

Nehemiah: Generosity, but Was It the Right Motive?

Nehemiah 5:14-19

By [Dr. Derek Thomas](#)

*The Lord's Day Evening
October 5, 2008*

Please be seated. Now turn with me if you would to the book of Nehemiah, chapter 5, and we're going to be reading from verse 14 to the end of the chapter. Now before we read the Scriptures together, let's look to God in prayer.

Lord God, this is Your word: the holy Scripture infallible, inerrant, true in all that it affirms, able to make us wise unto salvation through faith which is in Jesus Christ our Lord, for our instruction, for our reproof, for our correction in the way of righteousness. Father, help us now by the outpouring and illuminating work of Your Spirit to read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest, and all for Jesus' sake. Amen.

This is God's holy inerrant word:

Moreover, from the time that I was appointed to be their governor in the land of Judah, from the twentieth year to the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes the king, twelve years, neither I nor my brothers ate the food allowance of the governor. The former governors who were before me laid heavy burdens on the people and took from them for their daily ration forty shekels of silver. Even their servants lorded it over the people. But I did not do so, because of the fear of God. I also persevered in the work on this wall, and we acquired no land, and all my servants were gathered there for the work. Moreover, there were at my table 150 men, Jews and officials, besides those who came to us from the nations that were around us. Now what was prepared at my expense for each day was one ox and six choice sheep and birds, and every ten days all kinds of wine in abundance. Yet for all this I did not demand the food allowance of the governor, because the service was too heavy on this people. Remember for my good, O my God, all that I have done for this people.

So far God's holy inerrant word.

Two weeks ago we were in the beginning of Nehemiah 5, the chapter about bad

debts and loan sharks and mortgages at high interest rates, and fiscal liquidity, economic greed, opportunism...it sounds, doesn't it, a bit like the news of the last two weeks? But this is Jerusalem, 445 B.C.

Jerusalem is a troubled city. The problem isn't coming now from outside, but within, among the people of the Jews. Brothers and sisters are oppressing each other. The poor, the blue-collar section of Jerusalem, are complaining because all this wall-building wasn't putting food on the table. The *bourgeoisie* of Jerusalem, the land owners, were also complaining. They apparently didn't have a lot of money. They needed to borrow capital to buy seed to plant crops. As guarantee for the loan, they were mortgaging their land. Because the crops were poor (and now they're facing even poorer crops because they're not tending to their crops because they're building this wall), they are fearful that they may have to place their children into work — a form of slavery — to pay off these debts. Their fear is that the poverty cycle may get their children into perpetual slavery.

And then there were others who were complaining not so much about fellow Jews demanding, perhaps, high interest for loans that they're unable to repay, but the oppressive taxation policy of Assyria that equally is causing them to go into a debt cycle.

The tension is palpable, and especially when we read in the previous section that Nehemiah himself perhaps ...there was a difference of opinion as to how to interpret exactly what Nehemiah was saying, but some at least think that Nehemiah was confessing that he too, as someone who is relatively well-off (he is, after all, the governor, the Persian governor in Jerusalem)...and he too perhaps had been loaning to those in need at a certain interest rate. That point is disputed.

He's gathered the men (and leaders especially) together. They've banged heads together...not that usury is wrong, although Old Testament economics said that you couldn't charge interest on loans to people who are poor, but charging interest in and of itself was not wrong. But — and we all know from the past two weeks — there was a crisis: a crisis seemingly economically that could bring the city of Jerusalem down. And he urges the people to charge no interest, to give back any land that they may have acquired in the process.

And now in verse 14, it's twelve years later. This is a section that is chronologically out of sequence. Nehemiah — as he's writing the book of Nehemiah from his political memoirs (and every politician keeps memoirs, and Nehemiah is a politician and he's kept his memoirs), he's giving now further evidence of just what a servant heart had motivated that previous decision to charge no usury, and he's now giving, as it were, an example of how that attitude prevailed for the next twelve years.

I want us to see three or four things in this little section.

I. Self-denial.

The first thing I want us to see is self-denial. He's been made the governor. Now when he first came back to Jerusalem, he was not the governor — at least we don't think so. But somewhere in the next twelve years, he was made governor. Perhaps after the wall was finished he went back to Susa, was commissioned as the governor (he'd done such a fabulous job in the eyes of Artaxerxes perhaps). He was sent back to Jerusalem as the governor. It's a conjecture.

