

Building Together

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- [0 : 0 0] Hello, good morning. My name's Tommy. I'm the rector here. If you're new or visiting, welcome to you. Delighted that you can be with us. We have several baptisms to celebrate in a little while.
- We always love that, but first we're going to spend a little time looking at God's Word. We have been in a memoir of sorts reading the story of the life of a man named Nehemiah. God calls Nehemiah to lead in the rebuilding of Jerusalem and then to spiritually help to rebuild God's people who are scattered and destitute.
- It is a great story. We've been getting a lot out of it, but quite frankly, the chapter that we just heard read is one that many people are very tempted to skip.
- It's like reading a 2,400-year-old phone book. I don't normally do this because this is all really devoted to the glory of God, but I want to take a moment to say Sharon did a phenomenal job with that reading.
- [1 : 0 1] I would personally have been quite intimidated to have to read that, and Sharon this week just quietly said, I'll be happy to do it. And with all due respect, I would be happy to listen to Sharon read the actual phone book.
- She's such a gifted reader. But yeah, it's so good. It's amazing to see God's people doing what they're gifted to do. It's such a joy to see that. That's actually going to tie into the themes that we're going to be looking at.
- But we are, when we read this chapter, we're essentially presented with a very long list of names that tell us who was involved and what section of the wall they were assigned to.
- And so it raises the question of what could something like this possibly have to teach us so many years later? The answer, in short, is that there is a continuity between the Old Testament and the New Testament.
- They're all part of the same story. In Nehemiah, they're focused on the rebuilding of the physical city of Jerusalem. But in the New Testament, God's project is much larger.
- [2 : 0 6] It's actually the project He's had all along, but we get to step back and we get to see what Jerusalem really represents. In the New Testament, we see that God's plan of renewal actually means building the new Jerusalem.
- And the new Jerusalem isn't just a city in the world. It is the world. It is God's vision at the end of the New Testament of what the whole world will become when His work of renewal is complete.
- One great city where the heavens and the earth come together and God's presence dwells in the midst of it and illuminates it. The new Jerusalem. And because we know where the story goes, that means that as we look at these people working together to rebuild Jerusalem 2,400 years ago, we can apply some of this to the ways we approach our work.
- And we can begin to make connections between our work that God has given us to do and His larger project of renewal culminating in the new Jerusalem, the new creation at the end of all history.

So we're going to look at this list of names and we're going to see that it teaches us three things about our work and the relationship between our work and the kingdom of God. So let's pray and then we'll dive in.

[3 : 19] Lord, we thank You for Your Word. We thank You that it is not just ink and paper, but that it is living and active, that because of Your presence with us and Your Holy Spirit, because of Your grace and Your love, that You're able to do Your work in us through Your Word.

And we ask for that this morning. We ask that we would have hearts that are open, that we would be willing to place ourselves under the authority of Your Word, that You would stir up those who have become complacent, that You would comfort those who are afflicted.

Lord, that in all ways You would do what only You can do in us, and that through Your Word written, we would come to see Your living Word, Jesus Christ. And it's in His name that we pray. Amen.

Amen. So three things that we can learn from this list of names and work assignments about our work that God has given us to do.

The first thing that we see right away is this, that our work is sacred in the kingdom of God. Our work is sacred in the kingdom of God.

[4 : 22] In our culture, we have a tendency to think in dualistic ways about work. We tend to divide work into sacred work and secular work.

This, in some ways, goes back to medieval Catholicism. It was heightened by the Enlightenment. It was further heightened by the emphasis of the separation of church and state.

There's been lots of rounds of things that have happened throughout history that have deepened this sense of divide in our minds between sacred kinds of work, pastors, missionaries, and secular work.

And along with that division, there's a kind of hierarchy. People tend to see sacred work as somehow more important, higher up the tree, the hierarchy. Secular work is necessary because somebody needs to give the offering, but it's seen as lower down in the hierarchy.

That is not, I would say, a biblical view of work. And it is certainly not the view of work that we see here reflected in Nehemiah. Some people have tried to spiritualize the order in which we are given these names, but then some archaeological work was done in the 1960s.

