

Overcoming the Enemy Within

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Preacher: William Philip

[0 : 00] We're going to turn now to our Bibles and to our reading this morning, which is in Nehemiah chapter 5. If you have one of our visitor's Bibles, the Blue Bibles, that's page 401. And we continue our studies in this very exciting story of the return from exile in Babylon and the rebuilding, first of the temple, as we saw in the book of Ezra, and now the walls of the city and the repopulation and reestablishment of God's people in God's place and under his lordship and in his presence.

And we read last week of the opposition to the building from enemies without. And here in chapter 5 we see another problem, this time from within. Now there arose a great outcry of the people and of their wives against their Jewish brothers.

For there were those who said, with our sons and daughters we are many, so let us get grain that we may eat and keep alive. There were also those who said, we are mortgaging our fields, our vineyards and our houses to get grain because of the famine.

And there were those who said, we have borrowed money for the king's tax on our fields and our vineyards. Now our flesh is as the flesh of our brothers, our children as their children, yet we are forcing our sons and daughters to be slaves.

And some of our daughters have already been enslaved. But it's not in our power to help. Other men have our fields and our vineyards. I was very angry when I heard their outcry in these words.

[1 : 41] I took counsel with myself and I brought charges against the nobles and the officials. I said to them, you are exacting interest, each from his brother.

And I held a great assembly against them and said to them, we as far as we are able have bought back our Jewish brothers who have been sold to the nations. But you even sell your brothers that they may be sold to us.

They were silent. Couldn't find a word to say. So I said, this thing that you are doing is not good. Ought you not to walk in the fear of our God?

To prevent the taunts of the nations, our enemies? Nor over I and my brothers and my servants are lending them money and grain. Let us abandon this exacting of interest.

Return to them this very day their fields, their vineyards, their olive orchards and their houses and all the percentage of money, grain, wine and oil that you've been exacting from them. And they said, we will restore these and require nothing from them.

[2 : 44] We will do as you say. And I called the priests and made them swear to do as they promised. I also shook out the fold of my garment and said, so may God shake out every man from his house and from his labor who does not keep this promise.

So may he be shaken out and emptied. And all the assembly said, Amen. And praise the Lord. And the people did as they had promised.

Moreover, from the time that I was appointed to be their governor in the land of Judah, from the 20th to the 32nd year of Artaxerxes, the king, 12 years, neither I nor my brothers ate the food allowance of the governor.

The former governors who were before me laid heavy burdens on the people and took from them from their daily ration 40 shekels of silver. Even their servants lorded it over the people. But I did not do so because of the fear of God.

I also persevered in the work on this wall. And we acquired no land. And all my servants were gathered there for the work. Moreover, there were at my table 150 men, Jews and officials, besides those who came to us from the nations that were around us.

[4 : 01] Now what was prepared at my expense for each day was one ox and six choice sheep and birds. And every 10 days all kinds of wine in abundance.

Yet for all this, I did not demand the food allowance of the governor. Because the service was too heavy on this people. Remember for my good, oh my God, all that I've done for this people.

Amen. May God bless to us his word. Well, turn with me, if you would, to Nehemiah chapter 5, page 401 in the Visitor's Bibles.

And it's a chapter all about overcoming the enemy within. The Apostle Paul warns the Christian church not to be outwitted by Satan because we're not ignorant of his methods.

At least if we pay attention to what the Bible teaches us about them. And the New Testament is very clear. Satan attacks the church both with conflict from without, but also with corruption from within.

[5 : 14] It's a vivid picture. Remember, we looked at it in Revelation 13 where the devil manifests himself both in the savage destroyer and also in the other beast, the subtle deceiver.

And he wreaks havoc on this earth through both of those ways. And we see that pattern very specially in the early chapters of the church's life in the book of Acts.

And alas, we see that it is very often corruption of the church's life and witness through sin within that is the bigger problem. Just read the New Testament letters.

