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Sermon Series: *Called to Lead*, No. 6

In Dedication

September 26, 2021

Nehemiah 10:28-39 [NIV]

"The rest of the people – priests, Levites, gatekeepers, musicians, temple servants and all who separated themselves from the neighboring peoples for the sake of the Law of God, together with their wives and all their sons and daughters who are able to understand –²⁹ all these now join their fellow Israelites the nobles, and bind themselves with a curse and an oath to follow the Law of God given through Moses the servant of God and to obey carefully all the commands, regulations and decrees of the Lord our Lord.

³⁰ "We promise not to give our daughters in marriage to the peoples around us or take their daughters for our sons.

³¹ "When the neighboring peoples bring merchandise or grain to sell on the Sabbath, we will not buy from them on the Sabbath or on any holy day. Every seventh year we will forgo working the land and will cancel all debts.

³² "We assume the responsibility for carrying out the commands to give a third of a shekel[a] each year for the service of the house of our God: ³³ for the bread set out on the table; for the regular grain offerings and burnt offerings; for the offerings on the Sabbaths, at the New Moon feasts and at the appointed festivals; for the holy offerings; for sin offerings[b] to make atonement for Israel; and for all the duties of the house of our God.

³⁴ "We – the priests, the Levites and the people – have cast lots to determine when each of our families is to bring to the house of our God at set times each year a contribution of wood to burn on the altar of the Lord our God, as it is written in the Law.

³⁵ "We also assume responsibility for bringing to the house of the Lord each year the first fruits of our crops and of every fruit tree.

³⁶ "As it is also written in the Law, we will bring the firstborn of our sons and of our cattle, of our herds and of our flocks to the house of our God, to the priests ministering there.

³⁷ "Moreover, we will bring to the storerooms of the house of our God, to the priests, the first of our ground meal, of our grain offerings, of the fruit of all our trees and of our new wine and olive oil. And we will bring a tithe of our crops to the Levites, for it is the Levites who collect the tithes in all the towns where we work. ³⁸ A priest descended from Aaron is to accompany the Levites when they receive the tithes, and the Levites are to bring a tenth of the tithes up to the house of our God, to the storerooms of the treasury. ³⁹ The people of Israel, including the Levites, are to bring their contributions of grain, new wine and olive oil to the storerooms, where the articles for the sanctuary and for the ministering priests, the gatekeepers and the musicians are also kept.

"We will not neglect the house of our God."

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We're in Nehemiah once again today if you'd care to turn there with me – Nehemiah, Chapter 10.

Over these past weeks, I've been offering the Jerusalem Jews of Nehemiah's day as examples of God's people doing the right thing – representing God to their world, especially in times of uncertainty and even great personal difficulty.

How they conducted themselves, how they responded to the Lord and to Nehemiah and Ezra's godly leadership, and how they endured hardship were examples to those around them of God's work and grace in their lives – in several ways.

For example, we've mentioned how, when faced with trouble, they did not just jump into some self-conceived solution. Before they did anything, they went to God in prayer – looking for His guidance about what to do.

They led by example in prayer.

When it was pointed out to the wealthy ones of that group that they were taking unfair advantage of the poor among them, they realized that for the evil it was and repented of it and ended that behavior.

They led by example in fairness and justice.

Also, the group there did not live with some entitlement mentality. They worked hard – very hard – to accomplish their purposes, so they led by example in work ethic.

At one point, those in leadership realized the people there were thinking in unhealthy and inaccurate ways about their situation, and so the leaders intervened and brought them to a healthier, more correct way of looking at their circumstance.

In that way, they led by example in adopting correct perspective.

And then last Sunday we saw how the people there were quick to realize the different ways they had sinned before God, and they were equally quick to humble themselves, admit their sin and ask for God's forgiveness.

And so, the people there led by example in humility.

How much our troubled world today needs to see people who are examples:

- of prayer,
- of acting justly toward the less advantaged,
- of hard work,
- of correct perspective,
- and of humility.

Wouldn't you like to know people like that? Wouldn't it be nice to hang out and to live life with people like that?

Are there any in the world?

If so, where? Where do you go – where does our broken world go – to find people who pray and act justly and work hard and keep perspective and practice humility?

God's intention is that the world see this sort of people in His Church.

We who follow Jesus – we are God's intended examples of all these things. We're called to lead the world in living out these Godly behaviors, and especially so in difficult times, so the world can see Christ in us – and in so doing, find a place of stability and reason and calm and virtue.

Now, some will be repelled and even offended by the notion that there is a right way, and that it's God's way – and that's nothing new. That happened to those in Nehemiah's day. Some will call us names and think badly of us, as they did to those Jerusalem Jews.

They may even try to destroy us.

