

Nehemiah - The Urban Renewal Project

REVIEW: The last few weeks have been a little different in that they have been very pointed in addressing confession before God, and obedience to God. Confession should lead us to a place of humility and obedience. In the last couple of weeks we have focused ourselves on areas that need confession and obedience before the Lord.

INTRO: Today we shift gears entirely. I almost skipped this section in Nehemiah altogether because it basically comes down to this: Nehemiah found a way to repopulate Jerusalem. Sermon over.

However, this section of Nehemiah can be applied to some areas in which Christianity, especially here in America, has fallen woefully short. Living in the area of the country we do, it could be easy to dismiss this sermon. I encourage you from the outset to consider the ideas, and pray for the response God might have in mind for you.

CAVEAT: This is one of few messages you will hear me preach that looks far more at the overall theme rather than the specifics of the passage. The theme that I am pulling from the passage is not what the original author had in mind, but how we can apply what the author had in mind. Does that make sense? I refuse not to be true to the Word of God. The author simply meant: "Here's how we repopulated Jerusalem." We are going to look at the story for lessons that we can apply to our lives here and now.

Nehemiah 11:1-12:21

- I. I am sure we all understand that the world population is growing
 - A. At the time of Jesus, the estimates range from 170 million people world wide to 400 million with an average of 272 million
 1. To give you perspective the current population of the US is about 320 million
 2. So in Jesus day, there was a little less than the population of the US on the earth
 - B. It took about 1500 years to double that 272 million to 544 million
 - C. It took a little over 350 years to double the population again to about 1 billion - so we are at 1850
 - D. About 70 years later and we doubled to 2 billion at about 1930
 - E. Currently the world population sits about 7.4 billion people
 - F. The majority of people today live in cities
 1. According to the Globalist website

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- a) There are about 500 metropolitan areas with populations of 1 million or more
 - b) China has the most cities over 1 million people at 105 cities
 - c) Japan has only 8 million-person cities, but has the largest city in the world - Tokyo at 38 million
 - d) India has 58 million-person cities, the US 45, and Latin America 67
 - e) Almost 74% of Europe's population live in cities
 - f) Asia, 48% live in urban areas
2. Years ago, when society was largely agrarian, people lived in towns and smaller communities
 3. When society became much more industrialized, cities became the place where the majority of people live
- G. Remember when you sat in sociology class thinking, "I am never going to use this stuff in the real world" - Welcome to the real world
- H. We are almost at the opposite end of the scale from Nehemiah and the situation in Jerusalem
1. They are needing to repopulate the city
 2. Our cities are growing ever larger
- II. Nehemiah's problems
- A. Look back at Nehemiah 7:4 for just a minute
1. "Now the city was large and spacious, but there were few people in it, and the houses had not yet been rebuilt."
 - a) When is the last time you heard a city described that way?
 - b) Nehemiah is needing to attract people to the city
- B. Why? Why was the city so unoccupied?
1. First of all they had been without a wall for close to 150 years
 - a) That means no way of defending the people in the city
 - b) That means a very dangerous place to live
 - c) People living in the country have the chance to run and hide in case of an invasion - if all goes well they only lose their crops or cattle, or homes, but spare their lives
 - d) If you lived in a city, there is little place to run, and with few people, there are few defenders
 2. So at this time in Israel's history, you need to picture Jerusalem as you might remember pictures of Berlin after WWII
 - a) What structures Jerusalem had had been severely damaged by the Babylonians during the attacks on the city
 - b) What was left after their attacks would have been looted by marauders, and scavengers

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- c) To top it off, during the 150ish years of non-occupation, trees and plants would have grown up in the streets and around houses
 - (1) Most likely the first wave of Jews returning to Jerusalem would have taken care of some of it
 - (2) Probably the areas around their houses
 - (3) But Jerusalem was still a far cry from what it once had been

