

Rebuild: Ezra-Nehemiah
Part 8: “Finishing the Wall” | Nehemiah 5-7
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[SERMON MANUSCRIPT]

Introduction

The title of today’s sermon is “Finishing the Wall” and it’s from Nehemiah 5-7. There’s a popular comedy-drama TV series called “Ted Lasso” that I’ve gotten into recently. It’s about an American football coach who moves to London to run a fictional British football club in the Premier League called AFC Richmond. One thing that has made this series so endearing to so many people is how Ted has all these “sayings” that he uses to make his points and to rally his team. One of those sayings is “believe,” which he writes out on a piece of paper and tapes to the top of the door to the locker room. Over the course of the series, the team gradually begins to believe in Ted; this team that was so dysfunctional from top to bottom eventually comes together as a winning team.

This kind of story isn’t new- it’s also what we’re seeing in the story of Ezra and Nehemiah in our series we’re calling “Rebuild.” Ezra and Nehemiah called the people of God to also “believe” in God’s providence and covenant with them. So far we’ve seen how God brought his people from exile back to Jerusalem and how that generation rebuilt the temple; we’ve seen how he raised up Ezra the scribe about sixty years later to teach the Law of God to the next generation- so they knew who God is and what he’d done for them; and most recently we’ve seen how he raised up Nehemiah to leave his job as servant to the King of Persia so that he could rebuild the wall around the city of Jerusalem. God worked in his people to “believe” and come together to start the wall in the face of various challenges; now we’re at the part of the narrative when they finish the wall!

Proposition

Here’s the main message for today’s sermon- how God’s people back then were to respond and how we as the church are also to respond. This is the “one thing” from Nehemiah 5-7:

Persistently strive to live by faith as God’s people.

Organizational Statement

In today’s sermon, I have four main parts. There will be four ways that we are to **persistently strive to live by faith as God’s people** that I will teach today.

Transition: The first way to *persistently strive to live by faith as God's people* is...

Sermon Outline

I. Hating Evil and Holding Fast to Good (from Nehemiah 5:1-13).

- A. In these verses, Nehemiah put an end to the wrongs that the Jews were doing against their own people in the Province of Judah.
1. [Here's our lesson from this first part...] Lesson #1: *God's people love each other sincerely, hating evil and holding fast to good.*
 - a) In verses 1-5, there was a "great outcry" among the people of Judah. You see, production of food was down because there was a famine in the region and the Jews in the Province of Judah suffered some bad harvests. Another reason for lower food production was because the labor force was mostly working on the wall in the city and not at home in the fields. So there were a few problems that arose out of this. Some people didn't have enough food to even stay alive- they were on the brink of starvation. Some people were forced to mortgage their property in order to buy food for their families. Some people even had to sell their children as slaves in order to pay their debts.
 - b) Here is how Nehemiah responded when he heard this "great outcry" in Nehemiah 5:6-10:
 - o Nehemiah 5:6-10 (ESV): *6 I was very angry when I heard their outcry and these words. 7 I took counsel with myself, and I brought charges against the nobles and the officials. I said to them, "You are exacting interest, each from his brother." And I held a great assembly against them 8 and said to them, "We, as far as we are able, have bought back our Jewish brothers who have been sold to the nations, but you even sell your brothers that they may be sold to us!" They were silent and could not find a word to say. 9 So I said, "The thing that you are doing is not good. Ought you not to walk in the fear of our God to prevent the taunts of the nations our enemies? 10 Moreover, I and my brothers and my servants are lending them money and grain. Let us abandon this exacting of interest."*
 - c) [Amen!] Nehemiah was angry! This wasn't right! To help us feel Nehemiah's outrage, let me read part of a CNN.com article about how the crisis in Afghanistan has forced many families to sell their daughters as child-brides just in order to survive.
 - o "Parwana is one of many young Afghan girls sold into marriage as the country's humanitarian crisis deepens. Hunger has pushed some families to make heartbreaking decisions, especially as the brutal winter approaches. Abdul Malik, Parwana's father, can't sleep at night. Ahead of the sale, he's broken with guilt, shame, and worry. He had tried to avoid selling her- he traveled...to search unsuccessfully for work...and his wife resorted to begging other camp residents for food. But he felt he had no choice if he wants to feed his family. 'We are eight family members. I have to sell to keep other family members alive.'"
 - d) There are just too many things wrong with this situation, but my point is this: Doesn't this get you mad? That's about how Nehemiah felt! He was angry about this evil that was going on among his people! Nehemiah was clear about what was at stake: God's people and God's name. God had already "bought back" his people out of captivity in Babylonia; but now they were enslaved again- this time by their own people! Not only that, but their enemies were taunting them and insulting the name of God because of this evil!
 - e) Interestingly, also as a man who was close to the Lord, Nehemiah "took counsel with himself." This meant that he thoughtfully and prayerfully processed the issue (going

