

Sermon preached by Pastor Ben Kuerth on Nehemiah 5 on July 26, 2015 at Victory of the Lamb.

Series: Nehemiah

Today's Focus: Building Unity Through Generosity

"How Can I Help You This Week?"

"How can I help you this week?" It's a simple question, isn't it? But it's also one of the most powerful questions in the world. It has the power to transform your relationships with other people in a positive way. I mean just ask someone, "How can I help you this week?" It's a game changer. Ask your pastor that question for example and watch his face light up! Except that it's not so obvious or easy to do, is it? Instead of asking, "How can I help you this week?" the question that all of us, myself included, are tempted to actually ask in our minds at least is, "How can I get that person to help me get what I want?" Because that's a powerful question too. Except it has the power to poison relationships. We're going to talk about this today as we journey into Nehemiah chapter 5.

What we're going to see is a stark contrast between the world's way and God's way. The world's way goes like this: Use people to help you get the stuff you want. In other words, "You exist for my benefit." That's the world's way. But God's way goes like this: Use the stuff God gives you to help other people get what they need. So the world's way is, Use people to help you get the stuff you want for yourself. God's way is, Use the stuff God gives you to help other people get what they need. This is especially true within the family of believers, in the church, just as Jesus once said, "*By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another*" (John 13:35).

Of course last week in Nehemiah chapter 4 we saw how the people of Jerusalem came together at a crucial time and actually helped each other. Wasn't that an awesome chapter? They were surrounded by trash-talking, saber rattling enemies at a time when there were still gaps in the wall which made them all vulnerable to outside attacks. But under Nehemiah's leadership they overcame. As a team working together. As a nation. As a church family who believed that God really did care about them after all and that he really would keep his promises. What a good feeling this must have been. They were helping each other succeed in the face of outside opposition. And they were doing it together.

But they weren't in the clear just yet. In fact we're never really in the clear either until that final day when God calls us home to heaven. You see although the people in Nehemiah's day were rebuilding the wall to be protected from the opposition they faced outside the wall, yet they remained vulnerable to the opposition that was every bit as dangerous within the wall. This is one of the important lessons we need to take to heart also today in Nehemiah 5. Now what I'm going to do is read the whole chapter. I'll make a few comments as I go along. But then I'm going to try and apply the one big question I'm asking today, "How can I help you this week?"

Now the men and their wives raised a great outcry against their fellow Jews. ² Some were saying, "We and our sons and daughters are numerous; in order for us to eat and stay alive, we must get grain."

³ *Others were saying, "We are mortgaging our fields, our vineyards and our homes to get grain during the famine."*

⁴ Still others were saying, “We have had to borrow money to pay the king’s tax on our fields and vineyards. ⁵ 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.”

⁶ When I heard their outcry and these charges, I was very angry. ⁷ 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 ⁸ 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.

⁹ 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? ¹⁰ I and my brothers and my men are also lending the people money and grain. But let us stop charging interest! ¹¹ 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.”

¹² “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.

¹³ 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!”

At this the whole assembly said, “Amen,” and praised the LORD. And the people did as they had promised.

¹⁴ Moreover, from the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when I was appointed to be their governor in the land of Judah, until his thirty-second year—twelve years—neither I nor my brothers ate the food allotted to the governor. ¹⁵ But the earlier governors—those preceding me—placed a heavy burden on the people and took forty shekels of silver from them in addition to food and wine. Their assistants also lorded it over the people. But out of reverence for God I did not act like that. ¹⁶ Instead, I devoted myself to the work on this wall. All my men were assembled there for the work; we did not acquire any land.

¹⁷ Furthermore, a hundred and fifty Jews and officials ate at my table, as well as those who came to us from the surrounding nations. ¹⁸ Each day one ox, six choice sheep and some poultry were prepared for me, and every ten days an abundant supply of wine of all kinds. In spite of all this, I never demanded the food allotted to the governor, because the demands were heavy on these people.

¹⁹ Remember me with favor, my God, for all I have done for these people.

