

Recently I was out doing a bunch of errands. I had a lot on my list so I was in a rush. As I drove to do my next errand, I saw a woman walking through a parking lot. I noticed that she had an unusual walk. I wondered if she had a limp or injury. As I drove closer, I saw she struggled to even take a step. She swayed back and forth. She looked confused and uncertain. Then I noticed the liquor store right behind her. So I wondered if she was impaired. She just about fell on her next step. But I have errands to do. Others could help her if necessary, I reasoned. So I kept driving and checked my rearview mirror one more time to see if she was still standing which she was.

Then I started thinking, “Should I have pulled over and stopped? Should I have gotten out to try to help her? Yet, what would I do if she was drunk?” I probably justified not stopping by thinking someone else will help her. Soon, I forgot about her as I went on to my next errand.

Have you ever done that? You see a person potentially in trouble. Yet you keep going about your day. Troubled and vulnerable people are everywhere, especially these days; like the unemployed; those with disabilities; The mentally ill; Physically ill; Those having financial problems; A classmate struggling in a subject; A fellow bus rider who finds it difficult to stand; Someone at the side of the road with a flat tire; A person living on the street; Those with devastating medical diagnoses for themselves or their loved ones; Those deeply indebted with a string of unexpected blows; The immune compromised; Those awaiting surgery; The lonely; The kid with no friends at school; Single parents; Widows/Widowers/Seniors; Those discriminated against because of skin color, race, gender or accent; The falsely accused; Those in troubled marriages; Parents with rebellious children just to name a few.

How do you feel when you hear about or see someone like that? We don’t have to look far. In fact, that list I just shared describes people in our congregation. They’re sitting near you right now. They stand beside you when you’re having coffee outside. Hopefully we feel some compassion, sympathy

and concern. That's a good start. But I have another question. How do you **respond** when you see or hear about a vulnerable person?

We might point out that we can't respond to every vulnerable person we see in need. We would spend all our time helping others to the neglect of our own responsibilities to family, work or school. But might we too quickly go down the path of excusing ourselves from helping? How can we respond in some small or big way to at least share another's burden?

We might think that helping vulnerable people is solely the responsibility of social services and various church ministries. But neglecting the vulnerable is hugely offensive to God. And it can hinder or stop His good work among His people. Lack of awareness and action about those in need can contribute to the breakdown of community – especially the community of God's people. Today we will see how this almost happened to God's good work rebuilding the wall in Jerusalem.

We have seen Nehemiah and many diverse people join together to do this work. We saw in chapter 3 a people working together in harmony and unity. Then in chapter 4 we saw them come together to face a common enemy. But all is not well behind the scenes in the community. The next section pulls back the curtain revealing shocking neglect of the vulnerable. We will see how Nehemiah responded to this news. Then we will see how we can gain the awareness and power to respond to the vulnerable in our lives. If you're feeling vulnerable today or in need, I pray you will be encouraged as we see God's heart.

Nehemiah 5 (ESV)

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

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.” 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.

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 Artaxerxes the king, 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 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. ¹⁶ I also persevered in the work on this wall, and we acquired no land, and all my servants were gathered there for the work. ¹⁷ Moreover, there were at my table 150 men, Jews and officials, besides those who came to us from the nations that were around us. ¹⁸ 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. ¹⁹ Remember for my good, O my God, all that I have done for this people.

The account begins with the problem. All is not well among the people. The workers and their wives cry out greatly against their Jewish brothers. Why? Basically wealthier Jews took advantage of common people. There was no middle class in that day. Just the 2 extremes. You had the wealthy few then everyone else living around the poverty line. So common people constantly struggled. But a combination of factors combined to push them to the very edge. In verse 2, those with big families did not have enough to eat. In verse 3, a famine worsened their situation. So they could not depend on their own crops for food. They had to buy food. But since they didn't have any money, they had to mortgage their fields, vineyards and houses for food. On top of that, the emperor still demanded payment for taxes. This required further borrowing and indebtedness. It got to the point where they had no resources left except their own children. So they would give up their sons and daughters as slaves. Since they couldn't

pay their debts with money or grain, they would pay with free labor by their children. This split up families and caused great sorrow.

On top of this, verse 5 hints at abuse towards the slaves. The text says, "Some of our daughters have already been enslaved." The word enslaved means not labor slavery but sex slavery. Wealthy Jews did this to their own people. It would be like wealthy people in our church taking advantage of the vulnerable in our church.

