CIC 10-11-26

Nehemiah Chapter 5-6

There is an old **French** saying, 'the perfect is the enemy of the good.'[1] It means that it is easy to **criticize** what is *not perfect* but <u>still good</u>.

For example, many people these days criticize the founders for their imperfections. But when the US Constitution was written (Philadelphia, 1787), there were large states and small states, free states and slave states, advocates of strong federal power and defenders of state sovereignty. The American states were deeply divided and clashed. But the resulting Constitution was good. It emerged through compromise, debate, and cooperation. Was it perfect? No, but they embraced the good even though it was not perfect.

Similarly, people can **hurt a good church** by pushing for what they believe is perfection. Christians have divergent ideas on …

- Music - hymns or contemporary.
- Vision - social-issues or discipleship.
- Focus - local community or the world.
- Sermons - topical or exegetical.
- Gifts of the Spirit - charismatic freedom or always controlled.

I could tell you stories about how **good people damaged** the *very churches they loved* by <u>demanding their way</u> or insisting on <u>influence</u>.

Some in this church can remember when **strong personalities clashed**. Satan used **pursuit of the perfect** at the <u>expense of the good</u> to steal, kill, destroy and divide.

The challenge that each one of us faces in God's family is do we **insist on our own way** *or do we* <u>sacrifice</u> for a shared mission.

That is exactly what **Nehemiah's generation faced**.

- When we **decided to focus on Ezra**-Nehemiah for this sermon series, we did not know how <u>practical and timely</u> the series would be.

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[1] Attributed to Voltaire.

- It is a **great example** of people *coming together* to accomplish something great – building the Temple and the wall.

Leadership is a major theme in the story. For example, last Sunday **Pastor Guy** highlighted the fact that there is always opposition when God's kingdom advances. **Nehemiah's leadership** ensured that the work on the wall continued despite opposition. 'The people worked with all their heart (Ne 4:6 NIV).' Pastor Guy encouraged us to …

- Persist over criticism with prayer.
- Persist over opposition with strategy - work it.
- Persist over discouragement with community – we need each other.

Today's story **picks up where we left off** last week and highlights community;

Community

Nehemiah 5-6



Welcome to CIC, it is a delight to be together today.

- Last Sunday **I was ill** and had to watch online. I appreciate technology, but worship is so much better in person.
- Our **Z6 Prayer Challenge** - what a great way to start the day.

Last week we saw that **tensions could not be higher** for the returnees from Persia.

- They **work hard** on the city wall and always **have swords** with them.
- They **wait for the trumpet** to warn them of an attack from the Samaritans.

But there is **another enemy** – one within the family of God: criticism and gossip.

- Selfishness, position-seeking, and gossip are among **Satan's main tools to destroy** our unity.
- There is a reason **Jesus' final prayer** for us was that we would be unified (Jn 17:21).
- The **golden glue** that holds God's community together is love: 'If you love one another … everyone will know that you are my disciples (Jn 13:35 NIV).'
- We rebuild God's community when we sacrifice together, love deeply, and refuse to be divided by personal agendas.

Most of the **men lived inside** the city and worked hard at building the wall. Nehemiah's greatest challenge was not the wall, but keeping God's people united while they built it.

Let's read …

1. The Complaint, 5:1-5.

'About this time some of the men and their wives raised a cry of protest against their fellow Jews. [2] They were saying, "We have such large families. We need more food to survive." [3] Others said, "We have mortgaged our fields, vineyards, and homes to get food during the famine." [4] And others said, "We have had to borrow money on our fields and vineyards to pay our taxes. [5] We belong to the same family as those who are wealthy, and our children are just like theirs. Yet we must sell our children into slavery just to get enough money to live. We have already sold some of our daughters, and we are helpless to do anything about it, for our fields and vineyards are already mortgaged to others (Ne 5:1-5 NLT).'"

Look at the issues.

- Need food.
- Famine.
- Men are working on the wall, not attending to the crops.
- Persian taxes were higher than Babylonian.
- Borrowed money.
- Sell their children to survive.

The **greatest threat** was <u>not outside</u> the wall. It was **inside the community**. They did not expect opposition from their own family.

- They '**raised a cry of protests** against their fellow Jews (Ne 5:1 NLT).'
- The Jewish **community split** into two groups: those <u>not affected</u> – indeed, making money off the suffering of the less fortunate - and <u>those greatly affected</u>.

I have seen disputes in churches over trivial and immature matters. This was **a genuine injustice**, a fight for <u>survival</u>.

It is a **wise leader** who can <u>lead a community through change</u>.

Nehemiah said …

2. The Meeting, Ne 5:6-13.

'When I heard their complaints, I was very angry (Ne 5:5 NLT).'

There are times **we must speak out** against injustices. This was *not* low-level <u>gossip</u>, **this was immoral** and lives were threatened. **Children were even sold** as slaves already.