But as a governor he has a mansion. As a governor he has an entourage of civil servants; there is mention here of 150 of them. He has a stipend. He has a food allowance...a food allowance, you understand, that didn't come from the purse of King Artaxerxes, but it was a food allowance that was levied upon the people. He had the right as governor to levy taxes; to levy taxes and collect taxes not only for King Artaxerxes, his boss, but he had the right as governor to collect taxes for his own office, for the needs of the governorship of Jerusalem. Some of these taxes would go to pay for the repair of infrastructure in Jerusalem. Perhaps some of it would even go towards the repair of this wall that was being built. And some of it would have been utilized for paying for these day to day expenses of entertainment, of feeding 150 civil servants and what appears to be an entourage of foreign dignitaries, probably from Egypt, who would be heading towards Susa and the capital of the Assyrian Empire and would stop in Jerusalem along the way. And as the governor of the city, he would be responsible for providing them with hospitality. But he tells us in no uncertain terms that he did not levy this taxation on the people. He did not take what was his right.

Now it's important for us to see a principle here. Nehemiah isn't saying that it was wrong for him to levy this food allowance, to raise this tax. He's simply saying that he chose not to do so. He denied himself his right. He denied himself the privilege of his office. It's an important principle. It's exactly the same principle that Paul is elaborating in I Corinthians 9. He wants to speak about Christian liberty, but he tells the Corinthians in I Corinthians 9 that there are certain things that are his right as an apostle, as a preacher of the gospel. He has a right to live off the gospel. Ligon and I live off the gospel. We live off your generosity. We live off part of your tithe that you give to the church. We are full-time ministers of the gospel. [Actually, I have two jobs, so my illustration is now falling apart! But you understand!] Let me just say this about Ligon, then.

Paul is saying, in I Corinthians 9, that as an apostle he had the right to expect to be supported. He had the right because he had been set apart by the church. He had been commissioned by Jesus Christ as an apostle. He had a right to expect the people of God to support him, to give him sufficient to enable him to do the work of ministry without worrying about worldly cares. [There's a marvelous little expression that...eludes me now!] But he chose especially in Corinth not to do

that. You remember when he was in Corinth, he worked. He was a tent maker. He made tents. He worked. I have no idea how many hours a day he would work. One imagines that probably he would work early in the morning. There would probably be a lunch time meeting in the lecture room of Tyrannus in Corinth where he would put aside his daily vocation of tent making and he would give himself now for perhaps two or three hours during siesta time in Corinth. That room was available for gospel ministry. You understand what Paul is saying.

It's exactly what Nehemiah is saying here. He had the right to levy taxes. He had the right as governor to demand of the people. It's fascinating. I was reading some archeological background to the book of Nehemiah. [Some of it was deadly dull, I have to say.] But I came across some artifact — or at least, pictures of artifacts, utensils dated to this period of the fifth century B.C., and they were believed to be the utensils in which these taxes would be collected, perhaps at certain gatherings. Perhaps when the people of God would gather together in some communal setting there would be these utensils that would be sent around for the gathering of this money.

It's an example of self-denial. It's a Jesus-like attitude, isn't it? You remember what is said of Jesus by Paul in Philippians 2:

“Who being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God, but He made Himself of no reputation.”

He humbles Himself; He denies Himself. Deity was His right; to sit as it were on the throne of heaven was His right. It was His privilege; it was His prerogative, because He was God. But He denied himself that right. And Nehemiah is saying, ‘That’s what I did. I denied myself my rights.’

Now we live in an age that is terribly self-conscious about rights. Our little children are aware of what is their right. They can very easily demand something as a right. But here's a Christian principle, a Christian principle that is exemplified in the life and character of Nehemiah. He sacrificed his rights. He engaged in self-denial. It's a beautiful thing. It's a Jesus-like thing, and oh, for more of it among you and me, that we might deny ourselves our rights for the sake of others!

II. Generosity.

The second thing I want us to see here is generosity. It follows from what we've just been saying, but I want to see this as a separate thing and I want to focus on it.

There's a spirit of generosity about Nehemiah. He tells us (verse 18) what it cost him. An ox...this is a daily requirement to feed these 150 men and the entourage

of diplomats that would stay in the governor's palace perhaps...an ox and six choice sheep, and fowl of some kind, and every ten days all kind of wine in abundance. "Yet for all this, I did not demand the food allowance of the governor, because the service was too heavy on this people."

He's generous! This would have cost a significant amount of money, which he evidently paid out of his own purse. He tells us about previous governors who demanded forty shekels of silver as a daily ration. Now, translating that into today is notoriously a difficult thing to do, but this much at least we should understand: that it's meant to be a figure that brings a level of surprise. It's a figure that tells us something of the exorbitant demand that was being levied upon the people just to administer this provision. And Nehemiah pays for it himself. There's a spirit of generosity about him.

