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## NEHEMIAH 5

Series: Life Lessons from Nehemiah

[PRAYER] Father, make our hearts receptive to your word this morning. We thank you so much for giving it to us. Lord, we just want to settle our hearts and be ready for what you might say in the next few minutes. So speak to us. Holy Spirit, we ask that you'd fall on this place now and create revival in our hearts in this moment. We ask this in Jesus' name, amen.

My coworker Dr. Rob Rienow that I was in Dubai with said to me while we were there, "I'm going to write a new book for children and I want to throw out the title idea for you to see what you think."

I said, "Go ahead."

He says, "Here's the title: *Teach Your Children to Hate.*"

I said, "Well that's very provocative. Why don't you tell me a little bit more about what you're thinking."

He says, "It comes from this verse in the Bible that says that we are to love the Lord, and to love the Lord is to hate evil."

Now I don't know if that's a good title for a book or not, but I do know that there is a challenge in our young people today that they often don't learn to hate evil. They aren't educated about what evil is and there's a lot of confusion that makes everything look gray. Yet God has some very clear standards of what is right and wrong and we need to have a visceral response toward evil that takes place in our world.

In our passage today, Nehemiah gets angry. Very angry, the Bible says. He's mad and it's a righteous kind of anger.

How many of you received my email this week that told you what discernment is going to be about? If you don't get it, you can get it. Each week I'm going to try to tell you in advance what's going on so you can prepare yourself and your family so you can use it in advance before you come to church. I want to thank those of you who responded last week and this week to the email. It just kind of forms my thinking as I'm going through to hear your responses and what you're thinking. So thank you very much.

Nehemiah was angry. Righteous anger is what he experienced. I want to take you to the passage and I want to read the passage to you. We're going to find out what he's angry about and then we're going to find out his response to it.

So will you stand as I read verses 1-13 and then we'll pick up after verse 14 a little bit later. Let's stand in honor of God's word. Please open your Bibles. If you brought them that would be a great way for you to read along. If not, you can look up at the screen here where I have the verses for us.

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

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

*Still others were saying, “We have had to borrow money to pay the king's tax on our fields and vineyards. 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.”*

*When I heard their outcry and these charges, I was very angry. 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 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.*

*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? I and my brothers and my men are also lending the people money and grain. But 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.”*

*Then I summoned the priests and made the nobles and officials take an oath to do what they had promised. 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!”*

You may be seated.

There was an outcry of this is not fair, this is unjust. That's the cry. This is unjust. This is not fair what's going on.

Notice there are four complaints. The first one is in verse 2 where it says – *some were saying* we do not have enough food to live. That's what they're saying. The second one is in verse 3 where

he's saying we've had to put up our field and our home as collateral for loans to get the very food that we need to eat. That's not fair that we have to do that. The third one is in verse 4 – *still others were saying* the taxes are too high. And verse 5 tells us that some of them had already mortgaged their fields and mortgaged their property, so in order to get food they had to put their children up as collateral and now some of their children were even sold into slavery because they weren't able to pay the debt.

This is a description of poverty. There are different ways to measure poverty today. There are about a billion people that live on less than two dollars a day. So you can measure poverty by income, but probably a better way to measure poverty is based on capability. That is do I have the capability or the ability to get certain things. When a certain person isn't able to get clean water food, a set of clothes to wear, and shelter, when they're unable to get those things, we call that extreme poverty.

My first experience with extreme poverty was when I was thirty-three years old. I was invited to go to Africa to go do some evangelism work, to do some crusades. I told them I will go to Africa and do this in Kenya if I can bring my nine year old son with me. They thought that was a delightful idea. So Josh and I went to Kenya and we did our crusades.

But before as we were getting ready, Windsor Chapel (just right up the road here in West Windsor) their Sunday school group was sponsoring a child in Kenya and they said, "Since you're going to Kenya, can we work it out to give you a package that you can take and actually go and give to them?" I thought that's a great idea. I've always admired World Vision and what an opportunity to visit and see what they're doing there in the culture of the poor people there in Kenya. So I sent letters in advance and arranged it. They said just come to the World Vision office in Nairobi on such-and-such a day. So I want to describe for you my one day that I went on this World Vision project.

Joshua and I arrived at the World Vision office and met our guide and our interpreter, translator and we got into a 4x4 Land Rover. We drove for our first stop unrelated to the thirteen year old girl we were going to visit about five hours away. Our first stop was two hours away and we drove over on roads that were dirt roads, but the roads were not really roads. You needed a Land Rover in order to go over the huge ruts in the road that nobody fixes. And then if there's any water in the river you wouldn't be able to go through because you have to actually drive on the river bed to get to the other side.