past just his emotions). As a good leader, he assembled all the people and addressed the issue with them. Also, in taking counsel with himself, he probably realized his own part in this- in verse 10 he admitted that he also was guilty of lending money with interest to others and he resolved to correct this evil done by himself and by his people.

- f) Context: Last week we talked about all the *external* attacks that threatened God's people. What we see here are the *internal* attacks that threatened God's people: Jews taking advantage of their fellow Jews for their own gain. This shouldn't surprise us though, because the church is full of people whose sin *constantly* comes out against each other. That's why Paul instructed the church in Romans 12:9-10 this way:
- o Romans 12:9-10 (NIV): *9 Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. 10 Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves.*

I don't think it's too hard for us to think of examples in church of people taking advantage, abusing, or just treating each other terribly. But I also want us to think of the "milder"- yet just as harmful- ways we act wickedly towards each other: holding grudges, judging certain people, talking behind someone's back, or just ignoring other's absence or pain. Don't we see that these are the ways we can actually "kill" each other slowly? Scripture says love is sincere, devoted, and honoring of brothers and sisters in Christ over self. God doesn't want us to just *not* do evil like this, but to *hate* evil like this and to *do good* steadfastly! To be honest, sometimes we stink at these things- and I'm including myself! But persistently striving to live by faith as God's people is to see how we fall short of this for ourselves and for our church and to know that this is God's standard for us! So...

Transition: One way to *persistently strive to live by faith as God's people* is hating evil and holding fast to good. Another way is...

II. Being Truly Righteous and Generous (from Nehemiah 5:14-19).

- A. In these verses, Nehemiah demonstrated righteousness and generosity while serving as governor.
1. [Here's our lesson from this second part...] Lesson #2: *God's people bear the fruit of true righteousness and generosity in their character.*
 - a) Let's go ahead and read Nehemiah 5:14-15.
 - o Nehemiah 5:14-15 (ESV): *14 Moreover, from the time that I was appointed to be their governor in the land of Judah, from the twentieth year to the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes the king, twelve years, neither I nor my brothers ate the food allowance of the governor. 15 The former governors who were before me laid heavy burdens on the people and took from them for their daily ration forty shekels of silver. Even their servants lorded it over the people. But I did not do so, because of the fear of God.*

[Amen!] Nehemiah said that he was governor of the Province of Judah for twelve years and during that whole time, he did not use the food allowance that was normally budgeted for civil servants in his position. This was in stark contrast to the former governors who "laid heavy burdens" of taxes on the people (per day it was forty shekels of silver- or about half a kg- for their daily food).

- b) His focus was rebuilding the wall and he didn't take advantage of the situation to gain financially for himself- we all know that it's normal for politicians, their family, and their friends to all profit like this. Instead, Nehemiah said that he didn't do this because he had a proper *fear of the Lord*. He had a healthy reverence for God that compelled him to live righteously even if no one else knew or if everyone else thought it was acceptable to do! In fact, Nehemiah went on to say that he hosted dinners *every day* for other officials in and around the Province of Judah. He didn't use that food allowance but

paid for it out of his own pocket- about 150 people per day! Imagine what hosting these dinners would've been like: While some were probably pleasant, there were probably many two-faced politicians who plotted behind his back but acted like his friend at the dinner table. Nehemiah was not only generous with his money, but also with how he treated people.

