



“Leveraging My Resources” Nehemiah 5

Idea: Everything you have is a gift from God, and He expects you to use it for His glory and the betterment of others.

Intro: I want to give you some good news this morning: “We live in the most prosperous and wealthiest nation in the world.” There is also some bad news I need to give you: “We live in the most prosperous and wealthiest nation in the world.” A September 2015, article in Fortune magazine indicated that of the \$153.2 trillion in personal wealth in the world, Americans possessed 41.6% (\$637 billion). China was second with only 10.5%. As Americans we are extremely wealthy.

<http://fortune.com/2015/09/30/america-wealth-inequality/>

I understand what you may be thinking. When you hear reports like that you immediately compare yourself to people like Bill Gates, Mark Zuckerberg, and the like. But that is the wrong comparison. Sure, you may not even be close to the level of wealth of billionaires, but because you are living in America you are wealthy. You should be comparing your wealth to the rest of the world.

In February of 2011, I took my first trip to Uganda, a country in East Central Africa. The team I was on went there to hold crusade events and conduct a pastor's conference in the refugee settlements. I saw first hand what it was like to live in a third-world nation in Sub-Saharan Africa. The poorest lived in grass or mud thatched huts. The middle class lived in clay-bricked houses with a dirt floor. Everyone cooks outside over an open fire, and there is no indoor plumbing. They don't have closets full of clothes or appliances to keep their food from spoiling. Most people walk to where they need to go. And there is no AC.

When I returned home after that trip, I remember how I felt setting in my brand new house. I would set in the living room and stair at the beautiful hardwood floor. I would look at the crown molding and how Kara had decorated our house. Every time I took something out of the refrigerator, I would think, "Wow!" Even though, by American standards I wasn't rich, I still felt guilty over all that I possessed.

This feeling of guilt is not unique with me. It has been an area of debate throughout the history of the church. In fact even today there is strand of evangelical thinking that suspects, if not believes outright, that having a lot of money is something to feel guilty about. Rich Mullins once said:

"We do need to be born again, since Jesus said that to a guy named Nicodemus. But if you tell me I have to be born again to enter the kingdom of God, I can tell you that you have to sell everything you have and give it to the poor, because Jesus said that to one guy too."

Mullins and those in his camp believe asceticism is the proper Christian response to money and things because they see them as evil. The problem with that understanding is that it isn't biblical. James tells us that every good gift comes from God (James 1:17). According to the Bible the material things of this world are not inherently evil. They are morally neutral. A Puritan named William Ames put it this way: "Riches...are

morally neither good or bad, but things indifferent which men may use either well or ill.”

Asceticism is clearly not a view Christians should embrace because it places the emphasis of evil in the wrong place. But it is not the view causing the most damage among believers today. The view wreaking havoc is materialism. Those who hold this perspective are money-centered and thing-centered rather than God-centered. Today, I see many more Christians falling prey to materialism than asceticism. Both camps are destructive and a misunderstanding of Scripture. Therefore, the challenge before us as believers is to live in the middle. Martin Luther compared humanity to a drunkard who falls off his horse to the right, then gets back on and falls to the left. Asceticism is falling off the horse on one side and materialism off the other. Luther said,

“If silver and gold are things evil in themselves, then those who keep away from them deserve to be praised. But if they are good creatures of God, which we can use both for the needs of our neighbor and for the glory of God, is not a person silly, yes, even unthankful to God, if he refrains from them as if they were evil?”

Neither material things nor wealth are evil. In fact we find in the Bible many very wealthy people who are never condemned by God for their wealth. Instead, the Bible speaks to how they used what God entrusted to them for the good of others while also living a higher standard of life than the poor. Everything you have is a gift from God, and He expects you to use it for His glory and the betterment of others. Consequently, our need is to know how to steward what we have for the glory of Christ, the good of others, and the advance of the gospel. We must learn how to leverage our resources to that end.