So about two hours later we drive into the World Vision compound. Today was distribution day for food for the people that they do once a month. There were hundreds of people seated around on the ground and outside the camp all over the place, seated, waiting for the distribution of food. We got out of our vehicle and I was able to just walk around and see what was there. And I did. I walked around all the people and I was just shocked. I don't know if I should have been shocked because I've seen the World Vision pictures of emaciated bodies where you can see their bones and stomachs that are bloated and people that are starving. I've seen that, but I've never experienced it in real life. Here I am walking among all of this and it's just such a bizarre experience. I'm just trying to take this in and trying to understand it.

The World Vision truck arrives with big eighty-pound cloth sewn bags of sorghum. They get them off the truck and open them up and each family would get a three-pound coffee can, about that big, and that would be their food for the next month. That wouldn't be enough for one person to live on. But that would be what their whole family would live on for the next month. So I watched the distribution for a little bit.

It was about lunch time and they told us early in the morning, bring some food because you're not going to find any, you're not going to buy anything out there certainly, nobody's going to give you any food. So if you want a lunch, you better bring it. So I had prepared some bread and jam and fruit, but there was no way I could eat. I don't know if I was nauseated because of the smells and what I was looking at or it was just the guilt I had of having a lunch when these people didn't have anything. I even suggested I should just give my lunch to these folks and the guide said no, you can't do that. One, it would make them sick if they ate that at this point, and secondly, there would be a riot of who would get it. So you can't give the food away like that. But I was so impressed in my heart about the starvation that exists in certain places of the world.

We continued our drive and we drove about three more hours and we arrived at a school compound provided by World Vision. This compound had a hundred or more students in it and they had no idea that we were coming. There's no way to let them know in advance. There's no cell phones. There's no internet. There's no electricity. There's no water. There's nothing out there that they have. But there's a school there where they're learning. When we arrived there and got out, they're wondering what was going on. When it was explained that we were here to visit this one thirteen year old girl, the whole place kind of erupted in excitement. Because it's not every day that you have a thirty-three year old man and his son who are white show up in a black African village compound. So there was a lot of excitement and people were gathered around.

Now I'm feeling like I only have gifts for one girl here and all of these people would benefit from something. The church had provided for us a white dress for her, a couple big bags of candy (that I'm sure she shared), a journal, and some other gifts that we got out one at a time and we gave it to her. Now this girl was so shocked and embarrassed by the whole experience, she had her hands over her mouth and her nose most of the time. She just didn't know what to say. She was just shocked by the whole event.

There's a lot of excitement and exuberance going on. It's all being translated because we have no idea what anybody is saying. But then someone makes some statement and the translator says, "They think she should go try on the dress and come back." So sure enough she went and tried on the dress and it fit perfectly for this girl. It was amazing. A white dress is certainly not a good idea in that environment. I mean they sit on the floor in the dirt and don't have any shoes, they're barefooted running around. But she had this white dress. She came out and people were excited about it all.

Somebody made a comment and everybody laughed. I'm waiting for the translation. Why is this person laughing? Why is everybody laughing? And they said well the one person said that they think what happened is you've come and brought your son to find a wife and that's going to be the wife and that's going to be the wedding dress. So we assured them that was not the case.

They asked the question, would you like to go and visit her home where she lives? Of course that's exactly what I wanted to do. I would love to go visit her home. Okay, we've got to go quickly because it's getting dark. So we drive out about a mile to this compound. The board was made of sticks and rocks that would delineate the compound, and it had three huts in it. But the huts didn't have enough straw to make the roof complete. So there's plenty of holes all in the straw.

We never met the mother because she had gone for water, which she has to do every two or three days. She goes for water to bring back water, so we never met her. When we came into the compound, the father was there and he was wearing a shirt (I think you can call it a shirt, but there were no sleeves and raggedy) and some short pants and he was holding a machete, obviously as a weapon. Who knows what these people are doing here. The girl was with us and she explained to her dad why we were there. Oh he was so thrilled that we were representing World Vision and the church that was the sponsor for them. So he was so grateful to see us.

After showing us around and explaining how the compound worked (I was really interested in that and how they all lived and all of those things), he said through the translator, "Can you stay for dinner?" The translator said I'm going to translate this for you, but you have to say no. So she translated for us and she says we can't stay here. Number one, it's customary for them to invite us to eat. That's just what you do in an African culture. If somebody comes over, you invite them to eat. But these people don't have any food to give you to eat. And secondly, we've got to get out of here because it's getting dark and we don't want to be driving at night because of bandits that are out there, so you have to say no. So I said, "Oh no, that's okay. Thank you very much," and they translated that.

