

The Cost of Community

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What do you expect from the church? What do you expect from the fellowship of God's people? I think this is an interesting question. It's a question we should ask and honestly answer, because too often I think our expectations are totally unbiblical. I think our expectations for church relationships are super unrealistic.

We call church the fellowship of the saints—and in Christ Jesus we are that. That's true. Through faith in Jesus, God reckons us as perfectly righteous and clean. All our sins—past, present, and future—have “already” been dealt with. Praise God! However, there's a “not yet” reality to the church also. We still struggle with our sin. And in that way, we could just as truly be described as the fellowship of the sinners. Friends, until Jesus returns, this gathering will be sinfully messy.

And, that's precisely what we're going to be looking at today in Nehemiah—the messy, difficult, and costly work of serving God in relationship with his people. Let's read today's passage and see what it has to teach us about the messy fellowship of our Lord.

Nehemiah 5

5 Now the men and their wives raised a great outcry against their fellow Jews. ² Some were saying, “We and our sons and daughters are numerous; in order for us to eat and stay alive, we must get grain.”

³ Others were saying, “We are mortgaging our fields, our vineyards and our homes to get grain during the famine.”

⁴ Still others were saying, “We have had to borrow money to pay the king's tax on our fields and vineyards. ⁵ Although we are of the same flesh and blood as our fellow Jews and though our children are as good as theirs, yet we have to subject our sons and daughters to slavery. Some of our daughters have already been enslaved, but we are powerless, because our fields and our vineyards belong to others.”

⁶ When I heard their outcry and these charges, I was very angry. ⁷ I pondered them in my mind and then accused the nobles and officials. I told them, “You are charging your own people interest!” So I called together a large meeting to deal with them ⁸ and said: “As far as possible, we have bought back our fellow Jews who were

sold to the Gentiles. Now you are selling your own people, only for them to be sold back to us!” They kept quiet, because they could find nothing to say.

⁹ So I continued, “What you are doing is not right. Shouldn’t you walk in the fear of our God to avoid the reproach of our Gentile enemies? ¹⁰ I and my brothers and my men are also lending the people money and grain. But let us stop charging interest! ¹¹ Give back to them immediately their fields, vineyards, olive groves and houses, and also the interest you are charging them—one percent of the money, grain, new wine and olive oil.”

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

Then I summoned the priests and made the nobles and officials take an oath to do what they had promised. ¹³ I also shook out the folds of my robe and said, “In this way may God shake out of their house and possessions anyone who does not keep this promise. So may such a person be shaken out and emptied!”

At this the whole assembly said, “Amen,” and praised the Lord. And the people did as they had promised.

¹⁴ Moreover, from the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when I was appointed to be their governor in the land of Judah, until his thirty-second year—twelve years—neither I nor my brothers ate the food allotted to the governor. ¹⁵ But the earlier governors—those preceding me—placed a heavy burden on the people and took forty shekels of silver from them in addition to food and wine. Their assistants also lorded it over the people. But out of reverence for God I did not act like that. ¹⁶ Instead, I devoted myself to the work on this wall. All my men were assembled there for the work; we did not acquire any land.

¹⁷ Furthermore, a hundred and fifty Jews and officials ate at my table, as well as those who came to us from the surrounding nations. ¹⁸ Each day one ox, six choice sheep and some poultry were prepared for me, and every ten days an abundant supply of wine of all kinds. In spite of all this, I never demanded the food allotted to the governor, because the demands were heavy on these people.

¹⁹ Remember me with favor, my God, for all I have done for these people.

As we study Nehemiah five, we're going to focus on two important themes. (1st) God's redemption is our counterbalance. His redemptive work keeps us in check when we lose our way. (2nd) God's redemption is costly. It's never cheap and easy. It always entails sacrifice.

