



2019 Q4 Ezra and Nehemiah: Lesson 5

Violating the Spirit of the Law

by Tim Jennings (announcements last page)

SABBATH

What does the title of the lesson bring to mind? Any examples jump out at you from either Scripture or from your own life experience?

I think of the example of the church-school teacher I write about in chapter seven of *The God-Shaped Heart* whose husband physically abused her, and after years of suffering, after going to the pastor for help, she finally moved out and filed for divorce. The husband went to the conference officials and complained that she was divorcing him without Biblical grounds as he had not had sex with another person and therefore she was unfit to teach in a Christian school—and the conference fired her from her job.

Why do violations of the spirit of the law occur?

- Because of rule-keeping—it has to do with immaturity and not actually understanding God’s law. It is because people believe the lie that God’s law functions like human law—rules imposed and have not yet come to understand and practice design law.
- Rule keeping—level four and below—doesn’t lead to change of heart, thus selfishness reigns in the heart. The legal system of religion allows a person to maintain selfishness while appearing righteous by keeping their rules. Look at the Pharisees and how they kept rules but hurt people.
 - Corban—rather than caring for parents
 - Refusal to associate with non-Jews
 - Willingness to stone woman caught in adultery rather than try and save her
 - Rejection of Jesus and wanting Him off the cross to keep the Sabbath

The seven levels of moral development:

1. Reward and Punishment
2. Marketplace Exchange
3. Social Conformity
4. Law and Order
5. Love for Others
6. Principled-based Living
7. Understanding Friend of God

Violations of the spirit of the law occur by those operating at level four and below because the motive remains selfish. Only those at level five and above, those who have been reborn to love God and others more than self will live in harmony with the spirit of the law.



And those who live in harmony with the spirit of the law will often find themselves violating rules of their religious organization—examples:

- Jesus healing on Sabbath
- Jesus touching lepers
- Jesus talking to women
- Jesus talking to and socializing with non-Jews, tax collectors, prostitutes
- Disciples not ritually washing hands before eating
- Disciples plucking grain on Sabbath

And don't forget the story of the Good Samaritan...

Any examples in our world today?

Read first paragraph, "To this day..." Do we all agree that as Christians, as people who love God and Jesus and who want to represent God's kingdom of love, we are to love other people and seek to help those who need help? So we agree we all want to help the poor?

Okay—we all agree on the goal—does that mean we all agree on the method, on the best way, the specific action to take in helping the poor?

There is generally no disagreement on helping people who are incapacitated or disabled, or in providing assistance to people without disability but have suffered in catastrophic circumstances: natural disaster (Katrina), house fire, healthcare issue with medical bills beyond ability to pay, downsizing of company and loss of job etc.

But, what about people who are able to care for themselves, but instead of doing so refuse to work?

There are two philosophies: Paternalism versus Autonomy

Both philosophies will have as their goal the good of others, but their methods diverge.

Paternalism takes the position that the person in authority—doctor in medical setting, politician in governmental setting—knows better than the individual (patient or citizen) and that the person in authority functions like a parent and will make decisions for the individual which the individual **must** follow—**irrespective of that person's ability to make their own decisions**. The idea is that the person in authority knows better than the individual.

Autonomy takes the position that those in authority utilize their abilities to promote the autonomy of others and respect their decision-making, even if it is detrimental to their own health or wellbeing—assuming they have the ability to understand their choices—an adult who chooses to smoke for example.

In our society we have a mixture of both approaches going on simultaneously.



- Marijuana—illegality is a form of paternalism, recreational legality is a form of autonomy
- In communist and socialist countries paternalism is predominant
- In our country autonomy is predominant—but is under assault by social progressives who believe in a paternalistic approach of state-run programs for all people

What method is most Christlike?

- Every person should be fully convinced in his own mind. Rom 14:5
- Not by might nor by power but by the Spirit says the Lord Zech 4:6
- “Instead, speaking the **truth in love**, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ.” Eph 4:15

Presenting truth in love with various options while leaving people free is God’s method—thus autonomy—why is this God’s method?

Because of the design law of liberty—love only exists in atmosphere of freedom. God wants our love, trust, loyalty, devotion—and that we become understanding friends (John 15:15). As the Ephesians text above says, He wants us to grow up into mature people, which requires we think for ourselves and make choices for ourselves. Why?

Because of the design law of exertion—strength comes by exercise, not just physical strength but strength of character. People must exercise their own individuality to make decisions for themselves in order to grow and develop. The mature are those who have developed *by practice* the ability to discern the right from the wrong (Heb 5:14).

If we take the paternalistic approach and provide everything for everyone, then we:

- obstruct freedom, which damages love and incites rebellion
- infantilize and undermine development.
 - Some people in the political sphere want this because when people become infantilized they are dependent on the source of their sustenance, thus they become a predictable voting bloc. But such an approach is not in harmony with God’s design.

