

## **Responding to People Under Oppression Nehemiah 5**

In the past two months, I've been preaching about restoration and I've defined restoration as the good work that God is doing in our lives to make us more like Jesus. So the goal of restoration is becoming like Jesus in every way, and when you look at it like that, I think we all can see we have a ways to go – we're still in need of restoration and this is a process that will continue the rest of our lives.

Now, today in the book of Nehemiah we come upon an area of restoration where I think many of us need to grow. It's an area in which many Christians are not like Jesus yet, including me. And it's the area of how we respond to people who are being oppressed or treated unjustly. We are going to see an example of the oppression of a group of people in Jerusalem that has many similarities with what's happening right now in our nation with the outcry against racial injustice in the wake of the murder of George Floyd. We are face to face with people crying out because of oppression and as we seek to become more like Christ in this process of restoration, we need to learn how to respond to them.

We've all been pushed and pulled in many different ways by people, political groups, activist organizations, even our own emotions that are all telling us how we should respond and each of us has kind of settled into responding in a way that seems right to us. But we're all over the place in what that looks like and many of us have strayed away from how Jesus would respond and how the Bible would teach us to respond. And because of that we've offended each other, we've hurt each other, we've hurt our reputation and witness, and we've begun to create division in our church family. Some of you are very aware that this is happening and you're right in the middle of it, others have become part of it without even knowing.

So what we're going to do today is to look at what I believe is a biblical, Christ-like response to people who are crying out against injustice. Nehemiah is going to give us a wonderful example to follow. And by looking at what he did and what he didn't do, I am going to be pushing pretty hard against some of the things that people in East Lincoln have been doing. So I'm going to tell you up front that you may start to feel offended and upset and your mind will start spinning with arguments which will cause you to stop hearing what I have to say. I'm telling you that right now so you can be aware of when that starts happening and I ask you to

try to continue to listen. You can always go back and listen to this sermon again and think about arguments and counterpoints if you feel you need to. But for right now I just ask that you hear what I have to say through the end of this sermon before drowning me out.

I'm not going to pretend that I'm an expert on this subject. I have been learning a lot and I still have a lot to learn. But I also want you to consider that you too may have things to learn and room to grow. So let's humble ourselves together today before the Lord and ask the Holy Spirit to show us what we need to see as we turn to the Scriptures and learn from Nehemiah. In these first few verses we are introduced to the oppression that was happening in Jerusalem.

Read Nehemiah 5:1-5.

*Now there arose a great outcry of the people and of their wives against their Jewish brothers. <sup>2</sup> For there were those who said, "With our sons and our daughters, we are many. So let us get grain, that we may eat and keep alive." <sup>3</sup> There were also those who said, "We are mortgaging our fields, our vineyards, and our houses to get grain because of the famine." <sup>4</sup> And there were those who said, "We have borrowed money for the king's tax on our fields and our vineyards. <sup>5</sup> Now our flesh is as the flesh of our brothers, our children are as their children. Yet we are forcing our sons and our daughters to be slaves, and some of our daughters have already been enslaved, but it is not in our power to help it, for other men have our fields and our vineyards."*

So in the middle of the rebuilding of the walls things began to erupt within the city. There was a famine in the land that put a lot of the poor working class in a financial crisis. Things got to the point where they didn't have money to feed their children or pay their taxes. The Reformation Study Bible notes what they were supposed to do in times like that: *"a man who became poor could sell himself, along with his family, to a fellow Israelite in order to get back on his feet financially; he was to be treated as a hired worker, not as a slave."* So fellow Jews were supposed to work together when times were tough with the goal of helping the poor get back on their feet. They were expected to work and support themselves again, and the wealthy nobles and officials were supposed to hire them and treat them as hired workers. The goal was to restore financial stability.

But that's not at all what was happening in Jerusalem. The rich were deliberately taking advantage of the poor because of their desperate situation. Rather than

hiring them to work and make money, the rich forced the poor to borrow money from them and required them to put up their property as collateral and to pay interest. Then, when they couldn't pay their debts because of the famine, the rich would seize their property. And because they still needed money for food and taxes, the poor were forced to sell their children as slaves to the rich who were then bought and sold between the wealthy nobles and officials. So the poor were forced into this way of life in order to survive, and they were stuck. Some of them were slaves; some of them were free, but they no longer had property or a way of making money and they had no way out of their situation. This is an example of systemic injustice or systemic oppression. The system was corrupt and it favored the rich and oppressed the poor. It was a deplorable situation.

We have had a similar situation in our nation's history when it comes to our treatment of black people, which is why so many people have been crying out in protest. They're not the only ones that have been oppressed, but our oppression of the Black community has been particularly despicable and shocking. We purposely enslaved black people for generations and our legal system supported it. Our government supported it. Even Christians supported it and were slave owners. Much of our economy depended on it and our prosperity was built on it. It's deeply troubling to think about how slavery had such a central role in our nation's history, but it did.