That's a biblical principle. Paul in many places in the New Testament (in I Timothy 6:18) pleads for Christians to be generous and to be ready to share. Luke describes Cornelius in Acts 10 as "giving alms generously." Again, in that passage in II Corinthians 9, Paul thanks the Corinthians because of their generosity. "Each one must give as he has means, as he has made up his mind; not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver." [Well, yes, this is Stewardship Season. The text landed in my lap, so let me apply it.] Here's an example of a man who has certain rights, but he denies himself those rights and out of his own pocket, for the sake of the kingdom of God, for the sake of the Old Testament church, he gives — and he gives generously. He gives...what was Elder Harper's term in the prayer? "Hilariously." There's a measure of enthusiasm here about what he has done, so much so that he's actually recorded it for us. He wants us to see this.

Christians of all people should be generous. We who have received so much...I didn't have the right bulletin this evening, so I wasn't able to sing *How Deep the Father's Love for Us*. It's a deeply moving hymn. I love those words. There's a certain section of it that bring tears to my eyes. I can't sing a certain line of it. If you follow the words of that hymn, emotionally with that tune it really does something to me. We have experienced the love of God. We have experienced the propitiary work of Christ on our behalf. Of all the people in the world, we ought to be generous!

III. Nehemiah's motives.

But what were Nehemiah's motives? He mentions two of them. Why the spirit of self-sacrifice? Why the spirit of generosity?

He tells us in the first place, in verse 15, because of the fear of God. Because of the fear of God.... It tells us something about Nehemiah, doesn't it? About the way he viewed his life, about the way he lived his life: he's a man who lived with

God before him every day. He lived in the fear of God. He lived reverencing God. He lived with God before his eyes, with God before his heart, with God in his affections. He took the word of God seriously. He loved it, he treasured it. He hid it within his heart.

You know, when you fear God it changes everything. Ligon was reminding us this morning about Acts 2. He'd mentioned Acts 6, about the way deacons embryonically come into being in the New Testament, and he took us back to the time of Pentecost. And immediately after Pentecost you remember the Christians shared everything. They had all things in common, not because of communism, but this was a voluntary act on their part because...well, Luke tells us why. Immediately after that section in Acts 2 where Luke says, "And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and in the apostles' fellowship, and in the apostles' breaking of bread, and in the prayers," Luke tells us immediately after that that "fear came upon every soul." Fear came upon every soul — they lived with an apprehension of the greatness and the glory of God. I think...let me put it this way. For Nehemiah, God was real. He was more than just a philosophical principle. He was more than just something to argue about over the water cooler on a Monday morning. God was real to him! God filled his vision! God filled his life! He understood that there was coming a day when he would have to give an account before God. I think that's why he was so generous. I think he grasped the point that "here we have no continuing city, but we seek one which is to come, whose builder and maker is God." What better things can you do with your provisions than give them to the Lord, and for the service of the Lord?

But there's a second motivation. Not only did he fear God, but do you notice (at the end of verse 18) this is sheer compassion for the people. Because the service was too heavy on this people, he didn't demand this tax as other governors had done, because the people couldn't bear it; because they were groaning because they were in distress, because they were hurting. His heart responded to the hurt of the people of God. He loved the people. He was their governor. He had political authority over them, but he loved them and he had a shepherd-like heart. He has compassion.

And then there's this prayer. I wonder what you make of it. "Remember for my good, O my God, all that I have done for this people." I wonder what you make of that.

I have to tell you, I have...oh, I don't know...25 commentaries on Nehemiah. I consult them all. Some of them are not worth consulting very long, I have to tell you, but I glance at them all! I glance at some of them several times to try and see what exactly they thought about Nehemiah. I'll tell you what some of them think about Nehemiah: that he's a self-righteous prig...he's drawing attention to himself. Some (with an agenda, to be sure) remind us that he's a politician. He's writing his memoirs. He wants to be remembered well in history, so he's telling us all the great accomplishments because history may not be kind to him. So he is

kind to himself. Well, it's a misunderstanding of Nehemiah.

Is it ever right to bring before God the works that you do and say, 'Lord, I've done this thing and I've done it for you. Now bless it'? Turn back with me just for a little experiment...no, you have to turn forward. Turn forward to Psalm 35, and let's take as an example verse 24:

"Vindicate me, O Lord, my God,
According to Your righteousness...."