So maybe you’re thinking, What do this have to do with me? Well this chapter, friends, exposes something really ugly within human nature, doesn’t it? It exposes the selfish tendency we all have to ask “What’s in it for me?” instead of “How can I help you this week?” It’s the tendency we all have to use up and then dispose of people to get the stuff we want instead of using the stuff God has given us to help other people get what they need. Here in Nehemiah 5 it takes the form of greed. And it’s ugly, isn’t it? We see the wrongful exploitation of others as the result of cold, calloused, and greedy hearts.

Now remember that in Nehemiah's day it was very much an agricultural society. For the most part if you weren't working, you weren't eating. So it wasn't like everybody was just sitting around with their hands in their pockets until Nehemiah came along and got them working on the wall. No, these were hardworking folks who were up to their eyeballs working busily out in their fields or vineyards or tending their flocks. But in order to take on the rebuilding project on the wall, it meant putting life on hold for many of these people. Picture large families leaving their homes, farms, ranches, and vineyards untended to travel to Jerusalem to help work on the wall.

Then eventually these same people, like we heard last week, were asked to go the extra mile and stay overnight in Jerusalem to help defend the wall which meant leaving their animals and their crops and their homes not only untended but undefended and vulnerable. And yet they did this willingly too. Think about it! Nehemiah's vision of rebuilding the wall united them. It brought them together and they were willing to make tremendous sacrifices to see it carried out. They trusted God and were willing to sacrifice generously of their time, their livelihood, and ultimately their lives to complete the project because this is what God had put on their hearts to do with his help! They were united in their mission.

What happened? It turns out they were their own worst enemies. Those who had more money or more grain figured they could make a few extra bucks at the expense of those who had less. They exploited the willingness of the people who made sacrifices in order to come to Jerusalem to help rebuild the wall. So a lack of food combined with the already heavy Persian taxes made it impossible for some of the people to survive unless they received the generosity of others to get them through a transition time. But what happened instead? Some of the same people who once worked side by side with them to rebuild the walls saw dollar signs at the expense of their needy neighbors and thought, "Cha-ching!" So they ignored the law of God in the Old Testament which strictly forbid charging interest to their own countrymen because for them they saw a business opportunity. The result was the rich got richer while exploiting the sacrifices of others who got poorer.

You want the cold, hard facts? Once their land was mortgaged, some people from the Jewish community were actually being sold into slavery as collateral to pay their debt. Some were even being sold as slaves to people from the surrounding Gentile nations because these Gentile buyers could seemingly pay more money and then there wouldn't be any inconvenience perhaps of having to release them from slavery like the law of God had provided for every 7 years as a provision.

And the worst part about this? It seems like no one seemed to care. The cries of the oppressed fell on deaf ears. "Not our problem," some people thought. But it was very much everyone's problem among the people of God in Israel—God's specially chosen nation. In fact this was one of the very sins that the prophets had condemned so many years earlier which led to God's rejection of Israel and Jerusalem's destruction in the first place. (cf. Amos 2:6-8, 4:11, 5:11; Isaiah 5:8; Jer. 34: 8-22) And now they were following down the same path to destruction all over again.

Friends, isn't it true sometimes that the problems that bother us most are the ones we bring on ourselves too? God blesses us with abundant resources of food, income, savings, skills, health, and time and what do we do? We use these things to try and carve out as comfortable a life as we can for ourselves often without caring too much about what anyone else thinks. "None of your business" or "Not my problem" we might

think when it comes to those who worship beside us in church. “I’m not here at church for you. I’m not here for them. I’m here for me.”

Worse yet when we walk outside these walls don’t we also sometimes follow the way of the world and look at the people we meet as commodities to be exploited for our own benefit? We make judgments about people who we think aren’t worth our time sometimes because we’re so busy trying to achieve our version of success instead of God’s. We ignore people who legitimately and honestly need our help because we think of them as a bothersome distraction. But then we’ll use and use up anyone we think can help us get ahead or get the stuff we want in life until we discard them after they no longer can give us what we want. Are any of you here at this church because it’s simply good for the bottom line of your business or because it’s a good networking opportunity? Think about it. Remember that it’s the way of the world that says “Use people to help yourself get what you want.” In the end though what happens if we fall into the world’s trap is that we end up getting nothing. Jesus said, *“What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul”* (Mark 8:36)? Anybody here want to forfeit your soul?