Nehemiah seems unaware of this problem until the outcry reaches him. Then he responds. I see five responses. How does Nehemiah respond to the outcry of the oppressed?

First, **he gets very angry. 5:6.** "I was very angry when I heard their outcry and these words." Now we know we need to be careful with anger. Out of control raging brings long lasting damage. But sometimes righteous anger can produce good results. Nehemiah could have shrugged his shoulders and kept driving to his next errand. But he took in this news and felt the injustice done to his people. Then, in the first half of verse 7, he takes counsel with himself or thinks carefully or ponders about this. It's almost like he channeled his anger into action. This led to his second response.

He publicly confronts the wealthy who gained at the expense of their brothers/sister. Nehemiah calls for a "great assembly" according to verse 7. He brings charges against the nobles and officials. They took extra profit from their fellow Jews. They continued this practice even if meant enslavement of their brothers and sisters. Nehemiah's presentation silences the nobles at the end of verse 8.

Then he appeals for them to respond out of fear of the Lord. He points them to their own faith and relationship with God. Verse 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?'" So Nehemiah gets very angry; he publicly confronts the offenders.

But then comes the surprising third response. **He humbly acknowledges his own contribution to this problem. 5:10** Verse 10 – "Moreover, I and my brothers and my servants are lending them money and grain. Let us abandon this exacting or taking of interest." So here we discover that Nehemiah

and his family are very wealthy themselves. They lent money and grain expecting repayment with interest. It is likely then that this was pretty common practice. Yet it seems Nehemiah missed the devastating effect all this had on the vulnerable. It shows that just because something is common practice, doesn't mean it's just. We can get caught up in oppressing others by going along with an oppressive system.

But Nehemiah not only acknowledges his own participation along with the others. He acts to resolve the injustice. **5:11-13 - He commands the wealthy to return the wealth gained from the impoverished.** He calls for a complete return of fields, vineyards, olive orchards, houses, and the interest. Though not mentioned, it likely involved a return of the enslaved sons and daughters. The nobles agree. In verse 12, they say, "We will restore these and require nothing from them. We will do as you say." This is complete amnesty. The wealthy they will give up their claims against their brothers and sisters. They say they will release them from the financial and family indebtedness.

But will they follow through? Nehemiah called them out in front of everyone. Of course you will say the right thing when everyone's watching. But it is one thing to say you'll forgive a debt. It's another to actually let it go after everyone disperses.

So he takes further steps to ensure compliance. At the end of verse 12 he makes this a formal or legal covenant. "And I called the priests and made them (the nobles and officials) swear to do as they had 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.'" That's putting some teeth behind the command. This is like a solemn covenant before the Lord and the people to ensure compliance of the nobles.

But will Nehemiah keep his word? **Response 5 - 5:14-18 - He displays excessive generosity towards those in financial difficulty.** In verses 14-18, we learn that the king of Persia appointed Nehemiah governor of the land of Judah. This included a massive daily allowance. The local people's wealth and crops normally provided this. The king imposed these taxes on the people for their governor and his own gain. But Nehemiah and his brothers refuse this allowance.

He also refused to collect the governor's tax which previous governors has collected. They taxed the people 40 shekels of silver a day which was a very high price for common people. And even the former governor's *servants* oppressed the people. But Nehemiah would not do this "because of his fear of God," in verse 15. His faith and love for God showed up in his behaviour. He also refused to acquire land from the common people. Nor did he expect them to do all the hard labor while he and his servants relaxed in the governor's household. He and his servants participated in the wall rebuild. He also personally paid 150 people a day. So Nehemiah was quite wealthy. But he used his wealth to keep the people and the project going. He refused to join in any further oppression of the people. Finally, he calls on the Lord to remember this good done on the people's behalf.

I would summarize Nehemiah's actions like this. **Because of his fear of the Lord, Nehemiah responds to the injustice committed by wealthier Jews profiting from vulnerable Jews.** Nehemiah's motivation comes from a healthy fear of the Lord. Verse 15. "But I did not do so, because of the fear of God."

Nehemiah response reflects God's heart. God sees us when we're vulnerable and poor. God has a heart for those in need. God calls His people, you and I, to adopt His heart for the vulnerable. Jesus assumed we would look after one another when in need. In Matthew 6:2-4 Jesus says "Thus when you give (not if you give) to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do . . . do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing so that your giving may be in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you." Or how about 1 John 3:17? "If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him?" Or James 2:14-17. ¹⁴What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? ¹⁵If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, ¹⁶and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled," without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? ¹⁷So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead."

