

GSM 14/10/12

Nehemiah 5

This morning we're going to be looking at the subject of **money**. It's a subject that the church doesn't address very often and, when it does, it can fall into various traps – either of not being assertive enough in its teachings on money or in asserting the wrong things – particularly the notion that you have a guarantee as a Christian of prosperity. This is the so-called prosperity gospel – become a Christian, give your money away, pray hard enough and you will get financially better off as God blesses you. So could I say at the beginning of this morning's talk – my aim is not to make anyone give more money to this church. We're going to read about giving to the poor, and although that forms part of the charitable objects of this church there are other organisations who are far more focussed on helping the poor. And, as for the prosperity doctrine, if you give £10 of your money away, you will not be richer, at least not in financial terms – you will be £10 poorer.

My own feeling is that money is the Western church's biggest blind spot. When I was between jobs for 7 months in 2006 I thought about doing a course run by one of the larger evangelical churches in London, about the Christian approach to various lifestyle issues. There was more than one session in the course about matters to do with sex – what Christians believe about homosexuality, about the sexual revolution, about pornography, that sort of thing. There was not one thing about money. I thought that was really telling. There's a constant chatter in the wider church about matters of sex but hardly anything about money. Yet Jesus talked about money ten times more than he did about sex. Why? Well maybe for the same reason that when I was growing up my parents talked to me ten times more about the dangers of crossing the road than about the dangers of eating the poisonous berries that grew in our back garden – because I was far more likely to hurt myself crossing the road than I was by eating the berries in the back garden. I think we miss a trick if we don't follow Jesus's lead and think carefully about our approach to money, because it's a key issue for us, even if we try to ignore it.

When I was preparing this sermon I was having a look for some wisdom on money generally and I came across three quotes. I've been thinking about each a lot. Here they are – one from the Bible and two from secular sources.

- "Don't tell me what your priorities are. Show me where you spend your money and I'll tell you what they are." - James W. Frick
- “Woe to you Pharisees, because you give God a tenth of your mint, rue and all other kinds of garden herbs, but you neglect justice and the love of God. You should have practiced the latter without leaving the former undone.” – Jesus (Luke 11:42)
- “When it is a question of money, everybody is of the same religion.” – Voltaire

Each of these has stayed with me since I started preparing. Going quickly through them – the one from James Frick, whoever he was, is surely true. People may tell you where their priorities lie, but you need to see what they do with their money before you get to see if their actions match their words. The one from Jesus is an attack on the Pharisees, the religious leaders of the time. It's the only time in the New Testament that the tithe is mentioned – the tithe being the Old Testament system of giving away one tenth of your wealth. Jesus says that the Pharisees were very good at tithing, and so careful that they even tithed their garden herbs, but he was scornful of them because they *stopped* at tithing. He's saying that your giving should be about bringing about God's justice and should be an expression of your love for God, not just a religious duty, such that you think you've done the necessary when you've given 10%. In the Pharisees' case Jesus calls woe on them for stopping at 10%. The third quote is from Voltaire. Voltaire was an 18th Century French author who poured scorn on religious dogma – you might say he was the Richard Dawkins of his age, and like Dawkins, it's good to examine his criticisms to see if they're true. His quote about everyone having the same religion when it comes to money is often, sadly, true – his point being that all religions have their different rules and will pretend to be better, truer, nicer, or whatever – but when it comes to money everyone behaves in the same selfish way, however nicely they smile and however devout they act. I think that's a really interesting criticism and I want all of us to bear it in mind. Is that true of us? Is there a gap between what we say we believe and what we do when it comes to our money?

Let's turn our attention to this morning's passage. First, a bit of explanation of what's going on. The Jews are building the wall. Lots of men who would otherwise be earning money to

feed their families or growing their own food are busy building the wall. The result is that their families are struggling to feed themselves. But more than that – look at verse 4 - the Persian king was levying a heavy tax on the Jews. And finally – look at verse 3 – there was a famine, a general lack of food. All these things together meant that the Jews were desperate for ways to get food to feed their families, and had had to mortgage their fields and vineyards. When they needed still more money they were faced with having to sell their children into slavery. So they had approached their fellow Jews for help. But when it came to money their countrymen were just as greedy and ruthless as anyone else. So they had not had any different treatment from their own people than from the Gentiles. The loans given to them by some Jews were generous and free of interest – you can see that from verse 10. But some Jews were charging interest on these loans as if they were lending to a stranger rather than a brother, with the result that some of the Jewish children were being sold into slavery to the other Jews. The result? Verse 1 – a great outcry against these Jews who had been charging interest and forcing Jewish children into slavery.

How Nehemiah reacts shows us how we should use our money and power. First, he opposes injustice – look at verse 6. Nehemiah was angry at injustice and he confronts those forcing their fellow Jews to sell their children into slavery. He forces them to stop. Secondly he does not take advantage of his position. Look at verse 15 – governors that had come before Nehemiah had used their position as a means to feather their nest and place heavy financial burdens on the people. They had taken money, food and wine. But Nehemiah did not use his power in the same way. He refused to take advantage of the people and instead devoted himself to work on the wall. Thirdly, he is promiscuous with his wealth. He spreads it around. Look at verse 17 and 18. He arranges for all the food and wine mentioned in those verses to be made available at his cost to 150 Jews and officials, and those from outside the Jewish people also. He does not keep his wealth to himself but makes it available to others in need.