- c) Look at what he prayed in Nehemiah 5:19.
- o Nehemiah 5:19 (ESV): *19 Remember for my good, O my God, all that I have done for this people.*

[Amen!] What do we make of this “remember me” prayer? Nehemiah was definitely a normal human being, with his own sins and flaws (as we just saw in the last point). Fighting to be righteous and generous in a hostile environment must have been hard for him. I don't think that this “remember me” was a prayer of “look at all the great things I've done, God!” but more of “remember me in light of the covenant relationship you have with me- I need you!” He was a righteous man, but he knew that he was a sinner before God. He lived under God's covenant and steadfast love. This is what caused him to live righteously and generously *and* what caused him to hate evil and hold fast to good. It was not to earn favor from God but because he had already overwhelmingly received favor from God!

- d) Context: Friends, we are unable to hate evil and hold fast to good on our own strength. We are unable to live generously and righteously on our own strength. We are sinners who naturally seek out our own interests and cannot show mercy to those who hurt us. But “remember me” is a statement of faith- a heart cry- to Jesus Christ. It's what the criminal asked Jesus to do as he was executed right next to Jesus on the cross (Luke 23:42). Jesus hates evil and holds fast to good, which is why he triumphed on the cross. Jesus' love for us is righteous and generous, which he showed in his sacrifice on the cross. Jesus died on that cross because he did remember you and me!
- e) Context: Do you remember the story of Zacchaeus (in Luke 19:1-10)? Jesus initiated that relationship with Zacchaeus- a chief tax collector, traitor to his own people, and sinner on all accounts. He overwhelmingly received this favor from Jesus and he responded by giving all he had to the poor and giving back all that he'd stolen fourfold. As we fathom that we have a relationship with God only because Jesus *remembered* us on the cross, we can persistently live by faith! And we do this by being consistent with this Gospel: hating evil and holding fast to good towards others; being righteous before God and generous towards others. Let me give you a tangible way to do this. First, think about how Christ hated evil and held fast to good by going to the cross for you. And think about his righteousness and generosity poured out for you. Now think of a person in this room- who you don't know well or don't like (here in HL or Zoom/Lotte Shopping Ave or Zoom). How can reflect that hatred of evil and holding fast to good towards him/her? How can you pour out righteousness and generosity towards him/her? So...

Transition: Two ways to *persistently strive to live by faith as God's people* is *hating evil and holding fast to good and being righteous and generous*. A third way is...

III. Navigating Wisely towards the Goal (from Nehemiah 6:1-14).

- A. In these verses, Nehemiah navigated through the schemes against him by staying focused on his God-given goal.
1. [Here's our lesson from this third part...] Lesson #3: *God's people must navigate wisely through distractions to stay on mission.*
 - a) The walls were almost done now and only the doors for the gates still needed to be installed. Nehemiah's enemies relentlessly tried to trip him up. They invited him to

meet them somewhere outside of Judah, but Nehemiah discerned that they intended to do him harm, so he refused politely over and over again. He simply told them that he was in the midst of this “great work” of building the wall and did not want to be distracted in its completion. After four invitations and four rejections, this is what happened next in Nehemiah 6:5-9.

