

## Proper Dedication – Nehemiah 12:27-47

### Scripture Reading: Psalm 51:1-17

#### Introduction

Walls have different purposes and not all walls are created equally

Last week, I mentioned the wall at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and that is a wall whose purpose is simply remembrance

The Berlin Wall was infamous for being built in order to keep the people of East Berlin from leaving

And the wall at our southern border is meant to ensure national sovereignty

There are all kinds of walls and not all walls are created equally

The wall surrounding Jerusalem was a defensive wall, as were all city walls in those days, but it also served to separate the people within and to signify that they were different from the surrounding nations

As we come to the final section of chapter 12, we find the account of the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem

You might remember that we read about the completion of the wall clear back in **Nehemiah 6:15** and we read there that the wall was completed on *the 25th day of the month Elul* which would correspond to mid-September on our calendar

Then in chapter 7 we saw Nehemiah make provision for those who were responsible for keeping watch over the wall and its gates

In chapter 8 we saw the people come together and demand that Ezra read to them from the Book of the Law which led first to universal weeping and ultimately to the observance of the Feast of Booths

Then in the first verse of chapter 9 (**Neh. 9:1**) we read how in what would be our mid-October, the people gathered together to make public confession of their sins and to hold a covenant renewal ceremony

If we presume that the dedication ceremony in the verses before us took place shortly after that, it would be about a month or so after the wall was completed when they dedicated the wall

When we read the verses before us we see that this was a time of joyous celebration as there were two great processions made up of musicians, choirs, common folks, and the leaders of the people who marched around the top of the wall making so much noise that “...*the joy of Jerusalem was heard far away*” (**Neh. 12:43**)

But this was far more than a celebration of the completion of the rebuilding of the wall, it was a dedication – a setting aside and recognition of the wall’s special significance and purpose

And it was more than a civic ceremony as the inclusion of the Levites, the priest, the temple and the worship aspects of the dedication reveal the spiritual significance of the occasion

So, while we might dedicate many common things to a particular use; like a section of our yard for a garden plot or, as Abraham Lincoln did at Gettysburg, a portion of a battlefield for a cemetery for those who lost their lives there; this was a dedication unto the Lord

The residents of Jerusalem were undoubtedly very happy that they had completed the reconstruction of the wall but this dedication shows that they also credited God with accomplishing this achievement through them

The very things God gives to his people are to be set aside for him to use for his purposes

And as the two contingents of musicians, choirs, and citizens walked in opposite directions around the top of the wall they symbolically enclosed the entire city within their praise and dedication showing that Jerusalem herself was dedicated to the Lord

But there is a reason that the dedication was delayed and didn’t take place immediately upon the last gate being hung in place and that was **the more important dedication** that needed to occur

## **I. The More Important Dedication**

Before the wall could be rightly dedicated the people themselves had to be dedicated

After all, what good is a dedicated wall and city without a dedicated people to inhabit it?

It would be like a businessman dedicating his place of business to the Lord but not his business practices or parents dedicating their child to the Lord but not themselves or their family practices

We rightly recognize that those would be absurdly hypocritical situations

And the same was true with the people of Jerusalem

Before they could dedicate the wall to the Lord they first had to dedicate themselves

And before they could dedicate themselves they had to understand where they were and what God required of them

So the people needed to be deeply convicted by the Word of God and they needed to return to the ritual observance of the God's ordinances and they needed to partake in the public confession of sin and the renewal of their covenantal commitment thereby dedicating themselves to God

As we saw in our Scripture reading from Psalm 51 God doesn't desire outward, ritualistic observance

And to dedicate an object without first dedicating oneself would be exactly that – all form and no substance

The book of Malachi relates example after example of this kind of thinking and the behaviors it begets as Malachi shows again and again how God brings charges against those who only outwardly conform and perform perfunctory duties

In fact, Malachi even goes so far as to say in **Malachi 1:10** that it would be better for the temple doors to be shut and locked than for worthless sacrifices to be offered because God was only going to reject the sacrifices anyway if they weren't offered with love and devotion

