

Pine Knoll Sabbath School Study Notes
Fourth Quarter 2019: *Ezra and Nehemiah*
Lesson 5 “Violating *the Spirit of the Law*”

Read for this week’s study

Nehemiah 5:1–5; Exodus 21:2–7; Micah 6:8; Nehemiah 5:7–12; Deuteronomy 23:21–23;
Nehemiah 5:14–19.

Memory Text

“ ‘Restore now to them, even this day, their lands, their vineyards, their olive groves, and their houses, also a hundredth of the money and the grain, the new wine and the oil, that you have charged them’ ” (Nehemiah 5:11, NKJV).

Lesson Outline from Adult Sabbath School Study Guide

- I. Introduction
- II. People’s Grievance
- III. Against the Spirit of the Law
- IV. Nehemiah Acts
- V. An Oath
- VI. Nehemiah’s Example
- VII. Further Study

Questions and Notes for Consideration

Facilitator: Jon Paulien

1. From Nehemiah’s day until now, human beings struggle with questions of wealth and poverty and the gap between rich and poor. Even before Nehemiah, it was a major concern of the Old Testament prophets. Is it fair to be Gates, Bezos or Zuckerberg? (Sabbath afternoon)
2. Read Nehemiah 5:1-5. What complaint did some of the people bring to Nehemiah? Based on books like Nehemiah and the writings of the Old Testament prophets, does God hold human governments accountable for the way they treat their people? Does God hold His own people to a higher standard of ethics and morality? Why do you think economic oppression is such a constant theme of the Bible? (Sunday’s lesson)
3. Read Nehemiah 5:6-8. Why does Nehemiah react in anger to the report that the common people are being exploited? Read Exodus 21:2-7. How would the

application of this passage affect the way human governments operate? What implications does it have for God's view of human freedom? Read Micah 6:8. Is it possible to violate the spirit of the law in the way we follow the letter or the law? (Monday's lesson)

4. Read Nehemiah 5:7-12. What are Nehemiah's arguments against what is going on in Jerusalem? How does he go about persuading the people to right the wrong that they were doing? Should restitution be an important principle in today's society? (Tuesday's lesson)
5. Read Nehemiah 5:12-13. Why does Nehemiah pronounce a curse against those who do not uphold their part of the agreement? They had already agreed, why add a curse to their agreement? What do the following texts teach us about meaning of oaths in Old Testament times? Numbers 30:2; Deuteronomy 23:21-23; Leviticus 19:12. Read Matthew 5:32-37. Why does Jesus tell us to be careful in the promises and commitments we make? What strategies do you use to become more careful in what you say and how you say it? (Wednesday's lesson)
6. Read Nehemiah 5:14-19. What reasons did Nehemiah give for not demanding governor's fees for himself and his staff? How do Nehemiah's actions illustrate the gospel as articulated in Philippians 2:3-8? (Thursday's lesson)
7. What is the role of selfishness in finances and interpersonal relationships? (Friday's lesson)
8. Jesus said that the poor would always be among us and that we are to help those in need. What does it tell us about God that these two ideas are tied together? (Friday's lesson)

Thoughts from Graham Maxwell

It is possible to read the Bible as a code book. It's often done that way. That's "here a little and there a little". You just pick out the clear statements instead of reading everything in between. And if the Bible is read as a whole, then we're led to see the picture of God. The scriptures were given to bear witness to the truth about God, that we might be won back to him in faith, and go to him in faith, and go to him for life. Then the Book has served us well.

The Sabbath won't save us, but if the meaning of the Sabbath leads us back to a right relationship with God, God will save all who trust him; and the Sabbath can serve us well in that regard. We're not saved for our Sabbath keeping, or our tithe paying, or our health reforming, or anything like that. God as a physician can save and heal all who trust him. And all of this record is evidence, upon which we make up our minds whether or not we wish to trust God, and feel it's safe to go to him and ask him to save and heal us. And anybody who comes and asks him sincerely will be healed and saved, like the thief on the cross.

But the preoccupation with doing what is right for the wrong reason can be very destructive. And isn't it sad that after this great revival with Ezra, they became the worst enemies of God they'd ever been. Because the people who've done the most damage on this earth have been the ones who've come the closest to the truth and have professed to be his representatives, but really haven't known him. They've presented the Sabbath as a mere test of obedience and evidence that we're God's true people, instead of presenting the Sabbath as a reminder of all the evidence and truth that is the basis of our trust in God. Now, how do we present the Sabbath? Do we often say it's a test of obedience? That's what the Jews did. Or it's the mark that we're God's true people? That's what they did. Didn't they run home to keep Sabbath after they'd killed Him? So just keeping it doesn't prove that. It all depends on the meaning of the Sabbath, whether we keep it with understanding.

