

*Ezra-Nehemiah: Return and Restoration*

*“Cultivating Generosity”*

Introduction: We’ve been tracking this fall with the community of Israelites that returned to the Promised Land after spending 70 years in exile in Babylon. They came back in three waves, beginning in 538 BC, and ending in 445. They rebuilt the temple of God under Zerubbabel, became reacquainted with the Law of God under Ezra, and as we saw a couple of weeks ago, were rebuilding the walls and gates of the city of God, Jerusalem, under Nehemiah. As we’ve watched them regather, rebuild, and seek to restore their life together as a community of God’s missional people in the midst of the new reality they were facing, we’ve tried to learn from them as we face our own reality of return and restoration.

The picture we saw in Nehemiah 3 and 4 was that of a community working together, accomplishing God’s purposes, as they worked alongside each other and watched each other’s backs, in the face of opposition. This morning, we’ll see that the opposition can come not only from the outside, but from the inside of a community. And the internal threat we’ll consider this morning is one of selfishness and greed, of grabbing for oneself, a true community killer. Against that picture, which is painted for us in Nehemiah 5, we’ll see a picture from 2 Corinthians 8, not of grabbing, but of giving, lovingly, to meet the needs of others. This is the kind of generosity through which a community can become healthy and nourished. Let’s see these two pictures, and then consider how such generosity can be cultivated.

I. The Injustice in Jerusalem

A. So the key word that gets us going this morning is the word, “fellow” Jews (Neh. 5:1). This great outcry about the great injustice that was being done was not because some foreign, pagan, hostile people were oppressing God’s people. It was because God’s people were oppressing each other! It was from within the community of faith that the hostility had surfaced. If we sum up the information we are given, there were some greedy, selfish people in this community who were taking advantage of those who were struggling financially. These folks were struggling because they had left fields and businesses and shops to work on the wall, for almost two months at this point, and supplies at home were getting thin. Further, there was a famine in the land. Finally, the Persian king who controlled Jerusalem had levied some pretty hefty property taxes in order to support his opulent lifestyle.

B. In response, those in the community who were well off saw this as an opportunity to exploit their brothers and sisters for their own personal gain. They lent them money against their fields and vineyards so they could buy grain and pay the tax, but they charged them interest. And they offered to lend them even more if they gave their children over as slaves. The fact that God’s law forbade the charging of interest on money lent to a fellow Jew, and forbade enslaving a fellow Jew, didn’t seem to matter. Instead of taking care of the “have nots,” the “haves” were taking advantage of them.

II. The Miracle in Macedonia

A. Contrast this picture of injustice in Jerusalem with what we could call the miracle in Macedonia. The apostle holds the churches in this region up as an example for the church in Corinth to which he is writing. Significantly, these Macedonian churches were not financially well off. Just the opposite. They were in the midst of trouble and hard times because of the faith they professed. Refusing

to worship the Roman emperor, who was considered a god, the goods and services they produced were being boycotted. As a result, they found themselves in a major recession. Yet amazingly, despite their dirt-poor existence, there welled up an incredible desire to give. They not only gave beyond what one might think they were able to do, but Paul writes that they “urgently pleaded” for the opportunity to participate in the collection Paul was taking for the Christians in Jerusalem. That’s a trustee’s dream!

B. So what prompted such generosity? Did they need the tax credit? Did they want to gain a reputation in Christian circles as big givers? Did they feel the need to earn God’s favor? It was actually none of these. They didn’t give to get anything. We almost miss the reason because Paul tucks it in between their trials and their poverty: “Though they [the Macedonian churches] have been going through much trouble and hard times, their wonderful joy and deep poverty have overflowed in rich generosity” (2 Cor. 8:2). They gave out of a joy that overflowed into rich generosity. Now, what would cause such joy? Paul explains it for the Corinthians a few verses later: “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich” (2 Cor. 8:9).

C. The joy that caused the Macedonians to overflow with generosity was Jesus. As we’ll begin to remember next week in the season of Advent, the sacrifice of Jesus did not begin on the cross. It began as he left the comfort and richness of his heavenly home, was born in a barn, was wrapped in rags and laid in an animals’ feeding trough, and for the rest of his life lived by borrowing things such as food, clothing, even a coin for a sermon illustration, and ultimately, the tomb in which he was buried. He became “poor” in this way in order to give up his life for the human race, making us rich, not in a material way but in a way that spares us from the horrors of being eternally separated from the living God, reveals to us, and empowers us to live, the life the life that is truly life, and offers us the hope of being part of this God’s new creation.

D. Put another way, our sense of self-worth—our identity—does not come from what we’re able to acquire, or what we’re able to accomplish, or who we’re able to impress. All of those things simply help us cultivate greed. Instead, our sense of self-worth comes from the love of the one who was willing to give up his life for us, when we had done nothing to earn it, and make us his child. The joy of having received this gift, and pondering all of its implications, cultivated a spirit of rich generosity in the hearts of the Macedonians. There is no greater joy; they wanted others to share in it.

E. Tomorrow, you will be receiving by email a letter and pledge card to help you consider your giving to support our life together in 2022. To help you ponder, Lisa has put together a picture of what stewardship looks like at FCCOE. As you view it, ([fccoe.org](http://fccoe.org), “What Does Stewardship Look Like”) I hope it captures a sense of the joy that can come, not from grabbing, nor even getting, but from giving. [VIEW]

When we spoke of our need to be in community a few weeks ago, I said that because we have been made in the image of a relational God, our need for relationship should not surprise us. Likewise, our need to give should not surprise us, for we have been made in the image of a God who is a giver at heart, who gave us the world to enjoy and care for, and who gave us himself in the gift of his Son.

What does Paul do to help a congregation think about giving? He gives them this Son, Jesus, and asks them to give as they are able (v. 12). So, as you ponder your pledge in the year ahead, perhaps alongside the trouble and hard times this past year might have produced, may the joy of who Jesus is, the joy of what Jesus has done, and the joy of what he still promises to do, fill and guide your heart.