

4

Protect



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

QUESTION 1

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 more than 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 by living out a consistent faith. Nehemiah had to call those 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 (CSB)

¹ There was a widespread outcry from the people and their wives against their Jewish countrymen. ² Some were saying, "We, our sons, and our daughters are numerous. Let us get grain so that we can eat and live." ³ Others were saying, "We are mortgaging our fields, vineyards, and homes to get grain during the famine." ⁴ Still others were saying, "We have borrowed money to pay the king's tax on our fields and vineyards." ⁵ We and our children are just like our countrymen and their children, yet we are subjecting our sons and daughters to slavery. Some of our daughters are already enslaved, but we are powerless because our fields and vineyards belong to others."

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 people. In the previous session, we saw the Jews were facing a threat from outside: opposition from men like Sanballat. 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 people 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 (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 the people were even forced to sell their children into slavery. It was a devastating situation that brought a heart-rending cry: "We are powerless" (v. 5).

"A widespread outcry" (v. 1) arose among the people. They were not complaining about the threat from their enemies, but "against their Jewish countrymen" (v. 1). A few of the Jewish leaders had taken advantage of the people. The famine caused grain prices to rise at the same time the people were

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

QUESTION 2

working on the wall and not their own farms. They had to get loans to feed their children. The loans came from other Jewish leaders, and they charged exorbitant interest rates.

The leaders knew better. The law clearly commanded the people not to take advantage of each other. "Do not charge your brother interest on silver, food, or anything that can earn interest. You may charge a foreigner interest, but you must not charge your brother Israelite interest, so that the LORD your God may bless you in everything you do in the land you are entering to possess" (Deuteronomy 23:19-20).

Nehemiah 5:6-11 (CSB)

⁶ I became extremely angry when I heard their outcry and these complaints. ⁷ After seriously considering the matter, I accused the nobles and officials, saying to them, "Each of you is charging his countrymen interest." So I called a large assembly against them ⁸ and said, "We have done our best to buy back our Jewish countrymen who were sold to foreigners, but now you sell your own countrymen, and we have to buy them back." They remained silent and could not say a word. ⁹ Then I said, "What you are doing isn't right. Shouldn't you walk in the fear of our God and not invite the reproach of our foreign enemies? ¹⁰ Even I, as well as my brothers and my servants, have been lending them money and grain. Please, let us stop charging this interest. ¹¹ Return their fields, vineyards, olive groves, and houses to them immediately, along with the percentage of the money, grain, new wine, and fresh oil that you have been assessing 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. But Nehemiah would not let this remain the status quo, and he responded in three ways.

1. **Nehemiah responded emotionally with anger.** Nehemiah experienced righteous indignation because of the injustice being done to God's people. This response was one of the heart. He felt the pain of his 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.

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

QUESTION 3

- 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. But he didn't stop with accusations; 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.

Social media outrage is not enough. It doesn't take much to respond with a tweet or a post. It's another thing to *do something* about the problem. Nehemiah did something by calling everyone together and rebuking the leaders. He showed them how they had fallen into the same sin as those who enslaved them in the past. They had sought to free their fellow Jews "who were sold to foreigners" (v. 8), but now they were enslaving their own.

The leaders responded with silence. As the leaders processed their sin, Nehemiah challenged them to see they were endangering not only the wall's completion but also their entire way of life. Nehemiah continued, "What you are doing isn't right" (v. 9).

Nehemiah also led by example. He put himself in their camp because even he had made loans as well. While it's not likely Nehemiah was gouging the people, he would lead the way in returning "their fields, vineyards, olive groves, and houses to them immediately, along with the percentage of the money, grain, new wine, and fresh oil" (v. 11).



Nehemiah 5:12-13 (CSB)

¹² They responded: “We will return these things and require nothing more from them. We will do as you say.” So I summoned the priests and made everyone take an oath to do this. ¹³ I also shook the folds of my robe and said, “May God likewise shake from his house and property everyone who doesn’t keep this promise. May he be shaken out and have nothing!” The whole assembly said, “Amen,” and they praised the LORD. Then 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? The way the people were taking advantage of each other was also harming their relationship with God because not only were they failing to walk “in the fear of our God” (v. 9), but they also were acting in a way that invited reproach from outsiders (v. 9). They were sinning—and they needed to repent.

Repent is exactly what they did! After Nehemiah called out the leaders who were taking advantage of the people and challenged them to return what they had taken, they agreed. In order to ensure they were willing to see this through, Nehemiah formalized an agreement in front of everyone. First, he made everyone take an oath in front of the priests. Then Nehemiah “shook the folds” (v. 13) of his robe. This was a symbolic action, announcing that, if the leaders did not live up to their promise, then God should shake them out of His house and His blessing.

Repentance involves more than just words; it involves action and change. The leaders repented, “and they praised the LORD. Then the people did as they had promised” (v. 13). After repenting of their sins, Nehemiah and the Jewish people praised God together. Their focus on God produced a unity among them. Since they wanted to honor God, they sacrificed for each other. The people chose to be selfless rather than selfish because of what they believed about God.

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

"Do nothing out of selfish ambition or conceit . . . Everyone should look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others!"

PHILIPPIANS 2:3-4

PURSUE INTEGRITY



Consider the following statements. Then, rate yourself on each scale.

I get emotional or angry when I see someone take advantage of another person.



My behavior toward others demonstrates integrity.



I'm willing to do whatever is necessary to reflect a godly lifestyle.

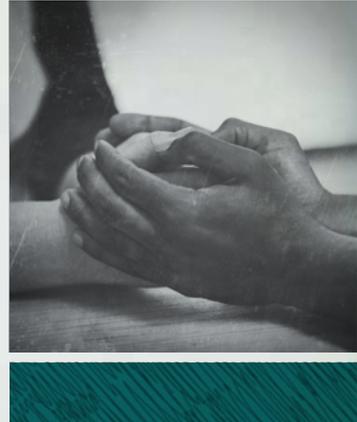


LIVE IT OUT

What you believe determines how you act. How will your actions reflect your walk with Christ?

- » **Reflect.** Reflect on times when you have been selfish. Think about how your view of God might help you become more selfless.
- » **Repent.** Confess and repent of any sin in your life. Be specific and ask God to give you 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