the new wine and the oil that you are exacting from them.”*

Put an end to charging interest. Pay back what you have unjustly received. Right your wrongs.⁷

That’s a strong message, and evidently, the wealthy were listening. Their response is perfect.

The Glad Resolve of the Repentant (vv. 12-13)

Confession: Bad for the reputation; good for the soul (v. 12a)

[12a] *Then they said, “We will give it back and will require nothing from them; we will do exactly as you say.”*

⁷ Remember the case of Zacchaeus, the Jew who collected Roman taxes from his own countrymen. After he came to know Jesus, he not only left off his former practices, he repaid those whom he had cheated fourfold. (Luke 19:1-10)

Way to go! Great words. But, as if to say, *“Talk is cheap”*, Nehemiah doesn’t dismiss them.

Bound with oath/curse (vv. 12b-13a)

[12b]... *So I called the priests and took an oath from them that they would do according to this promise. [13a] I also shook out the front of my garment and said, “Thus may God shake out every man from his house and from his possessions who does not fulfill this promise; even thus may he be shaken out and emptied.”*

He bound them with an oath of accountability. These men who had treated the poor so unlovingly are placed under a curse if they don’t follow through on their promise.

But, they got it. And we know that they got it because, after Nehemiah was finished, they said, ***“Amen.”***⁸

That ***“Amen”*** meant that they agreed from the heart with everything Nehemiah was saying.

Conviction’s fruit: WORSHIP and OBEDIENCE (v. 13)

And then, even better... **[13b]...*they praised the LORD.***

Permit me to camp here for just a minute.

These people have been called on the carpet for sin and then threatened with a curse if they don’t straighten up and fly right.

They responded with a promise to change, showed real repentance - and praised the Lord with obvious joy.

Let’s call this *“the joy of conviction.”*⁹

⁸ The word “Amen” (a word simply transliterated from Hebrew into many languages today) is related to the Hebrew word meaning “true.”

⁹ Christians from another era, namely, the Puritans, came up with this term, affirming the joy that comes when God’s child turns from darkness to light.

That little phrase says that there is nothing sweeter than the moment of a spiritual breakthrough.

That moment when God's Spirit shines His flashlight on our sin, when He convicts us of wrong, when the wrongness of that sin hits home is painful. But it is pure joy when we respond to the Spirit's conviction by turning from sin.

That joy hit those men in Nehemiah's day when they turned from the darkness to the light. And that joy is just as available to you and me today.

"They praised the Lord", will become *"I praised the Lord"* and *"YOU praised the Lord"* and *"WE praised the Lord"* when we respond to the Spirit's conviction the way they did.

So, let's be clear today. Obeying God and loving people brings joy. Walking with Jesus, trusting Him, obeying Him, is really sweet.

That was what is going on in Jerusalem when **[5:13c]...the people did according to this promise.**

They stopped usury. They gave the poor their land and possessions back. They returned their children. They paid back the interest they had charged over the years.

And, with that, the work on the wall started again.

What stopped the work on the wall was a lack of love among the workers. With love flowing, it's full steam ahead on walls and gates.

You and I both know that there is not a great danger that anybody's going to be charging someone else usurious interest rates here at church. Nor is it likely that anyone's debts are going to be called in, and their children taken as payment by a fellow member of Northwest.

But it is possible that we might violate love. and the whole point of looking at today's passage is to see how crucial love is when we're out to serve Jesus together.

That's the broad, overarching point of what we've seen so far in Nehemiah 5. As we wrap up, I want to highlight two aspects of Nehemiah's own life in Jerusalem that will suggest ways for you and me to grow in love, today.

Love: The Grease on the Wheels of God's Work (vv. 14-19)

Unselfishness (vv. 14-15, 17-18)

Nehemiah, the VIP who feared God

Governor Nehemiah arrived in Jerusalem as a VIP. In his role as governor, he earned a handsome salary, plus "perks."

One of those perks was a spending account he calls here a "food allowance." This fund of money was to be used to pay for the meals and entertainment obligations that came with the office.

But, the Persians who sent him to rule as governor didn't pay for this food allowance. No, the Persians gave Nehemiah the authority to raise the money by taxing the citizens of Jerusalem.

Nehemiah could have rightfully taken the governor's food allowance - and he never took it.

[14] Moreover, from the day that I was appointed to be their governor in the land of Judah, from the twentieth year to the thirty-second year of King Artaxerxes, for twelve years, neither I nor my kinsmen have eaten the governor's food allowance. [15a] But the former governors who were before me laid burdens on the people and took from them bread and wine besides forty shekels of silver; even their servants¹⁰ domineered the people.

Everybody knows that governors take their allotted food allowance. What executive doesn't make use of his or her perks? Nehemiah, for one.

¹⁰ And, if the treatment they received from the former governors wasn't bad enough, we read that even the servants of the former governors took advantage of the poor Jews. Minor government officials (bureaucrats) lorded it over the people.

