

Discerning the Times: Equipping Saints and UFOs

When Jesus said, "Give to him who asks you, and from him who wants to borrow from you do not turn away" (**Matthew 5:42**), some take that to mean that we should never withhold money from someone who asks and we should just give it away. Is that what He really meant though?

There are a few problems if we take Jesus' words in that way. Certainly, if we are in the position of helping others, we *should* try to help them out. However, I don't believe Jesus' statement is a blanket statement in all situations. Notice also that Jesus used the word "borrow," which implies using for a while, but returning eventually.

In Matthew (**15:24**), Jesus is met with a woman from Canaan. She asks for His help because her daughter was possessed with a demon. At first, Jesus doesn't even respond to her (**15:23**), and His disciples urged Him to send the woman away. His answer was simple and pointed:

I was not sent except to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. (v 24)

Jesus stated unequivocally He came to minister to the "lost sheep of the house of Israel," calling them back to the truth. In other words, the things Jesus taught were for Israel because they were based entirely on the Law given to Moses, which had been given only to Israel. His comment from **5:42** is based entirely on the Mosaic Law as it applies to Jews.

Back to the woman, Jesus states:

It is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the little dogs. (v 26)

Jesus was using a figure of speech to illustrate a point. He was *not* calling her a "dog." The woman understood and provided a perfect, respectful response to Him in return.

Yes, Lord, yet even the little dogs eat the crumbs which fall from their masters' table. (v 27)

Her faith and humility impressed our Lord and He healed the woman's daughter (v **28**). If we understand Jesus' ministry was primarily to the lost sheep of the house of Israel, then what He teaches in **Matthew 5** make a great deal more sense. He made an exception to minister to someone *outside* of Israel.

In **Matthew 5**, Jesus reminded His fellow *Jews* that they were supposed to obey the Mosaic Law. What did the Mosaic Law command with respect to *lending* money to fellow Jews? They were *not* supposed to charge interest. Yet not only were many Jews charging interest when they loaned money to other Jews, but it was often to the point of *usury*, which is *excessive* interest on a loan. Jesus was telling His fellow Jews: "*When you lend your money to your Jewish brother, do not charge interest! Lend to them freely, without the strings of interest or usury attached to it!*"

It was really as simple as that, yet when Jesus' statements are pulled out of their cultural context and used as bats over people's heads, the meaning becomes, "*If someone needs anything, give it*

to them free of charge and don't expect it back!" Yet, this is not what Jesus meant at all. He was *not* telling us to live like Socialists where everyone owns everything and no one owns anything. He was telling Jews to stop charging interest or usury when they *lend* to other Jews, based on the Mosaic Law.

Jesus was stressing *grace* regarding such lending, because there is much grace even in the Law. Instead, Jews were making themselves rich and putting tremendous financial burdens on those to whom they lent money. Jesus was *reminding* them that this was absolutely wrong and they should immediately cease and desist such practices in accordance with the Law of Moses. Every problem Israel ever faced occurred because Jews stopped following the Mosaic Law. In essence, if you lent \$50, expect only \$50 back when the debtor is able to repay. That's what Jesus was saying.

So what does this have to do with *Nehemiah* as the title suggests? Quite a bit actually.

In **Nehemiah 5**, we learn that many Jews were under a tremendous financial burden created by their need to borrow money from other Jews. The lending Jews were charging such high interest that the lenders would never be able to dig themselves out of their financial woes! Verses **1-5** tell the sad story.

1 And there was a great outcry of the people and their wives against their Jewish brethren. 2 For there were those who said, 'We, our sons, and our daughters are many; therefore let us get grain, that we may eat and live.'

3 There were also some who said, 'We have mortgaged our lands and vineyards and houses, that we might buy grain because of the famine.'

4 There were also those who said, 'We have borrowed money for the king's tax on our lands and vineyards. 5 Yet now our flesh is as the flesh of our brethren, our children as their children; and indeed we are forcing our sons and our daughters to be slaves, and some of our daughters have been brought into slavery. It is not in our power to redeem them, for other men have our lands and vineyards.'