In fact, 2 Corinthians 2 where Paul gives that warning about Satan's designs. The very issue at stake is pain being caused to the whole church by other Christian brothers and sisters in the fellowship.

And the whole letter, in fact, the whole of 1 Corinthians 2 is about all these kind of damaging behaviors. That leads Paul to tell the church, you've been deceived by the serpent's cunning, just like Eve.

[6 : 15] Likewise to Ephesians. He writes that anger and falsehood in the church among them is a result of them having given the devil a foothold. And they've got to arm themselves against the real enemy.

Similarly, James tells us that fights and quarrels and jealousy and anger in the church is a sure sign that they are allowing the devil to corrupt them. And they must humble themselves and repent and resist the devil and submit to God's commands on their lives.

And I could go on all through the New Testament and indeed the Old Testament. We see the relentless attacks on God's people from without, yes, for real enemies, but also very often, too often, from the enemy within.

And so often, these are things to do with issues about money, about power, about influence, about sex, and so on. In other words, about God's church behaving exactly and acting exactly like the world round about.

With the world's ideas. A world that is at odds with God. A world that is at war with the kingdom of God. And the Apostle Paul says, doesn't he, in Romans chapter 2, that when God's people are like that, instead of being what they're called to be, instead of being lights to the world, bringing honor to the name of their God and Savior, no, he says, because of you, God's name is blasphemed among the nations.

[7 : 49] God's people are not witnesses to his glory, but they're anti-witnesses. And that means, of course, that whatever they think they're doing, they are not worshiping God at all. All those so-called worship, their sermons, their sacraments, their singing, whatever it is, in fact, in God's eyes, it is anti-worship.

It's mere lip service that cuts absolutely no ice with him whatsoever. And moreover, it's anti-witness. In the words of our passage today, in Nehemiah chapter 5, verse 9, God's name and God's kingdom is exposed to the taunts and the scorn of the world, the enemies of the gospel of Christ.

Now, friends, this ought to be sobering for us, because, alas, the truth is that all through the history of the Christian church throughout the last 2,000 years, if we're honest, that has been a very great problem.

And one of the biggest problems, and probably the biggest problems, in the witness of the church today is not from enemies without, at least not in our Western world. When we do face enemies from without, often it galvanizes the church together in witness.

It unites the church. But no, the greatest problem often is the enemy within. That's what really does destroy the church's witness.

[9 : 20] And that is what, in the end, will really snuff out the church's life and existence. So what is this chapter, which Paul says is written for our instruction, to give us endurance and hope, what does it teach us about overcoming the enemy within?

Well, let's look at what Nehemiah shows us as the story unfolds, as it does in three movements. So first, in verses 1 to 6, we have the painful cry of the people. And Nehemiah faces, very disturbingly, a great painful cry.

But he realizes quickly that the presenting complaint, as so often in these situations, reveals far more perilous circumstances for the people of God than they realized.

Because the serious pathology that underlay this problem was a callousness and a selfishness, which will always, in the end, destroy the witness of any community of faith and will put its future in peril.

Because at the heart of it, as Nehemiah tells us, is a lack of real reverence and fear for God himself. Now, the presenting issues here were the natural problems, you might call them, of famine, in verse 3, and of taxes, in verse 4.

[10 : 38] The Persian Empire, like all empires, was very keen on taxes. And the reason they would send exiled peoples back to their own lands was not just an altruistic reason. It was to serve the exchequer.

The more people they had back in their own places, working the land, and producing goods, the more revenue there would be for the government. That's just like today, isn't it? That's why authorities want to build more houses all over the place, not just because of the demand.

It's because, well, think of all the stamp duty. Think of all the council tax. That's why they want to increase unemployment. Yes, there's altruistic reasons in that, but think of all the extra income tax. That's what the governments are after.

But the world doesn't change. And the problem in 440 BC was that there was a famine that had put the food prices up. And so verse 2 tells us that working people were struggling to make ends meet.

