

The Path to Restoration

Resolving Conflicts

Nehemiah 5

Introduction

Conflict and strife always threaten to destroy unity. To accomplish our goals and bring honor to God, we must learn to resolve conflicts and restore unity! Paul tells the Ephesians Christians to be diligent "to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." (Eph. 4:3). To the Roman believers, he says, "pursue the things which make for peace and build up one another" (Rom. 14:19). Peter writes that we "must seek peace and pursue it" (1 Pet. 3:11).

Chapters 4 and 6 reveal how Nehemiah faced opposition from those outside Jerusalem. Chapter 5 reveals how he deals with conflict from within. Today we'll take a look at what we need to resolve internal conflicts. First of all, resolving conflict requires compassionate authority.

I. Resolving Conflict Requires Compassionate Authority

In Chapter 5 verse 1, a great outcry from the people stops the rebuilding of the wall. Verse 1, "And there was a great outcry of the people and their wives against their Jewish brethren." (Neh 5:1 NKJV)

Chapter four ended on a note of victory. The people were doing the work of God despite all the obstacles. They worked with a sword in one hand and a trowel in the other. They were committed to restoring the wall and would not let their enemies stop them. But in chapter five, there is no mention of anyone working on the wall. The work stopped because of the strife among the people.

When Satan couldn't stop the work by directly attacking the project, he focused on stirring up strife among the workers. He tried to distract the workers causing them to lose focus and quit working together on the wall. A sense of great strife began to prevail. Factions and groups formed to fight against one another. Unfortunately, when God's people fight against one another, they help Satan's cause and don't get God's work done.

Verse 2 gives us the reason for the strife among the people. "there was a great outcry of the people and their wives against their Jewish brethren. 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." There were also *some* who said, "We have mortgaged our lands and vineyards and houses, that we might buy grain because of the famine." There were also those who said, "We have borrowed money for the king's tax *on* our lands and vineyards. Yet now our flesh *is* as the flesh of our brethren, our children as their children; and indeed we are forcing our sons and our daughters to be slaves, and *some* of our daughters have been brought into slavery. *It is not in our power to redeem them, for other men have our lands and vineyards.*" (Neh 5:1-5 NKJV)

According to Matthew 18:15, when you think someone has wronged you, the first step is to go directly to the person to resolve the problem. Obviously, that process had failed because the workers bring their complaint to Nehemiah. A fundamental principle of problem-solving is that you cannot solve it if you are unaware of the problem. It's impossible to solve problems if you don't know they exist.

Another fundamental principle in problem-solving is that you must voice your complaint to someone who has the authority to do something about it. Often, people make their complaints to everyone except the person who could do something to help.

Nehemiah's task was to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. His goal wasn't to become a financial planner or advisor. But because the worker's financial problems were directly affecting rebuilding the wall, Nehemiah got involved in solving this economic crisis. He needed to restore their confidence, in God, in him, and in the project. The cost of rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem was being paid for by the king of Persia. But the workers themselves were facing tremendous debt and didn't have enough money to provide for their families.

To make things worse, they were making personal sacrifices to see the walls built, while others were taking advantage of them financially. A famine in the land made things even more difficult as food prices began to soar. Some had to mortgage their property just to provide food for their family. The government kept increasing taxes, and the cost of living kept going up. To deal with these hardships, the people had taken out loans to pay their living expenses. But the interest rate on the loans was so high, many of them were in default. Some of them had to send their children to be servants to their lenders just to make their debt payments.

Financial problems can create strife that completely disrupts your life. They can also prevent you from accomplishing what God wants to do through you. Many people want to separate what they do with their money from their walk with God. But for the believer, everything is a spiritual decision. Buying a house is a spiritual decision. Taking a job, choosing a career, deciding how much money you should make and what things you will spend your money on - all of these are matters that will directly affect your walk with God.

A godly and righteous heart is essential to handling your money in a way that yields material and eternal benefits. In 1 Corinthians 16, Paul tells us our giving should be regular, thoughtful, and proportional (1 Corinthians 16:1-4). In 2 Corinthians 9, he says that it must be generous, freely given, and cheerful (2 Corinthians 9). But money problems are rarely only money problems. We think if we just had more money, it would solve everything. But that isn't true. Good money management is much more beneficial than just getting more money. How you spend your money is just as important as how you make it. In Nehemiah's case, however, it wasn't that the people were mismanaging their money. The problem was due to a combination of things:

- unemployment,
- sacrificial work on the wall,
- increased tax burdens,
- the increased cost of living, and
- exorbitant interest rates on borrowed money.

