

Paying Forward

Nehemiah 5

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Nehemiah 5: [Nehemiah was the governor of Israel after the Babylonian Exile, whose main task was rebuilding the Jerusalem city wall. This chapter is a passage from his memoir, concerning an economic crisis that was prompted by drought and crop failure.]

A great protest was mounted by the people, including the wives, against their fellow Jews. Some said, “We have big families, and we need food just to survive.” Others said, “We’re having to mortgage our fields and vineyards and homes to get enough grain to keep from starving.” And others said, “We’re having to borrow money to pay the royal tax on our fields and vineyards. Look: We’re the same flesh and blood as our brothers here; our children are just as good as theirs. Yet here we are having to sell our children off as slaves—some of our daughters have already been sold—and we can’t do anything about it because our fields and vineyards are owned by somebody else.”

[Nehemiah recalls,] I got really angry when I heard their protest and complaints. After thinking it over, I called the nobles and officials on the carpet. I said, “Each one of you is gouging his brother.” Then I called a big meeting to deal with them. I told them, “We did everything we could to buy back our Jewish brothers who had to sell themselves as slaves to foreigners. And now you’re selling these same brothers back into debt slavery! Does that mean that we have to buy them back again?” They said nothing. What could they say?

“What you’re doing is wrong. Is there no fear of God left in you? Don’t you care what the nations around here, our enemies, think of you? I and my brothers and the people working for me have also loaned them money. But this gouging them with interest has to stop. Give them back their foreclosed fields, vineyards, olive groves, and homes right now. And forgive your claims on their money, grain, new wine, and olive oil.” [The nobles and officials] said, “We’ll give it all back. We won’t make any more demands on them. We’ll do everything you say.” Then I called the priests together and made them promise to keep their word. Then I emptied my pockets, turning them inside out, and said, “So may God empty the pockets and house of everyone who doesn’t keep this promise—turned inside out and emptied.” Everyone gave a wholehearted “Yes, we’ll do it!” and praised God. And the people did what they promised.

From the time King Artaxerxes appointed me as their governor in the land of Judah—from the 20th to the 32nd year of his reign, 12 years—neither I nor my brothers used the governor’s food allowance. Governors who had preceded me had oppressed the people by taxing them 40 shekels of silver ... a day for food and wine while their underlings bullied the people unmercifully. But out of fear of God I did none of that. I had work to do; I worked on this wall. All my men were on the job to do the work. We didn’t have time to line our own pockets. I fed 150 Jews and officials at my table in addition to those who showed up from the surrounding nations. One ox, six choice sheep, and some chickens were prepared for me daily, and every 10 days a large supply of wine was delivered. Even so, I didn’t use the food allowance provided for the governor—the people had it hard enough as it was. Remember in my favor, O my God, everything I’ve done for these people.

I remember the first time that it happened. I was in the drive-through lane at Starbucks in Keene, waiting impatiently for a breakfast sandwich and some iced tea. I was running late to work that morning, and I felt frazzled as I waited. When I got to the window, I had my \$10 bill in my hand, ready to grab and go, but the cashier said, “There’s no charge. The person ahead of you already paid your bill.” “Wow!” I said, and then, “Please use this \$10 to pay the bill of the person behind me.” This small kindness, this gift of prepaying for my breakfast, changed my mood instantly. It opened up a little bottle of sunshine and poured it all over my day ahead. I arrived at work with a smile on my face.

Has this ever happened to you? Have you ever been the one to start the chain of giving? I understand that sometimes a single person’s offer to pay for the car behind them results in as many as 20 or 25 similar gifts down the line. Generosity begets generosity. Kindness begets kindness. After all, you can’t really repay the person who bought your breakfast. They have already driven away. You can only pay it forward to the next car in line. Over the years I have only started a chain like this once or twice. It usually just doesn’t occur to me. My mind is on where I’m headed and what I need to do next, as it was that first day. But whenever someone ahead of me pays my tab, I always pass it on to the car behind me. It’s hard not to, really. When we are face-to-face with an example of generosity, we simply respond in kind.

Our scripture passage today is about the power of our example, the example of generosity, of paying forward what we have been given, the power of that gift to bring about justice in our community. Nehemiah is the governor of Israel after the Babylonian Exile. His principal task is to rebuild the city wall around Jerusalem, a feat he accomplishes in record time by conscripting laborers. But this massive public works project pulls those laborers out of the fields at harvest time. And it's not much of a harvest anyway. There is a drought, and many of the crops simply fail. The poor people of the land – which is almost everyone – are starving. Simply to purchase grain to eat, they have to sell off their land, borrow money at exorbitant interest rates, and even put their children and themselves into debt slavery. The wealthy few of the nation have been enforcing these debt contracts aggressively, even in a time of economic crisis, and Governor Nehemiah wants to put a stop to it.

So, Nehemiah calls in the lenders and says, "What are you doing? Why are you putting your fellow Jews into debt slavery? We've just taxed ourselves to buy back so many of our countrymen from debt slavery to foreigners. Now YOU want to take advantage of them in the same way? And you are taking their only means of supporting themselves when you seize their fields and their winepresses in payment. My brothers and I have also lent money to help people out, but not with this exorbitant interest, and we are not seizing land from starving people." Then he says, "No matter what all the previous governors did, I am not taking the Governor's food allowance. I am spending my own money. And I have 150 people at my table, at no expense to you or anyone else." Faced with this example of generosity, the lenders respond in kind. They agree to stop charging interest to their countrymen, to redeem their debtors from slavery, and to return seized assets. Nehemiah seals the deal by calling in the priests to receive their promise as a vow to God.

I don't know where Nehemiah got his wealth from. Perhaps from his parents. Perhaps in a grant or salary from the Persian emperor. Ultimately, like all good gifts, it comes from God. And Nehemiah can't repay that gift. He can only pay it forward. He can use his money to counter the crushing poverty and the inhumane lending system. He can't solve all of those problems by himself. But his own generosity gives him the moral authority to challenge the wealthy people around him to follow his example.

God calls on us, too, to fight for justice in every way we can. Sometimes we can fix an injustice ourselves, and we may be the only one who can do that. Sometimes all we can do is pray. And sometimes, our money can go where we cannot. Our money can purchase a measure of justice for someone in desperate need. And by the power of our example, we can encourage others to give as well. This is why I am so proud of this church's mission giving. Our gifts to Habitat for Humanity this month help to house a family that can't quite do it for themselves. Our gifts of food to the local food pantries help to feed people who are hungry, even though we all live in a land of great wealth. Our money can buy a small measure of justice.

Everything we have is a gift from God. We can't repay God. We can only pay forward, using our own bounty to bring a measure of justice in God's name. We may make large gifts or small. We might even buy breakfast for the person behind us in line, and never know how much that means in their day, or in their life. So let us be generous, as God has been generous with us. Let us give our money with joy, and watch how far the ripples of our gifts can spread

Amen