That's the behavior Jesus repeatedly rebuked the Pharisees for during his earthly ministry as they were fastidious about following the rules – even to the point of inventing rules God never required – while being far from God themselves

What God desires are *“a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart”* – God desires his children to commit to him

So we must first dedicate ourselves to God individually and corporately because that is the more important dedication

And Nehemiah shows us four requirements of personal dedication and we will look at those next

## **II. The Requirements of Personal Dedication**

The first requirement for personal dedication we see is **purity**

### **A. Purity**

The great obstacle to dedication to God and worship of God is sin

As **Habakkuk 1:13** reminds us, God is of purer eyes than to see evil and he cannot look at wrong

So for sinners to come into God's presence, the defilement of sin must first be removed

And, as we see in Nehemiah 12:30, the first thing the priests and Levites did was purify themselves, then they purified the people, and then the gates and the wall

Nehemiah doesn't go into any detail as to what this purification entailed but we can infer from Exodus 19, Leviticus 16, and Numbers 8 and 19 that it may well have involved such actions as sprinkling with water, animal sacrifice, fasting, and abstinence from sexual intercourse

And this general purification was necessary because they were about to participate in something related to God

The late pastor, Ray Stedman, pointed out in a sermon of his that many people today are afraid of the word, purity, because they think it will make them seem like a self-righteous kind of person or goody-two-shoes

But that purification in the life of the Christ-follower stems from the same philosophy that motivates us when we wash the dishes

And how, just as we wouldn't set our table with dirty dishes and proceed to serve our guests, God doesn't want to work with dirty vessels either

Even as saved individuals we need a periodic cleansing of our lives and hearts

But we go about that a bit differently than those who lived in Nehemiah's day

No longer does our purification require ritual or sacrifice as it did in the Old Testament but rather simple confession of sins and the assurance that God has forgiven them

We simply admit our mistakes and failings without hiding or blaming or minimizing them – both to God and to whoever else might be involved in them – determine to turn from them, and believe that God has forgiven them

**1John 1:9** – *If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness*

I want you to make careful note of what that verse says – if you truly confess the sins you know about, the ones the Holy Spirit is convicting you about, God will not only forgive those sins but will cleanse you from *all* unrighteousness

And that includes sins you have committed unawares – all means all – how cool is that?

Each of us sins; there is no denying that, but purification is ours for the asking, and purification is necessary if we want to be dedicated to God and his work

You simply cannot be close to God and celebrate as the Judeans did with a hypocritical heart or your life is in a mess

But purification is ours for the asking even if we have to ask ten times a day

The next necessary characteristic we must have to be dedicated to God is **joyfulness**

## **B. Joyfulness**

Often, we in the church make a big deal out of the difference between happiness and joy as if one were exclusive of the other, but the joyful person will certainly be happy and appear so to others

And in the account before us, anyone watching or hearing the celebration that took place on top of the wall would have readily been convinced the Judean people were happy but they were also joyful because their hearts were right with God

They had experienced a time of sorrow for sure – we saw that when God's Word convicted them of their sins – and there is a time for soberness – which we saw as they confessed their sins and committed to obeying God's Law

And those are perfectly proper attitudes at the appropriate times, but, as followers of Jesus Christ, we have a lot to be joyful about, and it should show!

Far too many Christians walk around looking like they just sucked on a lemon

German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, who was no fan of the Christian faith, issued quite an indictment against joyless believers when he said, "I might believe in the Redeemer if his followers looked more redeemed."

Think of the joy expressed by the Judeans in the knowledge that God had helped them rebuilt the wall and how happy that fact made them

Now compare that to the joy we should feel knowing that our redemption our reconciliation to God is finished because of the work of the Lord that was completed on the cross with absolutely no input from us

If those Judeans had reason for being joyful; how much more do we!

