

KINGDOM WORK

Week Eight | June 16, 2019 | Kingdom Workers Pursue Justice and Mercy

PREPARATION

GETTING READY

Before your group meets next time, spend some time alone in God's Word reading through this week's texts, Nehemiah 5–6 and Micah 6:8. Pray that God, through His Spirit, would bring to life the truth of this text and how it applies to your life.

THIS WEEK

KEY BIBLICAL TRUTH

God commands His people to seek justice and love mercy.

THEOLOGY APPLIED

We pursue mercy and justice out of a holy fear of the Lord.

MEDITATE

"He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (Micah 6:8)

GETTING STARTED

+ Use this section to prepare your heart and mind for the truths of this week. This section will help to introduce the focus of this week's lesson.

You don't have to search very hard to find examples of injustice. Today's headlines are filled with stories of oppression near and far. Children are bullied to the point of suicide. Christians are hunted and killed in Somalia. Men are auctioned off as slaves in Libya. Unborn babies are slaughtered daily. Gang violence claims the lives of young men in America. Daughters are murdered by their parents in India for not being sons. Orphans are trafficked across borders and forced into prostitution in Nepal. Enslaved children around the world work in sweatshops supported, albeit unknowingly, by Western shoppers. The refugee crisis spreads across the globe as people flee war-torn lands in search of a safe place to raise their children.

What exactly is injustice? It's a lack of fairness, when the circumstances are just wrong. It is a breeding ground for corruption, brutality, and exploitation of the vulnerable. It's a result of sin and our fallen world. Oppression flourishes in the darkness. But we are children of light (Ephesians 5:8). Our Father is light (1 John 1:5). And He has equipped us with a gospel that charges into the darkness and illuminates. Our mission is to shine the light of the gospel of Christ into a darkened world.

One way we do this is by obeying God's command to seek justice and love mercy (Micah 6:8). We serve the God of justice (Isaiah 30:18). When we seek justice, we ultimately seek the God of justice. He is the giver of justice. He is the One who makes things right. His justice is coupled with His mercy. Ephesians 2:4 teaches that God is rich in mercy. David describes God's mercy as great (2 Samuel 24:14). Christ commands us to be merciful because our Father is merciful (Luke 6:36). God expects us to imitate His ways of justice and mercy.

When we bear the image of the God who is merciful and just we do justice and mercy. Our obedience is charged by our holy fear of Him. We love our Father and want to please Him. Nehemiah exemplifies this for us in today's text. Nehemiah had great reason to fear man. He was relentlessly pursued by his enemies who wanted to harm, discourage, and discredit him. Time after time, he chose to fear God and not man. His fear of the Lord fueled His obedience.

Our text today transitions from opposition from outsiders to obstacles from insiders. The Israelites were oppressing their own people. The people of God were becoming indebted to one another in ways forbidden by Him. Great acts of wickedness abounded. We will see God's mercy and justice extended to His people through His servant, Nehemiah.

The book of Ezra focuses on the rebuilding of the temple. The book of Nehemiah focuses on building the wall around the city. But look up. Look deeper. God is building more than temples and walls. He's building a people. He's building His kingdom. And He's doing it through His kingdom workers.

Just as God used Nehemiah to bring mercy and justice to His people thousands of years ago, He uses us in the same way today. Kingdom workers respond to the call to seek justice and love mercy out of our holy fear of our great King. We fight oppression. We are generous and merciful. We fear God and not man. And we do it all for His great glory. Let's press on in the name of our King and watch the darkness flee.

Q: *Jesus is our greatest example of one who seeks justice and loves of mercy. How does the cross portray both?*

Q: *According to Scripture, what benefits come from fearing the Lord?*

■ UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

In today's lesson we will learn from Nehemiah's example how God's people do justice and mercy out of a holy fear of Him.