[15b]...But I did not do so because of the fear of God.

We've already seen that reverence for God moved Nehemiah to condemn usury. Now we find that it also was reverence for God that prompted him to not take all that was rightfully his as governor.

And there was a second reason for not taking the governor's food allowance. This has to do with his heart for the people.

Nehemiah, the VIP who loved

[17] Moreover, there were at my table one hundred and fifty Jews and officials, besides those who came to us from the nations that were around us. [18a] Now that which was prepared for each day was one ox and six choice sheep, also birds were prepared for me; and once in ten days all sorts of wine were furnished in abundance.¹¹ [18]...Yet for all this I did not demand the governor's food allowance, because the servitude was heavy on this people.

And where did the money come from to pay for the food that all of these guests ate? Well, since he wasn't taking the governor's food allowance, it must have come from his own pocket.

To have required that the people pay him the food allowance would have been lawful. But, it would have stretched the people with whom he was serving to the breaking point. So, he paid for these outrageous, daily, royal banquets.

Nehemiah bore weight to take weight away from others.

The welfare of the people coupled with the fear of God led him to love. A big piece of that love is seen in that he chose to not exercise all of the rights he might have.

¹¹ The amount of food King Solomon required for one day makes Nehemiah's amount appear minuscule. From 1 Kings 4:22-23, Solomon's banquet table required 300 bushels of fine flour; 600 bushels of meal, 10 fattened oxen, 20 pasture-fed oxen, 100 sheep, plus deer, gazelle, roebucks, and fattened fowl. But, compared to Nehemiah's relative lack of wealth, it was a lot of food.

The Bible tells us that there are some things that are more important than the exercise of our own personal rights.

Over in the New Testament, the Apostle Paul encouraged Christians with strong consciences to be willing to give up rights for the sake of "weaker" Christians.¹²

It's better to not take full advantage of your rights if by doing so, you cause someone else to stumble or struggle.

- Better to give up your parking place next to the building to allow someone with young children or someone who is older or who has a disability to have that space.
- Better to come to church - or to walk into an ABF or a Care Group meeting - with a mindset, "How can I serve?" than, "What's in this for me?"
- Better to take the first step to greet than wait to be greeted.

Sometimes, if you move outside of your comfort zone when you don't have to, just for the sake of love, when you give up something to which you have a legitimate right, you grow in maturity. You give someone else a taste of God's love and grace.

Jesus showed us His love by putting aside His rights as the Son of God. When you refuse to exercise all of your rights, you may protect your church from strife. You might even prevent a work stoppage.

A final way Nehemiah points us to love was by the honor he showed to the workers, by working.

One Work, Many Workers, Many Works (vv. 16-18)

Never forgetting the MISSION (v. 16)

[16] I also applied myself to the work on this wall; we did not buy any land,¹³ and all my servants were gathered there for the work.

¹² See 1 Corinthians 9 and 10; Romans 14.

The governor of Palestine worked on the wall.

It doesn't appear that he had a specific place on the wall like most others did (see chapter 3). So, we don't know in what capacity he worked. But, in some way, he gave of himself to the work.

He was the highest-ranking government official in Palestine and he didn't consider himself above work on the wall. He led by example by his working with everybody else.

That message, *"We're all in this together. We're team."* fed love.

Today, love considers all others to be equals in the work of God.

Sure, we have different roles to play (see 1 Corinthians 12), but there is equality of value for all of God's work and for every one of God's workers.

Service happens, and it happens constantly.

Here, there's music and audio/visual tech stuff, greeting, teaching, working with kids and youth and giving and ushering and so much more.

Outside, there are countless ways to serve in Jesus' Name on high school or college campuses, at work, in a neighborhood, with a para-church organization, at home, other churches' ministries.

Without any one of these, the work of God would be less.

So, you're serving, and that's great. Would you make it a point to make this a week of affirmation? You've noticed someone who is serving. Would you affirm them in this? Call them out. Make a call.

Write a note. Tell them, *"I'm grateful to God for your service!"* - because by that service, you are affirming that THEY are vital to the cause.

The whole chapter ends with Nehemiah praying.

God-centered, start to finish (v. 19)

[19] Remember me, O my God, for good, according to all that I have done for this people.¹⁴

Short. Sweet. To the point. People may or may not affirm you. People may or may not recognize or remember what you are doing on the wall.

God knows. He won't forget. Your labor is never in vain in the Lord. (1 Corinthians 15:58)

¹³ I find it striking that Nehemiah didn't buy land. Making a governor's wage, he probably could have purchased property, especially since Jerusalem was likely a "buyer's market." But he didn't buy land because he had not come to Jerusalem to make a killing in real estate. He had come to restore the city, to make Jerusalem a bright light to the nations. He chose, out of a sense of personal conviction that being a property owner would get in the way of his mission - so he didn't buy.

¹⁴ Here is proof positive that prayers don't need to be long to be effective.