

Sermon #1536

Title: Holy Conflict

Text: Nehemiah 5

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Series: Nehemiah

INTRODUCTION → Welcome to The Creek.

If there were a single word that describes life in our culture, that word could easily be **conflict**. Conflict abounds in Washington, D.C. and across our country between political parties, between people of different ethnicities, social backgrounds and more. Not only is there conflict in the White House, in the State House, there's even conflict in God's House – the Church.

It started as a simple survey on Twitter, but once the question was put out on Twitter, a tsunami-sized response flooded the internet. The survey was about church fights, and some of the causes of actual church fights are hard to believe. One church fought over the appropriate length of the pastor's beard, while another church fought over the new policy that ministers on its staff could not have any facial hair at all. One church split because some people demanded the worship minister wear shoes on stage while other church members felt he could be barefoot. One fight was over whether to use some excess land for a children's playground or to sell it for a cemetery. [Source: Thom Rainer] Back in the 1970s, a book was even written called **Great Church Fights**, describing how Christians in different churches would go after each other – and all in the name of Jesus.

Pastor and author, J. Vernon McGee, said, "In the history of the church we have seen that when the devil could not destroy the church by persecution, the next thing he did was to join it!" [Source: **Ezra, Nehemiah, & Esther**, p. 117] A worship song became popular in the 1960s that declares, "They'll know we are Christians by our love." Really? Why don't we try that sometime? All too often, people far from God know that we are Christians by the way we fight with one another.

Whether we care to admit it or not, life is full of conflict internationally, nationally and locally between political parties, business rivals, sports teams, even in the family—especially the in-laws. Everywhere we turn, we run into conflict—and one such place is in the church, the body of Christ. If ever there was a place to find unity and peace, we would hope to find it IN the church. Yet, that is far from reality. Today, we find *both help and hope* in dealing with conflict from our journey in Nehemiah.

Here's why I would want to just more than listen to the Word today. I would want to *lean in* to the Word because it reveals **three** distinct ways to deal with conflict when it comes – and be assured – it will come. To help us remember these **three** distinct ways to resolve conflict, I'm going to use the initials of our church as a memory tool: I.C.C.C. "I" personally, individually must be involved in this process. Most people do not like conflict. For a majority of people, it's "flight over fight." We must remember that in His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus called us to be peace-makers, saying, "Blessed are the peace-makers for they will be called sons and daughters

of God.” We resemble God, our Father, when we deliberately, intentionally make peace with others—and it doesn’t demand that we fight.

Context Before Content

Today, we come to chapter five in the book of Nehemiah. We have been learning of the tremendous impact that Nehemiah had thousands of years ago, and of the impact we can have today and in the future.

If you’re new to us this weekend, Nehemiah was an ordinary guy through whom God did the extra-ordinary. Nehemiah was working as a butler (i.e., cupbearer) —of sorts—to the king of Persia when he became deeply broken for the broken condition of his homeland and its capital city, Jerusalem. Jerusalem was conquered and destroyed decades previous, including its walls and gates, which were a city’s pride and protection. The higher and thicker a city’s walls, the safer and more secure the residents of the city would feel. With a call on his life, Nehemiah turned in his resignation, moved several hundreds of miles to Jerusalem, and began a construction feat that would strike fear within the strongest of people. Yet, with God’s provision and protection, Nehemiah led with bold, unstoppable courage.

Now, as Dan has pointed out in previous weeks, Nehemiah experienced some strong opposition. Enemies of the Jews quickly made themselves known, and they became more than just a thorn in Nehemiah’s side. Two henchmen, Sanballat and Tobiah, did everything within their power and sphere of influence to bring both fear and failure to the job site. But, here’s where it gets dicey – there wasn’t just trouble coming from the outside. A heap of trouble came from the inside—from God’s people. And nothing has changed for thousands of years. Conflict comes against us from outside of the Church. The kingdom of darkness is doing all that it can to “kill, steal and destroy” the work of God in the Church. But, we must admit that far too often, trouble comes from inside the Church. Church folk fight and fume with one another. Christians walk all over one another, wounding fellow believers. Conflict is as real in the church house as it is in the White House, the State House, and in your house and mine. When people are in conflict—or they try to resolve conflict—people typically become angry and defensive. People move on and out of a relationship, a friendship, divorces are filed, families are divided. People quit a job, move to a new school, buy a new house, lease a different apartment, even find a new church. We need to engage the Word today because our world is in the midst of indescribable conflict.