But friends, the fantastically great news is that Jesus Christ himself didn’t have this attitude. In fact, Jesus Christ, though God from all eternity—think of it!—enjoying the riches of heaven and equality with the Father and the Holy Spirit—he didn’t consider his equality with God something to be used for his own advantage. Instead he used it for ours. And those aren’t just my words. This is the central message of the Bible. This is what makes Christianity like a sparkling diamond among all the religious lumps of coal in the world. You see it’s not first and foremost about what we could or couldn’t do on our own. It’s about what Jesus, our perfectly substitute, has done for us. Those two words “for us” summarize everything Jesus was willing to do, everything he was willing to sacrifice for us in order to give us the greatest blessings for our ultimate happiness and our eternal good.

The Bible says: *“In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; 7 rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. 8 And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!”* (Philippians 2:7-9). Just think, Jesus who is the King of the Universe, a King far greater than the Persian Artaxerxes in Nehemiah’s day, used his power and resources to do what? To help us. To serve us. In the time of our greatest need. He came to serve us by taking upon himself a human nature like ours and through his suffering and death to absorb all our shame, all our selfish clutching of our possessions and our time, all our sinful grabbing of more and more stuff, and to hang helpless and alone in our place with literally willing to intervene, where no one who had any power to help him did anything except let him die. That’s why there at the cross we see both the true nature of human hearts so calloused and evil, yet see also the generous love of Christ to forgive. *“For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many”* (Mark 10:45). When Jesus asked himself the question “How can I help?” he firmly resolved, “I will set them free from sin, death, and hell.”

Friends, “How can I help you this week?” That’s the question I asked at the beginning today. And hopefully now that’s the question you want to ask each other. One quick story. One of our members has been driving for Uber. It’s like an online taxi service that works through an app on your smartphone. It’s pretty slick. But my friend had been wondering if this was worth his time. Yet this week God gave him the opportunity to

pick up a young man who was feeling hopeless and worthless and dealing with unspeakable shame, guilt, loneliness and regret. The man was was a wounded army veteran. In the words of my friend, “When he came out for the ride, I saw that he was wearing a mask and having difficulty breathing. His left eye socket was shattered. And there was a hole where his nose was supposed to be.”

Well it turns out the man had come back from Iraq wounded and suffering from PTSD, and then when his wife divorced him, he tried to commit suicide. And now this man doesn’t even have a mouth to talk with. He literally can’t talk. But God orchestrated this opportunity through a smartphone app for one of our members to take a little extra time to engage this man in a lengthy text message conversation about God’s power and grace. God created this special opportunity for our member to make the effort to put his hand on the man’s shoulder and pray for him, and even to make the time to help get the man connected to other people with greater resources who might be able to help him in his situation and to tell him, “I’m here for you. I’m not going anywhere. I’m here to help.” Friends, what would happen in our church, in your family, in your neighborhood if you went home with the attitude, “How can I help you this week?” Amen.

My Next Steps

Points to Ponder: Are you more likely to use people to get the stuff you want or use the stuff God has given you to help people get what they need? What difference would it make in our world if Christians were known as the most generous people on the planet?

The Bible gives us two principles to follow in using the possessions God has given to us:

1. On the one hand, we are to do everything in our power to help those in real need.
2. On the other hand, we are not to encourage the laziness of people who seek only to live off the labor of others (cf. 2 Thessalonians 3:6-13; 2 Corinthians 8:13-15).

Treasure to Share: *“For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many”* (Mark 10:45).

Action to Take: God assures us that no small act of love ever goes unnoticed by him. What can you do this week with your time, skills, possessions, or presence to help someone who is in need? Talk about it as a family if possible and plan what you want to do to honor God by helping one of God’s people.