

For the City: Preserving Your Integrity Nehemiah 5:14-6:19

We are basing our “For the City” series on the book of Nehemiah. Nehemiah received a call from the Lord to rebuild the broken-down walls of Jerusalem and restore it to a place of dignity. And we are asking, “What would it look like for God to use the people of Chapel Hill to really love, champion and bless their city?” Gig Harbor, Port Orchard, Tacoma... wherever! If we really noticed the people around us; really invested in our neighbors; really prayed God’s favor upon our community.

Last week, Pastor Ellis showed us another way to be for our city: we remember the poor. No city can be great unless it treats its poor with compassion and dignity. One woman was so inspired that she called our Titus ministry and offered to pay half the cost of repairing her neighbor’s car if Titus could pay the other half. I was blessed by Ellis’ message. I was not blessed, however, by the cruel video he showed.

[Watch video here](#)

For those of you who missed it, Ellis showed a video of me breaking into a locked room at our pastors’ retreat. Unfortunately, I got stuck in the window. I could not get my arm back out. And when I called out for help, do you think anyone stepped up to aid me? No. Not even my trusted associate. In fact, who do you think was TAKING this video? (That’s right...Pastor Ellis!)

That’s okay—but I’ll just say this: while a group of guys half my age stood around, mocking, laughing, pointing and shooting video, I humbled myself in service to the community. I’d like to think that I was following the example of Nehemiah who didn’t consider himself so hoity-toity that he couldn’t dive right in. We are going to learn more about that leader tonight/today. Nehemiah 5: 14-19.

“...from the time that I was appointed to be their governor in the land of Judah, from the twentieth year to the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes the king, twelve years, neither I nor my brothers ate the food allowance of the governor. The former governors who were before me laid heavy burdens on the people and took from them for their daily ration forty shekels of silver. Even their servants lorded it over the people. But I did not do so, because of the fear of God.

“I also persevered in the work on this wall, and we acquired no land, and all my servants were gathered there for the work. Moreover, there were at my table 150 men, Jews and officials,

besides those who came to us from the nations that were around us. Now what was prepared at my expense for each day was one ox and six choice sheep and birds, and every ten days all kinds of wine in abundance. Yet for all this I did not demand the food allowance of the governor, because the service was too heavy on this people. Remember for my good, O my God, all that I have done for this people.”

Did you notice anything new about Nehemiah? We know he was sent by the Persian king to be a wall-builder. But it turns out, Nehemiah hasn't told us the whole story. He fails to mention that he was actually appointed governor of Judah! This is the first time we hear this. Nehemiah had WAY more authority than we were led to believe! He held a position of power and influence and privilege. It says something about his humility that he only mentions this in passing, halfway through the book! That's unusual. And as we discover, he exercises that authority with uncommon integrity. Let's look closer.

We think of integrity as moral uprightness. But it is more than that. A person of integrity is integrated. They live an undivided life. Same on the inside as on the outside. Same in workplace as in church. Same on Monday as on Sunday. Same with unbelievers as with Christians. The same in the dark ...as they are in the light. Integrity is concerned not only with WHAT we do but HOW we do it. And there is nothing more damaging to our witness as Christian citizens than to be branded hypocrites...the opposite of integrity; someone whose religious life is not integrated with their daily life. Nehemiah was a leader of integrity. We see that in several ways.

First, he refused to exploit the people. As governor, Nehemiah had access to a large expense account which he could use this for his own purposes. But he refused. Why? Because it was a tax burden that fell upon his people. 14. “[For] twelve years, neither I nor my brothers ate the food allowance of the governor. The former governors....laid heavy burdens on the people and took from them for their daily ration forty shekels of silver.” And in verse 18: “... I did not demand the food allowance of the governor, because the service was too heavy on this people.” It was his perk...but he refused it.

Nehemiah also refused to exploit landowners for economic gain. In 16 he says, “...[we] acquired no land.” When he and his brothers were sent by the King to rebuild Jerusalem, he could have made a killing in real estate! He could have bought up depressed property before it was restored. He would have been rich. I know a man in Bakersfield who was hired to survey the route of I-5 through the town of Buttonwillow. After figuring out where the off-ramps would be, he went to the unknowing farmers and bought up their land...and made a mint.

Nehemiah refused to do this. He refused to exploit others for his benefit; refused to take advantage of other people for his personal comfort or extravagance.

One time a member of this church expressed concern about the cost of my business trips. I invited him to come in. When he arrived, I handed him two sheets of paper. He said, “What's this?” I said, “That is every travel expense reimbursement from the last year. I invite you to

review them.” He was surprised because the meal costs were so low. He said, “I am a traveling salesman. I could not live on this food allowance. How do you do that?” I said, “Because we often eat at Taco Bell and Arby’s, that’s how.” Now, I like Taco Bell and Arby’s. But we also have a deep sense of responsibility to steward well every single dollar that is donated to this church.

When you are judicious with our expense accounts, when you live modestly, when you treat your employees fairly, when you spend other people’s money frugally...when you have a reputation for honesty, it strengthens your influence in your city. An integrated Christian never exploits others for personal gain. Is YOUR life integrated in that way?

