

Everybody's Doing It

Nehemiah 5:14-19

Nehemiah 5:14-19 - *“Moreover, from the time that I was appointed to be their governor in the land of Judah, from the twentieth year until the thirty-second year of King Artaxerxes, twelve years, neither I nor my brothers ate the governor’s provisions. ¹⁵ But the former governors who were before me laid burdens on the people, and took from them bread and wine, besides forty shekels of silver. Yes, even their servants bore rule over the people, but I did not do so, because of the fear of God.¹⁶ Indeed, I also continued the work on this wall, and we did not buy any land. All my servants were gathered there for the work.*

¹⁷ And at my table were one hundred and fifty Jews and rulers, besides those who came to us from the nations around us. ¹⁸ Now that which was prepared daily was one ox and six choice sheep. Also fowl were prepared for me, and once every ten days an abundance of all kinds of wine. Yet in spite of this I did not demand the governor’s provisions, because the bondage was heavy on this people.

¹⁹ Remember me, my God, for good, according to all that I have done for this people.”

Background Notes

Nehemiah lived in the 5th Century BC. Although he was Jewish, he was chosen as a cupbearer to the Persian emperor, Artaxerxes I, and he was probably a personal advisor to the king as well. In about 445 BC Nehemiah was distressed when he heard that the city of Jerusalem was unprotected, so he requested permission from the king to travel to Jerusalem and direct the rebuilding of the city walls. This ancient wall had been destroyed in 586BC when Jerusalem was conquered, and many of the Jews who survived the siege and battle were taken away as captives to Babylon.

When the Persian Empire came to power, the Persians looked upon the captive peoples with favor, even permitting them to return to their homeland. Why? Had the polytheistic Persians converted to the one true God of Israel? No! From their perspective, they wanted to appease all the gods of all the conquered nations.

But the God of Israel was working behind the scenes! As a result, fifty thousand Jews came back to Jerusalem in about 538BC. The Temple of the Lord was built, but the city walls were not repaired until Nehemiah arrived in about 445BC. King Artaxerxes appointed Nehemiah as governor of the province of Judah, and he was governor for twelve years (v14). He then returned again to Persia and King Artaxerxes - but we'll see that later he came back to Jerusalem.

During his twelve years as governor, Nehemiah set a tremendous example for spiritual leaders to follow. He gave up many of his rights and privileges as governor, all for the sake of the people and for the work of the Lord. He could have

received money and a lavish food allowance by taxing the people. Other governors had done that before him, but Nehemiah didn't do it because of the testimony and the work of the Lord.

He could have bought land at rock-bottom prices during the famine (v16), when the people were starving and desperately needed cash to buy food. But Nehemiah didn't do that. He built the wall, not a personal empire!

Nehemiah provided food and drink for many people out of his own pocket, including all the diplomatic expenses involved in his office as governor (v17-18). He certainly could have demanded his rights to acquire the governor's provisions and allowance, but he knew that it would ultimately come out of the people's pockets. So he denied himself those rights in the interest of his people, and for the sake of the work of the Lord.

Doctrinal Points

1. Blessed are those who deny their rights in the interest of the kingdom of God.

In 1 Corinthians 9:4 the apostle Paul wrote: *"Do we have no right to eat and drink?"* Then in verse 12 he said, *"Nevertheless we have not used this right, but endure all things lest we hinder the gospel of Christ."* And in verse 14-15 he continued: *"Even so, the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should live from the gospel, but I have used none of these things."*

1 Corinthians 9 teaches that it is okay for a Christian worker to receive remuneration from those whom they serve, as most Christian pastors and workers do today. But Paul went further. He didn't do that, even though he had the right to receive "food and drink" from those he served. He denied himself that right! Why? Paul didn't want to risk any chance that people would speak of those in the ministry in a negative or critical way. He didn't want people to consider that he was seeking financial gain for serving the Lord! While he was in Corinth, Paul denied his right to receive remuneration. In fact, sometimes he took a job made tents to meet his personal expenses rather than taking money from those he served.