Inquiry: In Nehemiah 1-2 we saw that Nehemiah was a man of prayer and Bible study who took action to be used of God in answer to his own prayers. In chapters 3-4 we saw that Nehemiah exemplified Christlike valor as he led the people of God to rebuild the wall at great risk to himself. Now, in

chapter 5 we will see him living a wartime lifestyle on a millionaire's budget.

1. The Situation

Read Nehemiah 5:1-5.

As the concentrated work on the wall continued, it brought both physical and economic strain upon the people. Those living in Jerusalem as well as others from surrounding towns and villages were doing the work. We must remember that this was an agrarian society, and the men had left their farms to join the work in the city. That meant their fields had gone unworked, resulting in a shortage of both food and money (vs. 2).

The shortage caused families to allow others to work the fields in exchange for grain (vs. 3). On top of that there was the imperial tax that had to be paid to King Artaxerxes. The complicated situation caused many Jews to sell themselves or their children into slavery (vs. 4-5). The people were under great financial strain.

2. The Sin

Read Nehemiah 5:6-9.

The outcry was from Jews about Jews. The Law of Moses was not regulating the financial dealings of those with money. The Jewish people of wealth were primarily concerned with themselves here. They were not thinking about the effect their financial dealings would have on the ability of the poor to feed themselves, care for their children, or devote themselves to the work on the wall.

The Law forbids the charging of interest to fellow Jews (Ex 22:12-27; Lev 25:35-54; Deut 23:19-20), but that is

what they were doing. When the poor Jews borrowed money to buy food, the wealthy charged them interest. When they mortgaged their farms, they wealthy charged them interest. They even went so far as to purchase Jews as slaves and more than likely did not release them in the seventh year as the Law required (Ex 21:2-6; Lev 25:38-55; Deut 15:12-18).

The Jews of wealth disregarded God's Word for the sake of capital gain. Their actions revealed that they had no reverence for God (5:9). Their actions revealed their heart.

“Our pocketbooks have more to do with heaven and also with hell than our hymnbooks.”

– Helmut Thielicke

3. The Solution

Read Nehemiah 5:10-19.

Nehemiah called for the wealthy to repent and return everything they had taken from the poor. They were to return the land, goods, money, interest, and the slaves. They were to follow the teaching of Scripture and the example of Nehemiah and his servants who gave from their wealth to help those in need (5:10, 14-19).

We learn in this passage that Nehemiah was not merely an influential Israelite with permission to rebuild Jerusalem's walls but the king's appointed governor of Judah (5:14). We also learn that he was phenomenally wealthy. He didn't take the allowance of food afforded to him as governor, yet he still fed 150 men from his table each day. Every single day one ox, six sheep, and several birds were killed and prepared. In addition every ten days a new shipment of wine was delivered (5:17-18).

Can you imagine what it must have cost Nehemiah to feed 150 men a day? It costs between \$30-\$75 to feed my family of five per meal, depending where we go. It would have cost \$4000-\$5000 per day to feed those at his table.

Nehemiah leveraged the resources God had given him for Kingdom purposes. He leveraged them for God's glory and the good of others. Why did he sacrifice so much for others? I believe he understood three things that we need to understand today.

- 1) The earth and everything in it belongs to God.
The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein,
– Ps 24:1

Nehemiah, you, and I are stewards. God gives each of us property and goods to manage. They are ours to tend not own.

- 2) The one who oppresses the poor person insults his maker, but the one who is kind to the needy honors Him. (Prov 14:31)

Anytime you take advantage of someone else, you put yourself in a dangerous situation with God. God never oppresses; He frees.

Nehemiah wanted to free the Jews as much as he could from financial burdens. We see this in his appeal to be remembered by God for his good deeds (5:19).

- 3) God is generous.
Gracious is the Lord, and righteous; our God is merciful. – Psalm 116:5

God delights in opening the windows of heaven for us (Mal 3:10) and abundantly pouring a blessing into our lives. He is the well of living water that overflows into our lives (John 4:13-14).