And they were saying to Nehemiah, all this kingdom work, all this building of the walls, it's hurting our income. We can't afford food. And some of them, verse 3, were mortgaging their land and were in danger of losing their lands if they couldn't keep up their repayments, which is a hard thing to do in a famine because they had no yield on their crops.

[11 : 47] And some of them, verse 4, were even more stretched. They were already in debt right up to the hilt in order to pay taxes. And so they were being forced into debt slavery.

By the way, interest rates were not half of 1% or a quarter of 1% in BC 440. They were somewhere between 30 and 40%. Now do the calculations and you'll discover that that doubles your debt in just two years.

And verse 5 indicates because they'd already lost much of their land to creditors, they had no way of raising income from their land to get cash.

And all that was left was to put their children into slavery, a dreadful situation. And so as often happens, actually, in church life today, the needs of a kingdom-building project exposes long-standing issues and real spiritual issues that have been hidden in the life of God's people.

All the blame gets hung on this project and sometimes it is a building project or some other new initiative or some crisis in the work forced by kingdom needs. And people start saying, oh, this must be stopped.

[13 : 06] This is a great mistake. We're against this. Look at all the problems it's causing. But just like here, you see, it often isn't the kingdom project that it is a mistake, but rather that it has exposed and brought to light spiritual issues among God's people and sin which has not been previously confronted.

Why is the outcry in verse 1 against their Jewish brothers, against fellow members of the covenant community? Well, it's because if you look at verse 5, it was their own flesh and blood who were profiteering from this situation, exploiting misfortune in order to amass wealth for themselves through various loans and lend-lease agreements.

Now notice, it is not wrong or against God's law to lend to those who are in need, nor is it wrong to take security, collateral, in case people run off with your money.

God's not naive and God's law knows that it's providing for sinful people. In fact, if you read the law, it clearly allows for these sort of pledges to be made.

And in Deuteronomy 23, if you read that later, you'll see that it was even deemed a dignifying thing to take a pledge even from a very poor person so as not to demean them and mark them out as a mere charity case.

[14 : 27] God's law would never pauperize people into utter dependency. As so much of modern welfarism does with tragic results. Now loans to help someone in need were a good thing if they were managed rightly and sensitively.

But that's exactly the point here. The whole tenor of the law of God was to be compassionate, to bring help in situations of need and distress. Not to exploit one another.

God's people were to show to one another the grace and the kindness and the mercy and the generosity that God had shown to them. And so they were to be honest stewards of his grace to one another. They were to be fair administrators of his justice.

You just can't miss the repeated emphasis on that if you read the law of God. Just listen to a couple of things here from Exodus 22. You shall not mistreat any widow or fatherless child.

If you do mistreat them and they cry out to me, I will surely hear their cry and my wrath will burn. I will kill you with the sword and your wives shall become widows and your children fatherless.

[15 : 37] That's pretty clear. If you lend money to any one of my people with you who is poor, you shall not be like a money lender to him and you shall not exact interest from him.

Listen to this from Leviticus 25. If your brother becomes poor besides you and sells himself to you, you shall not make him serve as a slave.

He shall be with you as a hired servant and a sojourner. He shall serve you until the year of Jubilee. Then he shall go out from you, he and his children with him, and go back to his own clan and return to the possession of his fathers.

For they are my servants whom I brought out of the land of Egypt. They shall not be sold as slaves. You shall not rule over them ruthlessly, but you shall fear your God.

Now I could go on reading many, many passages like that. You see, there's great realism. This is a fallen world and there will be hard times, difficult times for people.

[16 : 37] And God's answer, by the way, note, is not sloth and passive welfarism. But it is help to work. It's help to support yourself in indentured labor.

We might say in less well-paid work that we might not want to do if situations were better. But the point is that those who provided that work were not to do so ruthlessly.

Not to exploit it for their own gain. And yet that is precisely what had been going on here in Nehemiah's time in a shameful way, in a callous way, in a selfish way.

