

4

PROTECT



Who do you know who always delivers on what they say?

QUESTION #1

THE POINT

As Christians, we cannot separate who we are from what we do.



THE BIBLE MEETS LIFE

Year after year, Coach Joe Hendrickson pulled out his Bible and told his team about the gospel of Jesus Christ. They say football coaches in public high school are not supposed to do that, but Coach Hendrickson was going to share the gospel no matter what the cost.

This was over forty years ago, and my father was one of his players. He accepted Christ because Coach Hendrickson was willing to live out his faith consistently. He was a coach in a tiny south Alabama town, and he had no idea he would impact the kingdom simply by living a consistent faith. I never met Coach Hendrickson, but he had a personal impact on me. He shared Jesus with my dad, who in turn shared Jesus with me.

Coach Hendrickson “protected” his walk with Christ; he lived a consistent faith. Nehemiah had to hold those individuals building the wall in Jerusalem to the same truth: to honor God by living out a consistent faith. As Christians, we cannot separate who we are from what we do. We can protect our own walk with Christ as we live for Him every day.

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?

Nehemiah 5:1-5

¹ Now there arose a great outcry of the people and of their wives against their Jewish brothers. ² 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." ³ There were also those who said, "We are mortgaging our fields, our vineyards, and our houses to get grain because of the famine." ⁴ And there were those who said, "We have borrowed money for the king's tax on our fields and our vineyards. ⁵ 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."

The people were rebuilding the wall, and Nehemiah's plan was working. Everything appeared in order, but a serious problem threatened the work and the workers. In the previous session, we saw the Jews were facing a threat from outside opposition. But now we see a problem that surfaced from the inside.

The people faced a two-fold challenge: (1) many of the workers were pulled from their farms to help with the rebuilding; and (2) a famine had hit the region. Grain prices skyrocketed as agriculture came to a grinding halt. The workers were forced to mortgage their properties to pay the inflated grain prices and the king's taxes on land.

The workers had begun the rebuilding effort on faith. They saw the need to do the work, and they left their businesses and farms to work on the wall for six weeks. (See 6:15.) The times were tough enough with the famine, but the high interest and debt they were experiencing at the hands of their fellow Jews made life extremely difficult. Some of them were even forced to sell their children into slavery. It was a devastating situation that brought a heart-rending cry: "It is not in our power."

Where do you see examples of hardship and injustice in today's culture?

QUESTION #2

"A great outcry" arose among the people. They were not complaining about the threat from their enemies, but "against their Jewish brothers." A few of the Jewish leaders had taken advantage of the people, and the leaders knew better. The law commanded not to take advantage of each other.

"You shall not charge interest on loans to your brother, interest on money, interest on food, interest on anything that is lent for interest. You may charge a foreigner interest, but you may not charge your brother interest, that the LORD your God may bless you in all that you undertake in the land that you are entering to take possession of it" (Deut. 23:19-20).

Nehemiah 5:6-11

⁶ I was very angry when I heard their outcry and these words. ⁷ 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 ⁸ 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. ⁹ 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? ¹⁰ Moreover, I and my brothers and my servants are lending them money and grain. Let us abandon this exacting of interest. ¹¹ 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."

Famine and high interest rates were crushing the financial stability of the people. Like retailers who price gouge during a natural disaster or humanitarian crisis, the leaders were "working" the system and benefiting greatly from the dire situation.

What kinds of things can hinder a church's witness in the community?

QUESTION #3



But Nehemiah would not let this remain the status quo, and he responded three ways.

- 1. Nehemiah responded *emotionally with anger*.** More to the point he “was very angry.” Nehemiah experienced righteous indignation because of the injustice being done to God’s people.
- 2. Nehemiah responded *thoughtfully*.** He gave the matter serious consideration. This response was one of the mind. Instead of hastily succumbing to his emotions, Nehemiah took time to think about a legitimate solution.
- 3. Nehemiah responded *willfully*.** His emotions and thoughts became actions when he called the leaders into a meeting and accused them of taking advantage of the people. He reminded them they should fear God and counseled them to return all the property and goods back to the people immediately, which they agreed to do.

Nehemiah took responsibility to ensure he did what was right, and he expected the other leaders to do the same. In the same way, we are to “walk in the fear of our God,” an attitude that honors Him. Doing the right thing is more than just stopping the wrong we are doing in the present; it is also correcting past wrongs.

Ideally, we are to treat one another the way Christ has treated us.

Nehemiah 5:12-13

¹² 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. ¹³ 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.

As we’ve seen, the focus of the Book of Nehemiah is the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem. But what good are beautiful walls

surrounding a reconstructed city if the people inside the walls are destroying each other? They were sinning—and they needed to repent. Repentance involves more than just words; it involves action and change. The leaders repented so God changed hearts and returned the people to a lifestyle that gave Him honor. God works in our lives the same way when we repent.

- ▶ **Repentance calls sin what it is: sin.** We often attempt to relabel our sin as a blunder, error, mistake, or weakness, but we’re fooling ourselves. Repentance means we see what we’ve done as exactly what it is: *sin*.
- ▶ **Repentance acknowledges what we’ve done against God.** When we sin, it is against God, not just against society or another person. Sin—any sin—is taking control of our lives, control that belongs to the lordship of Christ.
- ▶ **Repentance means change.** Repentance is not self-pity. A person wallowing in self-pity is only sorry because of the consequences, like a stubborn mule being kicked and tugged. Repentance includes remorse over the sin itself and real grief over the sin because we have offended God.
- ▶ **Repentance is a way of life.** When we repent, we not only admit we did wrong, we also demonstrate an understanding of *why* we sinned. We are sinners prone to sin. We must consistently uncover our sin before God so that He can cover us with His forgiveness.

How would you define “repentance” for someone who’s never heard of it?

QUESTION #4

What role can our group play in protecting and advancing our witness for Christ in the community?

QUESTION #5

ONE-ANOTHERING

Some New Testament "one anothering" passages offer solutions for issues like the ones Nehemiah encountered in Jerusalem. Complete the following statements:

Live in _____ with one another (Rom. 15:5).

Bear one another's _____ (Gal. 6:2).

Be _____ to one another (Eph. 4:32).

Have the same _____ for one another (1 Cor. 12:25).

Have unity of mind, sympathy, _____ (1 Pet. 3:8).

_____ one another (1 John 4:11).

Which of these statements that relate to love do you find most challenging? Why?

"If you take care of yourself and walk with integrity, you may be confident that God will deal with those who sin against you!"

—WARREN WIERSBE

LIVE IT OUT

What you believe is seen in your actions. How will your actions reflect your walk with Christ?

- ▶ **Reflect.** Reflect on times you have been selfish. Think how your view of God will help you become more selfless.
- ▶ **Repent.** Confess and repent of any sin in your life. Be specific and ask God to help you develop a lifestyle of repentance.
- ▶ **Restore.** Identify someone you have used for your own advantage. Ask for forgiveness. Work to restore the relationship by doing something sacrificial for this person.



Faith is not meant to be part-time, but full-time, touching every area of life. We must give all we are to God, not just part. Let's use every day as an opportunity to live out what we believe about God.

My thoughts