- o Nehemiah 6:5-9 (ESV): *5 In the same way Sanballat for the fifth time sent his servant to me with an open letter in his hand. 6 In it was written, “It is reported among the nations, and Geshem also says it, that you and the Jews intend to rebel; that is why you are building the wall. And according to these reports you wish to become their king. 7 And you have also set up prophets to proclaim concerning you in Jerusalem, ‘There is a king in Judah.’ And now the king will hear of these reports. So now come and let us take counsel together.” 8 Then I sent to him, saying, “No such things as you say have been done, for you are inventing them out of your own mind.” 9 For they all wanted to frighten us, thinking, “Their hands will drop from the work, and it will not be done.” But now, O God, strengthen my hands.*
- b) [Amen!] We already know Sanballat- the governor of Samaria and one of Nehemiah’s enemies. He shrewdly crafted an open letter where he didn’t outrightly accuse Nehemiah of anything but said that he had *heard* reports that the Jews intended to rebel against the Persian Empire. He heard other reports that Nehemiah was seeking to become the king of the Jews and that he’d told the prophets to declare that he was the new king of Judah. This open letter was like an “hoax” that we see all over social media and the internet today- news that was totally made up but sounded like the truth.
- c) Sanballat advised that they get together to figure out what to do in response. But Nehemiah was not fazed by this “fake news”- he knew it wasn’t true and didn’t waste energy defending himself or denouncing the fake news. He recognized that Sanballat was trying to intimidate him and his people with these lies. Notice again that Nehemiah lifted up a short prayer: *But now, O God, strengthen my hands.* He kept moving forward towards his God-given goal of finishing the walls. Nehemiah *navigated wisely* through these distractions towards his goal of rebuilding God’s city and honoring God’s name.
- d) Context: The author of the book of Hebrews wrote about this to Christians as well, as he presented examples from the Scriptures of those who lived by faith, in Hebrews 12:1-2.
 - o Hebrews 12:1-2 (NIV): *1 Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, 2 fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith.*

Our faith is focused on the rock of our salvation, Jesus Christ. And he’s given us- his church- a clear mission to make disciples. As a church gathered, we disciple each other to follow Jesus by continually doing all those “one another” commands in the New Testament. As a church scattered, we disciple others that God has put into our lives- in our homes, work, and community.

- e) Context: Throwing off stuff that hinders us and sin that entangles us is the way that we navigate wisely to stay on mission. This was what Francis and Lisa Chan wrote about in their book about marriage called *You and Me Forever* (but also applies to the church):
 - o “People will tell you to focus on your marriage, to focus on each other; but we discovered that focusing on God’s mission made our marriage amazing. ...There’s no time to fight. We have better things to pursue than our interests.”

Church, we must focus on God's mission for us. We shouldn't waste energy on fighting each other or pursuing our own interests. Instead, let's spend our time and energy to make disciples inside and outside of the church!

Transition: Three ways to *persistently strive to live by faith as God's people* is *hating evil and holding fast to good, being generous and above reproach, and navigating wisely towards the goal*. A fourth and final way is...

IV. Finishing Each Season by Faith (from Nehemiah 6:15-7:73).

A. In these verses, Nehemiah led God's people to finish the walls, by the hand of God upon them.

1. [Here's our lesson from this last part...] Lesson #4: *God's people finish each season by faith, seeing their lives in light of God's covenant.*

a) Let's read Nehemiah 6:15-16 now.

- o Nehemiah 6:15-16 (ESV): *15 So the wall was finished on the twenty-fifth day of the month Elul, in fifty-two days. 16 And when all our enemies heard of it, all the nations around us were afraid and fell greatly in their own esteem, for they perceived that this work had been accomplished with the help of our God.*

[Amen!] Fifty-two days! The wall was done in fifty-two days! This was quite an extraordinary accomplishment, considering that the wall remained in ruins for 140 years before that point. It became well-known that this work was only done "with the help of our God." And the result of this was that the other people groups around Judah saw the hand of God upon his people.

b) Context: A key point is that they *finished* what they set out to do! They finished despite a lot of pressure and opposition against them; they finished despite the work being a huge- almost insurmountable- challenge. It is important to learn how to finish things in life with faith, including seasons of life. You might feel like you're just crawling to the finish line, but you can trust that God is accomplishing his will *in* you and *through* you as you are finishing! For example, what I love about my kids learning piano is seeing them finishing pieces of music. Whenever they start a new piece, it's really hard for them and they complain and get frustrated. But we encourage them to stick with it and eventually they finish learning it! Finishing little things in life and finishing seasons in life trains us to *finish the race of life!* We don't have to be perfect (Jesus was perfect for us), but we finish *full of faith*, trusting Jesus will finish what he started in us- so we keep following him!

c) Then what Nehemiah did was he *prepared* for the next season. The last part of this chapter that I want to read is Nehemiah 7:4-5.

