



Studies in Ezra & Nehemiah

Text

Nehemiah 5:1-19

Topic

Nehemiah calls everyone to assemble after the workers on the wall accuse the wealthy Jewish businessmen of profiting from their hardships

Title

“Accusers Assemble”

It's not business as usual for some of the top companies in the nation:

- *Chick-fil-A* and *Hobby Lobby* are closed on Sundays.
- *In-N-Out* puts Bible verses on its packaging.
- At *Interstate Batteries* their mission statement is "to glorify God."

- Purchase clothing from *Forever 21* and you may notice John 3:16 printed on your shopping bag.
- *Tyson Farms* "strive(s) to honor God" and "be a faith-friendly company."

Some of those companies go beyond proclaiming the Gospel. Since the year 2000, *Tyson Farms* has employed approximately 120 office Chaplains who are there to provide "compassionate pastoral care" to employees.

You might say it is business **unusual** for these companies.

We are in the fifth chapter of Nehemiah. On account of their commitment to rebuild Jerusalem's ruined wall, the workers had no time to farm. Their crops failed, leading to scarcity. They couldn't pay the heavy taxes levied by Persia. They were reduced to borrowing money.

The more well-to-do Jews, shrewd businessmen, saw an opportunity to profit.

They offered loans, but were charging illegal interest, then foreclosing on properties when the borrowers fell behind. In some cases, the borrowers chose to sell their children into indentured service to keep up with payments.

The wealthy were conducting business *as usual* at a time that called for the *unusual*.

Maybe you own a company; most of us don't. But we all do business in the world. And though we will talk about money, by 'business' we mean **all** of our activities in the world as we await the Lord.

We are God's on-going building project; and by 'we' I mean each of us individually, and all of us corporately. *Our* business should be **unusual** as we await the return of the King.

I'll organize my comments around two points: #1 If It's Business As Usual, The Earth Is What You Treasure, but #2 If It's Business Unusual, Heaven Is What You Treasure.

#1 If It's Business As Usual, The Earth Is What You Treasure

(v1-8)

The Book of Nehemiah is an accurate history; but it, and the entire Old Testament, is so much more than that. The apostle Paul reminded us that, “Whatever things were written before were written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope” (Romans 15:4).

The episode we are about to encounter seems to be a great example and illustration of something Jesus said in the Gospel of Matthew:

Mat 6:19 "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal;

Mat 6:20 but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal.

Mat 6:21 For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

- The workers on the wall: Would you say they treasured Heaven, or earth?
- The wealthy, as I've described them: Would you say they treasured Heaven, or earth?

It is a simple but memorable illustration of Jesus' words. One group was building for God, while the other was building bigger barns for themselves.

Neh 5:1 And there was a great outcry of the people and their wives against their Jewish brethren.

I get the impression that this situation was unknown to Nehemiah until something happened that triggered "a great outcry." It never crossed his mind that Jews would take advantage of their brethren - especially while they were working for God. Good for him for believing the best.

Why mention the “wives?” The women normally refrained from open complaining, in proper submission to their husbands. But things were so bad, even godly wives gave voice to it.

Problems in the church, between believers, always shock us. They should; we are charged to maintain unity in peace. At the same time, take a look at the first century church and you’ll see that it was rife with strife.

Neh 5:2 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."

We saw in the last chapter that the people worked from daybreak until the stars appeared. Because of the threat of attack from enemies, the workers whose homes and lands were outside of Jerusalem stayed in town rather than going home.

No one called Craft Services for catering. Basic needs of food were not being made available.

Any food had to be purchased, adding to their impoverishment.

There's a scene in the baseball film, *Moneyball*, in which players discover the Oakland A's are so pathetic a franchise, you have to buy your own beverages from a vending machine.

Neh 5:3 There were also *some* who said, "We have mortgaged our lands and vineyards and houses, that we might buy grain because of the famine."

Faithful to the work, the workers did not quit. They mortgaged property for the money they needed.