When it comes to resolving these conflicts, it requires the right kind of action.

II. Resolving Conflicts Require Righteous Action

What was Nehemiah's response to all of this? First of all, it made him angry!

1) Get Angry

Verse 6, he says, "And I became very angry when I heard their outcry and these words." ([Neh 5:6 NKJV](#))

It's ok to get angry about things like child abuse, pornography, abortion, racism, and domestic violence. But we need to make sure we direct our righteous anger righteously. That's what Nehemiah did. Nehemiah's anger stemmed from the greed of those who wanted to profit from others' money troubles, something Moses clearly said was wrong (Exodus 22:25).

These financial problems were affecting progress on the wall. Nehemiah realized that unity among the people was far more precious than money. He knew he couldn't let this situation halt their progress and keep the wall from being rebuilt. It must have frustrated Nehemiah to think that they could stand firm against the outside attacks and yet fall so quickly to these personal problems. So what did Nehemiah do? Somehow he was able to exercise some self-control.

2) Exercise Self-Control

Before he confronts those who were guilty of exploiting the poor, he took some time to think about it. Verse 7 says, "After serious thought, I rebuked the nobles and rulers,"

That is significant! He didn't go off in a rage to blast those who were wrong. He stopped, cooled off, thought and prayed things through, and then took action. Proverbs 16:32 says, "He who is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and he who rules his spirit, than he who captures a city." Whenever we get angry, we need to be able to exercise some self-control. Thirdly, He confronts the wrong.

3) Confront The Wrong

"and (He) said to them, "Each of you is exacting usury from his brother." So I called a great assembly against them. And I said to them, "According to our ability we have redeemed our Jewish brethren who were sold to the nations. Now indeed,

will you even sell your brethren? Or should they be sold to us?" Then they were silenced and found nothing *to say*. Then I said, "What 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?" (Neh 5: 7-9 NKJV)

Often a person gets angry, cools off, and then does nothing. It's difficult and uncomfortable to confront people who are causing a problem. And it would be incredibly difficult to confront the wealthy and powerful leaders involved in this corruption. What if they got defensive and withdrew their support from the project? What if they saw Nehemiah as the enemy and used their clout to undermine the project? Nehemiah could have decided to stall for time until they finished the wall. But he didn't do that.

First, he privately confronted those who were guilty of mistreating these poor workers. When that didn't work, he called for a public assembly and spelled out the problem. He rebukes the leaders, pointing out how he and others had redeemed their Jewish brothers who had been sold to the nations, but now it was Jews themselves who were selling their brothers into slavery.

The bible says they couldn't find a word to answer. Nehemiah tells them their behavior is wrong and doesn't honor God. He reminds them that their enemies would mock them for their mistreatment of their own people.

4) Set An Example

In verse 10, Nehemiah sets a personal example of godliness. "I also, *with* my brethren and my servants, am lending them money and grain. Please, let us stop this usury! Restore now to them, even this day, their lands, their vineyards, their olive groves, and their houses, also a hundredth of the money and the grain, the new wine and the oil, that you have charged them." (Neh 5: 10-11 NKJV)

Nehemiah loans his money without charging any interest. So he appeals to these wealthy men to join him in doing the same thing. He asks them to give back to the poor their fields, vineyards, olive groves, and houses, along with the interest that they had charged.

Confrontation is a very difficult thing to do. But it is absolutely necessary to keep corruption and greed in check! No one is perfect. And because of that, we often won't confront what is wrong for fear our own wrongs will be revealed. Nehemiah spends his own money to redeem his fellow Jews from slavery and loans them money without charging them any interest.

He was passionate enough to get angry but wise enough not to act until he carefully considered the matter. Nehemiah also exercised great courage. When people were in the wrong, he confronted them. His example teaches us that the way to approach a problem is head-on. He asks why they would allow their fellow Jews to become their slaves when they couldn't pay off their high-interest loans. Nehemiah didn't want the nobles and rulers just to feel bad and stop what they

were doing; if money had been charged unfairly or collateral unjustly taken, it had to be set right.