In honor of the occasion, the call went out for the Levites to come to Jerusalem with their musical instruments and in verse 17 (**Neh. 12:27**) we see the instruments listed are: cymbals, harps, and lyres

And in verses 35 and 41 we see that trumpets were also employed as the musicians accompanied the choirs as they sang under the leadership of Jezrahiah (**Neh. 12:42**)

It's really unfortunate that music has become such a source of division in the church today

And while there remain few churches that actually ban all musical instruments and sing acapella, which musical instruments should be allowed and which style of music is appropriate remain sources of contention in many churches

But, since we see in the passage before us, and many others throughout Scripture, that musical accompaniment is appropriate; the question really is really a cultural one and not a theological one as long as the instruments enhance the public praise of God's people

It would be fascinating to know exactly what the choirs sang and what the musical accompaniment sounded like

But the only thing we're told specifically about the music is that everything was done "according to the command of David and his son Solomon" (**Neh. 12:45**)

And we know that David was not sober and uptight when it came to praising God

Consider the account found in 2Samuel 6 where we read in verse 5 (**2Sam. 6:5**) that –

*David and all the house of Israel were celebrating before the Lord, with songs and lyres and harps and tambourines and castanets and cymbals.*

And then in verse 14 (**2Sam. 6:14**) we read that "David danced before the Lord with all his might"

Apparently, David was a little too exuberant with his dancing as we find out in the verses that follow that his wife was very displeased with the amount of skin David revealed as he danced

But he wasn't bothered or hindered by her complaint as we read in verses 21 and 22 that David said he was going to celebrate before the Lord with all his might and basically assured her "If that shook you up; you ain't seen nothin' yet"

With that in mind, I doubt very highly that there were any dirges played on top of the wall of Jerusalem

Perhaps there was even more than a little laughter as the people remembered the assessment of their enemy, Tobiah, who said the wall they were building would collapse if a fox were to jump on it (**Neh. 4:3**)

In any event, the day was marked with celebration and joy and the sound of glorious, God-exalting music as every act of worship should be as we address one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with [our] hearts (**Eph. 5:19**)

If you look down one more verse to Ephesians 5:20 you will see that Paul's exhortation to sing is grounded in **thankfulness** and that is our third characteristic of a person who is dedicated to the Lord

### **C. Thankfulness**

As the people walked around the top of the wall they were likely thankful for Nehemiah's leadership and administrative skills and for the fact that Artaxerxes had permitted him to come to Jerusalem to complete the project

And one would have to imagine that they were thankful for the victory over their enemies and the completed steps toward full restoration with God

So it's no surprise to read in verse 27 (**Neh. 12:27**) that the worshippers celebrated "the dedication with gladness, with thanksgivings and with singing" and again in verse 38 (**Neh. 12:38**) that they are describes as "those who gave thanks"

Truly thankful people behave in certain ways – they admit they have something to be thankful for, they acknowledge they have someone to be thankful to, and they express their thanks

And here we see the people worshipping God by making music and singing with thankful hearts because those who have experienced grace and mercy cannot help but sing songs of gratitude and praise

Some 13 years earlier, when Ezra had first returned to Jerusalem we read that "many of the priests and Levites and heads of fathers' houses, old men who had seen the first house, wept with a loud voice when they saw the foundation of this house being laid..." (**Ezra 3:12**)

And the prophet Haggai says that they wept because the smallness of the foundation made the second temple seem to be as nothing compared to the first (**Haggai 2:3**)

But there is no record of anyone weeping at the dedication of the wall – it seems everyone was thankful and rejoicing

Perhaps it's always been this way, but it seems like, in our culture today, people aren't happy unless they're complaining about something

People today seem to live in a perpetual state of discontent thinking that, no matter how nice something is, it should be better somehow

Maybe it's the fault of advertisers whose job it is to cause us to focus on what we don't have instead of what we do have so that we'll buy the next thing

But thanklessness in the life of a Christ-follower should be an aberration and not a way of life

When we think of all that God has done for us in sending his Son to die an unrighteous death to pay the penalty for our sins and thereby to reconcile us to the Father and the fact that we get heaven thrown in to boot – how can we not be thankful?

