

The Usage of Power

Nehemiah 5



Week Seven

inTro



Read This Week's Passage:
Nehemiah 5

TEMPTATIONS OF LEADERSHIP

Whether it's by appointment, accomplishment, election, perception, or ability, when individuals are called to serve, they are called to leadership regardless of title. They may not be up front, calling the shots and directing the masses—traffic officers can do this, but this does not make them leaders. They are not necessarily those who speak publicly with eloquence and zeal—actors can do this, but this does not make them leaders.

Leaders are agents of change. Some leaders use the power given them to influence positive change in their spheres. Others use their fame to influence the opinion of others. Yet others maneuver their positions to force a result. There is even a type of leadership that employs wealth to acquire resources for some goal. As many styles as there are of leadership, all Christian disciples are called to leadership of one sort or another. The book of Nehemiah teaches us that we are to use authority, influence, fame, position, or wealth for the kingdom of God under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

The temptation of leadership, though, is twofold. Some leaders fail through overstepping their jurisdiction, while others fail through not using the authority rightfully theirs. Let us study Nehemiah 5 to see how it illustrates these lessons of leadership.



inScribe

Write out Nehemiah 5 from the translation of your choice. If you're pressed for time, write out Nehemiah 5:6–8, 15, 19. You may also rewrite the passage in your own words, outline it, or mind map the chapter.



Go back to your scribed text and study the passage.

Circle repeated words/phrases/ideas

Underline words/phrases that are important and have meaning to you



Draw **Arrows** to connect words/phrases to other associated or related words/phrases



Memorize your favorite verse. Write it out multiple times to help memorization.

Where is accountability needed in your life? Public accountability? Spiritual accountability to God?



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ACCOUNTABILITY

Where there is motion, there is friction. Just when the external problems seemed to be resolved, internal conflict emerged. This internal crisis involved spouses, children, families, and the community as a whole. The rich were getting richer while the poor became poorer. Since everyone was busy building the wall, they had no time to go to the fields. Nehemiah 5:3 mentions a dearth, or famine, that caused the people to borrow money. Others, who had mortgaged their fields, borrowed money to pay the taxes. Unable to pay, some had to sell their children into slavery.

Even without the involvement of Sanballat and Tobiah, Satan tried to inhibit the building of the walls, this time using internal conflict. Chapter 5 is chaotic, and confusion is in the air. Although Nehemiah had successfully cast the vision, motivated the people, and organized for success, in the midst of their personal emergencies, the people lost sight of the goal. Instead of looking forward in faith, they were distracted from the work by their material needs.

As in chapter 4, Nehemiah became angry. Spiritual leaders must show righteous indignation when faced with injustice. Anger is not innately sinful. Rather, sinful anger arises out of self-defense, self-centeredness, impatience, wounded pride, resentment, or loss of self-control.

In Nehemiah 5:7, the Hebrew translated as “consulted with myself” states something akin to “give myself advice.” Spiritual leaders must calmly think things through, observe as objectively as possible, and then assess a course of action instead of impetuously reacting with irrational motives. In rectifying this situation, Nehemiah first meets with the nobles in private. He was not intimidated by the richer nobles, not because he used to work in the royal court but because he received his orders from a higher court! Apparently this private meeting did not suffice, for later he called a great assembly to hold them accountable for their public sins, for public sins must be addressed publicly (as private sins should be addressed privately).

Nehemiah explains to all how the nobles’ actions were wrong. First of all, their actions were contrary to the will of God (Exodus 22:22–27; Leviticus 25:35–37; Deuteronomy 14:28–29; 15:7–9). Second, the image of God’s people in the sight of the enemies was being tarnished (Nehemiah 5:9). Third, usury was being collected (verse 10). Finally, Nehemiah demands full restoration and correction (verse 11). Like other prophets, he even enacts God’s punishment for those breaking their promise by shaking out the fold of his garment (verse 13).