When we were in our building project at CCSan Bernardino, we went to Pastor Don McClure to ask if he would approach Pastor Chuck Smith about lending us money. Don wanted to know if any of us had second-mortgaged our houses.

It was a short meeting.

Later, a couple of guys in the fellowship, contractors, on their own, and with no knowledge of our meeting with Don, second-mortgaged a rental property they owned, and gave the money towards the building project.

I'm not saying it is always necessary to do something like that. What I am saying is this: If you think you'd never do something like that because it doesn't make good business sense, then you're stuck in the business as usual group. You identify with the wealthy Jews; and that's where you want to be.

Neh 5:4 There were also those who said, "We have borrowed money for the king's tax *on* our lands and vineyards.

Taxes were due regardless their crop losses. There were no subsidies, no help for farmers.

Neh 5:5 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."

This was the big reveal that it was their own "flesh," meaning their own "brethren" - fellow Jews - who were treating them this way.

Bottom line: It was a great opportunity to grow your portfolio.

I was surprised to learn that the commonly used phrase, 'bottom line,' is relatively recent in origin. It is an American phrase originally coined in the mid-1960's by corporate America to describe the last line of a profit and loss statement where the final numerical figure is placed, showing whether a company made a profit or took a loss.

If you are always looking to the bottom line, then you're not looking up; you're not looking Heavenward.

Do you think that *Hobby Lobby* or *Chik-fil-A* was looking to the bottom line when deciding to close on Sunday? From a business standpoint, it is foolish. If it were more profitable to be closed on Sunday, then more businesses would follow suit.

I didn't see *Mary Poppins Returns*, but I've seen the original enough times to know that George Banks getting fired by the bottom line bankers was the best thing that could have happened to him. It set him free to understand a greater purpose for his life.

Bottom line is an anchor that hinders spiritual building *in* and *through* your life. You've got the tuppence in your hand, but it is holding you prisoner to material things.

Neh 5:6 And I became very angry when I heard their outcry and these words.

Anger was a proper response. Not anger that lashes out, or loses control; that's sin, and can't be excused by saying you were righteously angry.

Neh 5:7 After serious thought, I rebuked the nobles and rulers, and said to them, "Each of you is exacting usury from his brother." So I called a great assembly against them.

I should point out that scholars debate the meaning of "usury" in this passage. Most agree that it means charging interest on the loans. If so, in Deuteronomy we read, "Do not charge a fellow Israelite interest, whether on money or food or anything else that may earn interest" (23:19).

Other scholars point out that the word translated "usury" isn't the normal word for interest. They say the lenders were acting more like pawnbrokers, holding property without interest, but with the intent of foreclosing on it.

Either way, these wealthy Jews were spiritually blind to the work of God.

Neh 5:8 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*.

Apparently Nehemiah and some others had purchased Jews out of servitude, while the wealthy were setting-up others to be sold into it. It's a mini-illustration within this passage to compare those who treasured earth versus those who treasured Heaven. One group set people free; the other sent them away bound.

Christian finances. There are several different resources that teach solid biblical principles. There are books and seminars. I'm not dissing any of them; in fact, most Christians will benefit by going through one of them.

I am saying that there are times when the Lord isn't interested in your shrewd handling of finances as much as He is in your personal sacrifice to further the work of the Gospel.

The things you have - they are yours, to do with as you please. But as you look at what pleases you, a picture emerges. Either you are treasuring Heaven, or you are treasuring earthly things.

Take a look: Where is your heart?

#2 If It's Business Unusual, Heaven Is What You Treasure

(v9-19)

In the early 1980's Pam and I were paring-down our lives in order to go into full-time ministry. We we sold our 2000 square foot home and were buying a 900 square foot home.

Even though we were going backwards, the numbers weren't working out. We were \$10,000.00 short in escrow to complete the deal.

Or were we? A couple unexpectedly deposited \$10,000.00 in our account, and the deal closed.

This ministry stuff seemed pretty good to me.

