

## All In

### Nehemiah 5b

When we looked into the first part of this chapter, we saw that the people of God were in a desperate situation. They had some big economic problems – there was a famine, which made it hard to grow crops. But at the same time, they had to pay high taxes to the Persian government. As a result, many of them had had to mortgage their land or even sell their children into slavery.

But that wasn't the worst of it. No, what made Nehemiah really angry was when some of God's people were taking advantage of the poorest among them, charging interest on loans people needed just to put a crop in the ground, just to feed their families, just to survive.

It's a powerful story, if a sad one. And the lesson is obvious – if we really love our Christian brothers and sisters, we shouldn't treat them badly. We shouldn't say that we love our neighbors at the same time that we are stabbing them in the back. In short, we must reject the sin of hypocrisy.

So much is clear, but if that's the negative lesson, showing us what we should not do, then what's the positive lesson? How can we avoid hypocrisy not by what we leave undone but by what we do? If we know what not to do, how can we determine what should we do instead?

Well, one way to decide what's right and wrong is to appeal to the laws of our state. After all, Romans 13 tells us that rulers are supposed to punish the wicked and praise the good. So, we shouldn't be surprised that you can go to jail for bad things like murder and stealing. There are even laws against charging too much interest – certainly, Nehemiah would approve of that! At the same time, the government rewards people who make charitable contributions by giving them a tax break. And institutions that support the public welfare – hospitals, schools, churches – don't have to pay taxes at all. At least in this country, at least for now, trying to be a law-abiding citizen is a good guide for righteous living.

But that's not always the case. Some things that are legal are just not right. In this country, it was legal to keep people in slavery until 1865. Today, it is legal for adults to gamble and drink alcohol, but lots of people find those things addictive. And the Supreme Court has decreed that it is legal for two men to marry each other and that it is legal for mothers to kill their unborn babies. No, the laws of any human government are going to get some things wrong every now and then.

And Nehemiah seems to have decided that was the case for him. For in verse 14 we learn that the Persian king hadn't just sent Nehemiah back to Jerusalem as a contractor to rebuild its city wall. No, the king had appointed him as governor of the province. And from the dawn of time it has always been legal for governments to tax their people. But no matter how legal it was, Nehemiah still decided it wouldn't be the right thing to do.

Okay, so if we can't just appeal to what is legal to decide what's right and wrong, perhaps we could appeal to our rights. Our Revolutionary ancestors certainly did that, and to great effect. On my trip to Pennsylvania recently, I had the chance to visit Valley Forge for the first time. 12,000 Patriot soldiers stayed there for six months between December of 1777 and June of 1778. It was cold, and food and clothing were scarce. 2,000 of the men died of disease. And why did they go through all that, and go on to fight the rest of the war? Because they believed they had a right to self government.

But let's face it – every appeal to one's rights isn't in fact correct. These days, folks protest that their right to vote has been taken away if they are asked to show identification at the polls. Others who came into this country illegally say they have a right to stay here, and even a right to receive all sorts of government benefits. And of course, as Congress prepares to vote on a new Supreme Court justice, there are all sorts of folks insisting that women have a right to kill their unborn children. Surely, every appeal to our rights isn't in agreement with God's will.

In the same way, Nehemiah had every right to ask the people to help support him as he administered the local government in the area around Jerusalem. And government was expensive, just as it is today. In Nehemiah's time, a governor had to set a table, providing support for the officials who served under him. He also had to provide hospitality for Persian officials from other areas who were traveling through as well as for foreign dignitaries. In fact, he had to support over 150 people every day. Surely he had a right to get some help from the people of the land. But Nehemiah chose not to exercise that right. He didn't think taxing the people was what God wanted him to do.

Well, if we can't appeal to what is legal or to our rights, how can we know what we should do? Let's face it, we Presbyterians often look to tradition. "We've always done it that way," often carries more weight than any subtle theological argument ever could. For everything from what we should wear to church to where we should put the rolls on the table for a covered dish supper, tradition tends to rule the day.

And Nehemiah could have looked to tradition to justify levying taxes on the people of the land. For not only were such taxes legal, and not only did his office give him the right to levy taxes, verse 15 makes it plain that all the former governors had been chargeable unto the people – that means they levied taxes on their bread and wine and even their cash. So, surely the people would have expected such local taxes to continue. Surely they wouldn't have thought any less of Nehemiah if he had just gone along with tradition. But Nehemiah still wouldn't do it. He wouldn't tax the people no matter how legal it was, no matter how traditional it was, and no matter how much of a right he had to the tax money. He just wouldn't do it.