In Bible times the widows and poor had mechanisms to get food for free, what was the mechanism? Gleaning in the fields.

What is the difference upon the poor who are getting the help between gleaning and staying at home and having someone else bring you groceries or giving you money to buy groceries? Again, we are talking about people who are capable, not the paralytic, the demented, the psychotic.

The goal of the Christian is to assist every person to develop their God-given abilities to the fullest. Thus, we do not deny people opportunity, we create opportunity and there are multiple ways to do this. But there are also multiple ways to deny opportunity. The obvious evil ways are:



- discrimination based on sex, race, religion etc.
- slavery
- refusing education (which occurs to women in some Muslim countries today)

But there are other ways to deny opportunity:

- giving handouts to those capable of work but provide no avenue for employment or autonomy
- providing a motorized wheelchair in the home of a person capable of walking
- doing for someone what they are able to do for themselves

SUNDAY

Read Nehemiah 5:1-5:

Now the men and their wives raised a great outcry against their Jewish brothers. ² Some were saying, “We and our sons and daughters are numerous; in order for us to eat and stay alive, we must get grain.”

³ Others were saying, “We are mortgaging our fields, our vineyards and our homes to get grain during the famine.”

⁴ Still others were saying, “We have had to borrow money to pay the king’s tax on our fields and vineyards. ⁵ Although we are of the same flesh and blood as our countrymen and though our sons are as good as theirs, yet we have to subject our sons and daughters to slavery. Some of our daughters have already been enslaved, but we are powerless, because our fields and our vineyards belong to others.”

The lesson points out that the rich and empowered were using the poor for their own gain.

Do we agree that exploiting people is wrong—that we should not exploit others for our own gain?

In every culture of the world, evil is defined, at its root, as exploiting another person, or even animals, for our own selfish gain.

M. Scott Peck wrote a book called *People of the Lie* in it he described human evil, not the evil all can see like the child molester, rapist, murderer, that evil is easy to see. He described the evil that masquerades as righteousness.

If we look at this definition—people in power exploiting those without power for their own gain, do we see that in societies today?

- In the Soviet Union, China, and Cuba, did/do people in power exploit those without it? (Communism)
- In Nazi Germany did people in power exploit those without it? (Socialism)
- In England and US did people in power exploit people without it—railroad barons, mining corporations etc.? (Capitalism)



Is there any human government that is immune from exploitation of others?

What about today in America? Are there ways people are exploited under the guise of doing them good?

What about programs that are framed as providing for the poor, but prevent the poor from becoming autonomous?

What about programs that send food to third world countries to help prevent malnutrition?

According to the Foundation for Economic Education:

Economists Nathan Nunn and Nancy Qian published research in the American Economic Review examining the causal effect of US food aid on conflict within poor countries. On average, “An increase in US food aid increases the incidence and duration of civil conflicts.”

Nunn and Qian suggest this is due to the fact that food aid can be easily stolen by armed groups or corrupt governments and used to prolong their struggles against each other.¹

If we love others, do we need to evaluate the impact our actions have on them?

Do we need to ask if our actions are causing harm, enabling dysfunction and dependency under the guise of compassion or are we helping people grow to the fullest stature of children of God possible?

From the same article as the quote above on the Foundation for Economic Education website:

Too often, policies are judged on their own terms — “X tons of food aid were delivered, therefore mission accomplished!” — and how they make us feel, rather than on a sober analysis of their overall effect. But Milton Friedman’s observation is as valid today as when he first said it: the results of a given policy do not depend on the intentions of its creators. Friedman’s insight should lead us to embrace a more skeptical view of the state and its ability to solve every social problem.

Is having a good intention enough, or do we need to consider the impact and reevaluate the specific action?

The lesson in the second paragraph states, “They had already lost their land, and now they had to send someone from the family, usually children, to be in the service of the creditor in order to work off the debt.”

¹ <https://fee.org/articles/3-policies-with-good-intentions-and-tragic-results/>



What do you think about this? Is such an arrangement evil—always?

Could such an arrangement—becoming indebted and then working for the creditor to pay off the debt—actually be good?

I was the recipient of a Health Professions Scholarship Program scholarship from the US Army. The US government paid my way through medical school and I became indebted to the government for this. Afterward, I was required to serve in the US Army a number of years to pay back my debt. Was this evil?

What would make working to pay off debt wrong or evil? Would it be forcing a person to work against their will, rather than a willful arrangement like I had?

Would it be the terms of the arrangement?

Would it be when children are involved?

MONDAY

In the second paragraph it points out that for Israel lending money was permitted but charging interest was not allowed.

What do you think of this rule?

Do you think if this was the law in our society—banks and lending institutions could lend money, but they could not charge interest—that the poor would be better off? Why or why not?

What would likely happen in our society if interest was outlawed?