And that's why Nehemiah is angry, verse 6. I was very angry when I heard this outcry in their words. Yes, they may well have been sticking absolutely within the letter of the law, but they were totally abandoning the spirit of God's law.

Just as Jesus accused the Pharisees of doing in his day, straining out gnats with great religiosity and legalism. Yes, great zeal, but swallowing camels of outrageous sinfulness all the time.

[17 : 45] And as Derek Kidner puts it, in hard times, legal rights to say nothing of wrongs can deal mortal blows. And so Nehemiah's anger is real because it's righteous anger.

Just like Jesus when he cleansed the temple of men who were keeping the letter of the law about all the temple sacrifices, but nevertheless were turning God's house of prayer into nothing more than the den of robbers.

A church full of all sorts of sound doctrine and correct practices, but no love for God's people or for God. This is Paul faced with the church in Corinth, a church full of so-called spiritual gifts, but no love.

And that meant it was as repulsive to God as the gongs and the symbols of those filthy pagan temples of idolatry in Corinth. And of course, Jesus says that our personal religion can be like that too.

Very proper on the outside, but utterly rotten and empty inside. Like the man in Matthew chapter 5, do you remember, who's on the way to the temple to offer sacrifices, and Jesus says, your heart's all wrong with your brother.

[18 : 56] Get that sorted out. That's what really matters. Otherwise, you're just a hypocrite. And God hates hypocrisy and sham, especially of the religious variety.

Let us love not in word and talk, says John the Apostle, but in deed and in truth. So here's a community of faiths, supposed to be a pillar and buttress of truth and godliness, a light to the world, but not only are some of them shirking and not doing their share of the work on the kingdom of God, but they're actually exploiting for personal gain some of those who are most engaged in laboring for the kingdom and its future influence in the world.

That's surely not something we'd ever want to be guilty of, is it? Because clearly, it makes God angry. And angry also all of those like Nehemiah who rightly share in his Holy Spirit of truth and righteousness.

Well, where does that anger lead? Well, verses 7 to 13 tell us that it led to the public confrontation of the community.

Nehemiah forces very courageously a great public confrontation because their conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel, with the covenant faith that they were called to obey.

[20 : 29] And so the whole future of that body of faith was in jeopardy. Just as it was when Paul had to similarly confront the Galatian church in exactly the same way.

Verse 7 shows us that Nehemiah was controlled. His anger was hot, but his head wasn't hot. But he was also courageous. He confronted the whole community together publicly as verse 7 describes to give the word of God censure by applying the truth of scripture to the whole congregation together.

And that of course is what the Bible is for, isn't it? The word of God. The Bible is not given to us for your quiet time, good though that may be. The Bible is principally a word of God for his entire community corporately.

But you see, it's when you do apply the word of God corporately like that to the whole congregation that you risk real fireworks. And that's why it needs courage.

It's very easy to preach and teach the Bible in such a way as to make just personal applications because people can hide from that. We're all treated as individuals. Nobody can see into our hearts. The person next to you doesn't know if this applies to you or not.

[21 : 43] You can just hide from it all. But if the word of God addresses issues that are issues that we all share in and we all know about and it's all confronted openly then there's no hiding, is there?

And the risk of outrage in that situation is very, very real. And all the more so if those being confronted involve well, leading, influential members of the community exactly as it did for Nehemiah here.

It was the nobles and the officials, the leaders of the people particularly in view. Now let me tell you in that sort of situation, the way of expediency will nearly always trump the way of principle, especially if your position and appointment depends upon those people.

It's one of the reasons why it's very hard to be a pastor who confronts sin in a fellowship that is entirely congregationally governed because if you offend people by God's words, then the deacons of the church can just turn around and sack you and shut you up, stop you offending.

But Nehemiah was courageous and devastating in his charge. You are acting like loan sharks, like unscrupulous profiteers against your fellow believers.