Most of all is this true of the Bible. How do you know that we're the people of the Book? Because we carry it around a lot? Because we read it a lot? Because we quote it a lot? The Jews memorized it. Most of them didn't have copies. They had to memorize it. They knew it better than we do. It's only if we read it with understanding. And the Book, because of the evidence within it, has led us to a relationship with God, not with a book, are we his people. So, as you know, it hardly needs to be said again, almost anything we say about the Jews, we're not being impolite, because we're saying it about ourselves, aren't we? We bear such a close resemblance to them. {Graham Maxwell. Excerpt from the audio series, *The Picture of God in All 66 – Ezra & Nehemiah*, recorded December, 1981, Riverside, California} *To listen to the entire audio of the above reference, click on the following direct links:*

*Audio links to the West Covina series recorded in 1984:

<http://pkp.cc/23MMPOGIA66> (Part 1) <http://pkp.cc/24MMPOGIA66> (Part 2)

What shall we pick out most? Sinai, say. God comes down on Sinai to show himself, to reveal himself to the people. Why do you think he chose to come the way he did, and what does it say about him? Because he comes other times. He comes to Mount Carmel. And no one's afraid of him. The children climb up in his lap, and Ellen White adds such colorful details. They were not afraid of him. They used to reach up and stroke his face, she said. In another place she said, "They loved to reach up and kiss that pensive face." They even watched tears roll down his cheeks one day. You're not afraid of somebody who cries like that and speaks so gently. Why didn't he come that way on Mount Sinai? Or in the Sermon on the Mount, what beautiful things he said! Why didn't he stand on Sinai and say, you know, "Blessed are those who realize their spiritual need," and "Blessed are the meek," and so on? And he spoke so softly. Had he spoken softly, would they have even known he was there? He did have to raise his voice, didn't he, with that kind of an audience? And haven't you had that experience yourself? {Graham Maxwell.

Excerpt from the audio series, The Picture of God in All 66 – Exodus, recorded October, 1981, Riverside, California} *To listen to the entire audio of the above reference, click on the following direct links:*

*Audio links to the West Covina series recorded in 1983:

<http://pkp.cc/3MMPOGIA66> (Part 1) <http://pkp.cc/4MMPOGIA66> (Part 2)

What do you think of such a God? He had to do something to get their attention. Now, anyone who has been a teacher of little children, and not such little ones, knows you have to do that from time to time, even at worship. Oh, I wish you could hear Elder Paul Heubach tell this; you know what a gentleman he is! But he likes to picture a father at worship when it's getting more and more noisy, and finally he has to thunder to his children, "Be quiet!" He uses another word for that. "Can't you see we're having worship?" And then he thinks, Oh, no! We've really got to start all over again. "Children, I don't want you to be afraid, and God doesn't want you to be afraid. But if you aren't respectful enough to sit quietly, I can't tell you that, and nor can he."

If the school building is on fire, would you teachers raise your voice, or would you stand upon your dignity, your reputation of many years, and refuse to raise your voice? So the children can't hear, and they'll all die in the fire, but your reputation is much more important than that! You'd at least, after being told by the Principal at the door that the building is on fire, you'd at least give the children a chance! You'd stand in before the class and say, "Boys and girls, the building is on fire; remember how we've drilled. Line up quietly and go out that door." But they're so noisy they don't even hear; don't even know you are there. Well, you've given them a chance; they haven't listened; they've rejected the truth. And so you leave, your reputation intact, and thirty children suffering and dead. Would you do that? Would you be willing to raise your voice, something you don't normally do? And they still can't hear? What a dilemma! Would you be willing to climb on the desk? Throw an eraser or two? Finally get their attention? In terror, they slip into their seats; they've never seen Miss Jones like that before. And you slip into your seat, worried about the consequences. And you say, "Boys and girls, please don't go home and tell your mothers I was angry with you; it's that the building is on fire, and I love every one of you, and I want you to line up quickly and get out that door."

Now, which shows greater love: to refuse to scare the children by raising your voice, or to love them enough to be willing to risk your reputation for a moment or two by terrifying them if need be; running the risk of being obeyed out of fear? They might even hate you for a minute, but you saved them all. It seems to me we owe God a lot of apologies for misunderstanding Sinai and many other places. It's for our sakes that he has raised his voice, and don't we love him the more for it? He's willing to meet us where we are, and speak a language we can

understand. {Graham Maxwell. Excerpt from the audio series, The Picture of God in All 66 – Exodus, recorded October, 1981, Riverside, California} *To listen to the entire audio of the above reference, click on the following direct links:*

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Further Study with Ellen White

God is the source of life and light and joy to the universe. Like rays of light from the sun, like the streams of water bursting from a living spring, blessings flow out from Him to all His creatures. And wherever the life of God is in the hearts of men, it will flow out to others in love and blessing. {SC 77.1}