[5 : 39] And I think it was a woman named Kathleen Kenyon, and she helped us understand what Nehemiah is actually doing. If you look at ancient maps of the wall of Jerusalem, we realize Nehemiah is giving us a counterclockwise tour around the wall.

That's all he's doing. So he's giving us a counterclockwise tour. He starts with the sheep gate. He goes all the way around the wall, and he ends at the sheep gate.

You can almost imagine him riding along, riding down as he goes. Okay, there over there. Okay, he's there. There, there. And he goes around the wall, and he just lists it as he sees it.

And one of the first things we notice is that there are priests and religious leaders listed, but they're listed right alongside everyone else. There's no separation. There's no distinction. There's no priority given to them over anyone else.

And this accurately reflects the larger biblical view of work in general, that from God's perspective, there is no sacred, secular divide when it comes to our work in the world.

[6 : 45] The Bible actually begins with God himself going to work, showing us that God is the ultimate entrepreneur. He's in the business of creation. And then we have the first problem in creation.

It's not the fall. This is before sin entered in. The first problem is in Genesis chapter 2, verse 5. Everything's in place, but there is no one to work the ground.

Now, it's easy to just skip right over that, but we need to think about what that actually means. The story begins by God creating and ordering a world that is perfect and yet unfinished.

It's unfinished. It's a world that by design is full of potential, but that potential needs to be realized. So God intentionally creates a world that is incomplete, and it needs something.

And it turns out, if you keep reading, that something is us. God puts Adam in the midst of his creation and says, get to work.

[7 : 52] In Genesis chapter 1, verse 28, this is what we have come to call the cultural mandate. God creates humans and tells them, be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and exercise dominion over it.

Now, what exactly does that mean? The Bible scholar Nancy Piercy unpacks this verse in a wonderful way. She says, the first phrase, be fruitful and multiply, means to develop the social world.

It's not just talking about having babies. It is talking about that, but it's talking about much more than that. Developing the social world. In other words, build families, churches, schools, cities, governments, laws.

The second phrase, subdue the earth, means to harness the natural world, plant crops, build bridges, design computers, compose music. Taken together, this tells us that our original purpose was to create cultures, build civilizations, nothing less.

We were created to work, to take the potential of creation and bring it to its fulfillment. God made a world that by design needs work, and he created us to do that work.

[9 : 03] The point is this. God cares about your work. God cares about your work. Because he created you to work.

So even if you feel like nobody sees you, God sees you. Even if you feel like no one knows the hours that you put in behind the scenes, God knows.

Even if you feel like your work doesn't matter, it matters a great deal to God. Because when we work the way we were created to work, we glorify God.

It doesn't matter if we're digging ditches or doing brain surgery. We are doing what God created us to do when we work. This is one of the reasons why it makes sense that the Hebrew word *avodah* means two things, and it's used interchangeably.

In the Old Testament, it means work. It also means worship. The same word means work and worship. From God's perspective, work is in itself a way to worship and glorify him.

[10 : 14] So just think about this question before we move on. How would this change the way you approach your job if you were to pause and reflect on what we're talking about for just a few minutes every day?

Excuse me. Wow. Shouldn't do that again. What if every day you approach your laptop, the emails in your inbox, the phone calls, the meetings on your schedule, what if you approached all of those things as though you were a priest entering into the temple to offer worship to the Lord, to offer service to God?

Right? If you work from home, maybe you have a desk or an area, a certain chair that you sit in at home. If you go into an office, maybe you have a desk or a cubicle, some area that is your workspace. What if you entered into that workspace as though it were a sacred temple, and you were a priest, and you were there to render service to God?

Worship isn't confined to Sunday mornings. It's possible to worship God every day of the week by doing the work that God has given us to do in ways that glorify Him.

So our work is sacred in the kingdom of God. That's the first thing we can draw out of this text. Number two, everyone has a job in the economy of God.

[11 : 39] Everybody has a job. Nehemiah's list shows us how many different kinds of people are involved and necessary in rebuilding the city.