God has generously given us His best. He leveraged the resources of heaven for your benefit. Therefore, as a recipient of His grace, He expects you to be generous towards others too. He expects you to leverage the resources entrusted to you for His glory and the good of others.

Three Life Truths:

- 1) Financial hardship creates great stress in your life and home.

The loss of a job, a medical crisis, a major mechanical repair, and overdo credit card bills put you in a tight spot. There is nothing worse than getting phone calls from creditors.

The rich rules over the poor, and the borrower is the slave of the lender. – Prov 22:7

When the money gets tight it puts everyone in the home on edge. Conflict over finances is the number cause for divorce in America.

Some of you today are living under that kind of stress. There's more month than money. You feel like a slave. You work to pay the creditor. And the effects of the situation are damaging your marriage, kids, and your ability to participate in Kingdom work.

- 2) The way you steward your resources affects

others and the Kingdom of God.

Randy Alcorn states in his book *Money, Possessions, and Eternity*, “Our use of money and possessions is a decisive statement of our eternal values.”

The Jews were commanded in the Law to be generous toward others and to generously support the work of God. They weren't to glean all the grain from their fields so that the poor would have something to eat (Lev 19:9). They were to bring their tithes, offerings, and sacrifices to the tabernacle/temple, which supported the priests, the poor, and the work of God.

The key to a right use of money and possessions is a right perspective – an eternal perspective. Each of our lives is positioned like a bow, drawn across the strings of a cosmic violin, producing vibrations that resound for all eternity. The slightest action of the bow produces a sound, a sound that is never lost. The everyday choices I make regarding money and possessions are of eternal consequence.

Therefore, when you choose to tithe faithfully through the church. Your gift helps support over 8,000 missionaries and church planters around the world through NAMB and IMB. It enables us to educate those God has called to ministry. It makes it possible to send church members overseas on short-term trips and conduct ongoing ministries locally to reach people with the gospel and make disciples.

When you see a neighbor in need and step in to meet that need, you make an eternal mark in his or her life. You show them the love of Jesus, and you help them understand that Christ cares.

This is why we ought to live with our palms up, holding the things entrusted to us loosely. What I have is not mine; it is the Lord's. I am simply His steward. Therefore, what He tells me to do with His money, I must do and do it with joy.

- 3) The way you steward your resources reveals your heart toward God.

The wealthy Jews had lost their fear of God; they no longer revered Him (5:9). By taking advantage of the poor, they exposed that their true love was money rather than God. This was the problem Zacchaeus had. When Jesus came to town he had an encounter that forever changed his life. He repented of his sin and surrendered to Jesus' lordship. Zacchaeus told the Lord he would give half his money to the poor and pay back fourfold to those he cheated (Luke 19:8). He dethroned the god of money and enthroned the Lord of heaven.

You cannot enthrone the true God unless in the process you dethrone your other gods. Randy Alcorn says, "If Christ is not Lord over your money and possessions, then He is not your Lord."

How are you stewarding the money, possessions, and talents the Lord has given to you? Do you leverage and give them away to bless others and bring glory to God? Or are you using and keeping them for yourself?

Conclusion: Nehemiah models for us how we ought to live as Christ-followers. He loved God and he loved people. He lived with his palms up, holding loosely the things entrusted to him.

It is not sinful to be wealthy, but it is sinful to be greedy and stingy. And you can be greedy without being wealthy. God

has called us as Christ-followers to leverage our resources for His glory and the good of others.

“Money is like manure. Stack it up and it stinks; spread it around and it makes things grow.”

This is the point Jesus taught in His parable of the talents in Matthew 25. The guys who were given five and two talents each leveraged what they had received and doubled what they had by trading with others. The master praised them for being faithful. The guy who received one talent buried it in the ground. When the master returned, the master rebuked the faithless servant and took his talent away.

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