What a wonderful reverence for human life Jesus expressed in His life mission! He stood not among the people as a king, demanding attention, reverence, service, but as one who wished to serve, to uplift humanity. He said He had not come to be ministered unto but to minister. . . . {OHC 176.3}

The sanctification of the soul by the working of the Holy Spirit is the implanting of Christ's nature in humanity. Gospel religion is Christ in the life—a living, active principle. It is the grace of Christ revealed in character and wrought out in good works. The principles of the gospel cannot be disconnected from any department of practical life. Every line of Christian experience and labor is to be a representation of the life of Christ. {COL 384.1}

Love is the basis of godliness. Whatever the profession, no man has pure love to God unless he has unselfish love for his brother. But we can never come into possession of this spirit by *trying* to love others. What is needed is the love of Christ in the heart. When self is merged in Christ, love springs forth spontaneously. The completeness of Christian character is attained when the impulse to help and bless others springs constantly from within—when the sunshine of heaven fills the heart and is revealed in the countenance. {COL 384.2}

It is not possible for the heart in which Christ abides to be destitute of love. If we love God because He first loved us, we shall love all for whom Christ died. We cannot come in touch with divinity without coming in touch with humanity; for in Him who sits upon the throne of the universe, divinity and humanity are combined. Connected with Christ, we are connected with our fellow men by the golden links of the chain of love. Then the pity and compassion of Christ will be manifest in our life. We shall not wait to have the needy and unfortunate brought to us. We shall not need to be entreated to feel for the woes of others. It will be as natural for us to minister to the needy and suffering as it was for Christ to go about doing good. {COL 384.3}

Supreme love for God and unselfish love for one another—this is the best gift that our heavenly Father can bestow. This love is not an impulse, but a divine principle, a permanent power. The unconsecrated heart cannot originate or produce it. Only in the heart where Jesus reigns is it found. “We love Him, because He first loved us.” In the heart renewed by divine grace, love is the ruling principle of action. It modifies the character, governs the impulses, controls the passions, and ennobles the affections. This love, cherished in the soul, sweetens the life and sheds a refining influence on all around. {AA 551.2}

The voice and tongue are gifts from God, and if rightly used, they are a power for God. Words mean very much. They may express love, devotion, praise, melody to God, or hatred and revenge. Words reveal the sentiments of the heart. They may be a savor of life unto life or of death unto death. The tongue is a world of blessing, or a world of iniquity. {SD 180.5}

Some are seen to come forth from their daily communion with God clothed with the meekness of Christ. Their words are not like a desolating hail, crushing everything before it; they come forth sweetly from their lips. They scatter seeds of love and kindness all along their path, and that all unconsciously, because Christ lives in their heart. Their influence is felt more than it is seen. {SD 180.6}

Kind, tender, compassionate words will flow from sanctified hearts and lips. {SD 180.7}

It is a wonderful thought that human beings can speak the Word of God, in simple words of comfort and encouragement. The humblest instruments will be used of God to sow the seeds of truth, which may spring up and bear fruit, because the one in whose heart they were sown needed help—a kind thought, a kind word, made effective by the One who has said, “Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world.”—Letter 329a, Nov. 16, 1905, to her 19-year-old granddaughter Mabel. {TDG 329.6}

It should be our aim to bring all the pleasantness possible into our lives, and to do all the kindness possible to those around us. Kind words are never lost. Jesus records them as if spoken to Himself. Sow the seeds of kindness, of love, and of tenderness, and they will blossom and bear fruit. {OHC 293.5}

We may never know until the judgment the influence of a kind, considerate course of action to the inconsistent, the unreasonable, and unworthy. If after a course of provocation and injustice on their part, you treat them as you would an innocent person, you even take pains to show them special acts of kindness, then you have acted the part of a Christian; and they become surprised and ashamed, and see their course of action and meanness more clearly than if you plainly stated their aggravated acts to rebuke them.—Lt 20, 1892. (MM 209, 210.) {2MCP 432.3}

Holiness is wholeness to God. The soul is surrendered to God. The will, and even the thoughts, are brought into subjection to the will of Christ. The love of Jesus fills the soul, and is constantly

going out in a clear, refreshing stream, to make glad the hearts of others (MS 33, 1911).
{6BC 1076.2}

Divine wisdom has appointed, in the plan of salvation, the law of action and reaction, making the work of beneficence, in all its branches, twice blessed. He that gives to the needy blesses others, and is blessed himself in a still greater degree. God could have reached His object in saving sinners without the aid of man; but He knew that man could not be happy without acting a part in the great work in which he would be cultivating self-denial and benevolence.
{3T 382.4}

Connected with Christ, human nature becomes true and pure. Christ supplies the efficiency, and man becomes a power for good. . . . Truthfulness and integrity are attributes of God, and he who possesses these qualities possesses a power that is invincible. {HP 179.6}