Nehemiah also denied his rights as governor, knowing that the money would ultimately come out of the poor people's pockets. We too can deny our rights in the interest of the kingdom of God. That's what discipleship is all about. The Lord said birds had nests, but He had *"nowhere to lay His head."* He talked about those who followed Him giving up houses, and property, and even family and friends for the sake of the kingdom!

A person who is called to serve the Lord in third world country might give up his or her right to a normal standard of living for the purpose of advancing the kingdom of God. A Christian couple might give up their right to retire in Florida for the sake of continuing to serve in a "snow belt" church, where they know they're needed for kingdom service.

Blessed are those people who deny their rights in the interest of the kingdom of God.

2. People may have short memories - but God doesn't!

In verse 19, Nehemiah said: *"Remember me, my God, for good, according to all that I have done for this people."*

God remembers our service for Him! 1 Corinthians 15:58 says, *"Your labor in the Lord is not in vain in the Lord."* Nothing we do in service for the Lord is useless or wasted. And 1 Corinthians 4:5 says that even the right **motives** of a faithful servant will receive the praise of God!

Hebrews 6:10 encourages us with this teaching: *"God is not unjust, to forget your work and labor of love which you have shown toward His name, in that which you have ministered to the saints and do minister."* People don't notice, and people forget. But don't be discouraged in your service for the Lord, because God remembers!

It's great to get letters from a number of my students who say how much they appreciate the teaching of God's Word in the classroom. But most students forget. Unfortunately, we're all like that. I should have sent my thanks to many faithful men and women who have helped me grow in my Christian life over the years - but I didn't.

God remembered David for wanting to build the Temple. God denied that privilege to David, because David was a man of warfare. But God commended David for his desire to build the Temple. God takes note of everything we do for Him, even our thoughts and motives.

We all have short memories, but - praise the Lord - God doesn't! Be encouraged. God takes note of everything we do, even our motives! People have short memories, but God doesn't.

Practical Applications

1. Don't get "compassion fatigue."

When we look around us and constantly see the overwhelming needs of disadvantaged people, we can become discouraged - and desensitized to their plight. When we see people taking advantage of the needy over a long period of time, our concern tends to wane and diminish. We become desensitized. If we see pictures of starving babies in country after country, we simply don't know how to meet all the needs. After a while we can't cope with the magnitude of the problem, and we become desensitized.

But Nehemiah did not get "compassion fatigue." He was always concerned for the disadvantaged and the poor. Why? The key is in verse 15. He didn't take advantage of the privileges to which he was entitled: *"I did not do so, **because of the fear of God.**"*

God's concern for the poor was always on Nehemiah's mind. He did not become desensitized, and he didn't get compassion fatigue. He saw the needs and the people through God's merciful and compassionate eyes.

Let's not forget God's concern for the poor and disadvantaged. Almost every book in the Bible has something to say about God's concern for the poor and oppressed. Let's avoid compassion fatigue.

2. Everyone does not do it!

Verse 15: *"But the former governors who were before me laid burdens on the people, and took from them bread and wine, besides forty shekels of silver. Yes, even their servants bore rule over the people, but I did not do so."*

Nehemiah could have used the excuse that the other governors had taken tax money from the poor, so he had the right to do it as well. Yes, as governor he had the right. But no! Nehemiah did **not** take advantage of his rights. Just because everyone else did it, that didn't mean that he had to do it, too!

When Nehemiah dared to be different, he broke a longstanding pattern of "accepted practice" that was not glorifying to God. We may need to take an unpopular stand with a minority of Christians against some longstanding but ungodly practices.

Just because most Christians around you are materialistic doesn't mean you have to be a materialist. Just because many churches and Christian ministries use emotional campaigns to raise funds does not mean that your ministry or your church has to seek donations through manipulative techniques. Some churches and ministries hire non-Christian fundraisers who guarantee they'll get a certain level of donations. You can depend on their techniques - no prayer is needed!

Just because "everyone else is doing it" doesn't mean that we should do it, too. Let's dare to be like Nehemiah. Let's take a stand against any common but ungodly practices of the crowd – what everyone else is doing.

Everyone does not have to do it!