

Violating *the Spirit of the Law*



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Neh. 5:1–5, Exod. 21:2–7, Mic. 6:8, Neh. 5:7–12, Deut. 23:21–23, Neh. 5:14–19.*

Memory Text: “Restore now to them, even this day, their lands, their vineyards, their olive groves, and their houses, also a hundredth of the money and the grain, the new wine and the oil, that you have charged them’ ” (*Nehemiah 5:11, NKJV*).

To this day, we humans struggle with the question of wealth, poverty, and the gap between the rich and the poor and what can be done about it. Yes, Jesus said that “you have the poor with you always” (*Matt. 26:11, NKJV*), but that’s hardly an excuse to do nothing about helping them. On the contrary, Scripture admonishes us to do our part to help. We can barely call ourselves Christians otherwise.

How fascinating, too, that even amid the trials and tribulations of the returned exiles in rebuilding Jerusalem, this theme appears, not just that of poverty and the poor, but that of the even more problematic question of the rich oppressing the poor. This was a problem before the exile, and now, even back in their own land, it reappears.

This week we will see another manifestation of this age-old theme and how Nehemiah worked to deal with it. As we will see, what made this oppression even worse was that it was being done within “the letter of the law,” a powerful example of how we need to be careful not to let rules and regulations become an end in and of themselves rather than a means to an end, which is to reflect the character of Jesus.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, November 2.

People's Grievance

Read Nehemiah 5:1–5. What is happening here? What are the people crying out against?

The Jewish community seems to be united under Nehemiah's leadership against the outside pressures. But all is not well within the nation that is standing up to persecution and defending itself from foreign assaults. Despite the outward appearance of toughness and cohesive efforts against the enemy, the community is broken inside. The leaders and the rich have been using the poor and underprivileged for their own gain, and the situation has become so bad that the families are crying out for relief. Some families were saying that they did not have any food to feed their children; some were crying out that because of a famine they had mortgaged their property and now had nothing; other families moaned that they had to borrow money for the Persian tax and even their children were slaves.

It appears that the main culprit of the trouble was a famine and tax payments that caused the poorer families to seek help from their neighbors. The Persian government required a tax of 350 talents of silver annually from the province of Judah (*see note on Neh. 5:1–5 in the Andrews Study Bible, p. 598*). If a person couldn't pay the designated portion of the mandatory tax, the family would usually mortgage their property or borrow money first. If, however, they couldn't earn the money the next year, then they had to do something about the debt they now owed. Usually debt slavery was the next option. They had already lost their land, and now they had to send someone from the family, usually children, to be in the service of the creditor in order to work off the debt.

There are times in life when we find ourselves in trouble because of the consequences of our own actions; of course, there also are times when we end up sick or in financial straits through no fault of our own. The story above recounts a time that government policies disadvantaged the people, leading to intensified poverty. They were caught in the spiral of deepening poverty, with no way out.

How fascinating that then, as now, people struggle with economic oppression. What message should we take from the fact that this is a topic the Bible often addresses?

Against the Spirit of the Law

Read Nehemiah 5:6–8 (see also Exod. 21:2–7). Why does Nehemiah react in anger?

However difficult for us to grasp today, slavery was a cultural norm in the ancient world. A parent could either become a slave himself/herself or sell a child. Socially and legally, the parents had the right to sell their sons and daughters. However, since God is all about giving freedom, He regulated the practice in Israel by requiring creditors to release their slaves every seven years. Thus, God protected people from becoming permanent slaves and demonstrated His desire for people to live freely.

Although lending was permitted by the law, charging interest was not (for biblical regulations against usury, see Exod. 22:25–27; Lev. 25:36, 37; Deut. 23:19, 20). And yet, the interest that the lenders charged was small compared to what the nations around them charged. They were asked to pay 1 percent every month. Mesopotamian texts from the seventh century show interest of 50 percent for silver and 100 percent for grain annually. Thus, the 12 percent interest per year was low compared to the practice of the countries in Mesopotamia. But overall, according to God’s Word, the only thing the creditors did wrong was to charge interest (*Neh. 5:10*), and interestingly, the people didn’t even mention that in their grievance. Everything else was within the social norm as well as within the provisions of the law. So, why is Nehemiah “very angry”? Remarkably, he doesn’t act right away but gives the matter some serious thought.

The fact that Nehemiah deals with the issue so decisively is very admirable. He doesn’t leave a grievance alone just because it doesn’t technically break the law or is socially acceptable, even “nice” compared to the practices of the land. It was the spirit of the law that was transgressed in this situation. Especially during a time of economic hardship, it was the duty of the people to help each other. God is on the side of the oppressed and needy, and He had to commission prophets to speak against the evils and violence committed against the poor.