It’s probable that this conflict took place *while* Nehemiah and the Israelites were building the wall, and that he wrote this book of the Bible years later when serving as governor for the second and last time. This is an historical account of what happened, and towards the end of this chapter (vv. 14 – 19), Nehemiah recalled how he served God with a selfless and generous spirit. So then, the work came to a halt. The workers went on strike because of a serious problem and Nehemiah had to deal decisively with the conflict at hand; and maybe we have conflict to resolve in our own lives. Let’s listen in and learn how to do so. There’s the context; now for the content.

Nehemiah 5:1-5

Now the men and their wives raised a great outcry against their Jewish brothers. Some were saying, "We and our sons and daughters are numerous; in order for us to eat and stay alive, we must get grain." Others were saying, "We are mortgaging our fields, our vineyards and our homes to get grain during the famine." Still others were saying, "We have had to borrow money to pay the king's tax on our fields and vineyards. Although we are of the same flesh and blood as our countrymen and though our sons are as good as theirs, yet we have to subject our sons and daughters to slavery. Some of our daughters have already been enslaved, but we are powerless, because our fields and our vineyards belong to others."

C→Communicate

With the men doing intense construction work, they did not have time to work in their fields, which resulted in a serious food shortage. Moreover, there seems to have been a drought, which resulted in a famine in the land. Food was in high demand when supply was low. As a result, inflation sky-rocketed and people were spending money they did not have to buy food that they had to have and was hard to get. They borrowed against their homes, their farm fields, and vineyards. To make matters worse, they had to borrow money to pay the King's tax—the King of Persia and you did not want *his* IRS department knocking on your door to collect. To make matters even worse, the unthinkable happened. To pay their bills and to buy food to stay alive, people sold their children into slavery (i.e., debt slavery)—and to their very own people! Poor, hungry, starving Jews sold their children into slavery to rich Jews—Jews who exploited their own countrymen, taking advantage of them at every turn. This tragedy on the home front brought "the wives" into the conflict. In the verses that follow, we read that the rich Jews even charged exorbitant interest rates called usury. In the Old Testament era, interest rates were double—even triple—what they are today, so these loans were driven by greed and avarice, and they charged even more! Think of what we call "pay-day loans" in our culture. These rich Jews were gutless, heartless businessmen who put their interests above and beyond all others.

So, what do we learn from these first few verses about resolving conflict? We must...C for COMMUNICATE. Rather than allow the wrong to continue, we call it out. Rather than permit the conflict to simmer within us, we get it out on the table so that we can do something about it. Yet, we avoid doing so like a plague! Why? We don't like conflict! We'd rather live with it, hoping it just goes away rather than to communicate openly about it.

From time to time, I've reminded us that there are five levels of communication in our culture: 1) cliché (shallow conversation), 2) reporting facts, 3) sharing opinions (which opens us to the risk of rejection), 4) sharing feelings, and 5) complete honesty. Rarely will we go deeper into conversation because we do not like conflict. We don't want to be rejected by others. So, we fail to communicate, hoping the conflict will just go away. Too often, we gossip about the conflict to someone not involved. First and foremost, when someone has wronged you or me, we go to that person, just as Jesus instructed in Matthew 18:15. No one can deal with a problem unless that person knows there's a problem. A person cannot try to resolve a conflict

unless he or she knows there's a conflict. It's impossible to deal with a problem if we don't know there's a problem. C is for Communicate. Moving on...

Nehemiah 5:6-11

When I heard their outcry and these charges, I was very angry. I pondered them in my mind and then accused the nobles and officials. I told them, "You are exacting usury from your own countrymen!" So I called together a large meeting to deal with them and said: "As far as possible, we have bought back our Jewish brothers who were sold to the Gentiles. Now you are selling your brothers, only for them to be sold back to us!" They kept quiet, because they could find nothing to say. So I continued, "What you are doing is not right. Shouldn't you walk in the fear of our God to avoid the reproach of our Gentile enemies? I and my brothers and my men are also lending the people money and grain. But let the exacting of usury stop! Give back to them immediately their fields, vineyards, olive groves and houses, and also the usury you are charging them—the hundredth part of the money, grain, new wine and oil."

C→Correct

Think of how busy Nehemiah was – building a wall and setting its new gates in place in as rapid a time as possible. He had to make sure that supplies were on hand, supervisors were effective, threats from the outside were kept away—if anyone was working overtime, it was Nehemiah. Yet, Nehemiah *made time* to deal with conflict among the people of God. He didn't say, "I'll work on this once the wall is done." He corrected the conflict immediately and intentionally—and he did it in THREE biblical and practical ways. Three things stand out...