There are metal workers and perfumers and parents and government leaders and business people and retailers and contractors, all different kinds of people, and they all have a job to do.

In God's economy, the employment rate is 100%. There's no unemployment. And there are different classes of people. There are wealthier, if you look into the backstory of some of these people that we can get pieces of their story from other places in Scripture, some of these people listed are very wealthy aristocrats, and they're working right alongside the poor.

You have white-collar workers working right alongside blue-collar workers. And the list even includes people who had messed up in the past. Malkijah, the son of Haram, first shows up in the book of Ezra.

He first shows up in the previous book, Ezra. Thanks, brother. He first shows up in Ezra, and in Ezra, he's a very different sort of individual. Ezra's calling God's people to repent and return to him, and Malkijah is listed among the men who had married foreign wives, which means he was probably worshipping foreign idol.

[12 : 59] How about that? He's married into a kind of foreign tribe.

He's worshipping foreign idols, and so he's listed among the people who need to repent, return to the Lord. And then we see him here in Nehemiah 13 years later. He's clearly repented. He's clearly come back to the Lord, and he's working right alongside everyone else.

There's a place for him. There's a place for everybody. Everybody is part of rebuilding the city. Everybody, every one of us, has a section of the wall, so to speak, that we are responsible for repairing.

And the only way we're gonna get it done is if everybody does their part. It's if everybody pulls their weight. And that's exactly what it's like for those of us who are Christians.

As I said, in God's kingdom, the employment rate is 100%. Every single one of us has a job to do. When it comes to the renewal of the world, when it comes to God's great project of renewing and restoring all that is broken, we all have a section of the wall that has been entrusted to us.

[14 : 10] What that means is there are needs around you that only you are uniquely able to meet. Some of us do that work of repairing the wall through leading or teaching.

Some of us do it through organization or planning or administrating. Some of us are parents or we teach or we are coaches. Some of us offer counseling or encouragement or support.

Some of us use our creativity or we are entrepreneurs. Some of us through physical work or serving or cleaning or fixing things or building things or selling things.

Right? God can use you no matter who you are, no matter what you've done in the past. In fact, if you look at scripture, many times God delights in using the people we would think least likely to have a place in his kingdom.

He delights in taking the person that everybody says, I don't want them on my team. I don't want them on my labor crew. And God says, I'm gonna do something amazing through that person. Because that's the kind of God he is.

[15 : 16] God can use almost anyone. There is one exception here though. We see it right in the middle of the passage. As we read along, we see people standing shoulder to shoulder, all working together.

If you were listening to Sharon Reed, it's this person was next to this person and this person was next to this person. But we get to verse five. And next to them, Zadok the son of Banna repaired. And next to them, the Techoites repaired.

Listen to this. But their nobles would not stoop to serve their Lord. The nobles from Tekoa are the only ones listed who refuse to join in the work.

They're the only ones. Why? Well, it literally says, and their nobles would not bend the neck. So the issue here is pride.

God cannot and God will not use people who are prideful. The Bible is very clear on this. The Apostle James says God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.

[16 : 16] Jesus Christ himself says, whoever exalts himself will be humbled and whoever humbles himself will be exalted. Now, when we talk about pride, what we're really talking about is our general view of life, our general view of what life is all about.

Our culture strongly emphasizes self-exaltation. We're led through a variety of influences to believe that it really is all about me.

It's all about my accomplishments, my accolades, my achievements. When we hide this, we try to hide that attitude under a kind of veneer of false humility, what we often call humble bragging.

We find ingenious, creative, rhetorical strategies for bragging without seeming like we're bragging. David Brooks writes a lot about this. He says that our humble bragging has become so unapologetic that now humility is the new pride.

We have ways of aggressively promoting our humility such that it has become its own manifestation of pride.

[17 : 36] Just go on Twitter. You see people all the time on Twitter saying things like, you know, I was so humbled to receive this award. I'm so humbled to accept this position.

Right? And what Brooks says is, you never see people tweeting about something that would actually lead to humility. Like, I'm humbled that I went to a party and nobody noticed me.