What are ways that, even unintentionally, we can follow the letter of the law while violating the spirit behind it? See *Mic. 6:8*.

Nehemiah Acts

Seemingly, the rebuke to the nobles and rulers—“each of you is exacting usury from his brother” (*Neh. 5:7, NKJV*)—didn’t bring the desired results. Thus, Nehemiah did not stop there but continued to fight for the oppressed among them. He could have just said that he had tried to teach the nobles and rulers but it didn’t work, and so he was forced to drop the issue. After all, these were the rich and powerful of the land that he would be going up against. But he was not satisfied until a solution to the problem was implemented, even if he created powerful enemies in the process.

Read Nehemiah 5:7–12. What are Nehemiah’s arguments against what is going on? What does he use to persuade the people to right the wrong?

Nehemiah calls a great assembly—all of the people of Israel are brought together to deal with this matter. He is most likely counting on the possibility that when all the people are present, the leaders will be ashamed, perhaps even afraid, to continue their oppression.

Nehemiah’s initial argument centers on slavery. Many of the Jews, most likely Nehemiah included, purchased freedom for other Jews in servitude to foreigners. Now, he asks the nobles and rulers whether they find it acceptable to buy and sell their own people. Does it make sense for the Israelites to buy Jews and give them freedom only to have them end up as slaves of their own people?

The leaders offer no response because they see that this argument is reasonable; therefore, Nehemiah continues. He asks them, “Ought you not to walk in the fear of our God to prevent the taunts of the nations our enemies?” (*Neh. 5:9, ESV*). Then, Nehemiah admits that he himself has been lending the people money and grain. By declaring “let us stop charging interest” (*Neh. 5:10, NIV*), he affirmed the law that forbade this practice with fellow Hebrews and demonstrated that under his governorship, he would like people to be solicitous toward each other. Amazingly, the response is unanimous. The leaders agree to restore everything to the people.

Have you done wrong to anyone? Most of us, if honest, would have to answer yes. What’s stopping you, in whatever degree possible, from making restitution, even now?

An Oath

Read Nehemiah 5:12, 13. Why does Nehemiah pronounce a curse against those who do not uphold their part of the agreement?

Even though the leaders agree to restore and give back what they have confiscated, Nehemiah is not satisfied with mere words. He needs solid proof; therefore, he makes them swear an oath before the priests. This action also gave the proceedings legal validity in case he had to reference the agreement later.

But why does he pronounce a curse? Nehemiah performs a symbolic act of gathering up his garments as if to hold something in them and then shaking them out as a sign of losing it. Thus, those who would go against this oath would lose everything. It was customary to utter curses in order to impress upon others the significance of a certain law or rule. The people also were less likely to go against the law when a curse was associated with the breaking of it. Nehemiah apparently felt that this was such an important issue that he needed to do something drastic in order to enhance the probability of its success.

What do the following texts in the Old Testament teach us about the sanctity of oaths for these people? *Num. 30:2; Deut. 23:21–23; Eccl. 5:4, 5; Lev. 19:12; Gen. 26:31.*

In the end, speech is a powerful gift that God has given to humans; it exists as something radically different from what animals have. And there is power in our words, the power even of life and death. Hence we need to be very careful in what we say, in what we promise to do, and in what verbal commitments we make. It also is important that our deeds match our words. How many people have been turned off to Christianity by those whose words sound Christian but whose actions are anything but?

Think about just how much impact your words have on others. How can we learn to be very careful in what we say, when we say it, and how we say it?

Nehemiah's Example

Read Nehemiah 5:14–19. What reasons does Nehemiah give for not demanding “the governor’s provisions [fees]” (*Neh. 5:18, NKJV*) from the people?

Nehemiah most likely wrote the account in these verses after his return to the court of King Artaxerxes, after his 12 years of governorship in Judah. Although governors were entitled to receive revenue from their subjects, Nehemiah never claimed this right, but rather financed his own living. Not only did he pay for his own expenses, but he also provided for his family, as well as the whole court. Zerubbabel, the first governor, is the only other governor whose name we know. When Nehemiah says “the former governors,” he is most likely referring to the governors in between Zerubbabel and himself. As a result, by the time he was done with his term in office, he very likely lost money. Rather than acquiring riches, as one would expect from a prestigious position, he probably forfeited wealth and possessions. Nehemiah was wealthy, which is why he could provide the daily food for many people, and he was generous in supplying plenty to others (*Neh. 5:17, 18*).