But others will be drawn – drawn to God and drawn to Jesus – if His people will be, by His help and power, the examples and leaders God intends us to be, especially in these areas we've discovered in Nehemiah: prayer,

justice, labor, perspective, humility – and then finally today, dedication.

Dedication.

The people of Jerusalem – once they had realized that they had not been living as God wanted them to live – were indeed sorry. They admitted to God they were wrong in acting the way they had been acting.

But they did more than just feel sorry.

They repented of what they'd done, which means, as we said last week, that they changed their behavior – they stopped doing the wrong they were doing and began doing what they now knew was right.

They put their agreement with God into action.

But you know, even that was not all.

Those Jews there in Jerusalem went one step further than that: they formally committed themselves to following the Lord by making a written agreement together for the sake of personal accountability.

You can call what they made a pact, a covenant, a promise, a contract – whatever you like, but they agreed that something beyond just their verbal assent was needed here, so they wrote out an agreement – and verse one of Nehemiah, Chapter 10, says they put their seals upon it.

In those days, a seal worked like a signature today, creating a formal commitment that indicates, not just that you mean what you say, but that you accept responsibility for what you're signing, and you're making yourself accountable for the outcome.

Either on paper or electronically, we sign for credit card purchases; we sign checks; we sign contracts and buy orders; we sign for bank loans.

Have you bought a car or a home lately? You have to sign a dozen or more documents when you do.

We sign that we've read the rules and agree to abide by them.

We sign marriage licenses.

Any truly important agreement usually requires our signature in some way, which proclaims that we will see this through – and we are making ourselves accountable to do so.

That's what these seals signified on this document this day – starting with Nehemiah, the governor's, and then the rest, which very likely were the leaders of these groups and families – representing their people.

So, to what did they agree? There were three broad principles.

First, they promised to inter-marry no longer with the peoples and nations surrounding them.

Now, let me say, this has nothing to do with racism or ethnic prejudice.

The fact is, the Jewish theology of hospitality was far better than that of any other ancient near eastern people. They were to treat foreigners in their land warmly and welcome peoples of other nationalities into their faith.

But they were not to compromise their faith in any way, which is the point here. The purpose of this restriction was to protect spiritual purity, which is a concern you see all through God's history with His

people beginning in Deuteronomy 7 and carrying on today in 2 Corinthians 6.

You see, God knows, very well, the danger we expose ourselves to when we commit ourselves – when we link ourselves – to persons who do not share our ultimate values and allegiances.

King Solomon would be a prime example of this.

At least some, in Nehemiah's day, were doing that – marrying non-Jews, and God knew that would be destructive to all involved.

So, they committed here, to not do that anymore.

The second commitment they made had to do with keeping both the weekly Sabbath and the sabbatical year. They promised to no longer buy or sell on the weekly Sabbath, since this involved working, which contradicts Exodus' call for God's people to rest on that day.

Of course, the peoples around them did not follow that, so there was this constant temptation in their lives, just as there is today, to go with the flow and do as their neighbors did, and just ignore God's command for a day of worship and rest.

Related to this was the practice of allowing the land itself to rest each seventh year. We see this law of God in Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy – a law that was physically good for the land and spiritually good for the people.¹

These had, apparently, not been observed. But the people here committed to following them.

And then the third part of this covenant involved not neglecting the Temple of God, which involved bringing the required sacrifices, the tithes, and the supplies needed to keep the ministries of the Temple operating.

Apparently, it was easy in Nehemiah's day, just as it still is today, to presume that the things that needed to be done in the name of the Lord would get done – by someone else.

But you see, when that presumption prevails, the work of the Lord suffers.

That presumption, however, has almost always existed, which is why it has nearly always been true, unfortunately, that 80% of the work of God is accomplished by 20% of the people of God. It's why many priests and pastors and the most dedicated of Christ-followers get tired and burn out – because while the 80% are usually very good at expecting, they are usually not very good at participating.

Back there in Jerusalem, part of the revival involved the Jews there realizing they'd been part of the 80%. They expected a full-service Temple, but had been, themselves, uninterested in doing their part – and so they committed here to doing differently.

Now, I'm sure God could have pointed out many more places in these persons' lives where they were not being completely faithful to Him.

But in His grace, you see, God restrains Himself along those lines.

Just like today, God could, but He chooses not to overwhelm us such that we drown in conviction or

¹ Exodus 21; Leviticus 25; Deuteronomy 15

shame. He works with His people by laying things before us and asking us to respond to a thing or two here, and then a thing or two there. And in that way, He grows us and matures us at a pace we can tolerate.

In other words, He treats us like any good, loving parent would.

