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## Community Development According to Nehemiah

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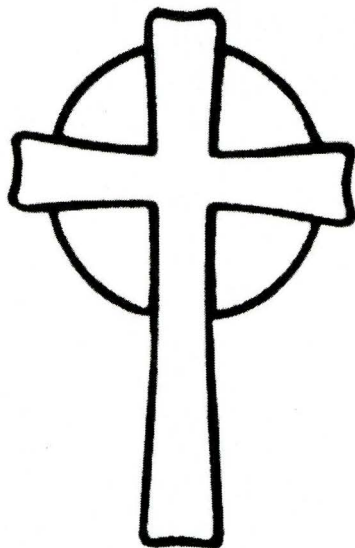
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## COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT ACCORDING TO NEHEMIAH

MICHAEL LANDON

Pratt, Kansas

According to the 1990 census, 49.9 percent of the children in my community live in poverty. The achievement test scores of this state always come in lowest in the rankings—usually in the 49th or 50th place, and the paper for this town of 16,000 daily reports injury or death by violence. All of this is distressing to me, but even worse is the uneasy question that lurks in my mind, “What should you be doing about this, Mike?”

The work of Nehemiah is a good example of godly community development. Many have extolled Nehemiah’s excellent example of leadership, but his story is also an example of the mind games that the devil tries to play with godly people when they try to help people in distress. As I have tried to build helping relationships with needy people, one of my greatest difficulties has been to deal with the barriers that spring up in my own mind. It is these barriers of a warped vision of reality, fear, greed, and ego-centrism that seem to hinder many Christians in outreach to the needy, and it is in these areas that Nehemiah is such a good example.

### Vision: Other or Brother?

Nehemiah lived in Susa, the capital of the Persian Empire (present-day Iraq) about 450 BC. His ancestors were among the Jews carried into captivity by the Babylonians after they destroyed Jerusalem in 586 BC. The prophet Jeremiah had urged the bewildered Jews to settle down, raise families, and work for their own prosperity and that of their captors, for God would enable them to return to Jerusalem within seventy years (Jer 29:4–10). God did such a thing through Cyrus, the first of the Persian emperors, who overthrew the Babylonian kings, but Nehemiah was a descendant of those Jews that decided to stay in the East instead of returning to Jerusalem.

Thus, in the first chapter, when Nehemiah received word from his relatives about the “great trouble and disgrace” of the inhabitants of

Jerusalem, he confronted his first mind game: Were these distressing people "the other" or "his brother"? If Nehemiah had chosen to regard them as "other," he could have easily said, "That's not my problem!" or "It's their own fault!" or "They got what they deserved. It was God that did this to them, you know!" or even "Where's Ezra? He's the high priest over there! It's his responsibility, not mine!" (Ezra 7:6-10).

Do any of these excuses sound familiar? Have you ever thought or heard, "It's their own fault," "They don't deserve any better," or "It's the government's or preacher's or elders' or benevolence committee's responsibility?" Nehemiah, however, regarded these troubled people as his brothers and their problems as his problems. He sat and wept and mourned for several days. Then he prayed, "I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself and my father's house, have committed against you" (Neh. 1:6).

When a significant part of your community is in great distress, (1) their problem is your problem, as often evidenced by the degradation of schools and other public services, the elevation of crime, and ever-increasing taxes intended to remedy this situation, and (2) you are a part of both the problem and solution! One out of every two children in my community could not live in poverty without something having been done to permit that by the politicians I elected, the school administrators, teachers, and police officers I support through my taxes, the businesses I frequent and the church of which I am a part! I cannot "live outside of history as a self-made man or woman."<sup>1</sup> The first barrier to community building which the Devil plants in my mind is that it's not my fault or my responsibility.

#### Fear

The second mind game involves fear. In chapter 2, distressed by the condition of his "brothers," Nehemiah is confronted by his boss: "What's your problem?" Nehemiah confesses, "I was very much afraid" (Neh. 2:2). Was he afraid of what he was about to ask the king or afraid of where his love for others was taking him? Fear keeps me away from certain people and certain areas of town.

Robert Cole's book, *The Children of Crisis: A Study in Courage and Fear*, tells about some of the little children, seven and eight years old, who were among the first blacks to integrate the white schools in the South. There was one little girl named Ruby,

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<sup>1</sup> Cynthia Ziemer, "Rekindling the Prophetic Voice of the Church," *Trinity Seminary Review* 1 (Spring 1983) 37.

who did, however, distinguish between whites and Negro people. She drew white people larger and more lifelike. Negroes were smaller, their bodies less intact. A white girl we both knew to be her own size appeared several times taller. While Ruby's own face lacked an eye in one drawing, an ear in another, the white girl never lacked any features. Moreover, Ruby drew the white girl's hands and legs carefully, always making sure that they had the proper number of fingers and toes. Not so with her own limbs, or those of any Negro children she chose (or was asked) to picture. A thumb or forefinger might be missing, or a whole set of toes. The arms were shorter, even absent or truncated.<sup>2</sup>

The point is that the devil tries to convince us that the challenge is so big and forceful, while we are so small and incomplete that we cannot possibly succeed. Hasn't the devil tried to tell you that you lack something in your life to do his will? Hasn't he told you that many times? And, sadly enough, hasn't it often worked?