One reason we have an annual Praise and Pie service on the Tuesday before Thanksgiving is to take time to publicly give thanks to God – to offer up personal testimonies of thankfulness for the blessings of the year

Frankly, if we are truly thankful people we should be giving evidence of our gratitude every waking moment of every day because thankfulness will naturally show in our lives and even as we quietly and privately give thanks to God for the blessings of the moment, it can't help but show in our countenances, our conversations, and our attitudes

So far, we've seen that people who are truly dedicated to God will demonstrate purity, joyfulness, and thankfulness and now, lastly, we see that they will demonstrate **obedience**

## **D. Obedience**

Earlier, in chapter 10, we saw the Judeans commit to honoring the giving of the firstfruits and the tithe to support the priests and the Levites

Now, in verse 44 (**Neh. 12:44**), we see them take the opportunity of this day of celebration to appoint men to receive those offerings and watch over the storerooms where they would be kept

This was really just a practical matter but the fact that they didn't put it off but actually carried through in making these plans for ongoing administration of the offerings demonstrates a high level of commitment to obedience – because enabling and facilitating obedience are themselves part of obedience

Clearly, the people planned to continue to grow in their obedience to the Lord – that is, they intended to continue to work and they planned to continue to give

Also from this paragraph we glean that these offerings were given with pleasure *“Judah rejoiced over the priests and the Levites who ministered”* (**Neh. 12:44**)

Offerings given reluctantly are not honored by God – the Bible makes that very clear

God isn't into reluctant obedience and he doesn't want your gift if it isn't given freely and joyfully

We don't obey because we want to earn God's favor and love – we obey him because he has already demonstrated his love toward us and because we love him

In the 2000 movie *Pay It Forward*, a young boy seeks to make the world a better place by repaying debts forward; that is, rather than reciprocating kindness back to someone who showed it to you, you pass it on to a third party and invite them to do the same for a fourth and so on.

And that's a good way to view the good gifts God gives to us

His gifts aren't a payment given to us to reward us for our own goodness and neither are they a loan we need to pay back to God

God gives us blessings so we can be a blessing to others

So, when God blesses us our question should be not, “What did I do to deserve this?” but “How can I obediently use this to spread God’s gospel and build his kingdom?” because that’s what God commands us to do

In **1John 2:4-6** we read:

*Whoever says “I know him” but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him, but whoever keeps his word, in him truly the love of God is perfected. By this we may know that we are in him: whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked.*

Our obedience is the evidence of our love for God – have you ever thought of that?

The readiness to obey and the cheerfulness in obedience and the thoroughness of obedience – or lack thereof – is a true barometer of your love for God

## **Conclusion**

While we tend to emphasize the fact of God’s forgiveness and the promise of eternal life in his presence it’s not so clear to us how the greatest good in this life is found in dedicating every facet of our lives to God’s purposes

Each of us is continually tempted to live in selfish and unholy ways – just as the people of Nehemiah’s day were

But the passage we just considered shows God’s people getting it right

As a result of being in God’s Word they were convicted which led them to confession and repentance and ultimately to dedicating themselves and their possessions – including the wall – to God

We need to recognize that the very things that God gives to his people are to be set apart for him and his purposes

And we quickly come to realize that this means everything we have because everything comes from God – even those things our culture, and we, might consider secular

But each of us needs to learn to live the life we were created for in the here and now and not wait to begin living that life in heaven

Because our eternal life began at the moment we accepted Christ

And using our abilities and our resources in godly ways – dedicating all we have and all we are to God – produces fulfillment and satisfaction that can come in no other way

Living like that isn’t easy in this world and it requires dedication

But to be truly and properly dedicated to God requires us to seek purity through confession and forgiveness of our sins, to seek to be people of true joy, to be truly thankful, and to obey God’s will as we find it in his Word

So let’s ask God to give us the ability to be people of true dedication

Let’s pray

**Psalm 51:1-17 (page 474)**

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions.

Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin!

For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me.

Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you may be justified in your words and blameless in your judgment.

Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me.

Behold, you delight in truth in the inward being, and you teach me wisdom in the secret heart.

Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.

Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones that you have broken rejoice.

Hide your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities.

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.

Cast me not away from your presence, and take not your Holy Spirit from me.

Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit.

Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will return to you.

Deliver me from bloodguiltiness, O God, O God of my salvation, and my tongue will sing aloud of your righteousness.

O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise.

For you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it; you will not be pleased with a burnt offering.

The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.