A few days—or even a few years—after our boys were born, I did not place them in the driver’s seat of my truck and say, “OK, boy, you have to learn how to do this, so let’s get on with it.”

No, there are steps to growth, right? Learn first how to just turn over. And then to crawl, then to sit, then to stand, then to walk, then to run, then to bike, then to drive—each in its time.

God works with us the same way, as He worked with those Jews there in Jerusalem.

He lays something before us and asks us to respond to it, and how we respond, to some degree, determines what He does next.

And He had to be pleased with how these people responded! They agreed enthusiastically—and more!

They challenged each other with a deeper and firmer commitment to God than they had lived in past days. It was their determination to honor God that led to this covenant.

And, with built-in accountability, you see? There in verse 29, they included—they self-imposed—a curse and an oath, with signature and seal.

This wasn’t some rigid, legalistic requirement. They didn’t have to do this. They could have just said, “Sure, sure, we’ll do it,” and then slink away, hoping everyone would just forget about it.

But they were more serious than that. God had spoken to them, and they wanted to do something that reflected the seriousness of their change and commitment, you see?

This is true repentance.

This is what happens when someone agrees with God, not just up here [pointing: head], but in here [heart.]

When God’s word gets to us down here, then that’s when we change the way we think and live, and we have this desire to stay just this dedicated to the Lord.

They realized they had failed Him before and they didn’t want to do it again.

You see, there is *momentary* dedication.

And there is *enduring* dedication. And the latter doesn’t just happen. It requires accountability, and maybe a mechanism for accountability.

Accountability to God, yes—but also accountability to other believers. That’s the extra step these people took in what they did here, but it’s a step that many people won’t take today, especially in our very independent, do it my way, “I’ll-be-fine-on-my-own-I-don’t-need-your-help-thank-you” culture.

But the fact is, most people who think that way usually don’t end up—at least spiritually—fine, because our world is, as Luther put it, is “filled with devils that threaten to undo us.”

Which is why we need each other. I need you to help me, and you need me to help you, to be dedicated to the Lord.

In part, that’s what the Church is for—it’s what church membership is supposed to be: making a commitment to be dedicated to God and His purposes, and to God’s people—to each other.

But even membership is only as good as one’s engagement, right?

Even in membership, we have to actually show up and make ourselves vulnerable to God and to others.

We have to put ourselves in positions where we’re asked, by God and by others, “How are you, really? How’s your life? How’s your faith? How’s your perspective? How’s your service? How’s your commitment?”

Making ourselves vulnerable.

Making ourselves accountable to others about the specific things God is showing us—the things God is saying to us.

That’s putting our seal—our signature—on our repentance.

That’s what these people were doing here.

That’s dedication.

That’s acting on our commitment.

That’s repentance that endures.

And, while it’s freeing in one sense, it’s actually quite limiting in another, isn’t it?

Being that kind of vulnerable and accountable to others is self-limiting.

Asbury president Kevin Brown wrote of something like this just last week: about how the act of believers gathering produces community; community produces identity; identity requires commitments; and commitments entail limitations.

Our identities are not just something we claim.

Identity has terms and conditions.

To be a follower of Jesus comes with a set of limitations on the ways we think and act, and we need one another to recognize and keep those limitations—just like those Jews needed each other all those years ago.

They recognized their need for accountability—that’s why they did this.

Their seals—their signatures—were intended to ensure their unity in dedication.

Our gatherings—our engagements with one another, our vulnerability with each other, and our commitment to each other do that for us today.

Doing whatever we have to do to keep our commitments to God and to each other,

—to keep the promises we make,

—to live with integrity before God and others.

We should be leading the world in this sort of dedication.

So, are you? Are you there? Are you doing that?

We speak of Christ when we do, and we give the world hope.

Theologian Gary Smith says, “Think of it this way: If die-hard football fans will spend untold hours watching games in terrible, cold weather, talk endlessly about their

star players, spend hundreds of dollars to see their team play, and give of their time and emotional energy to further the reputation of their team, should not followers of Christ be willing to demonstrate an even greater loyalty to God? Should not His Name be praised at every opportunity, His worship enthusiastically supported, and the financial needs of His ministries met? That's where confession and repentance become dedication: in actually supporting what we say is important to us."

Are you there?

Are you this sort of dedicated to Jesus?

Will you be?

With the help of Christ's Spirit, let's be.

Let's be this sort of dedicated together – for our own sake, for the Glory of God, and for the good of our lost world.

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

Benediction:

"And repeat the gospel story till all men His Name have heard."

We can talk of Jesus all day long.

But in truth, we repeat the gospel story most powerfully when we live lives that are truly dedicated to the will and purpose of Jesus.

May the Lord, and the watching world, see in our lives our signatures and seals of dedication to Christ.