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Sermon Series: *Called to Lead*, No. 3

In Labor

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Nehemiah 4:6-23 [NIV]

So we rebuilt the wall till all of it reached half its height, for the people worked with all their heart.

⁷ But when Sanballat, Tobiah, the Arabs, the Ammonites and the people of Ashdod heard that the repairs to Jerusalem's walls had gone ahead and that the gaps were being closed, they were very angry. ⁸ They all plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and stir up trouble against it. ⁹ But we prayed to our God and posted a guard day and night to meet this threat.

¹⁰ Meanwhile, the people in Judah said, "The strength of the laborers is giving out, and there is so much rubble that we cannot rebuild the wall."

¹¹ Also our enemies said, "Before they know it or see us, we will be right there among them and will kill them and put an end to the work."

¹² Then the Jews who lived near them came and told us ten times over, "Wherever you turn, they will attack us."

¹³ Therefore I stationed some of the people behind the lowest points of the wall at the exposed places, posting them by families, with their swords, spears and bows. ¹⁴ After I looked things over, I stood up and said to the nobles, the officials and the rest of the people, "Don't be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome, and fight for your families, your sons and your daughters, your wives and your homes."

¹⁵ When our enemies heard that we were aware of their plot and that God had frustrated it, we all returned to the wall, each to our own work.

¹⁶ From that day on, half of my men did the work, while the other half were equipped with spears, shields, bows and armor. The officers posted themselves behind all the people of Judah ¹⁷ who were building the wall. Those who carried materials did their work with one hand and held a weapon in the other, ¹⁸ and each of the builders wore his sword at his side as he worked. But the man who sounded the trumpet stayed with me.

¹⁹ Then I said to the nobles, the officials and the rest of the people, "The work is extensive and spread out, and we are widely separated from each other along the wall. ²⁰ Wherever you hear the sound of the trumpet, join us there. Our God will fight for us!"

²¹ So we continued the work with half the men holding spears, from the first light of dawn till the stars came out. ²² At that time I also said to the people, "Have every man and his helper stay inside Jerusalem at night, so they can serve us as guards by night and as workers by day." ²³ Neither I nor my brothers nor my men nor the guards with me took off our clothes; each had his weapon, even when he went for water.

Well, happy Labor Day weekend to you! For those of you who are from another nation, here in the U.S., Labor Day is the day our nation celebrates work by not working.

Speaking of work, did you hear about the man who lost his job at the orange juice factory? He just couldn't concentrate.

Before that, he tried to be a tailor, but he wasn't suited for that.

He tried working in a muffler factory, but that was way too exhausting.

He'd had a job in a deli, but anyway he sliced it, he couldn't cut the mustard there.

So, he went to school to be a doctor, but found he didn't have the patients.

He thought he'd become a professional fisherman, but his net income was too small.

His next job, at the pool maintenance company, was too draining, and when he applied to be a personal trainer, they told him he wasn't fit for it.

Finally, he began working at Starbucks Coffee, but he eventually quit there, because day after day, it was just the same old grind.

Then he tried to be a preacher, but the jokes he told were absolutely *punishing*.

We're back in Nehemiah today: Chapter 4, which is, if nothing else, a study in labor.

As you heard those verse read a few minutes ago, I hope you were able to picture in your mind what was happening there around Jerusalem as they built that wall. The physical work was hard enough as it was: moving and setting those huge stones, cleaning up rubble. Everyone was engaged—sweating, straining, long clock hours.

On top of that, there was all this opposition—the threats from neighboring kings. So, people had to be posted as guards, especially in the most vulnerable places.

And since the work was so spread out, all these contingency plans had to be made for rescue, in case of attack.

That's a lot of pressure to work under.

But then the threat level increased, such that not only were guards stationed alongside the stone masons and carpenters, everyone had to basically work around the clock. Verse 22 says they worked on the wall by day and as guards at night. They were on duty, in some way, all the time.

In that last verse there, Nehemiah sums it up by saying that no one ever took off his clothes—they never relaxed. They wore their weapons all the time, even when, Nehemiah says there at the end of verse 23, "*they went for water.*"

That line, by the way, is difficult in the Hebrew and when taken literally it doesn't make much sense, so there is some disagreement on what's meant. But the point is, there was not even a moment when they felt they could let down their guard.

We would all do well to remember this passage when we think we are suffering from a difficult work environment, which many people do in our culture today. So many, in fact, that our nation is really suffering from a labor crisis. The job situation in our country is unlike any most of us have ever seen. There are tons of jobs available. Yet people simply won't work.