A few years later, we were Hanford-bound. Our house wasn't selling, so we rented it to a couple from CCSan Bernardino. After a few months, I approached them about buying it. When the appraisal came in, can you guess how much it was below the sales price? Yep - God got His \$10,000.00 back from us, in order to bless them.

Was it bad business? No, it was business unusual.

Neh 5:9 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?

There were bigger spiritual issues than bottom line profit. The wealthy were acting against the Jews just like the surrounding nations. Worse, really, because they were price-gouging their own neighbors.

A church should follow sound business practices. In fact, it must. We do. We're not talking about that. We're talking about supernatural leading to do the unusual when God confirms it.

Neh 5:10 I also, *with* my brethren and my servants, am lending them money and grain. Please, let us stop this usury!

Nehemiah and his guys were lending - but according to the Law, they were not charging interest, or profiting in any way.

Neh 5:11 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."

Either were charging 12% per annum on the loans and were told to return it; or this was a penalty assessed against the wealthy. They were told to pay it, and to restore their property.

Neh 5:12 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.

They gave their word, but Nehemiah had it notarized, as it were. Unlike Charlie Brown, he didn't trust them to hold the football without a witness.

Neh 5:13 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.

The assembly was like a biblical finance seminar - but one that was based on the unusual. I will say this about the Christian financial resources: If they don't take the unusual into account, they will trap you in legalism. It's all too easy to think that if you keep all the rules, you are pleasing God. God's principles, His precepts, always allow for you to keep the greatest commandment - "YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, WITH ALL YOUR SOUL, AND WITH ALL YOUR MIND," and, "YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF."

All of this happened on Nehemiah's watch. Was he slacking off? No; he simply didn't know. He was counting on all the Jews to be like him. The chapter ends with a look at his own business unusual practices.

Neh 5:14 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.

What three U.S. presidents refused their salary? Hoover, Kennedy, and Trump. You might remember that Arnold refused his salary as governor of California.

Nehemiah held a government position, and it had perks. He refused to benefit from them.

Is this a must in ministry? No; but it might be necessary, or prudent, in certain circumstances.

Neh 5:15 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.

In the world, position over people can lead to oppressing them. In the kingdom of God, ideas about position are inverted. You are not to lord over others. You are to consider yourself the servant of all.

Neh 5:16 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.

Nehemiah didn't simply visit the wall for photo ops. He worked on it. Instead of serving him, his own servants worked on the wall. Nehemiah was all-in.

Neh 5:17 And at my table *were* one hundred and fifty Jews and rulers, besides those who came to us from the nations around us.

This doesn't mean that every night Nehemiah set a table for 150 guests. "At my table" is a euphemism for "at my expense."

Undoubtedly some ate with him, but not all every night.

Neh 5:18 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.

The governor's provisions were charged to the people. Nehemiah couldn't refuse it; but he could share it.

Are there things you feel you can't refuse because of your position? Maybe you can. But, if you can't, can you use them to bless others? Be creative.

Neh 5:19 Remember me, my God, for good, *according to* all that I have done for this people.

He wasn't looking for reward. He was acknowledging his motives - for which he could trust God to reward him.

The term "*fuzzy math*" was first heard during the debates prior to the 2000 U.S. presidential election. It was used by George W. Bush, who dismissed the figures used by his opponent, Al Gore.

God uses fuzzy math. Jesus once said that a poor woman who gave two mites gave more than all the others (Luke 21:1-4). She didn't... But she did.

Then there is the Parable of the Pearl of Great Price.

Matthew 13:45 "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant seeking beautiful pearls,
Matthew 13:46 who, when he had found one pearl of great price, went and sold all that he had and bought it.

The merchant is the Lord Jesus. The pearl of great price is the church. At Calvary He sold all that He had to buy this pearl.

Jesus valued you more than the whole world; more than the entire universe. It doesn't make sense... and it does make sense.

We all have business with God. For some, it may be to receive Him as Savior.