

Resolving Conflict Like Nehemiah - 5:1-13

We've been studying Nehemiah for a while - this is week seven. A couple of weeks ago we looked at Chapter 4 of Nehemiah which is about conflict that comes from all directions. Chapter 5 is specifically about internal opposition.

Are there still problems with division among the faithful today? Of course there are! Internal problems destroy more churches than external problems. Satan would rather cause division in churches than anything else.

Mark 3:24-25 says, "*A kingdom divided by civil war will collapse. Similarly, a family splintered by feuding will fall apart.*" Division can destroy any group, organization, or nation. The persistent, growing division we see in our nation today is a very dangerous thing. Division is the biggest factor in church closings. It doesn't take big numbers. It can happen with two people or thousands.

If you don't deal with conflict and division they damage or destroy the work of the Lord in your life. If you're going to be an effective believer you've got to learn to deal with this. So this chapter in Nehemiah is very important. It teaches skills for dealing with conflict. Verses 1-5 detail the roots of division and conflict; verses 6-13 give the remedy. So let's look at it.

First, **The Roots of Division** – We've been following Nehemiah's story of the rebuilding of the city wall. The people have been spending all their time working on the wall and defending one another. They haven't had any time for regular tasks like cultivating their gardens and raising food.

Verses 1-2 say, "*About this time some of the men and their wives raised a cry of protest against their fellow Jews. They were saying, 'We have such large families. We need more food to survive.'*" The first complaint was a food shortage. There were too many to feed. Resources were in short supply. That also created high prices.

Verse 3 says, "*Others said, 'We have mortgaged our fields, vineyards, and homes to get food during the famine.'*" They're doing the work of God and yet God allows a famine. Why? Weren't they doing what God had told them to do? The thing is, doing God's will doesn't exempt you from the necessities and problems of life. Just because you're doing the right thing doesn't mean your car isn't going to break down or that you're not going to have some health problems. During the last few months Linda and I have had every vehicle our family owns have some kind of trouble. I'm not even going to start on the health issues!

So to cope they had over-extended their finances and mortgaged their "*fields, vineyards, and homes*" just to get the basics for survival. That's financial bondage. They were using their equity to feed their families.

Verse 4 says, "*And others said, 'We have had to borrow money on our fields and vineyards to pay our taxes.'*" They were living in ruins, but the king still expected his taxes. Every circumstance seems to be working against them. They're borrowing just to pay taxes and going into deep debt.

As a result, in verse 5 we hear, "*We belong to the same family as those who are wealthy, and our children are just like theirs. Yet we must sell our children into slavery just to get enough money to live. We have already sold some of our daughters, and we are helpless to do anything about it, for our fields and vineyards are already mortgaged to others.*"

They needed food and now some of them are so desperate that they've started selling their kids into indentured service to raise money for the family. There were limits to these transactions and some protections for those sold into service, but still, this showed how desperate they were.

But the thing is, these hard times were not the main issue. Remember, verse 1 said, "*...some of the men and their wives raised a cry of protest against their fellow Jews.*" They are complaining about their own people. These situations aren't being caused by circumstances, by those oppressing them, by outsiders. Believers were taking advantage of believers in this time of crisis. This wasn't enemies taking advantage – this was their own people focusing on their own personal desires and preferences and rather than helping the poor among them they're building up their own fortunes. They were showing a disregard for the misfortunes of other people, only thinking of themselves.

All they're doing was clearly against God's law. Exodus 22:25 says believers cannot charge interest to each other. God allowed them to charge interest to other people, but they were not allowed to do it with each other. They could loan to each other but it had to be interest-free. The Bible also said that they were not to enslave another believer. If someone was poor he could come and work for you but you didn't put him into bondage. They were clearly violating God's will.

The root cause of internal conflict and disharmony is always selfishness. Whether you have conflict in your family, with your friend, in church, at your work, at school - the bottom line in conflict is always selfishness. Always!

James 4:1 NIV says, " *What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you?*"

The most fulfilling part of life is working with people. And the most frustrating part of life is working with people. People tend to be selfish, including me. We want our own way. We prefer our preferences. As a result we don't always want to do the thing that's best. We think of ourselves and what's best for us and that causes conflict.

