

ACHIEVING GREATNESS

PROFILE OF NEHEMIAH

MIKE MAZZALONGO

bibleTalk.TV

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14998 E. Reno

Choctaw, OK 73020

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1. Kingdom Greatness

Back in the 1960s and 1970s boxing champion Muhammad Ali caught the attention of the world by declaring, "I am the greatest!" Of course, throughout history there have been other talented boxers before him like the great Joe Lewis or Rocky Marciano. These boxers had better records and they fought more fearsome opponents, but no one, especially a public sports figure, had ever had the audacity to brag about their talent and success like Muhammad Ali. The public either loved him or they loved to hate him, either way he made news.

Muhammad Ali spawned a new generation of athletes: cocky boxers and ballplayers who flashed their skills and were eager to tell the world how wonderful or confident they were in themselves and in their abilities. These days this attitude is pretty much the norm, but before Ali, it was rare to have athletes boasting about themselves.

This mindset has so permeated our society that we no longer think anything of it when athletes or anyone else for that matter, publicly gloats over their success, their personal talent or wealth.

My point with all of this is to demonstrate that in the last 50 to 75 years our society has experienced a very definite change in determining what it takes to be great.

According to our present criteria, greatness seems to require a mixture of several elements:

1. Fame

The public tends to consider as great those who, for some reason or other, are famous. We have Kim Kardashian, for example, who receives a lot of attention and deference because she is famous. And she is famous for being famous! This is a feature of today's society. A person can become and remain famous not because they have a skill or won a prize or claim some sort of achievement, we tend to magnify the importance or the greatness of people, simply because they've arrived at some kind of celebrity status, regardless of the reason.

2. Skill

People who have the ability to run or sing or dance or eat six dozen hot dogs in 20 minutes, receive an inordinate amount of public attention or even adulation.

The skill or achievement can be the result of hard work or genetics, but it doesn't matter so long as it stands out, we honor that person. We confer greatness on people with a special ability, even if their only use of that skill is to generate self-serving publicity and wealth for its display.

3. Winning

This is absolutely an American phenomena. It can be horseshoe throwing, women's soccer, even scoring on a lottery, no matter the game, we love winners. You can be mean and selfish, you can even be sexually immoral, but if you win and win often, you will become great in America and be forgiven everything so long as you keep winning.

In America, at the beginning of the 21st century, any one or combination of these elements will lead one to greatness. Against this backdrop, it is no wonder that the Christian ideal of greatness is lost and there are few that seek it. What it means to be great in God's eyes is so very different than what it means to be great in the eyes of our present society.

When Jesus explains what it means to be great in the kingdom, He describes attitudes and behavior that are completely opposite to today's standards.

GREATNESS IN THE KINGDOM

In 5 different passages, Jesus describes the requirements for greatness in the kingdom of God, which on earth is represented by His church.

1. Obedience to the Word

Whoever then annuls one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven. **But whoever keeps** and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

- Matthew 5:19

The very first criteria for spiritual greatness is one's obedience to God's word. In other passages, Jesus confirms this basic principle. For example,

- In John 14:15 - he says, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments."
- In John 12:48 - he says, "He who rejects Me, and does not receive my sayings, has one who judges him: The word which I spoke. That will judge him on the last day."

It is very hard for "great" people in this world to be "great" in the kingdom of God, because so much of what they must do to be great in this world, is contrary to what Jesus teaches in his word. The rich young ruler in Luke 18:18 was great in his own Jewish society. He was intelligent, he had position, the public respected him, and he had wealth. He also wanted to be great in a spiritual sense (possess eternal life) so Jesus told him to let go his wealth and follow Him - this, we learn, was too much for the rich young man to do. His wealth was his security, and trusting Jesus rather than wealth was beyond him.

The desire to excel, to improve, to rise above is natural to mankind but in order to be great in a spiritual sense, one must harness that natural desire and focus it on the task of understanding and obeying God's word.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.

- Matthew 5:5

Throughout the Bible, we see many men and women who became great because of their obedience to God's word. For example,

- Abraham obeyed and was willing to sacrifice his son
- Moses obeyed and went to the Pharaoh demanding freedom for his people
- Mary obeyed and accepted her Spirit induced pregnancy
- Jesus obeyed and went to the cross to die for sinners

They focused all their energy and talent on carrying out God's word.