1. God's redemption is our counterbalance.

You know, it would be easy for us to read this text and think how simple it is for Nehemiah to resolve this problem. We might think that this clearly demonstrates how reasonable people can be. You point out an injustice—like the abuse of the poor by the rich, which we see here—and then for the most part people will come together and find a solution and work for the good of all.

It sounds great, but it's a total myth; it's a myth that is often perpetuated today. It says that people are basically good and that all they need is a little encouragement to go in the right direction—to do the right thing. (There was this billboard campaign in and around Harrisburg, when I lived there, that proclaimed or preached this myth. The group sponsoring the adds explained—“We believe people are ultimately good but sometimes just need a reminder.”¹ Is that all we need, just a reminder to do good? Just a reminder to love others? Just a reminder to not steal someone's television set? Just a little reminder not to drive our car into those protestors whom we don't like? Friends, I'm all for positivity. I appreciate what this organization is attempting to do. And, in one sense, I'm behind it. However, I'm pretty certain that our predicament—that the human condition—won't get fixed with a simple reminder.)

Why then did the Israelites—who took advantage of their vulnerable brothers and sisters in the midst of their crisis—turn so quickly around and do the right thing when Nehemiah confronted them? That's the question before us.

They did it because they had a context. They did it because they had a history. They did it because of God! When Nehemiah confronts them, all of this is in play. This is no simple reminder. This confrontation cuts to the core of their shared faith. It invokes the laws of the Lord and, also, the work of the Lord to redeem his people. Behind this rebuke stands the saving work of God. That's the context here.

¹ You can read more about *The Foundation for a Better Life* [here](#).

Back in Leviticus (a book with which all there that day would've been familiar and to which all their thoughts would have gone) the Lord says this to the Israelites. Listen to what he prohibits and listen to *why* he does so.

Because the Israelites are my servants, whom I brought out of Egypt, they must not be sold as slaves...fear your God (Leviticus 25:42-43).

I think Nehemiah gives a nod to this text when he asks—"Shouldn't you walk in the fear of our God...?" (v. 9). Didn't he prohibit treating your brothers and sisters like property? Didn't he command you to treat them with dignity, respect, and love? *What are you doing?!!*—he rebukes.

What, however, is the Lord's reasoning for this prohibition? That's important. That's the context which gives the commandment power. So, what is it?

Friends, the reason is God's redeeming work. The reason is that he freed them from slavery in Egypt. The reason is that God saved them. He saved the poor people who were being oppressed and, also, the wealthy people who were oppressing them. God saved them all. They were all rescued from slavery in Egypt. That's the logic. That's God's reasoning for his command.

His redemption is the counterbalance here. Redeem your brothers and sisters, says the Lord, because I redeemed you. Be gracious and generous with all of them, he says, just as I was gracious and generous with you.

There is a quick repentance here because of the Lord God's kindness and love and saving work. It's not just a reminder. It's a relational reality that brings change. It's the experience of God's grace. It's the experience of his kindness toward them. Only God can soften hearts and bring about repentance. In fact, it is God's kindness and mercy which works repentance in us (Romans 2:4).

Friends, Israel lived in a context of God's redemption, care, and love for them. So, they repented of their sins. And, we have a far greater context of his redemption, of his care, and of his love for us. He has not simply saved us from slavery to others but from slavery to sin and death through faith in Jesus.

How much more quickly should we repent of sins! How much more quickly should we work for those who are oppressed! This is not simply a reminder for you. This is a relational reality. God's redemption in Christ Jesus is our counterbalance.

The gospel calls us back to him over and over and over again. It calls us out of sins and into Christlike living. Amen!

This is our gospel context in Christ. This is our new reality. Live in this reality. Don't forsake it. You, brothers and sisters, are redeemed and loved by God.

Well, let's move now to our second theme.

2. God's redemption is costly.

We could celebrate this victory of repentance and, then, move quickly past it. We could rush to the next scene. But, we don't want to do that. We want to recognize how costly and how expensive doing what's right is. It's written all over this passage, and it's written all over Nehemiah, and it's written all over the Bible.