1. KINGDOM WORKERS FIGHT OPPRESSION

2. KINGDOM WORKERS ARE GENEROUS AND MERCIFUL

3. KINGDOM WORKERS FEAR GOD, NOT MAN

GOING DEEPER

+ *This next section will help show what God's Word says about this week's particular focus. Read through the Scripture passages and connect the text to this week's biblical truth.*

KINGDOM WORKERS FIGHT OPPRESSION

■ NEHEMIAH 5:1-9

Q: *In their outcry, who were the Israelites speaking out against [v. 1]?*

Q: *What was Nehemiah's response to his people's outcry [v. 6]?*

The community of returned exiles was struggling. They were a large community and food was limited. Their hungry bellies wanted grain. Some mortgaged their possessions, which meant they gave up the use of their homes and land for money. Others assumed debt with interest to pay the taxes on their land. In a desperate attempt to feed themselves, they even sold their children to fellow Israelites as slaves.

Mosaic law allowed for families in debt to sell themselves to fellow Israelites to regain their financial independence. These people were to be treated as hired workers, not as slaves. It was also a temporary arrangement. “If your brother, a Hebrew man or a Hebrew woman, is sold to you, he shall serve you six years, and in the seventh year you shall let him go free from you” (Deuteronomy 15:12). If they were unable to pay back their debt within six years, they were to be released in the seventh year, the sabbatical year or year of release (Deuteronomy 15:1–2). [NOTE: The Year of Jubilee was every fiftieth year (Leviticus 25:8–17)] The Israelite adults were only forcing their children into slavery, and those who acquired the children apparently were not treating them fairly, as the law required, but as slaves. This is the situation brought to Nehemiah’s attention.

Nehemiah got angry. Wouldn’t you? It was bad enough that Persians oppressed them as they worked, but to hear that the Jews were oppressing each other roused Nehemiah’s righteous anger. He sought justice through legal action, bringing charges against the nobles and officials. “You shall not charge interest on loans to your brother, interest on money, interest on food, interest on anything that is lent for interest” (Deuteronomy 23:19). The law forbade an Israelite to charge interest to a fellow Israelite who borrowed money due to poverty.

The powerful oppressing the vulnerable is not unique to our time. The wealthier Israelites were taking advantage of the impoverished ones. Nehemiah calls out his people on the irony that the recently freed Israelites are now being forced into slavery to each other. The people had no reply for this charge (Nehemiah 5:8). However, Nehemiah had strong words for them. “So I said, ‘The thing that you are doing is not good. Ought you not to walk in the fear of our God to prevent the taunts of the nations our enemies?’” (Nehemiah 5:9).

Nehemiah delighted to fear the name of his God (Nehemiah 1:11). He encouraged others to share in this delight and live in the fear of the Lord as well. Because he feared God, it was impossible for him to sit idly by and watch the oppression of his people. Kingdom people are not indifferent. We are passionate about God’s commands. And He clearly commands us to seek justice (Micah 6:8). He tells us to correct oppression (Isaiah 1:17). Kingdom people involve themselves in the burdens of the oppressed. We reflect our King to both the oppressed and their oppressors. We must be known by our pursuit of the God of justice by correcting oppression. How can we know that our brothers and sisters suffer and not act on behalf of our King? What would that do to our kingdom witness? Our failure to imitate our Father’s heart for the vulnerable further mars His image in the world.

We are the sons and daughters of the God of justice. When He adopted us, we inherited His DNA, so to speak. We’ve been given a new nature, one that responds to injustice with action. We must open our eyes and ears to the sights and sounds of injustice around us. Hear the outcry of God’s people. Respond out of fear of the

Lord. Respond by seeking justice for the vulnerable. Kingdom workers show the world what God's kingdom is like. So show them. Get involved. Protect. Defend. Pray. Advocate. Volunteer. Give. Visit. Welcome. Take legal action. Call out. Seek justice. It's what kingdom workers do. Show others our King. He is a stronghold for the oppressed (Psalm 9:9).

