

Fear the Generous God

Nehemiah 5:1-19

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Today in Nehemiah we'll see an example of the relationship between faith and work, specifically that the fear of God produces generosity. Scripture calls for generosity rather than selfishness, but there's no minimum giving threshold, otherwise it would be too easy to justify keeping the rest for yourself. It's not about percentages but instead about the heart. I recently bought an expensive leather jacket, and it's easy to justify practically that it was on sale, or morally that it isn't wrong to enjoy God's provision, or even theologically that in some roundabout way the purchase brings glory to God. But in reality this was selfishness because I was prioritizing myself, pursuing happiness for myself rather than others. We mustn't think about giving as little as possible to justify ourselves, but rather in everything we should put others first. This comes from fearing God, which means recognizing who He is and acting accordingly, acknowledging His authority and submitting to it, and seeing His generosity and responding in generosity. It's not about legalistic obedience, but having a heart that seeks to do God's will.

The first way we can live out the fear of God is by rejecting selfishness. Nehemiah 5:1-5 is one example of this selfishness. Some who returned from exile were wealthy nobles, but most were poor. We see the nobility oppressing the poor, who struggled to pay for food and taxes. In order to eat, the poor had to mortgage their property or even sell themselves into slavery to the nobles. And these nobles took advantage by charging interest (v. 7). Usury against fellow Israelites was forbidden by the Law (Exodus 22:25; Leviticus 25:35-38; Deuteronomy 23:19-20), so Nehemiah brings this legal accusation against them. He also brings a moral accusation in v. 8. Nehemiah spent his own money to get poor exiled Jews out of slavery and debt so they could return, and now these nobles were enslaving them again. Finally, Nehemiah brings a theological accusation in v. 9. Their disobedience not only made Israel a bad example to the nations, but also put them in danger of facing exile after they had just returned from exile. This disregard for the command to love God and love their neighbor was not just due to selfishness. The symptom is selfishness, but the underlying condition is that they didn't fear God. This means they didn't feel accountable to God (Psalm 14; Romans 3:18). As long as they didn't get caught, they didn't feel guilty, just like we often do when we speed. They didn't understand that we are always in the

presence of God, which is a threat to those who don't fear Him, but an encouragement for those who do. God cares and is watching lovingly. And if we fear God, we will respond with repentance, which we see the nobles do in vv. 11-13 after they are rebuked. They returned what they took. Fear of God manifests in action. This action is not a minimum bar we must meet, but rather striving to live our entire lives according to His word. It's not just about behavior, but attitude. For example when others need our time or energy, do we give them priority or just squeeze them into our leftover time? It's just like I was taught by my mother to share my food with others at a restaurant before I start eating, rather than giving leftovers. This is what rejecting selfishness looks like.

The second way we live out the fear of God is by prioritizing others before ourselves. Nehemiah exemplifies this in vv. 14-18. Governors were entitled to charge taxes to pay for their salaries, administration, and events. Previous governors charged exorbitant burdensome taxes, but Nehemiah didn't. Instead he regularly invited 150 people to eat at his table and paid for it himself. Because he feared God, he willingly gave up his rights and gave of himself. Let us also fear God and prioritize others, giving up what is rightfully ours for their sake, for we have an even greater example of this in Jesus Christ, who gave up His position to die for us.

Finally, fearing God means expecting His generosity. In v. 19 Nehemiah asks God to remember what he did because he knows God sees, cares, and is generous and benevolent. We shouldn't demand that God gives us what we want in return for fearing Him. He doesn't owe us, but He is generous. Nehemiah was only doing what was required by the Law and therefore didn't deserve any special favor, yet he knows God desires to bless. He is a God who rewards those who seek Him (Matthew 6), but not necessarily materially. We should expect His grace as we participate in His work. It doesn't mean we obey only for the sake of a reward. Rather we should fear Him and obey, trusting that His grace is sufficient for us, that although generosity requires sacrifice, He will provide for our needs. If we look out for others, we think nobody else will look out for us, but God looks out for us. His grace might not be additional material provision, but it may be the spiritual capacity to give more and be content with less. Don't be afraid of what will happen to you, but fear God and trust in His generosity, so it will be manifested in a generous life.