Would there be more “loan sharks” making illegal loans at exorbitant rates and threats of violence if one didn’t pay?

The lesson points out that Nehemiah took a stand for the spirit of the law even though the law was not technically broken.

Are there any lessons for us today?

Is it good to loan a person money, even without interest, if that person is unlikely to be able to pay it back? What would be better than a loan and why?

TUESDAY

Read third paragraph, “Nehemiah’s initial argument centers...” So it was wrong to buy and sell their own people—does that mean it was right to buy and sell other people?



In Bible times some people chose to be slaves—they would have their ears pierced and a ring put in them to mark them as voluntary slaves to a particular house for life.

“If a fellow-Israelite sells himself or herself to you as a slave, you are to release them after they have served you for six years. When the seventh year comes, you must let them go free. When you set them free, do not send them away empty-handed. Give to them generously from what the LORD has blessed you with—sheep, corn, and wine. Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and the LORD your God set you free; that is why I am now giving you this command.

16 “But your slave may not want to leave; he may love you and your family and be content to stay. Then take him to the door of your house and there pierce his ear; he will then be your slave for life. Treat your female slave in the same way. Do not be resentful when you set a slave free; after all, the slave has served you for six years at half the cost of a hired servant. Do this, and the LORD your God will bless you in all that you do. DT 15:12-18 GNB

Why would people choose this?

In the last paragraph it states that Nehemiah loaned money but didn't charge interest.

- Did people still go into debt?
- What do you think Nehemiah did for those who didn't repay the debt?
- Do you think he continued to loan to those who didn't repay?
- What happens in the heart/mind of the person who borrows but makes no attempt to repay? Would it “help” such a person to continue to loan them money?
- Do you think Nehemiah would loan to those who could work but refused?

In other words, even if one doesn't charge interest are there still other standards or criteria one uses to determine to whom one loans, or does one loan to whomever asks?

What would be the criteria if we use God's principles?

- What happens to a person who borrows money but does not pay it back?
- What would happen if we continued to loan to such a person—to them?
- Does increasing debt bring greater peace and wellbeing?
- Does failure to repay a debt increase one's sense of integrity?

So is it helpful to loan to a person with a history of failure to repay? What would be helpful?

WEDNESDAY

Read first two paragraphs, “Even though...” What do you think about these interventions?

Why did Jesus say make no oaths, let your yes be yes and no be no?



What about the curse—why pronounce a curse?

Does this entire event reveal something about the maturity of those with whom Nehemiah was dealing?

Public oaths are more likely to be needed on selfish people, who will be held accountable by the peer and social pressures and their own selfish need to maintain their reputation.

Mature people who are like Christ don't need that extra pressure, if they say they will do it, they will.

The curse also is a therapeutic intervention for the immature, like a parent who threatens a spanking for playing in the street. The mature adult doesn't need a threat from their parent, they know the dangers and won't play in the street. But the child needs the additional threat.

In this case, the threat was further evidence of how immature the people were that it was necessary to give them the added help for them to follow through on their promises.

Now, what happens to a child who plays in the street, what is the danger, what is the worst outcome?

What happens to the person who makes a promise and doesn't keep it?

What happens to a person who does evil—exploits others?

This is design law, so there is a curse, but it is the natural result of violating God's design life.

THURSDAY

Read Nehemiah 5:14-18,

14 During all the twelve years that I was governor of the land of Judah, from the twentieth year that Artaxerxes was emperor until his 32nd year, neither my relatives nor I ate the food I was entitled to have as governor. ¹⁵Every governor who had been in office before me had been a burden to the people and had demanded 40 silver coins a day for food and wine. Even their servants had oppressed the people. But I acted differently, because I honoured God. ¹⁶I put all my energy into rebuilding the wall and did not acquire any property. Everyone who worked for me joined in the rebuilding. ¹⁷I regularly fed at my table 150 of the Jewish people and their leaders, besides all the people who came to me from the surrounding nations. ¹⁸Every day I served one ox, six of the best sheep, and many chickens, and every ten days I provided a fresh supply of wine. But I knew what heavy burdens the people had to bear, so I did not claim the allowance that the governor is entitled to.

What is demonstrated? Did Nehemiah have a vision for the success of the country, the people, and not for himself?



Do you know of any modern leaders who refused their entitled pay and focuses on making their country better?

FRIDAY

Read and discuss questions

ANNOUNCEMENTS:

November 15-17, 2019: Dr. Jennings will be speaking at the Norwegian SDA Health Worker's Retreat in Oslo, Norway.

November 24, 2019: Dr. Jennings will be speaking in Aachen Germany.

January 17-19, 2020: The Power of Love Training and Equipping Course. If you would like to be prepared to more effectively share this message then come to this course. More details will be forthcoming shortly. Allen Texas (30 miles north of DFW airport). See events.comeandreason.com for more details and to sign up.