🔗: *Think about injustice in your own city. What are some ways your faith family can be a light to your community by seeking justice?*

🔗: *What examples of saints seeking justice do we see in Scripture? What do we learn from them?*

KINGDOM WORKERS ARE GENEROUS AND MERCIFUL

📖 NEHEMIAH 5:10-19

🔗: *Who was lending money and grain to the impoverished Israelites [v. 10]?*

🔗: *What job was Nehemiah appointed to [v. 14]?*

Because of his position as cupbearer to the king of Persia, Nehemiah was a man of great wealth. Because of his fear of the Lord, he was a man of great generosity and mercy. He used his wealth to honor the Lord and bless others as God intends. Paul instructs the church, “As for the rich in this present age, charge them not to be haughty, nor to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly provides us with everything to enjoy. They are to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share” (1 Timothy 6:17-18).

Generosity is not exclusive to the wealthy. So, if you're not a person of means, you're not off the hook. Kingdom people are generous with whatever they have, no matter how much or how little. Remember the widow's

offering in Jesus's day. As the rich were making it rain in the temple offering box, Jesus heard the gentle sound of two small copper coins dropped in by a poor widow. "And He said, 'Truly, I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them. For they all contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty put in all she had to live on'" (Luke 21:3-4).

God has generously given us eternal life through His Son. We were His enemies, but He made us His family. We were chasing after hell, and He mercifully redirected our path to Himself. If He never did another thing for us for the rest of our lives, that alone would make us the richest of people. But He has. He's given and done so much more for us. Today, your lungs draw breath because of the great generosity of God. Today, your sins may be forgiven because of the great mercy of God. How could we not be marked by mercy when we've been shown so much mercy ourselves?

Nehemiah and his friends loaned the people money and grain. He convinced the nobles to stop exacting interest on their loans and to return the houses and land to the poorer Jews. Then he was appointed governor of Judah. Though he and his people were entitled to a generous food allowance, they took none. His predecessors had taken burdensome rations from the people, but Nehemiah did not, "because of the fear of God" (Nehemiah 5:15). Nehemiah was a servant leader, working on the completion of the wall alongside his people. He hosted daily meals at his own expense. Nehemiah's example of generosity and mercy bears witness to his generous and merciful God. His holy fear of the Lord was great, and therefore his obedience to God by being generous and merciful was great.

What about you? Are you known by your generosity towards the poor? Do you give the minimum possible amount to your local church and worthy charities, or do you give lavishly in honor of the King who has lavished His love on you? Are you merciful towards the oppressed? Do you show mercy to others in response to the mercy God has shown you? Kingdom workers are people of mercy. It's a family thing. We act like our Father, and He is rich in mercy!

Q: *Find examples in the Scriptures of the generosity of the Father. How can your faith family encourage one another to live generously?*

Q: *Consider ways you can show mercy to others. Is there someone you need to forgive? Is there a group of people you have not shown kindness to because of a prejudice? Repent of your unmerciful ways and ask God for the grace to reflect Him by being merciful.*

KINGDOM WORKERS FEAR GOD, NOT MAN

NEHEMIAH 6

Q: *What were Sanballat and Geshem's true intentions for wanting to meet with Nehemiah [v. 2]?*

Q: *What did Nehemiah ask the Lord to do [v. 9]?*

Fear is the emotion we feel when we're afraid that someone or something will cause us harm. It can be paralyzing. Our enemy revels in our fear and delights to stifle our kingdom work by making us afraid. If we are not vigilant against the devil's schemes, we can easily succumb to fear. But believers know and live in another kind of fear, the fear of our great King. The fear of the Lord is not about being afraid He will harm us. It's about awe and wonder. Reverence and respect. It's about wanting to please our good Father. This is the kind of fear that marks our lives. We live in fear of the Lord, not the fear of man. Our enemy loves to make us afraid. When we live in reverence of our King, we won't live in fear of our enemies. We will trust God as we do our tasks. We will finish our work.

Throughout the book of Nehemiah, we see Satan's attempts to bring fear into the story. But Nehemiah is marked by a different kind of fear. His job of building the wall was almost complete. He's been faithful to do the kingdom work assigned to him. But his enemies refused to give up.