III. Nehemiah's solutions

- A. The first thing Nehemiah did, doubtless at his urging, was have the leaders settle in Jerusalem
 - 1. If they did not already have a home in the city, the leaders moved in and found a spot
 - 2. Don't pass that up, because there is a lesson there
 - a) Ready: Leaders lead.
 - b) Doesn't sound too deep, leaders lead, we get it, but think of what that means
 - (1) For them it mean that if they expected their fellow Jews to move and help repopulate the city, they had to lead by example
 - (2) That is the principle that is obvious here - leaders lead by example
 - (3) It is something we need to understand - with leadership comes responsibility
 - (a) Not just to make decisions for the church
 - (b) Church leadership is not just reduced to making good decisions in a board meeting
 - (c) The mission of our church is to expand the kingdom and while good, wise and godly decisions are a part of that, because our focus is the kingdom, it means leading by example throughout all levels at church
 - (4) Jesus gives us the perfect example of this in John 13
 - (a) Most of us know the story - Jesus and the disciples assemble for what would be "The Last Supper"
 - (b) Peter and John were sent ahead to prepare the room for the meal
 - (c) In their preparations they forgot to make sure there would be someone to wash everyone's feet - which was a custom of the day
 - (d) Rather than washing all of their friend's feet, they let it go
 - (e) So Jesus gets up, wraps a towel around him, and washes the feet of all of the disciples
 - (f) Listen to what Jesus said, "You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and

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Teacher have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you." - John 13:13-15

- (g) Jesus set the perfect example that leaders lead
 - i) He lived out the behavior He expected
 - ii) He was the Lord, and yet He made Himself their servant
 - (5) From both Nehemiah and Jesus, we get the perfect examples that leaders lead the people
 - B. The second thing Nehemiah does is cast lots among the people for who will live in the city
 - 1. At the end of chapter ten they were pledging themselves to tithing
 - 2. I guess Nehemiah was on a role and figured tithing the people for the city was a great way to get the city going again
 - a) It seems strange that people would just pick up and leave their homes to relocate in the city
 - b) However, the undertone of the verses suggest that people felt it was their religious duty
 - (1) They looked at the casting of lots as God's will
 - (2) And given the reference to the "holy city," people probably viewed it as a privilege to live near the temple, where God's spirit resided
 - c) The volunteers mentioned were probably the same people chosen by lot, but had the right attitude about moving into the city
 - C. The rest of the verses are about who moved into the city to get Jerusalem up and running again
- IV. What repopulating the city of Jerusalem has to do with us
- A. We have already said that they had the problem of getting enough people into their city
 - B. We have a different problem in that we have lots of people in the cities, and cities continue to grow all the time
 - 1. The problem comes in when we consider what is called, "white flight"
 - a) You may have heard the term before
 - b) It refers to the white population moving out of the cities to suburbs or more rural areas to avoid the problems of a city
 - 2. The same mentality, running from the problems and difficulties in the city, has actually affected world missions
 - a) Missions organizations have been focused on remote areas of the world
 - b) Fewer are focused on the cities of the world, where much of the population is

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- C. There is a movement in Christianity to get more Christians to move back to the cities
1. Part of the reason the cities struggle as much as they do is because Christians have vacated the cities
 - a) Please understand that this is a complicated problem and there is no one reason for the reason cities struggle
 - b) All I am saying is it is one factor in a very complex issue
 2. Christians have moved to avoid the problems that city life brings with it
 3. And because of that, because of the lack of influence of Christians, the cities have struggled with moral decline
 - a) Timeout! Quick theology lesson.
 - b) One of the Holy Spirit's roles is the restraint of sin and evil in this world
 - (1) 2 Thessalonians 2:6-7 "And now you know what is holding him back, so that he may be revealed at the proper time. ⁷ For the secret power of lawlessness is already at work; but the one who now holds it back will continue to do so till he is taken out of the way."
 - (2) The him being held back is the "man of lawlessness" - or the anti-Christ
 - (3) The one holding him back - the Holy Spirit
 - (a) This verse gives rise to the false notion that the Holy Spirit will be removed from the earth during the end times
 - (b) That is a theological impossibility - the Holy Spirit is God, and God is omnipresent - the Holy Spirit can't be "removed" during the end times
 - (c) However, His restraining influence can be removed
 - c) Now, the Holy Spirit's job is to restrain evil.
 - (1) Where does the Holy Spirit reside - where does He live?
 - (2) Inside each of us
 - (3) So it follows that if Christians vacate the cities, the Holy Spirit's restraining influence is lessened because God's Church is not present
 4. End theology lesson, but not the end of the examples of the lesson
 - a) Christians often complain about Hollywood and the music industry and how bad they have become
 - b) One of the reasons they got that way is because Christians vacated those industries in early years
 - (1) Christians used to lead in the arts - all forms (art, music, literature, etc.)