[23 : 02] That's what he's saying in verse 7. You are exacting interest. It's not the usual word there for interest in the law. It probably means you're lending on security, but you're doing it in such a way as to exploit and take advantage of the terms of that in order to accumulate land and wealth for yourself, to call in the loans when they can't be paid so that you get their land and all the produce and income from it and the victims are left with absolutely nothing.

Absolutely shameful. That sort of thing often happens in the world, doesn't it? It's like those who would corner the market for food and grain in a developing country perhaps, buying it all up in a famine and then selling it only to the highest bidder and when the highest bidder is a neighboring enemy country, your people starve but you profit as your enemies grow fat.

But here, it's like doing that to fellow believers in the church. So just imagine there's a widow in the congregation here who's got a lovely house, a house that I personally have always coveted when I visited.

But that widow becomes short of cash to pay her bills and just to pay her ordinary income. She's asset rich but income poor. So I say to her, well, I've got some savings and I think I can help you.

I'll lend you some money to sort it out. I know it'll be safe because we can have your house as a security and all will be well. Thank you so much, she says. That's just a wonderful answer to prayer. And we get a friendly lawyer to sign all the papers and all is properly done and everything's grand and she pays her bills and does her things and all the rest of it.

[24 : 40] And when I know that she just doesn't have much money left at all, I go and visit her again and I say, now, I'm afraid there's some bad news. You'll see this small print. It does say that I can call in the loan any time if I really have need of it and I'm afraid I've got need of that money now but I haven't got any money left.

Well, that's all right. I'll have your house. Thank you very much. And I move into the house and she's out in the street. It's unimaginable, isn't it?

At least I hope it's unimaginable. But that's what was going on here. That's the reality. And worse still, look at verses 8 and 9. Nehemiah had been buying back out of debt slavery fellow Jews who'd been sold to the Gentile neighbors.

And no doubt he'd been doing it with money that probably had raised from the whole community together. But some of these men were keeping that trade going by selling their own kith and kin into slavery.

And no doubt profiting from higher prices precisely because there was a ready market always to sell them back to Nehemiah and his people. That is surely a new level of utter heartlessness.

[25 : 55] And not only people trafficking fellow believers, but a classic example of privatizing profits while socializing the costs over the whole community as those perhaps with the least means were actually ending up subsidizing that whole operation.

Not only many not shouldering their share of the vital work of building for the kingdom of God, but profiteering shamelessly from those very people who are sacrificing the most for the sake of their labors for the Lord.

That's really dreadful, isn't it? And we can see that. And it's right that we're shocked. But let's not feel too shocked, too removed from that kind of situation.

Because if this is in the scriptures for our learning and our instruction, we have to ask ourselves, don't we? Is there a message? Is there a warning for the church today in a chapter like this? Because in every single church there are in fact those who do exploit brothers and sisters by not contributing as they should do to the work of the kingdom in terms of what they give, of their time, of their talents, of their money, things that we all promise to give when we become members of the church.

And the result of that is that others very often who have much less of all of these things are often left struggling to take the strain, aren't they? That's just a fact in nearly every Christian church.

[27 : 29] It's a financial fact in nearly every church that there are many who contribute little, that there are good many who contribute nothing at all in terms of financing the ministry.

While others, often with far less wealth themselves, give extraordinarily sacrificially to make up that shortfall. So what they're really doing is they are financing a higher standard of living for others who are consuming and receiving all the communal benefits of the body of Christ, but it's often being paid for by others who have far less than they have.

What would Nehemiah say about that? Or about people who want to have all the benefits of a congregation, all its services, all its events, all the fellowship, all the friendship and so on, but don't want to shoulder any of the responsibilities in terms of giving of their own time and energy to serve in the myriads of things that have to just be done day after day and week in, week out, just to make a church function and happen.

What about the kind of people who, when some sort of crisis erupts in their life, are very keen to have the church prayer meeting praying regularly for them and supporting them and visiting them and praying for them?