In verse 12, we see the response of the rulers and nobles who had done wrong. "So they said, "We will restore *it*, and will require nothing from them; we will do as you say." Then I called the priests and required an oath from them that they would do according to this promise. Then I shook out the fold of my garment and said, "So may God shake out each man from his house, and from his property, who does not perform this promise. Even thus may he be shaken out and emptied." And all the assembly said, "Amen!" and praised the LORD. Then the people did according to this promise." (Neh 5:12-13 NKJV)

Nehemiah told them the truth, and they received the rebuke and admitted they were wrong and did the right thing. Not very many people are willing to admit they are wrong, especially where money is involved. Nehemiah lived the way he told the nobles and rulers to live. He never expected more of his followers than he expected of himself.

In verse 14, it says that Nehemiah even cut taxes! "Moreover, from the time that I was appointed to be their governor in the land of Judah, from the twentieth year until the thirty-second year of King Artaxerxes, twelve years, neither I nor my brothers ate the governor's provisions. 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. Yes, even their servants bore rule over the people, but I did not do so, because of the fear of God. Indeed, I also continued the work on this wall, and we did not buy any land. All my servants *were* gathered there for the work." (Neh 5:14-16 NKJV)

Nehemiah is an excellent example of putting the work of God ahead of your own personal interests. He had the right to tax the people for his support (others had done it before him), but he didn't exercise that right because it wouldn't help the work of God.

In verse 17, we see Nehemiah's example of generosity at work. "And at my table *were* one hundred and fifty Jews and rulers, besides those who came to us from the nations around us. Now *that* which was prepared daily *was* one ox *and* six choice sheep. Also, fowl were prepared for me, and once every ten days an abundance of all kinds of wine. Yet in spite of this I did not demand the governor's provisions, because the bondage was heavy on this people. Remember me, my God, for good, *according to* all that I have done for this people." (Neh 5:17-19 NKJV)

Nehemiah not only did not take when he could have; he also gave when he didn't have to. He received a lot of food from the king's provisions, which he could have sold for his own profit. But instead, he gave it away - feeding as many as 150 people every day. Nehemiah confronted those at fault, and they agreed to give back the money they had taken from the people. And to assure that they did, Nehemiah made them swear before the priests and held them accountable.

5) Expect Accountability

Nehemiah warned them, "So may God shake out each man . . . who does not perform this promise."

He knew their words were not enough. Their words had to be followed up with real action. With their oaths, and the public record of all this, Nehemiah assures accountability - something we often need to help us do what our spirit is willing to do, but our flesh is weak to do!

Accountability is often a missing step in dealing with an area where *you* have a hard time doing what is right. Nehemiah knew that human nature is full of good intentions that never make it into practice. So he made these men take a public oath before the priests that they would follow through. Then, in the tradition of the prophets, he dramatically shook out his robe in front of them 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" (5:13). That's making them sign on the dotted line! And finally, resolving conflict requires we make appropriate changes.

III. Resolving Conflict Requires Making Appropriate Changes

When confronted, some react with anger or become defensive, or just give up and move on without dealing with the problem. Thankfully, these nobles and rulers accepted Nehemiah's rebuke. They realized their behavior disobeyed God's Word, hurt their fellow Jews, and gave their enemies cause to mock them and their God. They faced up to their greed and promised to pay back those whom they had taken advantage of. They were not only willing to be held accountable, but they did it with praise to God!

In his closing words, Nehemiah's prayer is that God will approve of his actions and judge them to be good! He says in verse 19, "Remember me, my God, for good, *according to* all that I have done for this people." (Neh 5:19 NKJV)

Nehemiah wanted God's blessing instead of the praise of men. Nehemiah could tell others how to do what was right because his walk with God was right. His public words and private actions said the same thing. Because Nehemiah was willing to make some changes, the nobles, leaders, and even the people were ready to make changes too! It is thrilling when people in conflict make the kind of adjustments and changes necessary to resolve the problem and enjoy the blessings and fruit of working together.

Conclusion

Satan loves to divide people by getting them to wrong one another and then refuse to deal biblically with the problem. Nehemiah teaches that we must be committed to resolving conflicts God's way so that His work will go forward, and His blessing will rest upon us.