What then should we do with our money and power? I guess the first thing to say is that not many of us have power in the sense that Nehemiah had power. But if you do find yourself in a position where you have power over people – maybe in a work situation, where you are in charge of others, or in a situation where there are others under your care such as children or elderly relatives, then Nehemiah's example shows us the template. There is a pressing need for Christians to live out the values they profess in their positions of power. There is no point

in allowing a split to develop between what we believe privately and how we act publicly with those who depend upon us. There's a scene in the film *The Godfather* when one of the characters, Tessio, has been plotting against the Al Pacino character, Michael Corleone. When his treachery is exposed and Tessio is led off to be executed he turns to Tom Hagen and says "*Tell Mike it was only business. I always liked him*". This notion of being friends with someone but having a completely different morality when it comes to matters of business is quite common, I find, in certain circles. When you have power over someone, be it someone who reports to you at work or someone else who depends on you, what governs your actions? I heard a phrase recently that sums up the approach of many people – "kissing up and kicking down". Have you heard that before? The notion that you do your best to get yourselves in the good books of those above you in the food chain but take advantage of those below you. Is that the approach we will follow? Or a different approach that speaks of God's grace and justice? Nehemiah was clear that he would not take advantage of those he had power over or who depended upon him but he would serve them, both by opposing those who brought injustice to them and by working alongside them and not taking advantage of them.

Many of us will not consider that this is relevant to us, because we don't feel we do have power. But each of us has money – some lots of it, some not very much of it. What does this passage say to us about how we should use it? Well, what we see in this passage is Nehemiah doing two things. He lends, and he shares his wealth. Verse 10 – Nehemiah lends the people both money and food. Now I'm not going to say too much about the responsibilities of Christians to lend to those in need because there's an excellent sermon by Lyndon on the website about just that topic, so do go and listen to it. But look at what Nehemiah does in terms of using his wealth for the benefit of others. Verse 17 and 18: "Furthermore, a hundred and fifty Jews and officials ate at my table, as well as those who came to us from the surrounding nations. Each day one ox, six choice sheep and some poultry were prepared for me, and every ten days an abundant supply of wine of all kinds. In spite of all this, I never demanded the food allotted to the governor, because the demands were heavy on these people." Nehemiah not only pays for his own food, unlike previous governors, but he pays for the feeding and watering of more than 150 people who, presumably, couldn't otherwise have fed themselves. The principle is clear, isn't it – Nehemiah had lots of resources, other people didn't and were under a heavy burden – so Nehemiah shared his

resources with those who were in need. If we have plenty of resources then we are to do so as well. We are surrounded by those in need – those in this country, but also those in other countries where there is no social security or other safety nets. If you have wealth beyond your needs, it won't do to think that once you've given 10%, that's it, that's the payment of your tax, you can spend the rest of your money without a second thought. Remember that quote from Jesus when he criticised the Pharisees for only tithing and ignoring the demands of justice? Now, here I'm not really talking to those of you in debt or with very little money, who are struggling to get by, who don't know where the next pound is coming from. This is not meant to be a guilt trip for you. But for those of us who have more than enough to live on, it's a call to Biblical obedience and discipleship. Giving to church activities is important and necessary, but our giving needs to be also directed at those in *material need* as well as spiritual need. That I believe means that part at least of our giving must be to help those who don't have access to food, shelter, or other essentials. The great American 18th century preacher Jonathan Edwards said this in one of his sermons: "We are professors of Christianity, we pretend to be the followers of Jesus, and to make the gospel our rule. We have the Bible in our houses. Let us not behave ourselves in this particular, as if we had never see the Bible, as if we were ignorant of Christianity, and knew not what kind of religion it is. What will it signify to pretend to be Christians, and at the same time to live in the neglect of those rules of Christianity which are mainly insisted on in it?" He also said "Where have we any command in the Bible laid down in stronger terms, and in a more urgent manner, than the command of giving to the poor?"

But we're not going to adjust our patterns of giving or the level of our generosity because some preacher beats us up. And I hope you don't feel I am beating you up – this is about presenting what I believe Scripture is saying to us. To me, as a wealthy financial services professional. To us as a mixed body of people with differing levels of wealth. Should we shirk the teaching because it's too difficult or embarrassing or personal? I don't believe that's right.