Sanballat, Tobiah, and others came back with a new tactic. They tried repeatedly to get Nehemiah to meet with them. Nehemiah saw through their attempts to lure him to a meeting in order to harm him (Nehemiah 6:2). When Nehemiah refused because he was busy completing the wall, they sent him a letter accusing him of intending to rebel against the government and establish himself as king (Nehemiah 6:5–7). His basic response was, "You're just making this up!" Nehemiah understood the fear tactics his enemies were employing against him. "For they all wanted to frighten us, thinking, 'Their hands will drop from the work, and it will not be done.' But now, O God, strengthen my hands" (Nehemiah 6:9).

Nehemiah did not fear Sanballat and his crew. He knew they were trying to scare him into dropping the work, so he prayed and asked God to give strength to his hands. Such a simple prayer. Such a mighty prayer. "God, my

enemies want my hands to stop what they're doing for You. Make my hands strong." But his enemies weren't through. Shemaiah warned him that his enemies sought to kill him and advised him to run away or hide in the temple. Nehemiah refused to play the coward. He had kingdom work to do. He learned that his enemies hired Shemaiah to scare him and get him to stop working (Nehemiah 6:13). His enemies were disappointed.

Six months after he approached the king of Persia about it, Nehemiah completed the work God called him to do (v. 15). He feared the Lord, not his enemies, and God flipped the script on them. The men who desperately tried to scare Nehemiah were now afraid for themselves. "And when all our enemies heard of it, all the nations around us were afraid and fell greatly in their own esteem, for they perceived that this work had been accomplished with the help of our God" (Nehemiah 6:16). Even then, Tobiah never gave up on trying to create fear in Nehemiah. Our text today ends with Tobiah still sending letters to make him afraid (v. 19).

Our enemy is relentless, but his doom is sure. He can rage and seek to frustrate our work, but kingdom workers need not fear him. We know how the story ends. We are part of the kingdom whose Savior is coming soon to crush the enemy's head. We don't fear the enemy. We fear only our King, and that holy fear fuels our obedience. We reflect Him on earth. We pursue justice and mercy and fight oppression. We are generous and merciful. Our King has given us this good work to do. It's our joy and privilege to join Him in advancing His kingdom on earth. We will not drop our hands because we're afraid. We are kingdom workers and our King delights to strengthen our hands.

- 🕒: *In what areas are you living in the fear of man instead of the fear of the Lord?
How can your faith family encourage one another to fear only God?*

- 🕒: *What examples do we see in Scripture of others who chose to fear the Lord?
What can we learn from their examples?*

NEXT STEPS

+ *Connect the truths from God's Word to your daily life. Process how what you've learned this week will impact the way you live beyond today and into the future.*

- Q: *Do you pursue justice and mercy? How so? What changes can you make so you can obey God's command to seek justice and love mercy?*
- Q: *Spend some time in prayer for those who suffer injustice. Consider ways your faith family can shine the light of Christ into the darkness.*

PRAY

+ *Use this prayer point to connect your time in prayer to this week's focus.*

Father, You are gracious and merciful. You give justice to the oppressed. Your Word says You love justice. Forgive us for our indifference towards the plight of the vulnerable. Cultivate our hearts to align with Yours so that we might be seekers of justice and lovers of mercy. Develop in us a holy fear of You. Glorify Yourself through our obedience. Use us to shine Your light into the darkness. We praise Your name greatly!

COMMENTARY

NEHEMIAH 5:8 – *our Jewish brothers.* See v. 1, 5. Nehemiah stresses this kinship in order to drive home the people's neglect of this great principle underlying the law. Sold . . . sell . . . sold. In his anger, Nehemiah brings out the irony of the Jews being redeemed from exile only to be sold into slavery by their own brothers.

NEHEMIAH 5:13 – *shook out the fold.* A symbolic action matching the words of the curse that follow. So may God shake out. This type of curse formula was a solemn, conventional way of compelling commitment to a course of action. By saying "Amen," the whole assembly took upon itself the terms of Nehemiah's curse.

**All exegetical content and commentary resourcing for this lesson was provided by the ESV Study Bible Commentary Notes.*