So what's the remedy for division? - Nehemiah knew this whole thing could blow up in his face and the city might never get rebuilt. They had believers against believers, families against families. People complaining against one another and being critical. This is much worse than fighting some enemy out there. An external enemy often rallies the troop and builds unity. This sort of behavior drives you apart.

First **1. Nehemiah Gets Angry with the Contention** - Nehemiah did not ignore the problem, he took it seriously. In verse 6 Nehemiah says, " *When I heard their complaints, I was very angry.*" Sometimes anger is very appropriate. Sometimes it's the right thing to do. This wasn't anger because Nehemiah wasn't getting his way or anything like that, it was because people were hurting other people.

It is possible to be angry and not sin. If it wasn't possible then God would be sinning at times because the Bible tells us times when God got angry. Jesus got angry - usually because of how people were treating other people, particularly the way they were treating the poor and those considered offenders. You can get angry and not sin. If there is disharmony caused by selfishness, you better take it seriously! There's a right kind of anger and a wrong kind. Know the difference.

Nehemiah's anger isn't a personal reaction. Nobody was hurting him. He is not angry because someone bruised his ego. That's the wrong kind of anger. He was angry at people's selfishness; deeply disturbed by their focus on their own desires and preferences.

They were causing a halt to God's work because of their own selfishness and greed. What they themselves wanted was so important to them that they were willing to let it damage the God-given work of the believers. Until the wall is finished, no one else could safely come to the city, so their attitudes are stopping growth. Nehemiah is thinking "What good is a wall to defend us against outside forces if we're hurting each other inside?"

We need to be angry at this kind of sin. When you see attitudes that are damaging the harmony in your family, your church, the first thing to do is to get upset. Nothing upsets a leader more than division. It's the one thing I really get upset about. I will work against people being this way.

Then, **2. Nehemiah Took Time to Think.** Verse. 7 says, "*After thinking it over, I spoke out...*" The Hebrew word translated as thinking about it literally means "I consulted with myself". Nehemiah's first reaction was to get angry. But before he did anything else he took some time to think. There are times when a leader needs to talk to himself or herself. You don't always need to have a huge discussion. You need to sit down and say, "What's really happening here? Set aside time for reflection. Because, when you get angry your first reaction is often wrong. You ought to get upset about when you see selfishness preventing or harming the work of God. But before you do anything, think before you speak.

James 1:19-20 says, "*Understand this, my dear brothers and sisters: You must all be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to get angry. Human anger does not produce the righteousness God desires.*" There is a difference between human anger and God's anger. Human anger is when we react because things aren't the way we like them. With God's anger there is no personal vendetta involved.

"...*be quick to listen, slow to speak.*" If you do these first two the third one "*slow to get angry*" comes more naturally. If you're quick to listen and slow to speak you will be slow to anger. You haven't just spouted off whatever came to mind. I've seen people who were effective for the Lord and in a moment of impulse, lost their credibility and effectiveness.

Then, **3. Nehemiah Spoke Out About the Issue.** Nehemiah 5:7 says, "*After thinking it over, I spoke out against these nobles and officials. I told them, 'You are hurting your own relatives by charging interest when they borrow money!'*" He's direct about the problem. He's not talking behind anyone's back. He's not bringing it up with his friends, commiserating with other people. He goes directly to the problem: he addresses the way they were sinning. He's just gotten here, but he's going to change things by addressing things that they're been doing to one another for years.

Now, let me make something clear: Nehemiah does this as a leader with authority and he's speaking out about the way the people in the group he has authority over are acting. If you as a believer have an objection against someone in the church who offends you for some reason, the procedure is a bit different. In Matthew 18:15-17 this is what Jesus said about how you are to handle conflict: *"If another believer sins against you, go privately and point out the offense. If the other person listens and confesses it, you have won that person back. But if you are unsuccessful, take one or two others with you and go back again, so that everything you say may be confirmed by two or three witnesses. If the person still refuses to listen, take your case to the church. Then if he or she won't accept the church's decision, treat that person as a pagan or a corrupt tax collector."* If you haven't followed this procedure, you have no right to carp about someone or speak against them.