I'm not here today to line out the reasons for that, although there are economic, political and theological

reasons, and I'll happily share my opinions with you if you're interested.

What I do want us to consider today is a few lessons about labor from this passage that apply directly to our national situation.

The first is simply this: **Work is of God.**

The idea of work — of working — is not the result of the fall in the Garden of Eden. Work existed before the fall.

The labor involved in accomplishing something — creating, designing, producing, refining, tending, managing — is all part of the character of God Himself seen in the creation of the world.

God worked in that event, and Scripture shows us that He continues to work. He is, even now, refining, restoring, managing and repairing His creation.

God works, and so for humans to work is part of bearing God's image. It's what we were designed to do — it's part of what makes us healthy and whole.

A growing and increasingly influential part of our culture says that we should work as little as possible, that we would be better people if we only worked enough to get by, so that we could move on to more important things — like amusing ourselves.

And, our culture says that if we can figure out a way to have someone else work so that we don't have to, well then, all the better — because if we can do that, then we'll have even more time to amuse ourselves.

What we don't realize is that we are, to borrow the title from a Neil Postman book, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*.

Our society has enshrined self-amusement because we think that will satisfy us, but it won't ever take the place of the satisfaction that comes with work — with labor.

That's just the way we're made.

A job done well not only produces good for the society and culture, it produces good within us — it provides purpose, it feeds us emotionally and spiritually.

The voice of our culture says to work as little as possible — to work only as much as absolutely necessary.

Don't listen to that voice.

Work is of God. God worked. God works. God made us to work. To follow God is to work.

There is a level of spiritual maturity, contentment and deep joy that comes to us only after we embrace those truths.

Work is of God. Don't let our ungodly culture convince you otherwise.

Second, **God calls people to difficult tasks.**

Now, I know I've mentioned this, in slightly different ways, for three weeks running now, but it bears repeating — because too many Christians these days, especially in our increasingly lazy culture, are convinced that a big purpose of following Jesus is so they don't ever have to experience hard things.

So again, let me say, that is simply not true.

God *can, has, and still does* call people to do **difficult** things — **painful** things, things in which *we* suffer grief and pain, and also where we bear the grief and pain of **others**.

As we see here in Nehemiah, God calls people, at times, to work all night, to work two jobs, to do things beyond their own giftedness and natural talents — let alone beyond their preferences, beyond what may make them happy.

Now He may not require that for the rest of their lives, but maybe for a while and for a specific purpose — His good purpose.

Just look at what the men of Jerusalem had to do.

If this level of engagement were asked of many Christ-followers in our day, I'm afraid most would conclude, "Well, God must not be in it if it's that difficult — if it requires that much effort of me — if it puts me in danger — if it does not make me happy."

And they would be wrong.

God's work often costs us much, and we all must accept that if we are to accomplish His purposes for us.

God does indeed call people to difficult tasks.

Third, **God depends on people to do His work in the world.**

Now, this gets theologically sticky, so please hear me carefully. When I say, "God depends on people," I'm not saying God is not sovereign. Of course, God is sovereign. God is all powerful — omnipotent. God can do — God can accomplish — whatever He wants without human assistance.

He did not need human help to make humans, after all, and there isn't anything I can think of that is more complicated than making a human being — except maybe making a venti, decaf, double-shot, soy-milk, half-sweet, non-fat, sugar-free, mocha Frappuccino with no whip.

That may be close, but God didn't need human help to make humans, so we know God does not **need** human help, in that sense.

At the same time, God has **chosen** to use us — to use humans — to work out His purposes in our world. That's His modus operandi, by His own choice, and so to that end, God depends on us to hear His voice, to agree with His directions, and to work out His plans.

Don't believe me? Well, consider:

- God did not tend the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve did — until they were, let's say, reassigned.
- God did not build Noah's ark. Noah built the ark.
- Moses was the one who went and talked to Pharaoh and then led the Hebrews out of Egypt.
- A variety of judges did a variety of things that kept Israel intact as a nation.
- It was David and his armies who fought the battles.
- Prophets proclaimed God's word to hard-hearted peoples.
- Jesus died on a cross for our redemption.
- The apostles traveled and preached the gospel and planted church and suffered for doing so.

The examples go on and on, you see?

- Nehemiah and the men of the city there built Jerusalem's wall.

Because God has chosen to use people, He then depends on people to do His work in this world.

So, God is depending on you and on me to accomplish His purpose—for His glory and for the good of ourselves, our family, our society and His Kingdom.

God depends on people to do His work in the world.

- 1) Work: the idea of work, the practice of work, is of God—not of the enemy.
- 2) God does indeed call people to do difficult tasks.
- 3) God is depending on people to work—to accomplish His purposes.

