

Nehemiah 5

MAIN POINT: The way of Jesus is all about rightly relating to God as King, and rightly relating to others in community in such a way that we work against injustice and align ourselves with the justice of God.

Introduction:

Ask group members to respond to these discussion starters:

- **When there's more month left at the end of your money, what do you decide to do without?**
- **What's the closest you (or someone close to you) have been to living in poverty? Who or what helped you become better off, financially speaking?**

Injustice:

Ask a volunteer to read aloud Nehemiah 5:1-8. Then ask the group members to respond to these questions:

- **Some of the Jews who came back to Jerusalem from exile were poverty-stricken. Three slightly different aspects of their problem are described in verses 1-4. Would you say these are three different problems with a similar outcome; or three symptoms of a single root problem? Explain...**
- **Why do you think the newly arrived Jews were being treated this way by the Jews who had not been exiled to Babylon?**
- **How do you see these symptoms, causes, and social reactions at work in the Church? In our society at large?**

Impact:

Ask a volunteer to read aloud Nehemiah 5:9-13. Then, in your own words, say the following: **Notice that Nehemiah's first response to the outcry of the Jews in poverty is an emotional one—he is angered.**

Now ask the group to write on a 3x5 card or slip of paper their responses to this question (one response per piece of paper):

- **What are one or two examples of injustice in our world that raise feelings of anger, disgust, or frustration in you?**

Collect the responses in a bowl or basket to be used later.

Next, ask volunteers to respond verbally to these questions:

- **Nehemiah offers three reasons the nobles and officials should correct the injustice: (1) Reverence (fear) for God; (2) Their witness to the Gentiles (non-Jews); (3) Nehemiah's own example. How effective do you think these reasons would be in correcting injustice in the Church? Would any one of the three be more motivating than the others?**
- **Which reason or reasons do you think would be most effective in correcting injustices in our society at large?**

- **The nobles and officials agreed to stop charging interest, which is a change in systems. What might that look like in our society as an act of justice?**
- **The nobles and officials promised to return land and houses, which is called reparations. What might that look like in our society as an act of justice?**
- **The nobles and officials promised to reimburse the impoverished Jews. What might that look like in our society as an act of justice?**

Ask a volunteer to read aloud Nehemiah 5:14-19. Then ask the group to respond to this question:

- **Nehemiah made changes in the governor's office for the sake of the people and he practiced what he asked of the nobles and officials. What are some examples in our culture of giving up our privileges and rights for the sake of others' well-being?**

New Community Life:

- **What are some social justice issues that Christians and the Church have traditionally worked on?**
- **What are some (possibly new) issues that Christians and the Church are uniquely suited to address in our time and culture?**

Sort through the cards or slips of paper that were gathered earlier, grouping similar topics together in different piles. Then choose one of the most numerous cards and read aloud the issue or topic written on it. Ask for the person who wrote it to describe why that issue piques their interest or raises their passion. Allow opportunity for anyone else who wrote a similar topic to offer their response as well.

After each pile of cards has been discussed, ask the group to respond to these questions:

- **Which of these issues—if any—would our church be well equipped to take on?**
- **Which of these issues—if any—would our Life Group be interested and able to take on?**
- **Which of these issues—if any—would you or your family be able to work on?**

[LEADER NOTE: As your group discusses these issues, they may want to start some initial planning. As you lead this discussion try to keep the focus on action that meets these standards:

Relational: Not just throwing money from a distance, but actively participating in the work or in a relationship with the providers and the recipients. Aim for partnership rather than patronage.

Sustainable: Social justice can take a long time to come about. Are you willing and able to “stay with the conversation” over time? Can the partners and recipients count on you to be there for the long run?

Effective: Will your efforts and participation make a real and meaningful contribution to the betterment of other's lives?]

Prayer: Pray for group members' requests and needs. Then close by praying this prayer:

Almighty God, who created us in your own image: Grant us grace fearlessly to contend against evil and to make no peace with oppression; and, that we may reverently use our freedom, help us to employ it in the maintenance of justice in our communities and among the nations, to the glory of your holy Name; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.