First, notice that it costs these wealthy Israelites. They were making money. They had loaned their fellow Israelites food during a famine and money to pay taxes. In return, they'd taken hold of their grain fields, vineyards, olive groves and homes. On top of all this, they were charging interest on the loans. These wealthy Israelites were making a killing. Business was booming. The markets had turned in their favor, and they were simply taking advantage of it. This is basic capitalism.

Then however Nehemiah runs their entrepreneurial spirit up against the Spirit of God, and business quickly changes for them. Look at what they agree to sacrifice when Nehemiah challenges them.

...let us stop charging interest! Give back to them immediately their fields, vineyards, olive groves and houses, and also the interest you are charging them—one percent of the money, grain, new wine and olive oil."

"We will give it back," they said. "And we will not demand anything more from them. We will do as you say."

...And the people did as they had promised (vv. 10-12, 13).

Doing what pleases their Creator entails sacrifice for these wealthy Israelites. They must give back what they've collected and pay back the interest on their loans. The welfare of their brothers and sisters in Christ is far more important to the Lord than their individual financial prosperity. So, God calls them to work for redemption, and it costs them.

Next, notice that God’s redemptive calling costs Nehemiah also. As governor, Nehemiah would have had many instituted privileges. The people under his authority would’ve regularly been required to provide a luxurious helping of food and drink for his entire household. This was his right as governor. Yet, Nehemiah is compelled by the redemptive love of God to waive this right. Instead, Nehemiah paid for this from his own expenses so as to not burden the people (v. 18).

Yet, let’s pan out a bit more. Was that all it cost Nehemiah to follow the Lord? Was that all he sacrificed to serve God’s redemptive purposes? No, he was cupbearer to Artaxerxes King of Persia. We have to recognize the status of a position like that. In many places, the cupbearer was the 2nd highest ranking official in the kingdom.² Just to seek Israel’s redemption, Nehemiah had to give up great status and privilege and humble himself. God’s redemptive calling cost Nehemiah.

And, we should ask—Did Nehemiah like building projects?³ Was Nehemiah into that kind of thing? This is a provocative question to ask throughout Scripture. Did Noah enjoy boats? Did Moses like guiding tours? Did Esther enjoy diplomacy? Friends, the redemptive purposes of the Lord entails sacrifice. It costs us something. This is the nature of redemption; isn’t it?

As we close, let’s consider Nehemiah. He follows the Lord’s calling upon him and goes to Jerusalem. He steps out of the royal courts and steps into a city in ruins: from abundance to squalor, from honor and privilege to scorn and sacrificial service. Just meditate upon what pursuing the Lord’s redemptive purposes cost Nehemiah. Consider how much he left behind to care for and help God’s people. His story is, without a doubt, a story of sacrifice for the Lord. And, it’s a story repeated regularly in the biblical narrative—men and women who follow the Lord’s redemptive calling despite the costs (e.g. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; Ruth and Naomi; Peter and Paul). It’s difficult to find an exception to this rule.

And, all of these people point us to Jesus. They are merely shadows pointing to the great, central hero in Scripture. And, Nehemiah’s story is no exception to this. His story points us to Jesus. The One who stepped out of the heavenly, royal courts

² F. Charles Fensham, *The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah*, 157.

³ I believe I first heard this question in a sermon by Paige Brown. You can watch that sermon [here](#).

and stepped into a world in ruins. Jesus left glory in order to pursue our redemption. He humbled himself to serve his heavenly Father. This is the good news:

That the Triune Son did not consider equality with God a thing to hold on to and use for his advantage, but instead made himself a humble servant—a mere man; he was obedient to his Father’s redemptive calling; he was obedient even to death on a Roman cross (Philippians 2:6-8).

Oh the cost of our redemption! Praise God for Jesus Christ! Amen.