But wouldn't really ever think themselves of coming regularly to pray for others? They'll be part of a team that would visit others or help others in those situations. Or people who are very keen to receive hospitality from others in the church, but would never think of opening their own home or their own lives to give in that way to others.

[29 : 10] We could go on, couldn't we? See, perhaps the issues in this chapter are not quite so far removed from our own lives and the issues that face God's people today as we might first think.

And Nehemiah is very clear. Look at verse 9. That kind of thinking, that kind of action, he says, is not good. In other words, it's quite wrong. Ought you not to walk in the fear of God, he says? But they weren't.

And that's why Nehemiah has to do two things, which real application of God's word always does. It exposes sin and it evokes real repentance. So first, he exposes their sin, verse 9.

This is wrong. Everything he said in verses 7 to 9 displays a lack of awe and respect for God. Who, verse 13, says, God will shake out those who don't take him seriously, whether they call themselves Christian or not.

Because the honor of God's name is at stake, verse 9. They're exposing God to the taunts of those who hate him. I wonder if we ever think that about our own conduct, our own contribution, our own commitment to the life of Christ's church in this world.

[30 : 27] If we're not doing that properly, we're exploiting others. But not only that, we're shaming God's name in the world. But Nehemiah exposes their sin and therefore he demands real change, verse 10.

Abandon this behavior. Stop it. Verse 11. Give back everything that you have deprived your brothers of. Some people, by the way, think in verse 10 that Nehemiah is including himself in the sin, that he's giving a kind of mea culpa, that he's also been doing things wrongly.

I think actually it's the exact opposite of that. I think he's saying to them, there's a right way to do this like we are, without exploitation. That's what he was doing. And we'll see in verses 14 to 19, a clear example.

His spirit was very different. But notice the key point. He is saying that repentance, if it's real, means real and tangible change. As Jesus said in Luke 11, 28, blessed are those who hear the word of God and do it.

That was John the Baptist's message of repentance. Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. Not just talk, action. How do we know Zacchaeus was really converted and had truly repented later on in Luke's gospel?

[31 : 41] Well, obviously by what he does, he gives half of his wealth to the poor. He pays back four times over every single one. He's defrauded. That's why Jesus says salvation has come to this house today.

And everyone said, well, of course we can see it. And that's what Nehemiah is saying here. He's saying stop using God's kingdom and your part in it for yourselves.

And start putting all that you have at his feet to share in the progress of his kingdom. That's what real repentance is. And notice in verse 12, although they say we're quick to do it.

Yes, we'll do it. We will. Nehemiah is more of a realist than that. And so he makes them swear a solemn oath, a covenant, ensuring that they do fear God. Because God, he says, will call you to account.

He'll shake you up and shake you out if you think you can treat him lightly. There's no cheap grace in the real biblical gospel. Friends, we must never forget that. God means business.

[32 : 45] And the message, surely, to Nehemiah's first readers was absolutely plain. The only way of blessing for God's people is the way of obedient faith. Because there's no other kind of real faith.

So never presume upon the God of heaven. Disregard his ways and it will lead to disaster. Disaster for the community of faith. Disaster for the cause of the kingdom.

And disaster for you personally. He will shake you out. And friends, we only need to read the New Testament letters to see that God's message hasn't changed for the church today.

Just take Galatians, as I mentioned. It's just the same. Here's a church that believes or says it believes the truth of the gospel. But it's living in hypocrisy. Paul says, your conduct is out of step with the truth of the gospel.

Out of step with the Spirit of God. And Paul has to confront them publicly. Who stopped you from obeying the truth, he says. It's doing it for real that counts.

[33 : 49] Not saying it. If we live by the Spirit, we have to walk by the Spirit. It's got to be real. No sham. Not shamelessly living by the flesh. Just like the rest of the world.