Biblical leaders are those who exercise the authority rightfully given to them. Here Nehemiah did not want the offenders to answer to him or merely to shame or blame them publically. Rather, he holds them accountable for their wrongs against the public. Additionally, he brings the priests out to symbolize the audience of God, even securing a vow in front of them.

WITHHOLDING YOUR RIGHTS

Whereas the first half of chapter 5 showed the proper exercise of rightful authority, the second half describes the withholding of the same rightful authority. Leadership is not always about using power; it is also about the yielding of power. In the case of Nehemiah, he worked as governor for the next twelve years in Judah. During that time, Nehemiah did not exploit his people nor use the power of the governor for personal gain (Nehemiah 5:14–19). Even in the areas where he had “discretionary funds,” he did not use them. Nehemiah did not moonlight nor buy other lands; he simply worked on the wall.

What makes a leader do this? Was it external accountability to an oversight committee that was watching his every financial transaction? No; the text reveals his motives. Through it all, Nehemiah’s primary motivations were made clear through two phrases that repeat in this section: “because of the fear of God” (verse 15) and “because the bondage was heavy on this people” (verse 18). These two parties were on the heart of Nehemiah: God and the people. He ultimately had to answer to God for his faithfulness to his mission and calling. And compassion overwhelmed him when the community did not have enough to sustain themselves, so he used the governor’s provisions for public consumption. Whereas good secular leadership may focus on the people, biblical leadership has God in mind first and then the community.

Doesn’t this remind you of the two great commandments of Christ? “‘You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.” (Matthew 22:37–40, NKJV).

The commandments are not just some abstract code of ethics; they are the foundation of the government of God. As such, Nehemiah did not just observe these laws but so implemented them into his ethical matrix that it came out in his leadership style. Ultimately this reveals the leadership style and character of Christ, who exercised authority for mercy and justice’s sake but also withheld His own rights for the sake of others.



inTerpret

After looking at your scribed and annotated text, what special insights do your marks overall seem to point to?



What questions emerge after studying this passage? What parts are difficult?

What other principles and conclusions do you find?



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What relationship do the following verses have with the primary passage?

Rom. 12:14–21

1 Tim. 6:10

Acts 2:42–47; 20:32–38



What other verses/promises come to mind in connection with Nehemiah 5?

Review your memorized verse from Nehemiah 5.

GO LOW TO GO HIGH

Imagine someone who has the ability to do whatever, whenever, wherever, and however he or she pleases. But then imagine that person limiting herself or himself in each of those dimensions, willingly. Imagine no more, for it happened at the incarnation of Christ. This willingness to be incarnated as a limited human being reveals the character of God. Of course, He still retains His divinity, for the person of Christ reveals that the two are not exclusive. But the details of this “emptying of self” are described in Philippians 2:5–11, appropriately identified as the mind of Christ. The Greek root, *phroneo*, denotes “mind-set” (Philippians 1:27 ; 2:2, 5, 3:15, 16, 19, 4:2, 10), or contextually, the mind-set of this incarnation.

Though Jesus, the second part of the heavenly trio, was “in the form of God” and “equal with God” (Philippians 2:6), He condescended into the form of a human being. Interestingly, Christ could have chosen any level of human society but selected the form of a servant. This Servant could have simply fulfilled the legal obligations, but instead, He lived a full righteous life unto death. Again, Christ could have chosen any form of death but elected the death of the cross.

This is not mere semantics or eloquent poetry. Paul makes a point to explain that Christ’s followers must have the same humility, incarnational way of living, and sacrificial attitude as Jesus. This mind-set is the basis of his call for unity between two women involved in ministry (Philippians 4:2). How can we, as His followers, claim our rights and demand justice when our Lord gave up His?

In response to Christ’s self-emptying, God the Father, the first member of the Godhead, exalts Christ, giving Him the highest name—all the universe will ultimately bow at His feet and confess His supremacy. In other words, while we are called to obedience and sacrifice, God, who is in the position to do so, will make all things right. He will exalt those who need to be exalted and lower those who need to be lowered. As we trust in the Lord, we are to reproduce this mind-set of Christ in all of our relationships (Philippians 1:27) by the power of the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Godhead.