Did you catch that? If we have material possessions, see our brother or sister in need and have no pity, it is questionable whether God's love resides in us. Or if we see someone poorly clothed or lacking in daily food and we don't give them the things needed, that lack of action calls our faith into question.

God reached out to us in mercy in our poverty. We were all spiritually poor and lost before we came to him. We lived in a state we could not free ourselves from. Yet God, in His great mercy provided a way to rescue us from spiritual death and poverty to life. As sinners, we did not deserve mercy. Yet because the Jesus' blood and sacrifice, we now enjoy spiritual riches. Like God adopted us into His family. God places us at His table. God blesses and protects us. God did all that when we were poor, so as God's spiritually rich children, we must respond in a similar way to the poor and vulnerable around us.

So here's how we can apply Nehemiah's example to our own lives today. **From the Lord's love, we can respond with compassion and generosity to the vulnerable.** From His love, we love others. This church needs to be a community where we look out for those vulnerable and support those in need. Out of the Lord's overflowing love for us, we can show love to others in a vulnerable state.

There are some legitimate concerns that arise with this call. What if the "vulnerable" are scamming or playing the system? There does need to be responsible stewardship of our resources. Injustice can go both ways. Misuse of funds or gifts given honestly is also an offense towards God. But if we've done our due diligence and a person still takes advantage of our generosity, we leave it between them and God. Another concern arises when a vulnerable person abuses those trying to help. I can think of many of you who has experienced this. My heart goes out to you. I want you to know it is legitimate and appropriate to set boundaries when needed. A great example of this occurred when the High Priest's officer struck Jesus. Jesus does not let him get away with that. John 18:22-23. Some things can let the anger or the abuse rail off of us. But when necessary it's ok to call such behaviour to account. So with these 2 concerns in mind, what steps can we take to respond with compassion and generosity towards the vulnerable?

Ask God to reveal any unhealthy heart attitude towards vulnerable brothers/sisters. We may not even know that we have an issue. Yet it may show up in when someone needs money or help and resentment or refusal is our response. God can change our hearts. But first we need awareness of what's in our heart regarding this. Psalm 139: 23-24 comes to mind. "Search me O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!"

Ask the Lord for a greater awareness to those in need around us. Nehemiah seemed unaware of the people's needs even though he worked beside some of them. Maybe the people you work beside have a great need that you can help with a little. So ask how they are doing. Ask the Lord for those around to open with their needs to you.

Act on that which the Lord calls you to. Yes, we can't do everything or help everyone. But we can respond to those the Lord lays on our heart. Stand up for someone vulnerable. Intervene when you see a stronger child oppressing a weaker child. Speak up and defend someone made fun of by the mean girl or boy. Help a vulnerable person with their home or job application or navigating the system.

Confess participation in something exploitive. **Confess not acting to help another.** There is the sin of omission. Sins of commission we commit or do. Sins of omission involve not doing something. James 4:17 states, "For whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin." Pay back any advantage taken from others.

Give - Time to help those in need. **Give Skill.** Serve on the board of a charitable society. Help out with maintenance for someone in need. Help out car problems. **Give Finances.** Your giving helps support our benevolent fund that assists those in need through tough times. Your giving supports Christmas hampers for families during the Advent seasons. Your giving supports an orphanage in Honduras. It supports a ministry in Brazil that takes kids off the street and helps raise them up. Our mission's team also supports families and children in Eastern Europe stuck in poverty.

Pray - Join the prayer chain to lift up others in need before the Lord.

Pray for another whom you know is in need. Maybe as you pray for others, the Spirit will prompt you to call them. Then you can pray with them over the phone.

Ask the Lord to reveal how your ministry or small group, friend group can reach out to and help the vulnerable.

There is great joy to be found in showing compassion and generosity to others. Jesus said, according to Acts 20:35 “It is more blessed to give than to receive.” Many of you have done this in many ways over the years of this church community’s life. So let us continue on this path of love and mutual support together through these days. Oh and about that woman that I drove past. Next time, I pray I am more sensitive to the Spirit to not to just feel something but to respond how He wants me to. Out of God’s love for us, let us respond with compassion and generosity to the vulnerable around us.