- First, Nehemiah was angry—and in a good way.
In vs. 6, we read that when Nehemiah heard of the abuse, he became angry—and in a good, righteous way. Nehemiah was angry at the serious conflict among the people of God. All too often, we become angry and in a wrong way. In Ephesians 4:26-27, we are told (by Paul), "In your anger, do not sin. Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry; do not give the devil a foothold." There's a way to be angry and not sinful. Until we are angry over what Satan is doing to divide us from one another, we will do nothing to right the wrong between one another, whether between spouses and others in the family or among friends. When greed drove the rich Jews to exploit their own friends and relatives, even to the point of enslaving them, Nehemiah became angry—and in a good way—about the conflict among them. Likewise, we should be angry about sin that destroys relationships within family and among friends. It is right to get angry about sins like greed, pornography, drug and alcohol abuse, child abuse, sexual immorality, and more. We will never CORRECT conflict until we get angry at Satan for what he is doing to divide us.
- Second, Nehemiah remained self-controlled.
In vs. 7, we read that he "pondered them (the accusations) in my mind..." Another way of saying this is that Nehemiah did not blow up! He did not fly into a rage! Once he heard of the abuse, he cooled off and *then* he spoke. James 1:19 states, "Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry." When Jesus turned over the tables of the money-changers, "he made a whip out of cords" (John 2:15).

Before Jesus exploded in righteous, good, right anger, he made a whip. How long did it take for Him to weave a whip? Not just a few seconds or moments, but long enough for Him to be self-controlled in His anger. When conflict comes between people—particularly those who are Christian, it is essential to practice self-control if we are to effectively CORRECT the conflict.

- Third, Nehemiah pursued private and public confrontation.

It would have been easy for Nehemiah to get angry, blow-up and then do nothing, but that wasn't what he did. In vs. 7, Nehemiah met with the nobles and officials first, and *then* he called together “a large meeting.” That sounds like the teaching of Jesus in Matthew 18, where Jesus said that if someone sins against us, we are to first go and confront that person in private, and if that person doesn't repent and apologize, we are to then take one or two witnesses with us; and if that person still doesn't repent and apologize, we are to then bring that person before the church (i.e., elders). Nehemiah followed a godly principle of conversation first in private and then in public. Friends, this speaks powerfully into our lives that we need to do life in community (i.e., life with one another) so that when we intentionally stray from godly living, there are people in our lives who will hold us accountable.

C→Commit

C for Communicate. C for Correct. Lastly, C for Commit. For conflict to be resolved, a commitment must be made—specifically, TWO commitments. Here's the first of the two.

Nehemiah 5:12-13

“We will give it back,” they said. “And we will not demand anything more from them. We will do as you say.” Then I summoned the priests and made the nobles and officials take an oath to do what they had promised. I also shook out the folds of my robe and said, “In this way may God shake out of their house and possessions every man who does not keep this promise. So may such a man be shaken out and emptied!” At this the whole assembly said, “Amen,” and praised the Lord. And the people did as they had promised.

Once the wealthy Jews had promised to repent and repay when they said, “we will give it back,” (v. 12), Nehemiah held these men *personally accountable*, and did so in two ways. He 1) called for *witnesses*, and 2) gave them a *warning*. Nehemiah “summoned the priests and made the nobles and officials take an oath.” This was pretty serious accountability because it was done with the witness of the priests, meaning in the sight of God. When called to the witness stand in a court of law, we raise our right hand and “solemnly swear to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth,” and in the “old days” we even said, “so help us God” while one of our hands was placed on a Bible. That practice was from Scripture passages like this when witnesses made an oath before God. The men who exploited others were held *personally accountable* for making restitution with witnesses and with a *warning*. Nehemiah shook out the folds of his garment. What does that mean? To keep a robe, a tunic, close to his body, a man often wrapped a sash around his waist, and in the folds of that sash, he would put objects, much in the same way we put things in our pockets. The dramatic image of Nehemiah shaking

out the folds of his robe represented God shaking out of His possession any of these men who do not live up to their promise. Nehemiah is declaring that if you are not accountable to resolving this conflict, may God reject you from His presence. What a warning!

Likewise, if we hope to correct conflict, we must to be committed to being held personally accountable. We must call others to help us follow through with whatever the plan of resolution happens to be. We must give people permission to hold our feet to the fire. Moreover, if we fail to resolve the conflict after promising to do so, we will not be on the best terms with God. There are painful spiritual consequences.