Nehemiah was so angry he **called the nobles** and said, 'You are hurting your own relatives by charging interest when they borrow money (Ne 5:7a NLT)!'

Nehemiah was *not hasty* but eventually **called a meeting**. Public meetings like this usually do not go well. He used the **power of the group** to bring pressure on the abusers. He said …

- You are just like the Egyptians who owned our ancestors as slaves.
- This is **not right**.
- You are **not fearing God**.
- Other **nations will laugh** at us.

He led by example: 'I myself, as well as my brothers and my workers, have been lending the people money and grain, but now let us stop this business of charging interest. 11 You must restore their fields, vineyards, olive groves, and homes to them this very day. And repay the interest you charged when you lent them money, grain, new wine, and olive oil (Ne 5:10-11 NLT).'"

- He asked them in **front of the whole community** to agree! That's a lot of **peer pressure**. Nehemiah **stands with the poor** and <u>pressures the wealthy</u>.
- 'They replied, "We will give back everything and demand nothing more from the people. We will do as you say." Then I called the priests and made the nobles and officials swear to do what they had promised. 13 I shook out the folds of my robe and said, "If you fail to keep your promise, may God shake you like this from your homes and from your property (Ne 5:12-13a NLT)!"'
- Nehemiah demanded that the **rich treat the poor** as brothers and sisters.
- He could have **said something like**, 'We are one community, one family. We are sacrificing for a great project; we have enemies outside our community; we do not need division currently. Let's work together and get through this.'

'The whole assembly responded, "Amen," and they praised the Lord. And the people did as they had promised (Ne 5:13b NLT)'

What about those sold into slavery?

According to the first five books of the Bible that **Moses** wrote, it **was forbidden** to sell a Hebrew <u>to a Gentile or to permanently</u> enslave them.[2]

- The ancient Jews could only enslave a fellow Jew for seven years and then they must be set free.

They **could be ransomed early** *if* someone paid off the indebtedness.

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[2] Ex 21:2-12; Le 25:53; Dt 15:12-18.

Nehemiah is so moved **he personally redeemed many** of the slaves.[3] 'At the meeting I said to them, "We are doing all we can to redeem our Jewish relatives who have had to sell themselves (Ne 5:8a NLT)."'

- What a great leader, sacrificing for the freedom of God's people.

That reminds me of **Jesus, our great redeemer**

- We **were slaves** to sin until Jesus ransomed us: 'For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus, [6] who gave himself as a ransom for all people (1Ti 2:5-6 NIV).'
- **We are the people** of God, ransomed by Jesus' death and resurrection. **He 'loved us** and gave himself for us (Ga 2:20).' Christ loves us, His Church.
- We **rebuild** God's community when we sacrifice together, love deeply, and refuse to be divided by personal agendas.

For the entire time Nehemiah was governor, twelve years, he did not take the amount of food allotted to him.

3. Nehemiah's Example, Ne 5:14-19.

- Doing **the right thing** required Nehemiah to sacrifice and be generous.
- Even **his servants worked** on the wall, 'because the people already carried a heavy burden (Ne 5:18 NLT).'

I love how Nehemiah, has little bursts of prayer: 'Remember, O my God, all that I have done for these people, and bless me for it (Ne 5:19 NLT)'

Did that resolve everything? Not even close. As soon as unity was restored, the attacks intensified.

4. Plots & False Narrative, Ne 6:1-9.

'Sanballat, Tobiah, Geshem the Arab, and the rest of our enemies found out that I had finished rebuilding the wall and that no gaps remained—though we had not yet set up the doors in the gates (Ne 6:1 NLT).'

Notice the strategy in chapter six. If Satan cannot stop the work one way, he will try distraction, deception and division.

Sanballat is getting desperate because he sees the project near the end.

Four times Sanballat wants to meet Nehemiah, and four times Nehemiah responded with 'I'm too busy.' 'The fifth time, Sanballat's servant came with an open letter in his hand, [6] and this is what

[3] Hannah K. Harrington, *The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah NICOT* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2022), 321.

it said: "There is a rumor among the surrounding nations, and Geshem tells me it is true, that you and the Jews are planning to rebel and that is why you are building the wall. According to his reports, you plan to be their king. [7] He also reports that you have appointed prophets in Jerusalem to proclaim about you, 'Look! There is a king in Judah!' "You can be very sure that this report will get back to the king, so I suggest that you come and talk it over with me (Ne 6:5-7 NLT)."'

Satan never gives up on trying to destroy you and God's plan for your life.

Nehemiah said, 'There is no truth in any part of your story. You are making up the whole thing (Ne 6:8 NLT).'

- (Kind of **like today's** algorithms and media influencers.)
- Nehemiah knew that this was **just intimidation** and an attempt to stop the work.
- Nehemiah was **accountable to the king of Persia** and would not rebel against his king.

