

Christian Politics: Nehemiah 5

Sunday, June 25, 2023
Covenant Church
Pastor Zack Phillips

Nehemiah 5

¹ Now there was a great outcry of the people and of their wives against their Jewish kin. ² For there were those who said, "With our sons and our daughters, we are many; we must get grain, so that we may eat and stay alive." ³ There were also those who said, "We are having to pledge our fields, our vineyards, and our houses in order to get grain during the famine." ⁴ And there were those who said, "We are having to borrow money on our fields and vineyards to pay the king's tax. ⁵ Now our flesh is the same as that of our kindred; our children are the same as their children; and yet we are forcing our sons and daughters to be slaves, and some of our daughters have been ravished; we are powerless, and our fields and vineyards now belong to others."

⁶ I was very angry when I heard their outcry and these complaints. ⁷ After thinking it over, I brought charges against the nobles and the officials; I said to them, "You are all taking interest from your own people." And I called a great assembly to deal with them, ⁸ and said to them, "As far as we were able, we have bought back our Jewish kindred who had been sold to other nations; but now you are selling your own kin, who must then be bought back by us!" They were silent, and could not find a word to say. ⁹ So I said, "The thing that you are doing is not good. Should you not walk in the fear of our God, to prevent the taunts of the nations our enemies? ¹⁰ Moreover I and my brothers and my servants are lending them money and grain. Let us stop this taking of interest. ¹¹ Restore to them, this very day, their fields, their vineyards, their olive orchards, and their houses, and the interest on money, grain, wine, and oil that you have been exacting from them." ¹² Then they said, "We will restore everything and demand nothing more from them. We will do as you say." And I called the priests, and made them take an oath to do as they had promised. ¹³ I also shook out the fold of my garment and said, "So may God shake out everyone from house and from property who does not perform this promise. Thus may they be shaken out and emptied." And all the assembly said, "Amen," and praised the LORD. And the people did as they had promised.

¹⁴ Moreover from the time that I was appointed to be their governor in the land of Judah, from the twentieth year to the thirty-second year of King Artaxerxes, twelve years, neither I nor my brothers ate the food allowance of the governor. ¹⁵ The former governors who were before me laid heavy burdens on the people, and took food and wine from them, besides forty shekels of silver. Even their servants lorded it over the people. But I did not do so, because of the fear of God. ¹⁶ Indeed, I devoted myself to the work on this wall, and acquired no land; and all my servants were gathered there for the work. ¹⁷ Moreover there were at my table one hundred fifty people, Jews and officials, besides those who came to us from the nations around us. ¹⁸ Now that which was prepared for one day was one ox and six choice sheep; also fowls were prepared for me, and every ten days skins of wine in abundance; yet with all this I did not demand the food allowance of the governor, because of the heavy burden of labor on the people. ¹⁹ Remember for my good, O my God, all that I have done for this people.

A. Our Faith Is Political...

1. Are they breaking the law? Do not charge interest to *Israelites* (Deut 23:20) or to *poor* Israelites (Exod 22:25; Lev 25:35-38)? An Israelite *may* be sold into indentured slavery but only for six years (Deut 15:12-188; Exod 21:2-11)?

2. Basic point Individual salvation, personal piety, and private prayer that are ignorant of or intentionally neglect social realities around us are not *full* faith

3. Politics in God's Kingdom This Age versus the Next Age • People have a claim on us • The poor are not crushed by systems

- Do not charge interest on loans to the poor (Exod 22:25)
- If the poor give you their cloak as collateral, give it back at night so they aren't cold (Exod 22:26-27; Deut 24:12-13)
- Pay the poor their wages at the end of every single day! (Deut 24:15)
- Don't reap the harvest of the land to the edges of the field, gather the gleanings, or pick up the grapes you drop but leave these for the poor (Lev 19:9; cf. 23:22; 24:21)
- In the seventh year, let your farmland lie fallow and let the poor eat what's there (Exod 23:11)
- The poor can offer less-expensive offerings if they cannot afford, for example, a sheep (Lev 12:8)

B. ...And Our Politics is Personal

1. To learn

Shane Claiborne: "The great tragedy in the church is not that rich Christians do not *care* about the poor but that rich Christians do not *know* the poor."

2. To contribute

3. To model Peter Claver • Thomas More • Pier Giorgio

4. A deeper Christian spirituality

People often asked Mother Teresa why she loved the poor so much, how she could honor dignity in such difficult situations. In response, she liked to grasp their hand, slowly wiggle one finger at a time, and explain: "You-did-it-to-me." In her mind, you could count the whole Gospel on just five fingers... The secret to her infectious joy and boundless compassion was that in every person — every paralytic, every leper, every invalid, and every orphan — she recognized Jesus... A Hindu gentleman once approached Mother Teresa and pointed out that while both he and Mother were doing social work, the difference was that he and his coworkers were doing it for something while Mother Teresa was doing it for someone. The compassionate nun didn't help people simply because "it was the right thing to do." She helped them because she knew, deep in her bones, that by serving others she was serving Jesus himself.¹

¹ Brandon Vogt, *Saints and Social Justice* (Kindle edition): 21-22.