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SERMON TITLE: Do Unto Others as You Would Have Them Do Unto You

Rebuilding a City: Trusting God & Each Other

SCRIPTURE: Nehemiah 5

DATE: June 14, 2020

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Jesus gives a command:

"In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets" (Matthew 7:12).

It seems like a fairly easy mandate. Until you get out on the road in the morning.

Yet Jesus persists:

"Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light" (Mt 11:29-30).

Let's admit it. We have this problem--selfishness. We are broken, the Bible says, and even though saved by grace, even though we believe God and love Jesus, we have to fight our self-centeredness.

In this fifth chapter of Nehemiah it wasn't external opposition, like the men who came from outside and tried to stop the work. There was internal opposition, too--injustice between neighbors that made life extremely difficult.

Let's don't be spiritually naïve. Expect this struggle.

It gets worse. Not only do we have to deal with our own sins, this corruption permeates the entire creation. Paul writes, "*For the creation was subjected to futility-- not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it-- in the hope that the creation itself will also be set free from the bondage of corruption into the glorious freedom of God's children.*" (Romans 8:20-21).

Injustice comes from the pall of sin over the whole earth. Rulers, authorities, and powers of this dark world constantly present influences which affect the entire earth, and you and me.

You hear talk about "systemic injustice." Systemic injustice is that unfairness that infiltrates our systems--governmental, economic, academic, even the church. The source of injustice is this human corruption that has permeated the world since Adam and Eve fell, as well as evil principalities in the spiritual realm that are continually at work. Our systems reflect our fallenness.

But God cares and God thinks we can do something about it!

The story of Nehemiah isn't just about rebuilding Jerusalem. It's also about reforming and reviving God's ways. These people were coming together again. Their faith needed a shot of renewal, just like their city. During the exile they had all but lost their identity as God's family. Now it was time for change; now they needed to see their neighbors in a different light--as brothers and sisters.

Turn and look at the person beside you. Now look at the person on the other side of you. Look across the room. If you are at home, think of the people you have seen on your screen today. They may not look particularly special but they are special!

These are your spiritual brothers and sisters.

On top of the work on the wall, there came a famine. Food became scarce. Greedy merchants used the opportunity to inflate the price of grain. It started an economic downturn.

People had to mortgage the farm to feed their families. They had lots of children because Israel believed children are a blessing from God. But then the government increased their taxes. Some families were forced to sell children into slavery to save the farm.

You know how that goes: businesses make less profit, hiring slows, savings decline, and people cannot pay their debt. Sometimes they lose their homes. Sort of like the economic famine that has resulted from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Moms and dads had had enough!

"I thought we were all in this together," they said. Didn't we all have a heart to do this work? Hadn't we defeated the enemies together? Didn't we fight and defend our families, homes, *and our neighbors*? What happened!

How would they find a solution? Whose problem is it?

There is a story about four people named Everybody, Somebody, Anybody and Nobody. There was an important job to be done and Everybody was sure that Somebody would do it. Anybody could have done it, but Nobody did it. Somebody got angry about that, because it was Everybody's job. Everybody thought Anybody could do it, but Nobody realized that Everybody wouldn't do it. It ended up that Everybody blamed Somebody when Nobody did what Anybody could have.¹

¹ Author unknown.

Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "We must learn to live together as brothers and sisters and not perish together as fools."

The source of trouble for God's people so many years earlier, the reason they were exiled in the first place was their unjust selfishness and their failure to follow God and God's ways. The people working on the wall needed to learn from their mistakes and do better so that they did not rebuild a culture with the same old injustices.

So Nehemiah thought it over, and he said this: "You are hurting your own relatives by charging interest when they borrow money!"

Now every person in the region was not related, but he calls for that spiritual relationship—you know, "*you're my brother your my sister so take me by the hand, together we will work until He comes. There's no foe that can defeat us When we're walking side by side.*" And what about "*We are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord.*"

"We must learn to live together as brothers and sisters and not perish together as fools." (MLK Jr.)

That's the spirit of the law. That is our spiritual heritage. Faith must produce works.

"There was an important job to be done and Everybody was sure that Somebody would do it. Anybody could have done it, but Nobody did it."

Sometimes you have to realize you're part of the problem.

Nehemiah as leader says, "Open your eyes, ears, and heart. We are all in this together."

That's the character trait for members of God's family. God is zealous about caring. For us to take advantage of a brother in need to achieve financial gain is not acceptable.

So Nehemiah reversed course. He called the nobles and governmental officials to reverse course.

They promised to do it. He got that unequivocal promise for three reasons:

He set the example by not using his governmental allowance for himself.

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. I also devoted myself to working on the wall and refused to acquire any land. And I required all my servants to spend time working on the wall. I asked for nothing, even though I regularly fed 150

Jewish officials at my table, besides all the visitors from other lands! The provisions I paid for each day included one ox, six choice sheep or goats, and a large number of poultry. And every ten days we needed a large supply of all kinds of wine. Yet I refused to claim the governor's food allowance because the people already carried a heavy burden. (Neh 5:14-18)

That's justice, self-sacrifice, and generosity.

He expected the offenders to walk in the fear of God in order to avoid being the laughing stock of other nations.

The reputation of our nation stands according to our injustice against our brothers and sisters. Oppression is out there front and center for the world to see. How are we resolving our own problems? Are we simply going to create other enemies? Are we going to continue to be divided as fools and perish, per Martin Luther King, Jr.? Or are we going to see that we are all in this together as brothers and sisters?

Nehemiah made them promise before the priests and God to reverse course by saying:

"If you fail to keep your promise, may God shake you like this from your homes and from your property!" The whole assembly responded, "Amen," and they praised the LORD. And the people did as they had promised."

God thinks we can do something about it! A city is only as strong as its weakest link. If you have been blessed, God expects you to be a blessing.

There was an important job to be done. Anybody could have done it, but Everybody did it. Then Nobody blamed Somebody because it was Everybody's job. Everybody learned Anybody could do it when Somebody took the lead. Nobody was disappointed.

This is what it looks like to win in God's eyes.

Do unto others as you would have them do unto you because we are brothers and sisters in Christ. All of us. God's children, we live together as brothers and sisters or perish together as fools.

AMEN

NEHEMIAH 5:1-13 NLT

About this time some of the men and their wives raised a cry of protest against their fellow Jews. ² They were saying, "We have such large families. We need more food to survive." ³ Others said, "We have mortgaged our fields, vineyards, and homes to get food during the famine." ⁴ And others said, "We have had to borrow money on our fields and vineyards to pay our taxes. ⁵ 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."

⁶ When I heard their complaints, I was very angry. ⁷ 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!" Then I called a public meeting to deal with the problem.

⁸ At the meeting I said to them, "We are doing all we can to redeem our Jewish relatives who have had to sell themselves to pagan foreigners, but you are selling them back into slavery again. How often must we redeem them?"

And they had nothing to say in their defense.

⁹ Then I pressed further, "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? ¹⁰ I myself, as well as my brothers and my workers, have been lending the people money and grain, but now let us stop this business of charging interest. ¹¹ You must restore their fields, vineyards, olive groves, and homes to them this very day. And repay the interest you charged when you lent them money, grain, new wine, and olive oil."

¹² They replied, "We will give back everything and demand nothing more from the people. We will do as you say."

Then I called the priests and made the nobles and officials swear to do what they had promised. ¹³ 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!" The whole assembly responded, "Amen," and they praised the LORD. And the people did as they had promised.