A *Newsweek* special issue called the American poor "the new untouchables." In the lead article about low-income children, Jonathan Kozol declares:

Many get to class so tired and hungry that they cannot concentrate. Others are ashamed to go to school because of shunning by their peers. Classmates label them "the hotel children" and don't want to sit beside them. Even their teachers sometimes keep their distance. The children look diseased and dirty. Many times they are. Often unable to bathe, they bring the smell of destitution with them into school. There is a smell of destitution, I may add. It is the smell of sweat and filth and urine. Like many journalists, I often find myself ashamed to be resisting the affection of a tiny child whose entire being seems to emanate pathology.<sup>3</sup>

Fear is a self-protection mechanism that God gave us, but the Devil perverts it. J. Lee Magness declared that Christians must "know fear! But the fear we must know is the fear of God." Then, once we know the fear of God,

[i]f we truly fear God, we will not let ourselves be terrorized by the prophets of fear—those who would have us fear everything from intruders in our homes to immigrants on our borders to cracks in our national security to the disintegration of our society to the demise of the church.<sup>4</sup>

Godly fear motivates us to fear God and do His will. It does not promote wild risks, but at the same time, it recognizes that the Apostle

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Cole, *The Children of Crisis: A Study in Courage and Fear* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1964) 47.

<sup>3</sup> Jonathan Kozol, "The New Untouchables," *Newsweek* 114 (Special Issue Winter 1989 / Spring 1990) 52.

<sup>4</sup> J. Lee Magness, "No Fear or K(no)w Fear?" *Christian Standard* (Feb. 5, 1995) 5.

John included the cowardly as those who “will be in the fiery lake of burning sulphur” (Rev 21:8). Godly fear teaches us to use godly wisdom to take risks for the Lord’s sake (Matt 25:2; Matt 25:14–30; Luke 16:1–9; Eph 5:15).

### The Cost

When the emperor Artaxerxes confronted the distressed Nehemiah and showed him compassion, he continued with the question, “What is it you want?” (Neh 2:4). Nehemiah responded with the strangest of requests, “Please let me take a few years off to go rebuild a city!” In the end, it looks as if Artaxerxes simply gave Nehemiah a temporary transfer of responsibility in order to fulfill his dream.

Have you ever stopped to think that to rebuild your community, you may have to earn less money? Or, at least, risk making less money? How can you help someone else when you’re burdened with so much work at work and so many things at home to take care of and so much entertainment to consume? Noah Snider, in his book *When There’s No Place Like Home: An Autobiography of the Homeless*, poses the question “Is life in a society like Monopoly? Does the game end when one player accumulates all the property titles and wealth? What happens to the rest of us?”<sup>5</sup> Jesus suggests in Matthew 19:

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Where is the local Bank of Heaven? Jesus clarifies in the parable of the sheep and the goats that one of heaven’s accounts is the poor, for “I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me” (Matt 25:40).

### Be Like Mike

The third of the devil’s mind games is our own ego-centrism. Strangely enough, the very fact that we are not poor is too often taken as proof that we know all about being poor. When Nehemiah arrived in Jerusalem, he did not immediately call a meeting to tell these destitute people their problem and how he was going to solve it. Instead, he kept silent and looked around (Neh 2:12–16). In modern social science terms, this behavior is called participant observation or ethnographic research. In

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<sup>5</sup> Noah Snider, *When There’s No Place Like Home: An Autobiography of the Homeless* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1991) 51.

other words, Nehemiah did not assume that he knew their problem sufficiently to find a solution.

According to tradition, James Harvey once discussed a Christian's greatest impediment to spiritual growth and happiness with an old plowman named Clayton. Harvey thought the key was to "renounce our sinful self," but Clayton replied, "No, the greatest difficulty is to renounce our righteous self."<sup>6</sup> Perhaps the greatest problem in community development is the presupposition that "poor people are not like me, but they want to become like me." If this Persian Jew had come over, told the people their problems, and announced plans to build a good Persian wall around this holy Jewish city, I doubt very much he would have succeeded.

Because we may have succeeded in the socio-economic system of our community does not mean we are necessarily good models for others. Our goal is to point others to Jesus and encourage our mutual transformation into his image (Rom 12:1-3; Gal 3:18).

#### Conclusion

Having overcome all of these mind games (and other problems), Nehemiah was able to lead the Jews in Jerusalem to rebuild their city wall and gates and, in the process, rebuild their lives around God's will (Neh 8-12). A faulty vision of reality, fear, greed, and ego-centrism is the tool of the Devil to keep us confused, isolated from others, and unproductive in the Lord's work. Recognizing our own part in building a divided society, fearing God more than people who are different from us, depositing our treasures in the local Bank of Heaven, and developing a little bit of practical humility can help us build helpful relationships with God's creatures living in pain and poverty and imitate Nehemiah, a hero of community development.

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<sup>6</sup> Christian Faith and Life, quoted in Walter B. Knight, *3000 Illustrations for Christian Service* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950) 535.