Not only because He died on a cross, but in light of his condescension, life, humiliation, resurrection, and final glorification, we ought to live with the same self-forgetful attitude and treat our fellow human beings, by His grace, as He treated us. Won’t you allow Him to create this mind-set in you?



inVite

Meditate on Nehemiah 5 again and look for Jesus in the chapter.



How is Jesus like, as well as unlike, Nehemiah?

How do you see Jesus differently or see Him again?

Prayer: How do you respond to seeing Jesus in this way?



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Review your memory verse.
How does it apply to your
life this week?

—————→
As you have studied this
week, what personal
applications have you been
convicted of in your life?

What are practical applications
you must make in your school,
family, workplace, and church?



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Spirit of Prophecy at
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INTEGRITY IN BUSINESS AFFAIRS

“The wall of Jerusalem had not been completed, when Nehemiah’s attention was called to the unhappy condition of the poorer classes of the people. . . .

“ . . . The more wealthy took advantage of their necessity, obtaining mortgages of their lands, and adding them to their own large possessions. They also required usury for all money loaned. This course soon reduced the unfortunate debtors to the deepest poverty, and many were forced to sell their sons and daughters to servitude. There appeared no hope of improving their condition, no way to regain either their lands or their children, no prospect before them but that of perpetual slavery. And yet they were of the same nation, children of the covenant equally with their more favored brethren. They had the same affection for their children as had the others. Their distress had not been caused by indolence or prodigality. They had been compelled to contract debts because of the failure of crops, and to pay heavy taxes.

“As a last resort, they presented their case before Nehemiah. . . .

“The fact that the oppressors were men of wealth, whose support was greatly needed in the work of restoring the city and its defenses, did not for a moment turn him from his purpose. Having first sharply rebuked the nobles and rulers, he presented the matter in an assembly of the people, clearly showing what were the requirements of God touching the case, and urging them upon the attention of his hearers.”¹

“Just to the extent that man would advantage himself at the disadvantage of another, will his soul become insensible to the influence of the Spirit of God. Gain obtained at such a cost is a fearful loss. It is better to want than to lie; better to hunger than to defraud; better to die than to sin. Extravagance, overreaching, extortion indulged by those professing godliness, are corrupting their faith, and destroying their spirituality. The church is in a great degree responsible for the sins of her members. She gives countenance to the evil, if she fails to lift her voice against it. The influence from which she has most to fear is not that of open opposers, infidels, and blasphemers, but of inconsistent professors of Christ. These are the ones who keep back the blessing of the God of Israel.

“All who would form characters for heaven must be Bible Christians. They must be diligent in the study of the Chart of Life, and must carefully and prayerfully examine the motives that prompt them to action. The business world does not lie outside the limits of God’s government. True religion is not to be merely paraded on the Sabbath, and displayed in the sanctuary; it is for every day and for every place. Its claims must be recognized and obeyed in every act of life. Men who possess the genuine article will in all their business affairs show as clear a perception of right, as when offering their supplications at the throne of grace.”²

1. Ellen G. White, “A Rebuke Against Extortioners,” *Southern Watchman*, May 3, 1904.
2. Ellen G. White, “Integrity in Business Affairs,” *Southern Watchman*, May 10, 1904.



Share insights from this week's memory verse and Bible study as well as any discoveries, observations, and questions with your Sabbath School class (or Bible study group). Consider these discussion questions with the rest of the group.



Have you ever taken advantage of fellow Christians? In what ways?

How can we practice Christian principles like accountability in a secular world?

How can we practice accountability in the church?

Which is more difficult: using power at the right time or withholding power?

Is the larger culture more worried about personal rights or self-denial? How about you personally?

How should we avert internal crises in the local church today?

How can we emulate Christ's mind-set?

What examples have you seen of forbearance?