But even if you go through all of this procedure, that's not the end of it. It said, *"Then if he or she won't accept the church's decision, [Notice, that's the church's decision, not yours. It's what the leaders decide] treat that person as a pagan or a corrupt tax collector"* So, how did Jesus show us was the way to treat pagans and tax collectors? He loved them; worked to bring them to God; had lunch with them.

Very few people like to confront people personally. If you like to confront people, you're weird! People who like to confront have a problem! And very few people like to be confronted. Most people hate it! So a lot of people avoid following the proper, Biblical procedure. They talk to other people about people. They agitate or carp behind the person's back. That may seem easier and safer, but that is sinful behavior. Even if you're in the right and that person is wrong, you can't do the right thing in the wrong way. If you do, you give up any right to complain about someone else.

Nehemiah's situation is a bit different. He's the leader of the whole thing and he's dealing with a problem: with the way people are acting toward one another. Leaders must have the courage to confront situations within their area of authority. If you're the leader of a small group, you have to confront it if people are acting poorly in your group. If you're the leader of a team, you have to confront it if people are acting poorly in your team. This is a skill you have to develop – it doesn't come easily or naturally. If it does, you've probably got personality problems! Leadership requires courage and it isn't a popularity contest. Politics is a popularity contest, but leadership isn't. As a leader, if you try to please everyone you're trying to do something even God can't do.

In Titus 3:10-11 Paul tells the pastoral leaders, *"If people are causing divisions among you, give a first and second warning. After that, have nothing more to do with them. For people like that have turned away from the truth, and their own sins condemn them."* Notice that the only offense mentioned here is being divisive. One of the tasks of leadership is stop people from being divisive. I've seen a lot of pastors and church leaders fail to confront a subject out of fear of losing people. The long term problems that caused in the church were a lot worse.

Then, **4. Nehemiah Dealt Publicly With Public Divisions** - Obviously in this situation everybody knew about it so it had to be dealt with publicly. You deal with things publicly to the degree that they are public. If it is a personal sin, you confess it personally to God. If it's a private sin between you and another person, you deal with it privately between the two of you. If you have a disagreement with the leadership of a ministry or of the church, go to the leader involved that you have a disagreement with - it's not right to try to go around leaders God has given you. If you can't resolve it with that leader, go to the appropriate leaders who have responsibility for the area that leader serves in. But if you didn't go to the person first, don't go around them.

Nehemiah was probably nervous speaking out about this publically. As the leader God had sent, he publicly took on the city leaders. He rebukes the people most able to give, the very ones he has to depend on to support rebuilding. Now who'd pay for supplies? The poor people who don't even have enough for food??? He's critical of the very people who are ponying up the money. It's a real gamble for him.

The devil was probably whispering in his ear, Nehemiah if you get up in front of these people and say these things and you lose their support, you'll never finish the project. But Nehemiah was committed to doing the right thing regardless. If it meant putting the wall on hold for a time while they dealt with this sin, so be it! That shows Nehemiah's integrity.

He said, *"What you are doing is not right! Should you not walk in the fear of our God in order to avoid being mocked by enemy nations?"* He's appealing to their consciences. He's saying what they're doing is bad testimony. Unbelievers are saying, "Those people are supposed to be godly people and look at them: they're being awful to one another."

Discord is always a poor testimony. When a church gets a reputation for being contentious, it loses its effectiveness. The world avoids churches where people contend with each other. People looking for a church or for something meaningful pass up these churches religiously.

The result of Nehemiah's challenge was that they repented and changed their behavior. Verse 12 says, *"They replied, 'We will give back everything and demand nothing more from the people. We will do as you say.'"* Nehemiah must have breathed a sigh of relief at that point. It was quite a gamble to challenge these people. But Nehemiah didn't take any chances. He wasn't just going to take their word for it, so verse 12 continues, *"Then I called the priests and made the nobles and officials swear to do what they had promised."* He didn't just let them say they would change. He made them take a public vow.