This is tragic! The borrowing Jews could not manage the debt they had incurred because lending Jews were charging exorbitant rates of interest, expressly forbidden under the Law of Moses (cf. **Exodus 21:1-6; Leviticus 25:35-46; Deuteronomy 24:10-13**). Paul would've chimed in with, "*Brothers, this ought not to be!*"

What was Nehemiah's response to this burdensome situation?

*And I became very angry when I heard their outcry and these words. After serious thought, I rebuked the nobles and rulers, and said to them, 'Each of you is exacting usury from his brother.' So I called a great assembly against them. And I said to them, 'According to our ability we have redeemed our Jewish brethren who were sold to the nations. Now indeed, will you even sell your brethren? Or should they be sold to us?' (**Nehemiah 5:6-8 NKJV**)*

Nehemiah's first reaction is one of righteous *anger* and he remonstrated against those Jews who had created such heavy financial burdens for their Jewish brethren. But what he said next is the *main* reason for his anger.

What you are doing is not good. Should you not **walk in the fear of our God** because of the reproach of the nations, our enemies? (v **9**; emphasis added)

Nehemiah is saying two things here. First, why weren't the Jews who were lending to their fellow Jews not walking in *the fear of the LORD*? Second, were they not concerned about how this would look to other nations because of how they were literally blaspheming God by disobeying His commands? We Christians have a *major* obligation to live lives that are above reproach so we do not provide reasons for non-Christians and atheists to blaspheme God.

Nehemiah is saying that if they feared God at all, they would *obey* God's commandments. A proper, growing fear of the LORD prompts correct actions and words. Instead, they did *not* fear God and had no qualms about creating financial hardships for fellow Jews, through high interest rates.

Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter; fear God and keep His commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. (Ecclesiastes 12:13)

That's the duty of Christians in a nutshell. First, we must learn to *fear* God. Without a healthy, profound, reverential awe and respect (fear) for God, we will not do the right things from our hearts. In fact, too often we will not even do the right thing, period because the motivation is lacking. Fear provides the motivation.

God wants us to keep His commandments. He has provided the ability by implanting fear within us as part of the New Covenant (**Jeremiah 32**). Without this inner fear, we will not do what we are supposed to do. We need to *cultivate* that fear.

As I've stated before, fearing God has *nothing* to do with fearing His judgment or the pouring out of His wrath on authentic Christians. Fearing God has a great deal to do with our unwavering reverential respect and awe of Him, so that we actually *yearn* to do what is right from our hearts in our thoughts, our words, and our actions.

I don't believe Jesus was talking about homeless people and our alleged "need" to supply for them in general. Certainly, if we are able, we should give, but I believe it is often far better to give to a shelter or soup kitchen because these organizations are equipped to find out who is in real need and who is faking it. I'd rather donate my money or goods to them.

My point is simple and I'm sure you see it. First, just because a person asks for help does not mean they actually need it and it can be very difficult to know. Second, if you do choose to give (*lend*) money or goods to a fellow Christian, be sure to do so without attaching interest or expectations. If it comes to a point where they cannot pay you back, let it go or forgive the debt.

Jesus was not issuing a blank check telling us to give to everyone who asks whatever they need. I had an atheist come up to me and try that, stating that if I didn't give him the \$500, it was "proof" that I was *not* a Christian. I took the time to explain to him that I did not have an extra \$500 to give him and if I did, I would be robbing from my own family. I told him what the apostle Paul said about those who do not provide for their own families are worse than infidels (**1 Timothy 5:8**). I asked him how I could put him ahead of my own family. He had no response.

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom: and the knowledge of the holy is understanding. (Proverbs 9:10 KJV)

It all begins with *fearing the Lord*. We grow wisdom and knowledge of the holy through that fear. We gain greater insight and understanding because not only do we fear the Lord, but because of that fear, we more naturally live for Him as an outgrowth of that fear.