Sometimes we must speak the truth to a lie and then pray. 'But I prayed, "Now strengthen my hands (Ne 6:9b NIV)."' His second under his breath prayer.

This next section is curious.

5. False Prophecy, Ne 6:10-14.

Nehemiah paid a **visit to a shut in**. Shemaiah was a prophet. Nehemiah **respected** prophecy.

But Shemaiah **warns Nehemiah** of a plot to kill him and *recommends* that he flee to the Temple. 'But I said, "Should a man like me run away? Or should someone like me go into the temple to save his life? I will not go!" [12] I realized that God had not sent him, but that he had prophesied against me because Tobiah and Sanballat had hired him (Ne 6:11-12 NLT).'

Notice the strategy. If **Satan cannot stop** the work one way, he will try distraction, deception and division.

- This was **false prophecy**.
- There are times **we must ignore the voices** that seek to bump us off mission.

For a third time Nehemiah prays: 'Remember Tobiah and Sanballat, my God, because of what they have done; remember also the prophet Noadiah and how she and the rest of the prophets have been trying to intimidate me (Ne 6:14 NLT).' Interesting, there was a prophetess who also tried to intimidate him – Noadiah.

But …

6. Completion, Ne 6:15-16.

'October 2 the wall was finished—just fifty-two days after we had begun. 16 When our enemies and the surrounding nations heard about it, they were frightened and humiliated. They realized this work had been done with the help of our God (Ne 6:15-16 NLT).'

Nehemiah was **governor for 12 years**,[4] but the rebuilding of the walls was less than two months.

The wall was *not completed* because **everyone agreed** on everything, *but because* enough **people loved the mission** more than their personal comfort or preferences.

People were able to see that 'Nehemiah was supported by supernatural power … (and) efforts to disturb the project only brought more glory to it.'[5]

Satan never rests and he will use good people, **like you and me** to undermine God's plan if we are not careful. For example …

7. Intimidation, Ne 6:17-19.

'During those fifty-two days, many letters went back and forth between Tobiah and the nobles of Judah. 18 For many in Judah had sworn allegiance to him because his father-in-law was Shecaniah son of Arah, and his son Jehohanan was married to the daughter of Meshullam son of Berekiah. 19 They kept telling me about Tobiah's good deeds, and then they told him everything I said. And Tobiah kept sending threatening letters to intimidate me (Ne 6:17-19 NLT).'

Tobiah's family were insiders not outsiders.

- They had a lot of clout and constantly tried to undermine the project (for whatever reason).
- He **tried to get his way** through gossip and intrigue. But **he did not intimidate** Nehemiah

Tobiah had a strategy. If **Satan** cannot stop the work one way, he will try distraction, deception and division.

This should be a warning to all of us to guard the unity our great community here.

Great Christian Communities …

- Keep Jesus at the center.
- Practice humility.

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[4] Nehemiah went back to Persia and then returned as governor for an unknown period, Edwin M Yamauchi, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: 1 Chronicles-Job, Vol. 4*, Revised Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 500.

[5] Harrington, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, 339.

- Extend grace and forgiveness.
- Speak the truth *in love.*
- Pray.
- Bear one another's burdens.
- Serve together.
- Pursue love.

Conclusion.

CIC is at a great point. We are *not* building a wall, but we **are rebuilding a community**.

- **Walls are easier** to build than communities. Walls are made of stone.
- **Communities are made of people**. People disappoint us. People frustrate us. People do not always agree with us.
- Yet **God's plan has** always been to build a people, not merely a project.

In this area, it is easy for people to go find another church, or a series of churches – picking this and that like a salad bar. Perfect is the enemy of the good.

I really respect those who put their shoulders to the work of building community. Recently, a family I respect told me how they were asked to attend another church by friends. They replied, 'we want to be part of the solution and not a part of the problem.'

The **question is not** whether CIC is perfect. It is not. The **question is** whether **we love this community** enough to sacrifice for it, pray for it, serve it, and protect it.

We rebuild God's community when we sacrifice together, love deeply, and refuse to be divided by personal agendas.

Pray

Communion.

We usually think the Lord's Supper was a somber mood. Yes, the subject was deep, but the evening was a happy festival. They actually left to go pray singing a song.

The key verse for Nehemiah is: 'Don't be dejected and sad, for the joy of the Lord is your strength (Ne 8:10 NLT)!' Nehemiah sadness was turned to joy.

Why? Because God was rebuilding. God had brought them back from Persia.

‘And the ransomed of the Lord will return And come with joyful shouting to Zion, With everlasting joy upon their heads. They will find gladness and joy, And sorrow and sighing will flee away (Is 35:10 NASB).’

‘While they were eating, Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, “Take it; this is my body.” [23] Then he took a cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, and they all drank from it. [24] “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many,” he said to them. [25] “Truly I tell you, I will not drink again from the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God.” [26] When they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives (Mk 14:22-26 NIV).’