

## Social Justice & the Gospel

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**Exegetical Idea:** Nehemiah successfully rebukes the Jewish nobles for the oppression and exploitation of the poor Jews as an act of justice and mercy.

**Homiletical Idea:** Our local church should be more involved in the community through projects that will minister to suffering humanity.

**Purpose Statement:** Inspire church members to serve and/or create new ministry opportunities.

### Intro:

1. Testimony of William Carey's ministry showing how his mission of impactful because he combined the proclamation of God's Word with social justice.

“William Carey, the father of modern mission organizations, remains an inspiration for many due not only to his commitment to evangelism, but mainly for his relentless and successful dedication to social reforms. **Indian society was plagued with social evils such as slavery, infanticide, widow-burning or sati, and burning of lepers.** Due to Carey's advocacy efforts, **a Regulation (VI of 1802) was passed and made unlawful the inhuman practice of infanticide. In 1829,** after more than 30 years of missionary and social advocacy work in India by Carey, other missionaries, and native Indian reformers like Raja Ram, **sati was banished by law.** Carey was not alone in his advocacy endeavor. ‘Other missionaries, as well as governors and Indian reformers, gave much needed aid in order that the practice of burning widows be forbidden’ (Kuhn, Wagner. 2013. *Redemption and Transformation through Relief and Development*, p. 129).” William, Michelet, *The Concept of Social Justice in the Social Sciences, in the Bible, and in Adventism*, p. 16

- a. Today we are going to turn to Nehemiah chapter 5, which talks about a social issue that Nehemiah had to deal with in order to carry on his primary mission—to rebuild the wall and gates of Jerusalem.

### Body:

2. Understanding the problem: the noble Jews were exploiting their poor brethren to enrich themselves upon their misfortune.
  - a. **Nehemiah 5:1-3** – Due to a draught the Jews could not produce their own food, and therefore many of them had to mortgage their lands and houses to the noble Jews in order to buy food.
  - b. **Nehemiah 5:4** – This Jews also had to borrow money from the noble Jews to pay the Persian king's taxes.
  - c. **Nehemiah 5:5** – They had to sell their children as slaves in order to pay their debt and interest.
    - i. The fact that they did not have their land to reverse their situation their poverty increased because of the interest.

3. Nehemiah's response to the issue of exploitation among God's people:
  - a. **Nehemiah 5:6** – Nehemiah's anger was roused against exploitation and unfairness.
  - b. **Nehemiah 5:7** – Nehemiah did not act impulsively, but after much consideration of the matter he understood that exploitation could not pass unnoticed. He used his influence to change the situation.
    - i. This is called "social justice."
    - ii. He called a "great assembly against" the nobles—public manifestation.
  - c. **Nehemiah 5:8** – Nehemiah denounce the malignity of their oppression against the poor of selling them as slaves to the heathens.
    - i. He contrast his attitude with theirs. Nehemiah was in the business of setting the Jews free from the hands of the heathens while the nobles were selling them as slaves.
    - ii. "The fact that the oppressors were men of wealth, whose support was greatly needed in the work of restoring the city, did not for a moment influence Nehemiah." *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 648
  - d. **Nehemiah 5:11** – Nehemiah demands the nobles to restore what they had gained by oppression, and they did.
4. Through Moses God gave an economy that was intended to irradiate selfishness and develop nobility of character:
  - a. "If you lend money to *any of My people who are poor among you, you shall not be like a moneylender to him; you shall not charge him interest.*" Exodus 22:25
  - b. "For the poor will never cease from the land; therefore I command you, saying, 'You shall open your hand wide to your brother, to your poor and your needy, in your land.'" Deuteronomy 15:11
  - c. Social dimension of Old Testament ethics:
    - i. The Sabbatical year (Lev 25:1-7)
    - ii. The Year of Jubilee (25:8-24, 35-46)
    - iii. The law of redemption (25:25-34, 47-55)
    - iv. The law of gleaning (Lev 19:9-10)
    - v. Moving boundary stones that delineated a person's property (Deut 19:14, 27:17)
    - vi. Perverting the legal system by showing bias, accepting bribes, or committing perjury (Exod 23:1-2; Deut 18-20).

"The Lord had commanded Israel, through Moses, that every third year a tithe be raised for the benefit of the poor; and a further provision had been made in the suspension of agricultural labor every seventh year, the land lying fallow, its spontaneous products being left to those in need. Faithfulness in devoting these offerings to the relief of the poor and to other benevolent uses would have tended to keep fresh before the people the truth of God's ownership of all, and their opportunity to be channels of blessing. It was Jehovah's purpose that the Israelites should have a

training that would eradicate selfishness, and develop breadth and nobility of character.”  
*Prophets and Kings*, p. 646

5. Should God’s people be involved in social justice?
  - a. Let’s first define what social just actually is:
    - i. “Social justice is simply that—realizing that **all people have rights** and that **each human deserves dignity**, the same as we desire for ourselves.” Target-Paul, Kimberley, *Social Justice, a Christian Duty?*
    - ii. “Therefore, whatever you want men to do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets.” Matthew 7:12
  - b. “The Spirit of the Lord *is* upon Me, because He has anointed Me to preach the gospel *to the* poor; He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to *the* captives and recovery of sight to *the* blind, *to* set at liberty those who are oppressed; to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.” Luke 4:18-19
  - c. “Learn to do good; seek justice, rebuke the oppressor; defend the fatherless, plead for the widow.” Isaiah 1:17