Okay, so if Nehemiah wasn't going to make decisions based on what was legal, or based on what his rights were, or based on tradition, how did he decide what to do? Well, in order to answer that, let's first take a look at what Nehemiah did.

We already know he refused to tax the people. But that necessarily meant that he himself had to pay for the running of the local government. That meant he himself had to support the daily needs of 150 people pretty much out of his own pocket. Now, that's not to say Nehemiah wasn't up to the task. For all we know, he may have been drawing a fat salary from the king. Or he may have saved up some money during the time he was a prominent official at the Persian court, serving as cupbearer to the king. But it does mean that he was willing to raid whatever income and savings he had, he was willing to assume what had to be a substantial financial burden so that others could have some relief.

But that's not all. For at the same time, verse 16 makes clear that he passed up lots of opportunities to make the kind of money he doubtless needed to support all those officials. He could have purchased land and engaged in farming or ranching – again, it would have been legal and he had every right to do so. But instead, he directed his personal servants to devote themselves to building the

wall around Jerusalem – those men who could have generated income for him thus turned into yet more people he himself had to support.

In short, he chose not to make more money at the same time that he was spending whatever he had to pay for the government, just so that the city wall could be built and so that the people wouldn't have to pay more taxes. Was he just nuts to do this?

Well, before we judge Nehemiah too harshly, let's turn our attention back to Valley Forge. General Washington was one of the richest men in America, owning thousands of acres and hundreds of slaves, and yet he and his wife chose to spend a winter in one small room in a Pennsylvania farmhouse so he could encourage his soldiers. Was Washington nuts? How about the Marquis de Lafayette, a French nobleman of great wealth. He was so determined to get to America to fight that he bought his own ship to cross the Atlantic and offered to serve in the Patriot army without pay. Was he nuts too? And then of course there were all the regular joes, who chose to live for six months in log huts while the British army was partying every night in nearby Philadelphia. They could have just gone back to their farms and their firesides, but instead chose to endure hours of daily drill, supervised by another European who threw his lot in with the colonists, Baron von Steuben. Surely, if we should admire these men's dedication to freedom, Nehemiah deserves some credit too.

Okay, so why wouldn't Nehemiah levy taxes on the people? Why was he willing to spend his own money on public affairs? He gives us two reasons: In verse 15, he points to the fear of God. That means that, somehow, he thought that God wanted him to put the building of the city wall ahead of making money for himself. And so he put God's will first in his life, even ahead of his own economic self-interest.

And isn't that really the sort of thing Jesus told His disciples in our responsive reading as well? Doesn't Jesus want us to have the same priorities? "If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his life shall lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel's shall save it." Nehemiah may not have been asked to give up his life, but he certainly thought God wanted him to give up his cushy government job back in Persia and most if not all of his savings. He went all in for God because he knew it wouldn't do him any good to cling to all his wealth and influence if he lost his own soul in the process.

And if we want to follow Jesus, we have to be willing to do the same thing. After all, in our responsive reading, when Peter urged Jesus to avoid the painful and shameful death of the cross, Jesus called him Satan. Jesus said such a desire for self-preservation necessarily meant losing focus on God's will. In short, we can't escape the conclusion that for us to do God's will in this sinful world means we have to engage in self-sacrifice of some sort. We can't love the Lord our God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength while we are still holding out on Him. Just so, for Nehemiah, loving God meant going all in, putting the building of the city walls ahead of his own financial self-interest.

But how could he have been so sure God wanted him to pay all those government expenses? He tells us in verse 18. He knew that the people were already having a tough time making ends meet. He knew they were already being heavily taxed by the Persians. That's why he didn't want to add to their burdens with more taxes of his own. He was willing to suffer himself so that others could have some relief.

And isn't that really what love for our neighbors means? I mean, if we know someone has a need and if we know we can meet that need, can we really claim to love him if we try to keep our time, talent or treasure to ourselves? And can we really claim to love God while we are holding out on God's people?

Now, the exact nature of the sacrifices God is calling each of us to make will doubtless be different. We don't all have the same daily time commitments, and we certainly don't all have the same amount of money in our bank accounts. But just as those men at Valley Forge were willing to risk everything for freedom, God calls us to put everything we are and everything we have on the line for Him and for others. That's what Nehemiah did in today's passage. And that's what Jesus did for all of us on the cross. Because that's what it really means to obey the Great Commandment. In this world, you can't love without sacrifice. And real love is never satisfied with half-measures.

So, Christians, are we willing to go all in for God? Are we willing to go all in for others? Or will we cling to the things of this world, will we cling to life itself, and lose everything?