So after a few minutes, another statement. The translator says since you can't stay for dinner, he wants to give you a chicken. This was like chicken to go. He wants to give you a chicken to take home to your wife in America. And the translator said you can't say no to this. You have to take the chicken. We'll just throw it out of the jeep on the way, but you need to take the chicken. So I said to her, "I've never even held a chicken." Now as soon as I said that, everybody starts laughing because here's a thirty-three year old man that's never held a chicken. What do you mean you've never held a chicken? You guys are rich in America, you must have lots of chicken in your compound. How come you've never held a chicken? I said, "I've just never held a chicken." So they're laughing. They think this is a big joke and a lot of fun. They said well he's going to tie the feet for you. So take the chicken and hold it. You'll be fine. So I took it, we took pictures, we thanked them, and we got into the vehicle. We put the chicken in the back of the truck and we headed off.

I'm imagining we're going to throw it out the window. But they're having so much fun teasing me about not having experience with a chicken that they decided that the best thing for me to do would be the one to cut the head of the chicken when we get to our location and we're going to eat chicken for dinner. So we're taking the chicken and I'm going to bring the chicken and I should cut off the head. In all of this joking, I said, "Look, here's what I will do. I will cut off the head of the chicken if you untie the feet. Because we have this saying in America that someone's running around like a chicken with their head cut off and I don't know what that means. I would

like to see that.” Oh they laughed. They thought that was so funny. We can’t do that though. No way. Because the chicken will run away and we’ll lose it.

So I did cut the head off the chicken and they had the hot water boiling because right away they stick it in hot water so they can take all the feathers off. It releases the feathers. I wanted to go in the kitchen and see how they’re preparing it, but men don’t go in the kitchen. So this is another big fiasco of me just wanting to see what’s going on. They have to cut this one piece out of the chicken that would poison the meat if they don’t cut that part out of its guts before they cook it. And then they cooked it. When they put it on the plate before me, I just couldn’t eat this nice little chicken. I’m not sure if it was the fact that I held this chicken or its whole days of activities, but it was quite an event that day.

We went to bed in this...it really wasn’t a house, but this compound place. We went to sleep and then got up the next day and rode the rest of the day to Nairobi and back home. Extreme poverty.

I think that when we see social injustice... Poverty is one of the social injustices of our world. When we see that, it ought to raise up something inside of us. We ought to be angry. Do you know that there’s enough resources in our world to facilitate and feed everybody that lives in our world? But often because of corruption in our government a World Vision boat that contains lots of food stay there because the government is requiring a bribe for them to be able to deliver it. It should make us angry when we see these things.

That’s what’s happening with Nehemiah. He is angry when he sees the injustice that’s taking place and the poverty among his people. Social injustice should make us angry. If we were to look at the map of what social injustice looks like, poverty would be one piece of that. We could go to another piece of the map and see the abused children, child abuse, or even the right to life, abortion. It should make us angry. But you know social injustice is always messy, complicated. Because even though we’re fighting for the right to this unborn child to live, we must remember lest we be callused that there is a mother who’s traumatized by this potential birth and doesn’t want to have the child. We must consider the messiness of the situation and be able to care for that person as well, not just protect the child. Social injustice is messy.

Then there’s the whole issue of women in our society being abused by men. Sometimes that takes place in the marketplace when women are not paid equally in the system as men are. Sometimes it takes place with sexual assault because of men abusing women. Some takes place in domestic violence with men harming women. So the whole protection of women is social injustice that must be met and challenged in our world today.

And then we can go to another part of the map where Christians are being persecuted all over the world. It’s a social injustice that’s taking place that’s so painful. It should make us angry when we see social injustice taking place.

Climate change and resource management is not considered a social injustice because social injustice is when one group of people harm another group, but it’s beginning to become a social injustice because it’s being recognized that there are people out of neglect could be caring for the

environment better. Thus those people who are being harmed by the climate warming and other things that endanger the environment, there are people that are being hurt by that.

Social injustice takes place regularly and it should anger us. There should be a righteous anger that causes us to rise up and do something about it, to make a statement or to feel something inside that I want to be part of the solution and not part of the problem.

Let's look at what Nehemiah does. Notice it says in verse 6 – *When I heard their outcry and these charges, I was very angry.* I just want to suggest there are times when we have righteous anger about a situation that's going on and we are in that moment very close to God's heart. Because God is very concerned about social justice. He was angry, but notice in the next statement what happened. He didn't just spout off. He didn't just react in his anger. It says – *I pondered them in my mind.* He met with himself is what the King James Version says.

I have a practice in my life because I'm a rather busy person and I've got my hands in a lot of different things. Every once in a while I have to stop and have an internal staff meeting where I get all those voices that are going on in my head about being a dad and a husband and a homeowner and a pastor and all the things that I'm doing. Well what's important? What do I need to do? Sometimes I need to have an internal staff meeting with Jesus and just talk about it. I know some of you would say there's medication for that, but that internal staff meeting is an opportunity for me to allow the voices in my heart to speak and allow God to reorient me and make sure I'm doing what God wants me to do in the various aspects of my life.