Or, I'm humbled that I got fired for incompetence. Like, nobody tweets that. But that would actually lead to humility. Right?

So we have this kind of aggressive false humility that we put out there. True humility flows out of a right view of reality, which is simply this. It is not about us.

It's not about me. It's not about you. We're not the protagonist. It's about God. It's about God's purposes for our lives.

[18 : 38] Until we wrestle with that, our lives are not going to make sense. Because reality constantly reminds us, it's not about you. You're not the hero.

Verse 5 is actually heartbreaking when you really think about it. These nobles had the chance to be listed among all of these people, all joining in and doing this work together.

This could have read, everyone worked and no one worked harder than the nobles from Tekoa. That's what it could have said for all of history. But instead, they are remembered, they are singled out for all of history as the only ones who refused to participate.

All because of pride. It makes you wonder, what are we missing out on in our lives because of pride?

What great work are we not a part of? What opportunities are we blind to?

[19 : 48] What doors remain closed? What stones remain unturned because we think it's all about us? Because we're so focused on what we think we owed or on proving ourselves or on what other people think about us that we're excluded from what God's doing right in front of us.

God uses people who are simply willing to say yes to him. People who say, I'm not above whatever you would call me to do. People who say in the words of the prophets, here I am, Lord, send me.

I'll do it. If you're wondering what God's purposes in your life might be, if you're seeking to know that, that's a great place to begin just by simply praying that prayer.

Every day, saying yes to God, saying here I am, Lord, send me, and then saying yes to whatever comes your way. So this brings us actually to the third point.

Number one, the first point, our work is sacred in the kingdom of God. Number two, everyone has a job in the economy of God. Number three, the work we do, all the work we do is in service to God.

[21 : 04] With the exception of the nobles from Toccoa, the rest of the community actually sets an amazing example for how to approach our work. For starters, they were truly humble.

Some of the professions listed would have been quite lucrative. These are not all people who are accustomed to manual labor, and yet they're willing to roll up their sleeves and do the hard work necessary to get the job done.

No one is above doing whatever task might be required of them. You know, there was a great example of this yesterday. We've bought and we now own this property at Fifth and Q Northwest.

We're renovating it now. We're raising money now, actually, to renovate it over the next year. And it had gotten really overgrown because we're not able to use it yet, because we are still doing that work.

And so we had to go do some work. And so some of the men from the men's ministry said, we'll take care of it. And we had a bunch of guys show up on Saturday morning, and they brought a bunch of tools and spent a couple of hours out there.

[22 : 10] You know, we just, we were trimming hedges, and we were, you know, mowing grass and pulling out weeds and hauling stuff away. And it was just a couple of hours of guys. Now, some of these guys may have super important job titles.

They may have lots of people who wanna meet with them. They may have, you know, but they're like, a job needs to be done? We're gonna take care of it. You want me to pull weeds? You want me to get dirty? We'll take care of it.

And it's that kind of attitude. It's such a beautiful thing in the church. When you have somebody in the church who might, in another kind of sphere of life, they might be the CEO of a multinational corporation, right?

They might be a high-level political leader, right? But in the church, they might be setting up folding chairs. They might be taking out the trash. It's beautiful when you see God's people gather together with true humility, willing to do whatever needs to be done.

Another characteristic you see here is that these people demonstrate a generous commitment to the common good. You need to read closely to figure this out, but it's not only the citizens of Jerusalem who are building the wall.

[23 : 11] There are volunteers who are coming in from the surrounding region, traveling 15 or 20 miles to help. Now, these are people who, they did not directly benefit from Jerusalem being rebuilt.

They had their own farms. They had their own communities. They had their own workshops. They had their own families. They had stuff that needed to be maintained back home, but they were willing to leave their homes and their families in order to offer themselves in service of the city.

And there are several examples of people who, when they finish their section of the wall, the Tekoites are one of these examples, they finish their section, and then they go on to do another section.

These are people who are so generous, they're willing to go above and beyond. Now, why are they so exemplary? I believe it's because they knew, because Nehemiah makes it very clear in the previous chapters, because they knew they weren't just working for their boss, but they were working for their boss's boss.