That's not loving your neighbor as yourself, Paul says. That kind of selfishness, that kind of bowing and devouring one another will make you consume one another. I think the Apostle Paul would say to us, Nehemiah chapter 5.

Yes, indeed. So little has changed. Read my letters. Read 1 Corinthians 11. Read 1 Timothy 6. Read my brother James' letter in chapter 2 or chapter 5.

See what I mean. You need this chapter. And every church does. And we need to digest honestly the message of verses 7 to 13 here.

We need to ask honestly, does my heart and does my practice need to change? And we also need the encouragement of verses 14 to 19 which show us the path to change into a better way.

[34 : 58] To a way of selfless service that alone is the way that can overcome the enemy within. Because it shows us the personal cost of leadership, the kind that God honors.

Because Nehemiah bore very selflessly great personal cost for the sake of the good of God's people and for the sake of the building of his everlasting kingdom.

And you see, if any of us and indeed all of us want to lead others, and the New Testament tells us that we are all called to lead others, to lead one another in the way of Christ.

And of course, many of us have particular responsibilities in leadership, don't we? In our homes, in our marriage, in our family, in our fellowship group, in our Christian union, at a camp, or in leadership in the church.

But if any of us are to be able to give a lead to others in that way of righteousness, then we've got to be able to say with Paul, imitate me as I imitate Christ.

[35 : 59] That is, not serving myself, but serving so as to build others. We've got to be able to say with Paul, we endure everything rather than put any obstacle in the way of the gospel of Christ.

I've got to be able to say, I don't pursue any of my rights, but I make myself a servant to all that I might win many of them. We've got to be able to say, all things are lawful, but not all things build up.

So let none seek his own good, but that of his neighbor. Do all things for the glory of God. I don't seek my own advantage, but that of many, that they might be saved.

Be imitators of me as I am of Christ. And that's the message here, isn't it, in verses 14 to 19 from Nehemiah. It's an extract from his memoirs that's placed right here deliberately and forcibly to make the contrast with verses 7 to 13.

And we're told here for the first time that Nehemiah had actually been made the governor by the emperor. But notice verse 14. All the way through those 12 years, far from exploiting his position, he denied himself even his clear legal rights to the food allowance, to the salary of the governor.

[37 : 21] 40 shekels of silver a day, a very considerable sum, which would come from a levy on the people. He didn't take it. And as verse 16 says, he insisted also on making no profit, on acquiring no land by pressing for closure of the loans that he had made to people, because he really was doing it to help them and not to exploit them.

And furthermore, look at verses 17 and 18. He paid out of his own pocket for this vast horde of officials and his own countrymen, not to mention all of those who came back from the nations around, no doubt the slaves that he paid to liberate.

All of them, vast amounts of food and wine from his own pocket. No selfish taking. All selfless giving for God's people.

And for God's kingdom cause, verse 16. He and all his servants, notice, were hard at work, persevering on the work on this wall. Isn't that so like Paul in 1 Corinthians 9?

We've got the right to take a living from you for the gospel, but it's a right we have not made use of because we want no obstacle for the gospel of the kingdom of Christ.

[38 : 36] Because the work is so, so important for Paul and for Nehemiah. This one thing I do, says Paul, pressing on towards the goal in Christ Jesus.

This one thing I'm focused on, says Nehemiah, building this wall. All he cared about was God's kingdom, not this world's things.

God's praise, not the praise of men. That's why it's a total misunderstanding in verse 19 to think that somehow this is a pompous prayer from Nehemiah, so he's claiming merit from God.

It's nothing of the sort. He's just doing what Jesus says we should do in Matthew 6. He's saying not to do your good deeds before men for their praise, but for God's eyes and for his praise.

Because God does see and honor every true sacrifice that is made out of love for him and love for his people and his kingdom. You see what we're being told?

[39 : 38] This is real leadership in the Christian church because this is real living of the Christian life. How does Jesus put it? All God's commands are summed up by this one.

Love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength and your neighbor as yourself. Well, that's Nehemiah's faith in action. It's visible.