All this makes the honoring of work that we do when we observe Labor Day, truly, a theological occasion.

I know our nation does not think of it that way, but I think it's OK—it's even good—to capture this secular occasion and use it for spiritual purposes and to think about Labor Day as a spiritual day, a true holiday (the word "holiday" comes from—a "holy day,") because work—done well, done faithfully, as Nehemiah shows us—speaks powerfully of God, especially to our culture today.

Which is the idea that I want to close with here.

As I've observed the path that our nation is on and *has been on*, especially since the social revolution of the 1960s:

- the negative thoughts about work that prevail in our culture,
- the appeal to laziness,
- the priority given to leisure and personal amusement, and to the increasingly acceptable notion that it's just fine for those who won't work to leach off those who will...

As I've been observing these things, I've mentioned to our graduating seniors from time to time the same thing I've told my own boys ever since they were little:

"In light of the state of our culture regarding work, **if** you will simply work hard and **if** you will just give a full effort to whatever's asked of you in your labor, then:

- you will jump ahead of nearly all of your contemporaries;
- you will be seen and treated as a leader;
- you will be given opportunities;
- you will be esteemed and respected by your overseers.

All this will come simply if you will work faithfully and hard and do your very best."

Now, I'm not talking about working all the time.

I'm not advocating "work-aholism" such that you don't know how to do anything else. Some people fall off *that* side of the wagon—they think working all the time is somehow noble—but that's not right either. The fact is, even God didn't do that, so neither should we. We're just covering up other issues when we do that.

But, as I've told the boys, if you will embrace labor for the gift that it is and the good it brings, regardless of your own natural talent or ability, you will set yourselves

apart from the vast majority of people in our culture, and you will be successful.

But, you know, that's not all.

Those relative few of our day who will see labor in these ways will not only be successful, but they will also be, if they will choose to be, powerful witnesses for Jesus, because:

They will be examples of the overall health that following God and His ways brings to people.

They will model a balanced life of work and rest.

They will have purpose.

They will have direction.

They'll have the peace that comes from living in ways God intended people to live.

They'll be able to sleep at night.

They'll be productive and they'll know the good feeling, the satisfaction, that comes with real productivity.

They will contribute to society.

They will be in a position to help others.

They will reflect the character of God.

They will be the leaders of thought and practice that Christ-followers are called to be.

And, they will help move God's Kingdom forward in our world in ways that so many are not doing because they have a misdirected and frankly crummy theology of work.

All you have to do is look at the numbers and the help wanted signs all over the place. They tell the story.

Granted, COVID has exacerbated it. But the state of our nation regarding work is not really about COVID.

We've been on this course, as a culture, for a long time.

COVID has just allowed for some things to fully blossom. For many, it's a good excuse to work less and depend on others more.

And so, what's happened?

- Not just ours, but nanny governments around the world have grown larger.

- Mental illness has spiked.

- Physical health has deteriorated.

- People have been impoverished.

- The worth of our money is diminishing.

- And this funk of purposelessness has overtaken so many—and especially our younger people—in part because of this unhealthy, ungodly, underlying attitude toward work.

Friends, followers of Jesus simply cannot fall into this trap. If we claim Christ, then our attitude toward work will produce spiritual fruit, one way or another. So, we want to make sure our fruit is good.

Whatever the nature of our work, we work with diligence and excellence and joy, knowing that no matter whom we're working for on earth, we are ultimately working for God.

Christians are called to lead in this way.

Called to be witnesses for Christ.

Called to help others find wholeness.

And maybe even to help redeem our culture in the process.

The body and blood of Jesus are powerful reminders of the work that Jesus did.

What He did was of God the Father.

It wasn't free of grief or pain – just the opposite, actually.

And it was necessary to achieve the Father's purposes on earth.

And Jesus was able to say at the end of His life, *“Father, I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do.”*

Jesus' work changed the world – as will ours, in some eternally important way – if we'll embrace and complete the work God's given us to do.

So, it is right that we, the very fruit of Jesus' labor, recommit ourselves to the sanctity of labor here today – as witnesses for Christ, for the glory of God the Father.

Would you take the bread and the cup and the words of preparation?

Service of Holy Communion

Closing Song: *Come, All Christians, Be Committed*

Benediction:

As followers of Christ, may our attitude toward labor be different than the world around us.

May we work at all the Lord gives us to do with excellence and diligence and joy, knowing we're accomplishing something far beyond just what is seen:

we're speaking of Christ,

we're helping those around us,

we're building His Kingdom,

and we're bringing glory to God.