They might be digging a ditch. They might be building a fence. They might be, they might have a foreman who's telling them what to do. That's their boss. But they know that ultimately, they're working for the Lord.

[24 : 22] That's how Paul talks about Christian work in Colossians chapter three. He says, whatever you do, work heartily as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord, you will receive the inheritance as your reward.

You are serving the Lord Christ. He's saying, whatever your job is, whether you have a supervisor, whether you're self-employed, work wholeheartedly because you're working for Jesus.

And that, my friends, is the real definition of Christian work. It's not limited to any particular career path. It's working wholeheartedly in whatever job you've been given because you know that you're serving Jesus.

Whatever career you have chosen, there are ways of doing your job that are sinful and idolatrous, and there are ways of doing your work that honor and obey and glorify Jesus.

That's the difference between Christian and secular work. So you can have somebody with a very sacred job title, like a pastor, but that person does their work in a very secular way.

[25 : 36] They mistreat their staff. They use the church as a vehicle for their own fame and success rather than as a place to serve and minister. Likewise, you can have somebody with a very secular job title, but they do their work in a very sacred way.

You know, I was at an event, Laura and I were at an event a couple of weeks ago, and we ended up meeting the head of the catering company responsible for catering the event. And we made the connection, you sort of feeling each other out, and we realized pretty quickly that we're both Christians.

And then this man just begins to pour out his heart. And he gave one of the most passionate and beautiful descriptions of biblical hospitality, of the central importance of table fellowship, of the way he believes hospitality, generous hospitality, has the power to change and transform people, and how that connected to his own story of coming to know Jesus and being transformed by him.

And I was tearing up. And then I saw the way this man treated his employees as well as the guests, how he treated everybody with incredible respect and kindness and patience.

You know, that man, that man is a priest, right? His sanctuary just happens to be the dining room, and his sermons come in the form of the meals he serves and the way he responds to his employees when they're 30 minutes behind.

[27 : 11] Right? That's what it looks like for someone to do their work as though they are doing it for Jesus. It was very clear to see this guy in action. It was very clear who he serves. Let's bring all this to a close.

When you wake up tomorrow, wherever you are going, whatever you're going to do, whatever tasks lay before you, I want you to try to do your best to remember these three things.

Number one, your work is sacred in the kingdom of God. What would it look like for you to approach your tasks tomorrow as though you were doing the sacred work of leading worship in the temple?

Number two, you have a job in the economy of God. Ask God what that is. Ask God to help you understand what is your section of the wall. How is your work connected to the renewal that God is doing around you in whatever spheres you occupy?

And then number three, remember that the work you do, you ultimately do in service to God. You may hate your boss. You may have a boss that treats you unfairly.

[28 : 25] You don't feel like it's worthy of your respect. But remember that your boss has a boss. One day, your boss will be called to account by his boss. And remember that ultimately, the one that you're serving is Jesus.

And so work wholeheartedly. And as you work, rest in and trust in the fact that God delights in you doing that every bit as much as he delights in us coming together and singing praises to him.

God delights in you doing what he put you on this earth to do. Let's pray. Lord, we love you and we thank you that even though none of us deserve it and none of us even asked for it, that somehow we have been enfolded into and invited into being a part of the work of renewal that you're doing in the world, Lord.

And this is only because of your grace that we on our own don't deserve any of this. We can't repay. And yet it's your delight to forgive us and to bless us and to include us and to give us a section of the wall.

Lord, we are all like that man, Melchizedek, Lord. We've all gone astray. We've all gone after other gods. We've all tried to glorify ourselves. But you've given us a path of restoration.

[29 : 45] You've given us a way back to be a part of the real work that's happening. And I pray that you give us a vision to see and understand how the work that we do Monday to Friday connects to that larger work of renewal that you're doing in the world.

I pray that you would give us a renewed vigor and passion for it because of you. That we would understand that the meaning of our work doesn't come from what we do. It comes from the one we do it for.

Lord, I pray that you would keep this central in our minds. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.