

Brother against Brother—Overcoming Internal Conflicts

Neh. 5:1-19

Intro: It is inspiring to study the book of Nehemiah and watch the wonderful leadership of Nehemiah and the cooperative “follow”ship of his fellow Jews. And we have seen that when God’s people unite to work together they can do great things. And, we have also seen that Satan raises external opponents to hinder the work that must be overcome.

However, God’s work is not only hindered by opposition from without, but from conflict within among God’s workers. Here in Nehemiah 5 we see that internal conflict can bring God’s work to a standstill. But more importantly we see how such problems can be solved by leaders in order that God’s people can get back to work again. Let’s consider together Nehemiah’s record in chapter 5.

In this text we see some important principles in identifying and solving conflicts.

Conflicts escalate when greed becomes the creed

In this case it was greed for money that led to conflict. Some of the Israelites took advantage of their fellow Jews. It was a time of famine and food shortage. Many of the larger families did not have food for their families. The high taxes of the king had forced some of the people to mortgage their property at high interest rates to get money for payment. Some had even had to resort to selling their families into slavery to acquire money for survival. Worst of all it was the Jewish nobles who were taking advantage of their fellow-Jewish brethren. They had allowed their greed to cause them to misuse their own brethren.

Let us all beware of what may happen when greed becomes the creed, when God’s people are motivated by misplaced desires!

Sometimes conflicts are the result of “class warfare”, of people angry with their own limited circumstances who resent someone else who has greater blessings (Cf. Jas. 4:1ff).

What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you? Is not the source your pleasures that wage war in your members? You lust and do not have; so you commit murder. And you are envious and cannot obtain; so you fight and quarrel. You do not have because you do not ask. (James 4:1-2)

It could be greed for attention or recognition or for influence, power or control

Paul gives the perfect prescription:

Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind let each of you regard one another as more important than himself; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others. (Philippians 2:3-4)

Having right attitude will keep many conflicts from arising. But if and when they arise there are principles that should govern our attempts to solve them!

Real grievances must be given a fair hearing.

Nehemiah apparently didn't know how people were suffering under the abuse of the noble class. There was the need for communication.

Nehemiah did not rebuke the people who were suffering under the burden of oppression for revealing how they were wronged. Instead he was angry with those who had oppressed their fellow-Jews (v. 1-6)

In solving problems it is important for those with real grievances to raise them so that they can be solved. Nothing productive comes from holding grudges or making unfair accusations from a distance.

In fact, when we feel wronged by someone we are taught to go to the brother who has wronged us, make known to him the point of wrong, and seek reconciliation:

"Be on your guard! If your brother sins, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. "And if he sins against you seven times a day, and returns to you seven times, saying, 'I repent,' forgive him." (Luke 17:3-4)

Response must be reasoned and not merely emotional.

Nehemiah was emotionally charged by the actions of his fellow-Jews. And that's o.k. The nobles had clearly violated the teaching of the law about how the needy should be treated.

Nehemiah took a reasoned approach that prevented him from doing wrong things. "He consulted with himself" before he acted!

Righteous indignation is acceptable as long as it does not lead us to carnal expressions!

It is important to keep cool heads when differences and perceived wrongs arise. Sometimes we are prone to do the wrong thing when there is rush to judgment. Instead if we take measured steps to solve problems, then the outcome is much more likely to be a good one!

Brethren, even if a man is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; each one looking to yourself, lest you too be tempted. (Galatians 6:1)

Behavior should be judged by Scripture, not position.

The nobles were not exempt from rebuke because they were nobles or were powerful. Nehemiah took a risk in correcting them, but in so doing he revealed to all the people that no one is above the Law!

It was wrong to loan money at interest (Ex. 22:25; Deut. 23:19-20).

It was wrong to enslave fellow-Jews (Lev. 25:35-40).

Nehemiah acted on the basis of principle, not persons.

And so there should not be double standards. We cannot hold some people to one standard and ourselves to another. We cannot hold some people accountable for their actions but not others because of the fact they are friends or people of prominence.

Those who continue in sin, rebuke in the presence of all, so that the rest also may be fearful of sinning. I solemnly charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus and of His chosen angels, to maintain these principles without bias, doing nothing in a spirit of partiality. (1 Timothy 5:20-21)

We must be motivated by the cause of God rather than personal desires.

Nehemiah appealed to the honor of God and his cause as the motivation to do right.

Nehemiah appealed to the nobles to “walk in the fear of God”.

Obedience to Him must come before personal wishes.

Nehemiah appealed to the distinctive lifestyle of the Jewish people and the reproach that came upon the nation when they did not honor God’s ways (v. 9).

What must be of utmost importance in conflict is the good of the cause of Christ.

Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. (1 Corinthians 10:31)

True love leads to repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation.

If this text shows us the high cost of internal conflict, it also reveals the high value of internal love. To the credit of the Jewish nobles, when confronted with the error of their ways, they were humble enough to admit their guilt and make things right (v. 12)

Every party in a conflict ought to have the love for others to make right any perceived wrong, forgive others, respect the consciences of others, and make efforts to reconcile with others.

“For if you forgive men for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. “But if you do not forgive men, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions. (Matthew 6:14-15)

Those who lead must exemplify the principles they call upon others to embrace.

Nehemiah as governor revealed integrity by living by the standards he expected of others.

He agreed to offer help to those in need with no interest (v. 10).

He would live in luxury while the people around him were suffering, even though he might have had a right to such things as the governor (v. 14-18).

He could talk about compassion with credibility because he “walked the walk”.

And so we have the right to expect leaders to be an example of love and forgiveness.

nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock. (1 Peter 5:3)

Conclusion: It is always sad and difficult for everyone when brethren have conflicts and it is a great hindrance to the Lord’s work. But the good news is that problems can be solved when attitudes are right and when the honor of God

is most important in our hearts. And what rejoicing comes to the people when love is expressed and unity is achieved! Notice that expression, “Then they praised the Lord!”

Whenever problems arise we can bring joy back to the congregation by respecting these principles taught in God’s word.