Now I'm tempted to ask, "Hands up, those of you who have ever prayed a prayer like that." I venture to think that not many. Doesn't sound right, does it? I don't want God to vindicate me according to His righteousness; if God deals with me according to His righteousness, according to His justice, I have no hope! Isn't that the problem that Luther had that made him begin to hate the righteousness of God? It's not "remember me according to Your righteousness" that we pray; we pray, "Lord, remember me according to Your mercy."

But we confuse two things. We confuse retributive righteousness and remunerative righteousness, and what we have here is the latter. Let me explain. The psalmist (and for that matter, Nehemiah in his prayer) isn't praying this prayer saying, 'Lord, remember all the things that I have done and vindicate me. See my good works and reward me so that I may be justified in Your sight.' That's not what the psalmist is saying. That's not what Nehemiah is saying. He's already been justified. He's already in a right relationship. He has trusted by faith in the covenant promise, and what Nehemiah is praying is 'Deal with me according to the terms of Your covenant.'

Now what had God said in His covenant? Well, broadly speaking, what God had said in His covenant was that He would reward and bless certain behavior and He would rebuke and chastise certain ill behavior; that within the covenant, within a right relationship with himself, He expects us to do good works.

It's exactly the point of James, and I think that what Nehemiah is doing here — although I think it probably makes us a little nervous that what Nehemiah is saying, 'Lord, what I did, I did with honesty...at least with as much honesty as I'm capable of.' He's not saying 'I'm sinless.' Because even if I have sinned, I still want You to deal with me according to Your righteousness, because what does the righteousness of God's covenant say? That there is forgiveness with God, that He may be feared. We take our sins and we take them to Jesus Christ. We take our failures and we take them to the cross, and we say, "Wash me of all my sins and iniquities, but these are things that I have done, and I have done them for You, and I've done them for the cause of the kingdom of God, and I want You, Lord, to see them. I want You to bless them."

I wonder what you think of Nehemiah's prayer. It's not the {last} time that we're

going to see this prayer. We're going to see it again in chapter 13, so we'll have a little quiz on retributive and remunerative righteousness when we come to chapter 13 of Nehemiah!

"Remember for my good, O my God..." — he already knows God — "...all that I have done for this people."

IV. Application.

Now what's it teaching us tonight? Well, two quick things.

Firstly, that we ought to be generous. Yes, I think it's teaching us that. We ought to be generous. Is there a way in which you can be more generous than you are? Of course there is. Well, let this word, let this passage, let this chapter, let the example of the life of Nehemiah have its way with us. Let's ask ourselves in the course of this week and in the course of this stewardship season, let's ask ourselves, "How can I exemplify more of the spirit of generosity in a particular way, in a very practical way? What is that way? What is that practical way that I can demonstrate the spirit of generosity, because it's a Jesus-like spirit?"

But secondly, it teaches us this: that like Nehemiah, we need to live in the presence of God. The one single most powerful motivation in Nehemiah's life was the fear of God. He lived *Coram Deo*; he lived before the face of God. You know, if we lived like that, if we really lived like that, it would transform us. It would transform our homes. It would transform our attitude toward our employment. It would transform our church. Oh, may God, and all that He is, so fill our vision that we can see nothing else, and that we might live out and out for Him!

C. T. Studd...let me close with this quotation. C. T. Studd says that if Jesus is God and died for me, no sacrifice is too great for me to make for Him.

Let's pray together.

Father, we thank You for the Scriptures, and we pray that You would write them now upon our hearts and have Your way with us, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

Please stand and receive the Lord's benediction.

Grace, mercy, and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen.

This transcribed message has been lightly edited and formatted for the Web site. No attempt has been made, however, to alter the basic extemporaneous delivery style, or to produce a grammatically accurate, publication-ready manuscript conforming to an established style template.

Should there be questions regarding grammar or theological content, the reader should presume any website error to be with the webmaster/transcriber/editor rather than with the original speaker. For full copyright, reproduction and permission information, please visit the [First Presbyterian Church Copyright, Reproduction & Permission statement](#).

This article is provided as a ministry of [Third Millennium Ministries](#) (Thirdmill). If you have a question about this article, please [email](#) our *Theological Editor*.

Subscribe to *Biblical Perspectives Magazine*

BPM subscribers receive an email notification each time a new issue is published. Notifications include the title, author, and description of each article in the issue, as well as links directly to the articles. Like BPM itself, *subscriptions are free*. To subscribe to [BPM](#), please select this [link](#).