Eventually enough people came to their senses and the Civil War took place and slavery was abolished, but even after that, there was terrible injustice against black people in our system. There were Vagrancy Laws in the South along with something called "Convict Leasing" that essentially put freed black people back into slavery, oftentimes with even worse conditions. Then came the Jim Crow Laws that legalized segregation and discrimination against black people for decades, well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Some of you were alive back then. Essentially the white law makers told the black community where they could go, where they could work, and where they could live. Because of the laws of our land, horrific hate crimes were committed against black people for decades, many of which were carried out or allowed by governing authorities, and in many cases nothing was done about it. The stories will make you cry and shudder with horror.

The Federal Housing Administration enacted discrimination policies that prohibited black people from buying homes in white neighborhoods. Then there was a practice known as "Redlining" where certain neighborhoods were deemed

too high a risk for banks to give mortgages to. Those neighborhoods were the ones the white lawmakers told black people they had to live, which meant black people couldn't buy homes, which meant they couldn't build wealth or achieve financial stability. So black communities were beset with poverty and drug abuse. Jails and prisons filled up with a much higher proportion of black people. Because of the poverty and segregation, public schools in black communities were grossly underfunded and couldn't provide black students with the opportunities they needed to get ahead. Legalized discrimination and crime against black people continued at least into the 1970's – that's during my lifetime.

Phil Vischer, who most of us know as the creator of Veggie Tales, shares the troubling statistic that the average black household in America today has one tenth the wealth as the average white household. Why is that? He reasons that it's because of historical racism in our system: *"We, the majority culture, told them where they could live and where they couldn't. Then we moved most of the jobs to the places we told them they couldn't live. When the predictable explosion of unemployment and poverty resulted in a predictable increase in drug use and crime, we criminalized the problem. As a result a white boy born in America today has a 1 in 23 chance of going to prison in his lifetime. For a black boy, it's 1 in 4. And that is why people are angry."*

Now, the laws and policies have changed, so racism isn't embedded in our system the same way it used to be. But that doesn't erase the horrific ways that black people were treated. It doesn't erase the repercussions of that mistreatment that are still very evident today in communities throughout our nation. And it doesn't mean that the discrimination and prejudice against black people is gone. There are still racist groups that are active today who discriminate and commit crimes against black people just because of the color of their skin. It is true that the same things happen to people from every race and it is true that oftentimes black people are discriminated against because of inappropriate behavior and not skin color, but it doesn't nullify these things. And because of the recent history of racial injustice in our system toward black people in particular, the ongoing discrimination feels especially painful and brings up all kinds of ugly memories, anger, and fear. That's why things have exploded as they have in recent weeks.

On May 25<sup>th</sup> when my family was enjoying a campfire in our back yard to celebrate Ayla's 8<sup>th</sup> birthday, George Floyd was dying on the street in Minneapolis. And when that video started circulating a volcano erupted across

our nation. Decades of racial oppression, injustice, pain, bitterness, and anger exploded to the surface. We have been seeing an oppressed people group crying out because of their history and the trauma they've been through and because there are still people who hate them and mistreat them because of the color of their skin. I'm not condoning looting and rioting in any way – those things are completely wrong – but I am hoping you can see why people are protesting and why racism is still such a huge issue even after all the good changes that have taken place.

People who have a long history of oppression cry out for justice because that's what oppressed people do. That's what the poor working class in Jerusalem did as you can see in the verses we read and that's what members of the Black community have been doing and are continuing to do.

The question then is this: How should we respond to them? How have you responded? Our responses have been all over the place. But there is a direction we all should go – we should learn how to become like Jesus in the way he responded to the cries of the oppressed. And in the rest of chapter 5, Nehemiah gives us a great example of that that should look like.

We're about to embark in some waters that may become offensive to some of you, so we're actually going to take a short time to pause for prayer. I'm hoping that during this time you will pray for the Holy Spirit to soften your heart so you can hear what he may be trying to say to you. The worship team is going to come up and play a song that reminds us of how desperately we need Jesus to pour out his grace on us. You can sing along if you like, but I also urge you to take some time humble yourself before the Lord, to open up your heart and invite him to speak to you. After this song we'll come back and finish the sermon...

SONG: Rock of Ages, Cleft for Me...

Let's look at how Nehemiah responded... The first thing Nehemiah did when he heard about the oppression of the poor was he got really angry. He was deeply bothered by what was happening because he actually took the time to listen and care. We see that in verse 6.

Read Nehemiah 5:6.

*<sup>6</sup>I was very angry when I heard their outcry and these words.*

Nehemiah became angry when he saw that there was a system and people in his city that were contributing to such deplorable practices against their own countrymen. He didn't ignore their cries of desperation even though he was incredibly busy with overseeing a massive building project – he listened; he cared.