Nehemiah refused to exploit the people. He also worked beside the people. Verse 16: “I also persevered in the work on this wall....and all my servants were gathered there for the work.” Nehemiah didn’t stand on the sidelines bossing people around. He was humble. He was a player-coach. He got his hands dirty. There was no work that was beneath him. In 15 he comments that “[even the former governor’s] servants lorded it over the people.” That is the infectious nature of a bad leadership culture. Servants who are bossed and abused by their superiors turned around and boss and abuse those beneath them. They do what they see.

But notice Nehemiah’s next line: “But I did not do so.” Who does that remind you of? Remember what Jesus taught his disciples in Mark 10? “You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. But NOT SO WITH YOU!” That’s not the way my disciples lead! The integrated Christian leader is secure enough and humble enough to lead by example...to lead in service...and not through intimidation. What about you? Are you living an integrated life of humility?

Nehemiah refused to exploit people, worked beside the people and was generous with the people. His role as governor required him to throw huge dinners to entertain Jews and dignitaries from surrounding nations. This P.R. work was part of restoring the city’s reputation. But because he refused to raise taxes on his people, he footed the bill himself. And since the daily menu included one ox, six sheep and birds plus lots of wine...this got pricey. But Nehemiah was a generous person.

I think generosity is one of the most Christian of virtues. The willingness... even the desire... to share our wealth with others... is a reflection of the God who has given to us all we possess...and supremely, given us his own son. “Stingy Christian” is an oxymoron. I don’t know how you can be a follower of Jesus...who gave his all...and not become more and more generous. Cyndi and I were talking about this last week. She asked, “Have you ever known a truly generous Christian who was not a mature believer.” I said, “Well...I have known some who used their money to manipulate and control. But that’s not generosity. Mature Christians are generous people.”

Martin Luther once said that there are three conversions: the conversion of the heart, the conversion of the mind and the conversion of the purse. And of the three, he said, the

conversion of the purse is the last and the most difficult. How about you? Do you live an integrated Christian life of generosity?

So Nehemiah modeled integrity when he refused to exploit the people, worked beside the people, was generous with the people. And finally, he was transparent before the people. Pastor Ellis touched on this last week. When the poor among the workers cried out for relief from the interest they were paying on their debt, Nehemiah admitted that HE TOO had been charging his people interest. I'm sure at the time, it seemed like good business. But he realized it was wrong...and confessed and repented and changed!

Nehemiah doesn't model integrity because he was perfect. He models integrity because, when he realized he was wrong, he repented and changed his ways. And here we come to the heart of Nehemiah's character...and to the reason this is not just a sermon on moralism. Nehemiah's love and reverence for God is what enabled him to live an integrated life. In 15 he said that he behaved differently than previous governors "...because of the fear of God." His motivation for living an integrated life was his deep respect...and even, yes, a little fear...of his awesome, holy God.

And then, at the end of the passage, Nehemiah prays, "Remember for my good, O my God, all that I have done for this people." This might sound like bragging: "Hey Lord...look at how good I am! Reward me." But I think Nehemiah is echoing the prayer in Psalm 139 where David asks God to hold him accountable for his actions. David closes that epic psalm with words of spiritual transparency: "Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting."

Nehemiah constantly laid his life before the Lord in prayer. Asking for guidance. Asking for clarity. Asking for forgiveness. Asking for courage. Asking for strength to do what he knew he could not possibly do on his own. We have much to learn from Nehemiah about a life of constant prayer.

But...we also have a leg up on Nehemiah. We have something he did not have. We have the Spirit of Jesus living within us. It is the Holy Spirit who convicts us when we exploit others. It is the Spirit who inspires and empowers us to do the work we are not qualified to do. It is the Spirit who prompts stingy Christians to become more generous. It is the Spirit who reminds us when we fail, forgives us our shame and frees us to try again. It is the Spirit of Jesus who whispers, "That is not right. You can be better than that." It is the Spirit who enters our life and pulls together our disparate and desperate parts into an integrated whole. And Nehemiah never had that!

Our city...our world...is begging for Christ-followers of integrity. One man in our congregation works for a boss who is a church-goer and claims to be a Christian. But his boss's behavior in the workplace is so un-Christ like, it has been a source of discouragement and struggle in this

man's own spiritual walk. I assure you, a city is harmed when its self-identified Christian business leaders lack integrity. But it is blessed when they do!

The single best way to be FOR your city... is to live a Spirit-empowered life of integrity...a life of authenticity... a life of transparency...a life of humility...a life of generosity...a life that is the same on the inside as on the outside... a life that reflects the transforming and redeeming power of Jesus Christ...and is so attractive that it entices others to discover that integrity for themselves.

Pray with me: Holy Spirit, make us persons of integrity. Grant us the influence that is earned because others see a life that is consistent with our words. Help us to be the same on Monday as we are on Sunday; the same at work and at home as we are in the pew. Help us to walk our talk...and in so doing, may we bring your favor and your blessing upon our city. Amen.