Then Nehemiah, with a dramatic flair, gives an object lesson, a dramatic presentation. Verse 13 says, *"I shook out the folds of my robe and said, 'If you fail to keep your promise, may God shake you like this from your homes and from your property!'"* He says, this is a symbol of what God is going to do to you if you don't keep this vow you've taken. The vows we take - our membership vows, , the commitments we make with each Crosstraining seminar, the affirmations of faith we make in worship, the covenant prayer we made a few weeks ago, God takes these seriously.

Then 5. Nehemiah **Set an unselfish example.** We're going to cover this in more detail and from a different angle in two weeks. But the foundation of all of Nehemiah's leadership was leading by example. When he asked them to rebuild the wall, he was out on the wall too. When he asked them to pray he had already been praying. When he asked them to stay up all night and work night and day to get it built, he stayed up night and day to get it built. When he asked them to help the poor, he'd already been doing it. That's what these next verses say.

Verse 14 is a little biographical statement about Nehemiah: *"For the entire twelve years that I was governor of Judah—from the twentieth year to the thirty-second year of the reign of King Artaxerxes—neither I nor my officials drew on our official food allowance. The former governors, in contrast, had laid heavy burdens on the people, demanding a daily ration of food and wine, besides forty pieces of silver. Even their assistants took advantage of the people. But because I feared God, I did not act that way.."*

As the appointed governor there was a certain amount of expense benefits he could expect to receive from people as part of his compensation and he never took it. He realized the people were hard up. He could have exploited the people but he didn't even take what he was entitled to. His servants could have exploited the people like the servants of the governors in the past but he didn't allow it. In fact he set the example. He helped people. He did all he could out of his own personal resources. He's setting the example.

Why is this important? Because the source of all the conflict was selfishness. Nehemiah didn't even take his due. He didn't ask them to do what he himself wasn't willing to do. He could say with a clear conscience, "Follow my example".

Paul was like that too. In 1 Corinthians 11:1 Paul said, *"...you should imitate me, just as I imitate Christ."* Paul wasn't being arrogant. He was saying, I'm trying to do it the best way, to imitate the best example - the ideal example. Because of that, you can use me as an example; a model. People follow models.

I'm in awe about how this guy stood up to those powerful people and challenged them and publicly confronted them. He was a person of integrity. He was walking his talk so he had every right to stand up and challenge them. You can't say "Do as I say, not as I do". That's ineffective.

For the next couple of years we're going to be in a time when we're doing a major new work for God. Whenever God wants to build, Satan wants to battle. I can guarantee you that as surely as there were forces trying to stop the building of the wall in Jerusalem the devil will try to stop the building of our ministry and our church. Count on it. It's absolutely essential that we be united. There will be enough problems and difficulties from other forces. The last thing we need are people on the inside nit picking or creating dissension.

So what's your responsibility? If EUMC is your church family, Ephesians 4:3 is your job description given to you from your pastor for the next couple of years. *"Make every effort to keep yourselves united in the Spirit, binding yourselves together with peace."* Let's say that together: *"Make every effort to keep yourselves united in the Spirit, binding yourselves together with peace."* That's the job description I'm asking you to take on for the next couple of years. It says "every effort" because God really means it and I really mean it – every effort. That means make it your number one priority to promote unity and harmony in our church.

The fact is whenever you've got a group of people, internal differences are inevitable. There are going to be differences. There's no such thing as a perfect church. There's no perfect family. There's no perfect business, office, school, whatever. There's going to be conflict. But God wants us to minimize that for his glory. The testimony of a church should not be beautiful buildings, great sermons, lovely music but how they love one another. That's the mark of a Christian. In John 13:35, Jesus said, *"By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."*

Individually you can't do a lot. Individually I can't do a lot. But together we form this body called EUMC. And together we can be making an impact. It's like you take 100 five pound rocks and drop them in a pond one at a time, it's nothing much. But if you put them all together in a big bag and toss it in, it makes waves. When we are unified, when we work together, nothing can stop this church. Nothing.