In the 1700s, a preacher named John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist faith, emphasized the need to live devout Christian lives. He led a society called “The Holy Club,” a movement of people who wanted to live in relationships marked with a true sense of accountability. Doing life in community meant helping hold one another accountable for their deepest values and most important decisions. Wesley called this: “watching over one another in love.” Before someone entered into this community, they would be asked a series of questions to see if they were serious about living in mutual accountability. For example: Does any sin, inward or outward, have dominion over you? Do you desire to be told of your faults, plainly and clearly? Just think of what it would be like to live in authentic community where we “watch over one another in love.”

And not only were they COMMITTED to being personally responsible, Nehemiah provided a *personal example*. As we check out the last verses of the chapter, Nehemiah is looking back over the years at how he led as governor. Verses 14-19 describes the *personal example* he was committed to set before the people.

Nehemiah 5:14-19

Moreover, from the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when I was appointed to be their governor in the land of Judah, until his thirty-second year—twelve years—neither I nor my brothers ate the food allotted to the governor. But the earlier governors—those preceding me—placed a heavy burden on the people and took forty shekels of silver from them in addition to food and wine. Their assistants also lorded it over the people. But out of reverence for God I did not act like that. Instead, I devoted myself to the work on this wall. All my men were assembled there for the work; we did not acquire any land. Furthermore, a hundred and fifty Jews and officials ate at my table, as well as those who came to us from the surrounding nations. Each day one ox, six choice sheep and some poultry were prepared for me, and every ten days an abundant supply of wine of all kinds. In spite of all this, I never demanded the food allotted to the governor, because the demands were heavy on these people. Remember me with favor, my God, for all I have done for these people.

Nehemiah was governor for more than twelve years, and during that time, he set a personal example of godly leadership for the people to follow. While building the wall, he and his officials did not buy land or pursue other initiatives (v. 16) as there was a wall to build as quickly

as possible. He set an example of focusing on the priority of the moment. He probably knew that land prices would jump as soon as the wall and gates were in place, and he could have made some great capital gains on real estate, but that wasn't his focus. Protecting the people was of greatest concern to him. Even though he could have demanded the people to put food on his table for many others, he did not take advantage of his position or power. He could have imposed taxes from the people to benefit his administration, but he did not do so. Nehemiah paid these expenses out of his own pocket. Why did he live this way? Simply put, Nehemiah feared God and cared for people who were being oppressed (vv. 15,18). Most importantly, Nehemiah was working for the Lord, wanting God's favor (v. 19).

Every conflict can be corrected if we will commit to putting others first out of reverence for God. Ephesians 5:21 states: "Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ." Our greater hope of correcting conflict comes when we fear God, having a reverence for Him, and for Jesus Christ. Only then do we find strength and resolve to submit to one another.

Summary

So then, here's Nehemiah's formula for resolving conflict in our lives: I + C + C + C. I must personally pursue resolving conflict, whether at home, at work, among friends, at church, wherever conflict abounds, I must personally pursue resolving conflict. That requires three essentials; that I **communicate**, I **correct** what's wrong and I **commit** to the making of peace.

Let's remember – we must *desire* this. We have to pursue peace. In His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus preached: "Blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called children of God" (Mt. 5:9). You are I resemble God, our Father, when we make peace with others. We are a chip off the old block, and the apple doesn't fall far from the tree when we live like God—the ultimate Peacemaker! Ephesians 4:3 states "make every effort to maintain unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." Make *every effort* to maintain unity. No gossip. No pitting person against person.

1 Peter 3:8-12

Finally, all of you, be like-minded, be sympathetic, love one another, be compassionate and humble. 9 Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult. On the contrary, repay evil with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing. 10 For, "Whoever would love life and see good days must keep their tongue from evil and their lips from deceitful speech. 11 They must turn from evil and do good; they must seek peace and pursue it. 12 For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and his ears are attentive to their prayer, but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil."

Peter reminded the people of God that a blessing awaits those who seek peace and pursue it (i.e., "so that you may inherit a blessing"). Who wouldn't want "to love life"? Who wouldn't want to "see good days"? To love life and see good days requires that we seek peace and pursue it. Period.

INVITATION & COMMUNION BRIDGE:

Emphasize the love of God for Jesus at His baptism (“This is my Son, whom I love, with Him I am well pleased.”) Yet, Jesus hadn’t preached a sermon, performed a miracle, etc. He was simply loved by God, and God who doesn’t change, loves you and me *before or because* of what we do. God is the ultimate Peace-Maker. He has resolved all the conflict between us and Him that has been caused by sin in our lives. He has made peace with us by sending His Son, Jesus, to be our Prince of Peace.

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