That's what Nehemiah's doing. Lord, we've got a problem here. I'm angry about it. But he ponders this inside of his heart. I would hope that as a result of our time this morning that you would ponder some things in your heart. That you would have an internal staff meeting or an internal family meeting and talk about how you might be part of the solution and not part of the problem.

So the first thing he does is he gets angry. The second thing is he ponders this to decide, Lord, what is it that you want me to do? The next thing that he does is he takes some action. The action that he takes is to confront these people and to help them make some changes. And they respond to him. So he actually has an effect.

I want to suggest that some of you young people, if you understand what social injustices are out there, if you understand that sin exists out there and you are angry about it and you recognize that you can do something about it, you can change the world. I'm confident that people sitting here are people that can make major changes. Not just in their own small environment, but on a large scale.

That's what Nehemiah's doing. He challenges these guys. Then notice in verse 12 they repent in their hearts. They make a change. They say – *“We will give it back and we will not demand anything more from them.”*

So the third thing. He gets angry, he ponders it in his heart. The third thing he does is he takes some action. I don't know what that action looks like for you. But it's important for us to do what we can to right wrongs. In the name of Jesus we take a stand for what's right.

I would encourage you... You know the political field right now is ripe with people trying to solve social injustices. Whether you're Democrat or Republican, it doesn't make any difference. I mean it makes a difference, I'm sure, but the point is there are social injustices that are being spoken to that have to do with taxes and immigration and all kinds of things that are very important issues. You hear the people speaking. I would encourage you to vote. As a Christian you need to vote. Understand what the issues are and vote. You don't have to be Democrat or Republican, you just need to be a Christian to vote. You want to get educated and understand. Be a part of the solution, not part of the problem. Vote.

If you don't know what the issues are, if you're not registered to vote, stop by the information table. Sue has all the stuff necessary for registering you to vote so you can take part in the election that's taking place next year. If you're not giving to Calvary Chapel, I would encourage you to do that. We are a church that's committed to raising up people who are disciples of Christ that are taking action and doing something. Be part of the solution.

Well that's as far as I read in the passage. But there's a whole other piece of this that I want you to see and I think you'll be impressed by it. I'm going to read the next verses from 14-19. This will complete the chapter. It will illustrate for us what else Nehemiah did. Because he wants us to know this and how he acted independently, how he had personal integrity, how he had privileges, but he didn't take them because he wanted to be part of the solution here and not part of the problem. So let me read this to you as we complete the rest of the chapter.

Nehemiah says this: *Furthermore, from the day King Artaxerxes appointed me to be their governor in the land of Judah, from his twentieth year until his thirty-second year (12 years total), neither I nor my brothers ate the food allotted to the governor.*

The governor was allotted a certain amount of benefits legally that he could take from the people as a tax and he could use those for himself as part of his benefit package for leading the people. Nehemiah says I didn't do that. I had a right legally to do that, but morally I felt like I couldn't do that. I just want you to see that legally you might have an opportunity to do something, but morally you choose not to.

*The governors before me had heavily burdened the people, taking from them bread and wine plus forty shekels of silver. Their servants also oppressed the people, but I did not do this because of my fear of God.*

Why are we acting with integrity? We're acting with integrity because we know that we serve a God that's concerned about justice in our world. We know that we believe in a God that's concerned about the hearts of people, the needs of people, and that He's chosen us to be part of the solution to those challenges.

*Instead, I devoted myself to the construction of the wall, and all my servants were gathered there for the work; we did not acquire any land. There were 150 Jews and officials at my table, besides the guests from the surrounding nations Each day, one ox, six choice sheep, and some fowl were prepared for me, and once every ten days an abundance of all kinds of wine was provided. But I did not demand the food allotted to the governor, because the burden on the people was so heavy. Remember me favorably, O my God, for all that I have done for this people. At this the whole assembly said, "Amen," and praised the Lord. And the people did as they had promised.*

So I go away from this message that I read in Nehemiah with a feeling of the need to be part of the solution. So I asked myself, what does that look like? What does it mean to be part of the solution? So I listed ten things that you might consider in your internal staff meeting and ponder for yourself. I suggest you want to do these things and make them convictions in your own life.

Never compromise your faith.  
Share the gospel with excitement.  
Live boldly.  
Love unconditionally.  
Be a light in your home and in the world.  
Be kind.  
Give generously and sacrificially.  
Speak out.  
Be courageous.  
Where God leads, take action.

Would you stand with me and let's pray together.

[PRAYER] Lord, I know that your justice comes from two qualities of you that we admire. One of those is your holiness and the other is your compassion. So fill our hearts we ask with a craving for justice to see people that are hurting and recognize that the map is messy and the challenges are difficult to know how to help and be part of the solution. But Lord, we receive from you what you have spoken to us through Nehemiah and we ask that you give personal direction that we might live our own lives with integrity and with purpose. We ask this in Jesus' name, amen.