

Connecting Lending Practices to the Fear of the Lord (Nehemiah 4-6)

Nehemiah's wall-building project was threatened, not just from the outside, but also from the inside. Certain wealthy Jewish nobles and officials were taking advantage of economically difficult times to line their own pockets. They were loaning money to fellow Jews, expecting interest to be paid on the loans, even though this was prohibited in the Jewish Law. When the debtors couldn't repay the loans, they lost their land and were even forced to sell their children into slavery. Nehemiah responded by demanding that the wealthy stop charging interest on loans and give back whatever they had taken from their debtors.

The nobles and officials were actively pursuing their own gain as if economic life had nothing to do with God. But Nehemiah tells them that their economic lives are of utmost importance to God, because God cares about all of society, not just its religious aspects.

These issues in Nehemiah challenge us to consider how much we should profit personally from our position and privilege. Should we take advantage of perks made available to us in our workplace, even if these come at considerable cost to others? Nehemiah's specific commands, such as don't charge interest, don't foreclose on collateral, and don't force the sale of people into slavery, may apply differently in our time, but underlying his commands is a prayer that still applies: "Remember for my good, O my God, all that I have done for this people" (Neh. 5:19).

As it was to Nehemiah, God's call to today's workers is to do everything we can for our people. In practice, that means we each owe God the duty of caring for all the people who depend on our work: employers, co-workers, customers, and the public. Nehemiah may not tell us exactly how to handle today's workplace situations, but he tells us how to orient our minds as we decide. Put people first.