- o Nehemiah 7:4-5 (ESV): *4 The city was wide and large, but the people within it were few, and no houses had been rebuilt. 5 Then my God put it into my heart to assemble the nobles and the officials and the people to be enrolled by genealogy. And I found the book of the genealogy of those who came up at the first, and I found written in it...*

[Amen!] The transition to the next season included repopulating Jerusalem. This was a crucial part of God's plan for his people- that they'd fill up God's city and worship him in God's temple! This was the next step now that the city walls were done.

d) Nehemiah wrote that God had "put it into his heart" to assemble the current generation of God's people according to the record of the families that returned from exile from Babylon that 140 years ago from Ezra chapter 2. In fact, the portion of Scripture from Nehemiah 7:6-73 is almost exactly the same as what is recorded in Ezra 2:1-69. What was the purpose of devoting so much space to the same exact information? Nehemiah connected how God had been faithful to his covenant with that previous generation- those names and families specifically- with how God had acted faithfully towards *his*

generation. God brought his people back to Jerusalem; God finished the temple; God finished the wall...and now they were ready for what was next! They needed to see their lives in light of God's covenant with them as they finished this season by faith!

- e) Context: May we see our lives in light of the cross, the resurrection, and Christ's imminent return: he is faithful to us, church! Therefore, we can finish this season well- this COVID19 pandemic season- by staying on mission as a church: one that *gathers* to make disciples *and* that *scatters* to make disciples. We may feel like we're crawling, but let's strive to keep going forward, full of faith in God's care and commitment for us! Then we'll also be prepared for whatever new season that God will bring us to. In light of seeing our lives in light of God's covenant with us in Christ, I want to invite us to sowing seeds *now* into each other as a church! Remember Psalm 126? Let me read some of it again.
- o Psalm 126:5-6 (NLT): *5 Those who plant in tears will harvest with shouts of joy. 6 They weep as they go to plant their seed, but they sing as they return with the harvest.*

This is the story of Israel- returned from exile and rebuilding the city. This is the story of God's people- the church- in the first century that believed and followed Jesus Christ, bearing witness of him to the ends of the earth. And this is the story of God's people- HMCC in Tangerang and Jakarta as well- as we keep sowing seeds into each other until Christ returns! Let's have this vision as we finish each season by faith!

Transition: So we've covered four ways to ***persistently strive to live by faith as God's people***: *hating evil and holding fast to good, being righteous and generous, navigating wisely towards the goal, and finishing each season by faith*. Now let's finish this sermon with the...

Conclusion

V. Life Application

A. Think about following question- as God's Word and the Holy Spirit are speaking to you now:

1. What specific ways will I live by faith in light of God's covenant with me in Christ...
 - a) In showing sincere love for a brother or sister in Christ?
 - b) In being righteous or generous towards a brother or sister in Christ?
 - c) In removing distractions from staying on mission to make disciples?
 - d) In sowing seeds to finish this season and transition to the next?

Transition: This is putting our faith into action: by receiving the love, righteousness, generosity, salvation, and sealing work of Christ in our lives and then deciding about how to live that out. Maybe showing sincere love is reaching out to someone and inviting them out for a coffee. Maybe being generous is opening your home for a meal with another family. Maybe removing distractions is not streaming a movie but participating in LIFE group that evening. Maybe sowing seeds is making some prayer cards and praying 15 minutes a day for people and for yourself. Let's think about it and pray to the Lord at this time before we close out with a time of corporate worship.

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