Though it was not the same thing as what Abraham did after the rescue of those taken captive by some of the surrounding nations (*see Genesis 14*), what Nehemiah does here nevertheless reveals the same crucial principle.

Read Nehemiah 5:19. What is he saying there, and how do we understand this in terms of the gospel?

What we see with Nehemiah is an example of someone who put the Lord and the Lord’s work before his own personal gain and advantage. It’s a good lesson for us all, regardless of our particular situation. It’s easy to work for the Lord when it doesn’t cost us much.

Read Philippians 2:3–8. In what ways, right now, can you reveal in your own life the self-denying principles expressed here?

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, “A Rebuke Against Extortion,” pp. 646–652, in *Prophets and Kings*.

“As Nehemiah heard of this cruel oppression, his soul was filled with indignation. ‘I was very angry,’ he says, ‘when I heard their cry and these words.’ He saw that if he succeeded in breaking up the oppressive custom of exaction he must take a decided stand for justice. With characteristic energy and determination he went to work to bring relief to his brethren.”—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, p. 648.

“Jesus proceeded to lay down a principle that would make oath taking needless. He teaches that the exact truth should be the law of speech. ‘Let your speech be, Yea, yea; Nay, nay: and whatsoever is more than these is of the evil one.’ R.V.”—Ellen G. White, *Thoughts From the Mount of Blessing*, p. 67.

“These words condemn all those meaningless phrases and expletives that border on profanity. They condemn the deceptive compliments, the evasion of truth, the flattering phrases, the exaggerations, the misrepresentations in trade, that are current in society and in the business world. They teach that no one who tries to appear what he is not, or whose words do not convey the real sentiment of his heart, can be called truthful.”—Page 68.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Why does selfishness lie at the core of our human problems when dealing with finances and interpersonal relationships?
- 2 How can God’s people avoid greediness? What is God’s provision against it? (*Study the following texts: Isa. 58:3–12 and Mic. 6:6–8.*)
- 3 Dwell more on the gift of speech and the power of our words. What does John 1:1, 2 mean when it calls Jesus “the Word”? How does this help us understand the importance of words and what they mean?
- 4 It’s amazing that thousands of years ago Jesus said that the poor would always be among us. We also are admonished to help those in need. How do these two ideas fit together in helping motivate Christians to work for those who are less fortunate?

Stubborn Wife

By ANDREW McCHESNEY, Adventist Mission

Convinced that Saturday is the biblical Sabbath, business owner Zelindo João Lay informed his wife he would leave their Sunday church in Lospalos, East Timor.

“What, are you crazy?” exclaimed his wife, Dulce. “First you close our two mini-marts on Saturday, and now you want to leave the church. Why?”

“I have found the truth in the Bible,” he said.

Dulce refused to discuss the matter anymore. “From now on, you go your way, and I’ll go mine,” she said. She stopped cooking for Zelindo and sometimes locked him out of the house.

Zelindo cried and prayed, “What is happening to me? I found the truth in the Bible, but now my wife wants a divorce because I am following the Bible’s teaching about the Sabbath.”

In the mornings, Dulce went to their larger mini-mart as usual, and Zelindo watched their young son at home. He took the noon to 9:00 P.M. shift at the shop, and Dulce returned home to be with their son. One morning, Zelindo prayed, “If You want me to leave my church, show me a miracle.”

At noon, he walked into the shop and was shocked to find Dulce reading the Bible. He had never seen her read the Bible before. He saw she was reading about the woman and dragon in Revelation 12. “Darling, if you don’t understand what you are reading, I can explain it to you,” he said.

Dulce abruptly slammed her hand onto the desk. The loud noise drew stares from customers. Dulce started crying. “Why did they lie to us?” she said. “Why did they hide this from us?”

Zelindo hugged her. “Thank You, God, for answering my prayer,” he said. “I have seen a miracle.”

On Saturday, the family went to a Seventh-day Adventist church for the first time. Later, Zelindo and his wife were baptized into the Adventist Church. Zelindo, 42, said God has blessed beyond measure as he has sought to honor Him at work. He stopped selling alcohol, tobacco, coffee, and tea, and he changed the employment rules. In addition to salaries, he provides employees with room and board. He asks them to worship with him every morning and evening and to attend Bible studies once a week. Zelindo prays every day, “I want to use this business to praise You. Help me to bring people to You.”



The employees have expressed amazement as they study the Bible. “What you are teaching us from the Bible is really true,” they say.

ZELINDO, left, said God has blessed his business beyond his biggest hopes: eight employees have been baptized in four years. Part of a 2015 Thirteenth Sabbath Offering helped build the first Seventh-day Adventist school in East Timor’s capital, Dili. Thank you for your mission offering.