

Victory of the Lamb // Pastor Ben Sadler // October 3, 2021
"Challenges on the Inside" // *Forward No Matter What* series

⁵ 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."

There is no such thing as the perfect church. I know it is pretty common to compare one church to another, but there is no perfect church. Churches are made up of people. And although we preach the Bible and have the Holy Spirit, we are still sinful people. So when you have sinful leaders who gather sinful people together you are going to find sin in the group. That means that as much as we want to go outside our walls and reach today's people with Christ's victory, we will have a lot of cleaning up to do inside these walls.

As Jesus says before we can take the speck out of someone else's eye, we need to take the plank out of our own eye. There will always be a plank in our eyes. There will always be work to do inside our walls even as we reach out beyond our walls.

We are continuing our sermon series **Forward: No Matter What**. It is a sermon series through the book of Nehemiah. And in this sermon, I would like to answer the questions:

What problems are happening inside our walls at Victory? And what can we do about it?

To answer those questions, we are going to go to Nehemiah chapter 5. Let's remember where we are in this story. The year is 444 B.C. The Jews, who were exiled to Babylon, were set free by the Persians, as

the Persians became the new world power. The Jews had rebuilt the Solomon's Temple that was torn down by the Babylonians, but they never rebuilt the walls around the Temple. Nehemiah had a divine burden on his heart to lead God's people to rebuild the walls around the Temple. He gave them a clear vision of what they were going to do. He got everyone involved. Every family had their own section of the wall. But right when they started rebuilding, they met opposition. They had enemies outside their walls. So there are enemies that are outside our walls. But, as we heard last week, with God's help they faced those enemies outside the walls. And kept building the walls.

But as they are rebuilding the walls, there are three complaints that are brought to Nehemiah.

First we hear, **Some were saying, "We and our sons and daughters are numerous; in order for us to eat and stay alive, we must get grain." (5:2)** There were lots of people who moved back to Jerusalem to rebuild the wall. But it doesn't seem like there was land for everyone to plant and harvest and have enough to eat.

Next, Nehemiah heard, **"We are mortgaging our fields, our vineyards and our homes to get grain during the famine." (5:3)** There seems to have been a famine in the land, so even those who did have land didn't have a big enough harvest. So they had to mortgage their field to get grain.

Finally, Nehemiah heard, **"We have had to borrow money to pay the king's tax on our fields and vineyards." (5:4)** The Jews were not free. They were under the control of the Persians. So even those people who did have land, and did have a good harvest, were not able to make ends meet because they were so heavily taxed.

So basically, all the Jews were going into debt. But here is the real sad part. The debt collectors were their fellow country, other followers of the Lord. And according to the laws given by Moses they were not supposed to be enslaving their countrymen or even collecting interest. But this is what Nehemiah heard, 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." (5:5)**

God's people were selling their own people into slavery to pay for their debts. Can you hear the cries of the Jewish mother, as her daughter was being taken away by slave masters? And the people told Nehemiah because we don't own our fields and vineyards, there was nothing they could do.

Even worse, this was a systemic problem. Nehemiah had to admit. ¹⁰ **I and my brothers and my men are also lending the people money and grain. (5:10)** Everybody was committing these sins, even the leaders!

It came to Nehemiah's attention that what was going on behind the walls of Jerusalem looked a lot like what was going on outside the walls of Jerusalem. Outside the walls in Persia and Samaria the people took advantage of people by collecting debts and selling people into slavery. Inside the walls of Jerusalem they were taking advantage of people and selling their fellow countrymen into slavery.

How about us? Does what goes on inside these walls look much different than what goes on outside these walls. Out there we live in a consumeristic society. Out there people make decisions only based on what they get. Out there people look to be served, fed, and taken a care of. Inside these walls we can

look consumeristic as well. We participate in church when it works for us. We expect to be served and we aren't ready to make sacrifices. We make eternal spiritual decisions about worship and church based on convenience and service.

Just like in our text, Nehemiah had to admit, he was doing the same thing as the people. He was charging interest and taking advantage of the people. And I have to admit that I commit the same sins as the rest of the church. I too can approach worship with a consumer's spirit: What is in it for me? What is going to serve me and make me happy?

When Nehemiah realized the sin that was going on behind the walls, he decided to do something about it. He wasn't going to just focus on the sins and the opposition outside the walls. He was going to call out the sin that was happening inside his walls. **⁶When I heard their outcry and these charges, I was very angry. ⁷I 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 ⁸and 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.**

Nehemiah spoke directly to the people, He was saying, We are sinning. We look no different than the people outside these walls.

Can I speak directly and as frankly as Nehemiah? I am very concerned about the consumeristic apathy in our congregation. COVID has been a massive disruption in our lives. But for many of us, much of our lives have returned to our pre-pandemic patterns. But would you say that your faith and walk with Jesus is as strong as it was pre-pandemic? Would you say that you are growing in the knowledge of Jesus? Are you serving your neighbor and loving the community of believers more than before?

So after Nehemiah call out the sin what was happening behind their walls, what did he call them to do? **¹¹Give 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.** Nehemiah called them to give back the fields so that they wouldn't sell their sons and daughters into slavery. He called them to a new kind of life of following the Lord. And guess what? They listened to his preaching. We read, **¹²"We will give it back," they said. "And we will not demand anything more from them. We will do as you say."** They followed the Lord. They continued to have problems and challenges. They didn't become the perfect people of God. But they did start to take steps towards walking in God's ways.

Can I make a similar call to you all? Can I call us back to Jesus our first love? Can I call us out of a consumer mentality? Can we all make worship and Jesus and our faith a priority not because we like the music or the message or got something out of it, but because we love Jesus, because he lived, died, and rose for us?

What if we did this? What if we rededicated ourselves to Jesus and his Word? What if we all became on Christians who were on fire for Jesus? I believe that would be the greatest witness to the world. I think we would live our mission of trying to reach today's people with Christ's victory.

There is no such thing as a perfect church. Every church will have something to work on. Right now, I think we need to work on our consumeristic apathy. In a year from now, we might need to work on something completely different. What that tells us is we will always have a need for Jesus. We will

always need a Savior. We will always need his Spirit to change us and lead us and grow us into new people. As we try to reach out to people outside these walls, we will always need to keep working on what's going on inside these walls.