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- (2) Christians used to lead in science as well
- (3) As the number of Christians diminished, so did the influence, and so did the moral standards in many ways
 - (a) Please don't take that as a rant against all TV, movies, secular music, etc.
 - (b) It was merely an observation, and there are many good and redeeming qualities to those things
5. I say all of that to say this, Christians need to seriously pray and ask God for where they can exert their influence in society
 - a) If it is in the arts, or sciences, be the best artist, the best musician, the best scientist in recent memory - use the aptitudes God has given you for His glory
 - b) Here is something each one of us should pray about
 - (1) Is God calling you to the city?
 - (a) If you immediately said "no" than you are not taking seriously the possible call of God because you gave no thought or prayer to the idea
 - (b) If the kingdom is built on people, and people are largely in cities, and God is calling you to build His kingdom, you need to take seriously that God might ask you to go to the city
 - (2) Will it be easy? I'm sure it will not
 - (3) Will it be worth it? If you are following God's will for your life it is worth it.
6. On balance, does every Christian need to move to the city?
 - a) No. God does not have that as a call for everyone
 - b) However, everyone should seriously consider if that is God's calling.
7. One last idea here is a story that comes from Dr. E.V. Hill - a man that pastored a church in Los Angeles
 - a) I was able to hear Dr. Hill speak in my days at Moody during Founder's Week
 - (1) I remember him for one primary thing
 - (2) Dr. Hill is the only man I have ever heard call Satan and "booger" during a sermon and get away with it
 - b) Dr. Hill used to work for the democratic party in Texas
 - (1) He used to try to get people out to vote
 - (2) He developed a strategy to reach the masses
 - (a) They would have a block captain for every block in the city they were working in

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- (b) That captain would be responsible to contact all of the residents on their block - especially on election day to remind them to get out and vote
- c) Dr. Hill, after moving to LA figured if he did that for the democratic part, why not for the kingdom of God
 - (1) Dr. Hill figured out the number of blocks in LA - 9000
 - (2) Then the number in the district in which his church operated - 3100
 - (a) That was their target - 3100 blocks of LA
 - (b) At the time he told this story, his church had a presence on 1900 of those blocks
 - (3) The block captain would invite people to church, help people with things when able and skilled (like moving), and generally be around and a presence in the community
 - (4) As the story goes, one man got fed up with the block captain always being around, and inviting him to church
 - (a) He was so put off by the captain that he decided to move to another part of town
 - (b) His block captain came out, lent aid, and said good bye to the man
 - (c) Then the captain went into their house, grabbed the directory for all the block captains and called the captain of the new area the man was moving to
 - (d) When he arrived at his new home, the new captain was standing there to greet the man to his new home
 - (e) His comment was, "My God, they're everywhere."
- d) I'll be the first to admit that this strategy could backfire if not handled well - our desire is to be inviting, not off putting
 - (1) That really should be our goal as Christians
 - (2) To have a visible presence everywhere
- D. Whether God calls you to move to the city to be a part of a strong Christian community there, or whether He calls you to your current community, the call is the same - to be a visible presence in the community we live
 - 1. Acts 17:26 "From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands."
 - 2. If we really believe that God marked out the appointed times for where we should live
 - 3. If we really believe that God set us in a specific place in the history of the world

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4. We should understand that God gave us a mission for the kingdom, and we need to be busy about accomplishing this mission
- V. To end today, I want to show you a video
- A. This video is how one church is making a difference in their community
 1. Their community is not our community
 2. They have different problems, and different needs
 - B. What I want you to think about as you watch the video is what can we be doing in our community?
 1. What needs do we have?
 2. How might God be calling us to engage to meet those needs?
 3. When the video is done, the worship team will come back up and close the service
 - C. VIDEO: Night Strike