It's easy if you're not the one being oppressed to ignore the suffering of those who are and go about your business. This is something I've been confronted with. I've got my own stuff to think about and there are so many people suffering in the world it can be easy to become callous and not care. But Nehemiah cared, and more importantly, Jesus cared. His ministry was primarily to people who were suffering and oppressed. He ministered to the rejects of society – the lepers, the blind, the lame, the beggars. He listened to and cared about women and children and the poor – those who had little value. He loved people who were despised because of their race, people like the Samaritan woman at the well. In story after story in the Gospels you see Jesus reaching out to the oppressed and if we are going to become like him, we're going to have to do that too.

There have been some things circulating on the internet that are trying to expose a scheme of Satan in our world that puts all the focus on fighting for justice and essentially ignores the Gospel that tells people of their sin and need of a Savior. These teachings rightly demonstrate that the fight for justice should never replace the message of the gospel like we see happening in so many churches, but they also treat justice as a practice of a new false religion with a leftist political agenda that we need to guard against. Fear is leading Christians to divorce justice from the gospel and it's completely going against who Jesus was. It's drowning out the cries of the oppressed and we need to watch out for it. Working to bring justice and mercy to people who are being oppressed was a foundational part of Jesus' ministry. It's a foundational part of the gospel. It's the way that we outwardly express the love and mercy that God has shown us by delivering us from the oppression of sin and it must go hand and hand with the proclamation of the Gospel if we are going to become like Jesus and reach people for him. So listen to the oppressed, care, and be angry.

The second thing that Nehemiah did was he did his homework and brought accurate charges against those who were guilty. We see that in verses 7-9.

Read Nehemiah 5:7-9.

*<sup>7</sup> 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 <sup>8</sup> 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 and could not find a word to say. <sup>9</sup> So I said, "The 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?"*

It says that Nehemiah sought counsel with himself. He did his homework. He didn't just make gut reactions based on partial, one-sided information. He did research to find out exactly what was going on and who was to blame. And once he did, he confronted the people who were guilty.

This exposes a huge problem we have. I think we all know that there's a lot of misinformation circulating out there related to the issue of racial oppression. There are a lot of half-truths, blatant lies, and politically biased information that leaves out many of the facts. And one of the things I see all the time on Facebook is that people are making gut reactions without looking into the credibility of what's being said and without understanding the issue as a whole. We mainly listen to things we like to hear that fit our perspective and political leanings and rather than doing research and getting the whole story, we believe what we hear and then we like, share, and post things on Facebook. We make all kinds of accusations against people based on partial, biased, and faulty information. It's incredibly divisive and hurting those who are crying out for help.

In our current situation, racism has been turned into a political issue. The left has primarily taken up the cause of the oppressed and because of that the right has ended up doing things to argue against or divert attention away from the cries of the Black community. It's incredibly political and I hope you can all see that. And it's terribly saddening because racial injustice and oppression isn't a political issue. It's a sin issue. The cries of the oppressed aren't the creation of a leftist political agenda. People in the black community aren't making this stuff up and they are trying to bring it to our attention.

Right here in Amery, I have friends who are black who have recently been screamed at, threatened, and called horribly offensive names just because they're black. This is our community and is happening to our friends. And when that

happens, they feel very afraid, vulnerable, and alone. They want people to be aware and they want people to support them and to care about what they're going through. They want things to change so that they aren't being mistreated anymore and so they don't have to be afraid.

But because of the influence of politics, we're drowning out their cries. Several people from East Lincoln tend to lean towards the right politically and we need to be very careful because oftentimes without realizing it we're drowning out the cries of those who are suffering by responding like our political party is responding. And it's not like Jesus at all. You may feel like you're fighting a battle to stand up against a leftist political ideology that frightens you, but in doing so you are drowning out cries for help from our black friends and brothers and sisters in Christ. We are abandoning them in their greatest time of need. I don't know how many posts I've seen on Facebook from people in our church that are either arguing against the people trying to cry out for help or diverting attention to another volatile issue or oppressed people group. This is where I think a lot of people don't know how hurtful and divisive they're being.

I realize the left is making white people and police officers feel guilty and racist even if they're not. I realize they have an agenda. I feel the pressure to have to hold a sign and become an activist for social justice or be labeled as being racist or violent. These things are wrong. But we have to be able to see beyond them and we have to be able to see beyond our political leanings when oppressed people are crying out for help. Jesus wasn't a Republican or a Democrat and if you're going to become like him in the way you respond to people under oppression you're going to have to leave politics behind.