It's tangible. Why did he do all this? Because, verse 15, he feared God. He loved with real affection and real allegiance the true God, the holy God, the righteous God, the good God.

And therefore, verse 18, he loved God's people, his brothers and sisters. He wouldn't take that allowance because it would have hurt them.

And always when there's real faith, these two things go together. Fear of God, which is an essential part of love for the true God, the holy one of heaven.

[40 : 35] Fear of God defines our treatment of other people. And likewise, our treatment of others, especially our brothers and sisters in Christ, that demonstrates true love for God himself.

At least according to Jesus and his apostles. Whoever loves his brother abides in the light. Whoever hates his brother walks in darkness, says John.

He who doesn't love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he hasn't seen. So let us love not in word and talk, but in deed and truth.

It's what Nehemiah did, just like Paul. And his prayer is simply a cry to God to look into his heart and see where his heart really was.

Far from feeling confident and proud, I think it's very likely he felt very inadequate and lacked a lot of assurance because he prays that prayer again several times. Because I think he felt personally, greatly, the failings of God's people.

[41 : 42] Just because a leader like Nehemiah might be fearless and courageous and rock solid in public doesn't mean he didn't tremble inside. Doesn't mean he didn't think he was an utter failure. Doesn't mean he didn't feel responsible for all these mistakes and failures of the flock personally.

That's the prayer, isn't it, of a humble man crying out to the Lord, Lord, remember me. How different from the world's view of leadership.

Whereas verse 15 says, he used the position to lay heavy burdens on people. Even their servants, Nehemiah says, lorded it over the people. But not so with you, says the Lord Jesus Christ.

Whoever would be great among you must be your servant. Whoever would be first among you must be your slave. For even the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, even to give his life as a ransom for many.

And that's the real key, isn't it, to this story. Why are there such parallels between Nehemiah and the Apostle Paul and indeed between them and every other true servant of God?

[42 : 55] You read about from the Bible's beginning to its end. Think of Joseph. Think of Moses. Of Joshua. Samuel. All the rest. Well, it's because, of course, each one of them reflects and foreshadows the great servant, the Lord Jesus himself.

The one who loved his father and loved his brothers. And therefore came down to a community in painful and perilous circumstances, oppressed by the Romans, with even their own countrymen as tax collectors, putting them into penury.

But all that was as nothing compared to the far greater bondage to sin and to the devil himself. And he confronted his people publicly with the word of God, called them to repentance, called them back to fear of God and to love of one another.

But he himself personally bore the cost, not only to be an example to us, but to be a savior, to come and cleanse his people forever, to bring a restoration, a renewal that Nehemiah himself could never bring.

And so, yes, to leave us a perfect example, but far, far more. To give us a powerful enabling to follow him in his way as the servant king, who gave up all that was his to lift the burden that was too heavy for his people to bear.

[44 : 29] Do you see, friends, that is how we overcome the enemy within. It's as John saw in his vision in Revelation 12 of how every true believer overcomes the evil one.

They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they did not love their own lives, even to death. We overcome by Christ's sacrifice for us to redeem us from our sin and by our testimony to Christ's spirit within us, who renews us in his image, that we might also walk in the way of glad surrender, in the way of generous sacrifice for the sake of Christ's people and his kingdom and the honor of his name in this world.

That's how we will testify that we also belong to him, just as Nehemiah did, just as Paul did. So let's encourage one another to look to him and so to overcome every enemy within, within our own hearts and within our fellowship together.

Let's pray. By this we know, love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers.

But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against them, how does God's love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or talk, but in deed and truth.

[46 : 29] By this shall we know that we are of the truth and reassure our hearts before him. Heavenly Father, may this be true of our hearts, of every one of us and of all of us together as a body of your people here, may we love, not in word or talk, but in deed and in truth.

That your name may not be scorned, but held high and honored and recognized and loved in for Jesus' sake, amen.