Here's why and how we should consider our approach to money and power. We should base our motivation on the motivation of the Nehemiah of the Old Testament and the Nehemiah of the New Testament. First, let's look at the Nehemiah of the Old Testament and what motivated him to oppose injustice, not take advantage of his position, and share his wealth. Look with me at the passage. Nehemiah acts like he does for two reasons. Firstly, reverence

for God. Look with me at verse 9 where Nehemiah says to his fellow Jews “Shouldn’t you walk in the fear of our God to avoid the reproach of our Gentile enemies?” Verse 15 “But the earlier governors—those preceding me—placed a heavy burden on the people and took forty shekels of silver from them in addition to food and wine. Their assistants also lorded it over the people. But *out of reverence for God* I did not act like that.” Nehemiah revered God. It says in my commentary on this passage says that revering God meant “honouring God’s name, obeying God’s word and loving God’s people. The fear of God increased his respect for other people made in the image of God and it was a controlling spiritual principle in Nehemiah’s life”.

The second motivation for Nehemiah was compassion – compassion for the people who were labouring under the burden of the debt, the taxes and the famine. Verse 18 makes that clear when Nehemiah says “I never demanded the food allotted to the governor, because the demands were heavy on these people.” Nehemiah’s love for the people influenced the way he acted. He saw that people were oppressed – he did something to lighten the burden on them by feeding them and forgoing his own rights as governor.

Reverence, and compassion. We should be the same. But again, I’m not sure that that in itself is going to result in a transformation of our approach and attitudes to money and power. Whilst I’ve been preparing this sermon I’ve had this image in my head for a while, which is of those Russian dolls where each doll is made up of two parts, which you separate, and inside there’s another Russian doll, which you separate and inside there’s another Russian doll, and so on. Each of us presents a picture to the outside world, at church and out of church. We are judged by the things we do, how we look, how we behave. But what drives those things is deep inside us, several layers in. If we are encouraged to change our behaviour then it won’t work, or it won’t work for very long, unless that exhortation addresses the places deep inside us – where we tick, what is the driving force in our life. And to do that you need to look at the Nehemiah of the New Testament, the other Nehemiah who also left the courts of the king to come and save his people from disgrace and rebuild.

You see, Jesus came to the world to rescue us from slavery, just as Nehemiah set out to free his people from slavery. We were labouring under debts that were too great for us to service or manage – debts that were owed not to greedy money lenders but to God himself. And just as Nehemiah announces here in verse 11 an amnesty for these debts and a restoration of

fields, vineyards, olive groves and houses, so Jesus dealt with our debts and announced an amnesty. Just as Nehemiah invited his people to share his food, so Jesus invites us to the heavenly banquet, where God himself will serve us. I'd like to suggest that the extent to which we decide to change the way in which we think about and deal with our money and power is the extent to which we understand and take on board what Jesus has done. So let me ask – do you realise the dreadful slavery and debt you were in? Do you realise the rescue that Jesus has personally achieved for you? For Nehemiah it meant leaving the comfort of the Persian court - for Jesus it meant paying the debt himself and being tortured to death, separated from his father. Have you grasped hold of how great the redemption from debt was that Jesus brought about for you? He could have stayed with God and enjoyed his ultimate wealth and prosperity – the glory that was his before the beginning of the world – but he gave it up. As with Nehemiah, out of reverence for his father and compassion for us he came and paid our debt so that we may eat with him and be blessed.

Have we taken that on board? Have you spent time recently thinking on what Jesus gave up? Paul wrote to the church in Corinth “you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.” *That's* the reason why we will be promiscuous with our wealth, why we will look out for opportunities to bless others – not because we're better than other people, but because we *get it* – we understand the rescue that Jesus has brought about for us, and we want to respond in kind. We will look for opportunities to help the poor, because we understand that *we were poor*, but Jesus helped us. We will use our money to bring about justice, because we understand that *Jesus suffered injustice for us*. We will give our money generously not grudgingly or sparingly because *Jesus did not spare himself but gave up all he had* on the cross to bring us in. What are the things that hinder us from this path? Well, let's deal with a couple – identity and security. Do we define ourselves by what we can buy or do with our money for ourselves? Do we think of ourselves as attractive because of the amount of money we can spend on our activities, our clothes, our cars and homes and friends? Jesus says – *you are defined by my loving sacrifice for you. You were in rags, but you are made beautiful by me. I treasure you and love you.* Are we so concerned for the future that we want to save more than we should for ourselves? Jesus says – *your ultimate future is secure* – my death is the guarantee that the price for your sins has been paid. The day of Jubilee has come. Your debt is gone, you are no longer a slave. *You are free.* Don't act as if you were still a slave. Instead, store up your treasure in heaven. Jesus gave himself for us – we are

invited to give ourselves for him. It's an act of obedience that comes from a grateful heart, not a resentful one.

I want to end with an example of what this means. To the extent that this place has a founding father it's Ronnie Wilcox. Ronnie, I understand, rose to great heights in business and was offered a knighthood when still quite young – which he turned down because he thought he was too young. He was a man of God who wanted to do something for the young people of the East End. His generosity was legendary, and when he died people who he had supported hoped there would be generous gifts coming their way in his will. But when the details of his estate came out, it turned out he had no money left. He had given it all away. When he died, he died poor by the standards of this world. But now he's in heaven I confidently expect Ronnie to be one of the richest people there.