“God repeatedly called advocates to denounce oppression, injustices, and wickedness in earthly political regimes. God sent Moses to Pharaoh to advocate for the deliverance of Israel from an oppressive system. Queen Esther, pushed by her uncle Mordecai and concerned for the survival of the Jewish community, went to meet king Ahasuerus, risking her life and advocated for the life of her people, forcing the king to suspend and replace an edict that doomed the existence of the Jews.” Falk, Lehnart. 2015. Does the Church have a Social Responsibility? Advocacy, a Biblical Legacy. In *Church and Society: Missiological Challenges for the Seventh- day Adventist Church*.

“God expected his servants to raise their voice in defense of the voiceless and the oppressed. God is heart-broken when there is no advocate. None of the prophets of the Old Testament—Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Amos, etc.—remained silent in the face of injustices.” William, Michelet, *The Concept of Social Justice in the Social Sciences, in the Bible, and in Adventism*, p. 8

6. Nehemiah was able to rebuke oppression because he lived an exemplary life.
  - a. **Nehemiah 5:14, 15** – Nehemiah chose not to benefit from luxury that the previous governors did, and he did not charge more taxes from the people.
  - b. Because of his blameless conduct he was successful in rebuking the oppression of the nobles.
7. What should we do as a church?
  - a. In 1956 the Adventist Church established the Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA) to address social distortions and depravation.
  - b. We also have created the Adventist Community Services that operate in the local level.

- c. We must recognize that the proclamation of the gospel must be coupled with works of social justice.

“Rather than emphasizing mainly evangelism (as conservative churches do) or mainly social justice (as liberal churches do), we intentionally set out to give a very high emphasis to both—employing a holistic approach that connects the people in our church to the city through both evangelistic proclamation and ministries of justice and mercy.” Keller, Timothy. 2012. *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-centered Ministry in Your City*, p. 292

“McKnight concludes that the ‘atonement creates the kingdom’ (13), understood as a society where God’s will is fulfilled in terms of “equality, social justice, economic availability to and liability for one another, and fellowship” (14).” William, Michelet, *The Concept of Social Justice in the Social Sciences, in the Bible, and in Adventism*, p. 7

- d. We must listen to the needs of the communities and reach beyond the church walls.

“Certain populations within a country are **left out of social development** due to **discrimination**, **poverty**, and/or **lack of access to education**.” William, Michelet, *The Concept of Social Justice in the Social Sciences, in the Bible, and in Adventism*, p. 3

- e. There are three groups of people that the Scriptures often mention as vulnerable people in need of help—the foreigner, the fatherless/orphan, and the widow.

“You shall not pervert justice due the **stranger** or the **fatherless**, nor take a **widow’s** garment as a pledge.” Deuteronomy 24:17

- f. Ministries of our Church:

- i. Food Pick Up
- ii. Diaper Pantry
- iii. Grief Sessions
- iv. Covered with Care, Blanket Ministry
- v. Free Oil Change
- vi. Cooking Classes

**Conclusion:** We need to more actively impact our community with acts of justice and mercy, just as much we need to proclaim the gospel message.

### **Additional Comments:**

However, when it came to slavery laws, Nicholas Miller notes that “White called for civil disobedience, the breaking of federal law, in order to protect the human rights of African Americans” (2017:24). Miller cites White’s Testimonies for the Church, volume 1, “the law of our land requiring us to deliver a slave to his master, we are not to obey” (1948:202) (in Miller 2017:24). Such a position clearly has a self-deterministic resonance.

In addition, Andrew Walls and Cathy Ross identify five marks of mission in the 21st century: (1) to proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom, (2) to teach, baptize, and nurture new believers, (3) to respond to human needs by loving service, (4) to seek to transform unjust structures of society, and (5) to strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth (2008:*xiv*).

A third example of best practices in social justice advocacy utilized by the Adventist Church is the *Enditnow* campaign to end violence against women. The goal of the campaign was to “raise awareness and advocate for the end of violence against women and girls around the world (ADRA 2017a). The main strategy of the campaign consisted in collecting 1,000,000 signatures from more than 200 countries, followed by a presentation of these signatures to General Secretary Ban Ki-Moon at the United Nations. The activities undertaken included women holding rallies in communities, going door-to-door, going to supermarkets in order to collect the maximum amount of signatures possible (Boyd 2015:280).

Love of money and love of display have made this world as a den of thieves and robbers. The Scriptures picture the greed and oppression that will prevail just before Christ's second coming. “Go to now, ye rich men,” James writes; “ye have heaped treasure together for the last days. Behold, the hire of the laborers who have reaped down your fields, which is of you kept back by fraud, crieth: and the cries of them which have reaped are entered into the ears of the Lord of Sabaoth. Ye have lived in pleasure on the earth, and been wanton; ye have nourished your hearts, as in a day of slaughter. Ye have condemned and killed the just; and he doth not resist you.” James 5:1, 3-6.” Prophets and Kings, p. 651