Please delete, retract and stop liking, sharing, and posting things on Facebook that deny racism or argue against the cries of people in the Black community who are suffering. Please don't try to divert the attention to another issue or oppressed people group when you're responding to people crying out against black discrimination. Please don't respond by saying "Slavery has ended and none of us were there, so just get over it." That's incredibly callous. Please don't respond by saying, "But all lives matter." Of course they do, but when black people are crying out and hoping that someone is listening, saying that is incredibly insensitive and hurtful. It's not what Christ would do; it's what a political party is teaching you to do.



If you want simple proof to show you that you may have gotten sucked into the politics in this matter, think about how you respond to abortion. If a baby in the womb is afraid of being aborted and cries out “My life matters,” you would never respond by saying “All lives matter.” You would never argue with them and say they’re overreacting. You would never deflect the attention in that moment to focus on a different group of people. You would say, “Yes, your life matters and I want to help you.” You would stand up for the oppressed. Do the same thing when it comes to people suffering from racial oppression. Don’t follow your political party. In fact I hope this helps us see that there are terribly sinful practices in both major political parties and we need to become far less devoted to them and far more devoted to Jesus.

Nehemiah did his homework and got accurate information and because of that he was able to confront the people who were actually guilty. Instead of casting blame on all kinds of people who aren’t really guilty in our current situation we need to get accurate information and confront people who are. We should not allow people to get away with deplorable behavior against the vulnerable. We need to confront them stand up for those who are oppressed. At a community level this might mean joining a peaceful protest with those that have been oppressed. I know that idea can be difficult for some of us to swallow because of all the politics involved and because of the actions of some protesters, but there’s nothing wrong with standing together with the oppressed. Treat it like a pro-life rally or march. Or this might be at more of a personal level if you see someone treating another person in a harmful or hateful way. As followers of Christ we should confront that person and that kind of behavior and show personal support for the one being oppressed.

The third thing Nehemiah did was he led the way in calling the people to repent. We see this in verses 10-13.

Read Nehemiah 5:10-13.

*<sup>10</sup> Moreover, I and my brothers and my servants are lending them money and grain. Let us abandon this exacting of interest. <sup>11</sup> Return to them this very day their fields, their vineyards, their olive orchards, and their houses, and the percentage of money, grain, wine, and oil that you have been exacting from them.” <sup>12</sup> Then they said, “We will restore these and require nothing from them. We will do as you say.” And I called the priests and made them swear to do as they had promised. <sup>13</sup> 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 praised the Lord. And the people did as they had promised.*

Nehemiah realized that something he and his associates were doing was actually part of the unjust system that was keeping the poor in bondage. So he repented and led others to do the same. They made immediate changes to their behavior and the system and put policies in place so that it wouldn't happen again.

If you've done anything to contribute to racial oppression you need to lead the way in repentance. I've already mentioned several behaviors that often take place on Facebook that you may need to repent of. Or, if you've taken advantage of someone and benefitted because of their oppression, you need to stop doing whatever it is you're doing and make things right. Thankfully the laws have been changed in our land and things are much different than the way they were. But there are still ways we take advantage of people and manipulate situations based on our biases and prejudices. Allow God to search your heart. If you've shown favoritism or discrimination toward someone because of the color of their skin, if you've given or withheld something or manipulated a situation against someone or in your favor because of race, you need to repent. You need to try to do whatever you can do to make it right. And if you see someone else doing the same thing, you need to call them to repent as well.

Nehemiah made drastic changes in his personal life and to the system that he was a part of to make sure he didn't contribute to the oppression ever again. And that's what we read in the last few verses.

Read Nehemiah 5:14-19.

*<sup>14</sup> 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 Artaxerxes the king, twelve years, neither I nor my brothers ate the food allowance of the governor. <sup>15</sup> The former governors who were before me laid heavy burdens on the people and took from them for their daily ration forty shekels of silver. Even their servants lorded it over the people. But I did not do so, because of the fear of God. <sup>16</sup> I also persevered in the work on this wall, and we acquired no land, and all my servants were gathered there for the work. <sup>17</sup> Moreover, there were at my table 150 men, Jews and officials, besides those who came to us from the nations that were around us. <sup>18</sup> Now what was prepared at my expense for each day was*

*one ox and six choice sheep and birds, and every ten 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. <sup>19</sup> Remember for my good, O my God, all that I have done for this people.*

Nehemiah made great personal sacrifices and gave up things he could have had in an unjust system, because he decided to follow the ways of the Lord and not the ways of man.

What is Christ calling you to do today? God wants to bring restoration in this area of our lives. I know I may have offended people this morning, but I hope you've been able to hear if God is speaking to your heart. He wants us to become more and more like Jesus in every way and when it comes to showing justice and mercy to the oppressed we all probably have room to grow. Look at how Nehemiah responded. Look at how Jesus acted and ask yourself: Am I becoming like him in this area? That's what this is all about. That's how we experience restoration and that's how we move forward together as a church. Stand up for the oppressed. Stand up for police officers. Stand up for the unborn. And stand up for your friends in the Black community.