It is wise to be prudent about what we do in church as far as worship is concerned, or how we organize a congregation and other matters that are done according to the instructions given to us in the word of God. However, being great in God's eyes, is not about being successful or dynamic, but rather about being obedient in both great and small matters. Whether our actions involve important matters, like dispensing mercy and justice, or small matters, like how we conduct a worship service, the basic criteria for judging our individual and collective greatness in the kingdom of God will be measured by how well we've obeyed God's word.

2. Accurately Teaching the Word

Whoever then annuls one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven. But whoever keeps **and teaches them**, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

- Matthew 5:19

If one learns to obey the word consistently, then they will be in a position to teach it - one goes with the other.

The Pharisees (Jewish lawyers who arbitrated the word of God and interpreted it for the people) were the chief example of teachers who did not do this.

Jesus saved his harshest criticism for these men who fancied themselves as expert teachers of God's word, but who knowingly avoided obeying the word themselves.

But Jesus said, "Woe to you lawyers as well! For you weigh men down with burdens hard to bear, while you yourselves will not even touch the burdens with one of

your fingers.
- Luke 11:46

Climbing a mountain or throwing a ball or getting from point A to point B in record time, these are not activities that impress God, or make us great in His sight. After all, He created what is seen from that which is not seen (Hebrews 11:3). The great men and women of God are those who, in some way or another, labor to accurately teach the world and the church God's word. Jesus' final command to the Apostles, and by extension all the disciples that would come after them was the following:

¹⁸ And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth.
¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."
- Matthew 28:18-20

This command includes and extends to missionaries, Bible school teachers, elders, preachers, moms and dads as well as grandparents who teach their families and their grandchildren, and great-grandchildren God's word in every generation. Those who, in some way or another, communicate God's word to a lost world, or to a growing church, whether they be the ones directly teaching or instructing through their service or supporting those who do, these are the heroes, the great ones that the angels in heaven rejoice over and applaud. These are the ones that God will bless with the words, "Well done, good and faithful servant."

3. Humility - Luke 9:46-48

Jesus disciplined the Apostles for three years. During that time He taught them by word and example, personally disciplined and sent

them out to practice their ministry. During this time He often selected certain ones (Peter, James and John) for special experiences (witnessing His transfiguration - Matthew 17:1-9) or for special tasks (obtaining the animal He would ride for His triumphal entry into Jerusalem - Luke 19:28-40). It was after one of these special tasks (Peter sent to obtain a coin from the mouth of a fish to pay the Roman tax - Matthew 17:27) that a discussion arose among the Apostles concerning who among them would be considered great in the kingdom.

Apparently, the special closeness and opportunities for service afforded to Peter and certain ones caused the other Apostles to begin debating **who** would be considered great. They each anticipated being great in the Lord's earthly kingdom, but who would be the greatest among the twelve?

In Luke 9:46-48 Jesus explains not only the actions required by those who are great in the kingdom (obedience to the word, teaching accurately God's word) He also describes the attitude necessary for greatness in His kingdom as well.

⁴⁶ An argument started among them as to which of them might be the greatest. ⁴⁷ But Jesus, knowing what they were thinking in their heart, took a child and stood him by His side, ⁴⁸ and said to them, "Whoever receives this child in My name receives Me, and whoever receives Me receives Him who sent Me; for the one who is least among all of you, this is the one who is great."
- Luke 9:46-48

The meaning of "receives this child in my name" is that a person would take care of a certain child because Jesus said that he should do this. In other words, the person doing this is ministering directly to Me and by extension to the Heavenly

Father as well. Caring for children, especially by males in that era was not the norm and so would be seen as an unusual request.

Jesus says to them that if He would ask them to receive or care for a child (something that had no glory; a task that would not make one, "great" in this world) but they humbly submitted to it by faith, then this humble act would be raised to the level of serving Jesus and the Father directly, which would be a great thing indeed!

A parallel idea is found in Matthew 25:

The King will answer and say to them, 'Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me.'
- Matthew 25:40

Jesus doesn't mention the word "humble" or "meek" but this is what He is describing by using a child as His example. Humility or meekness is not the absence of character or willpower. On the contrary, it is the ability to not only submit our will and person to the authority of Christ and His word, it is also the ability to restrain our will and person in order to sustain and nourish other people.

Being the least in the sense that one

- can deny one's own self-will in order to support another
- can suppress one's own ambition to realize the good for another
- can die to self so that the welfare and the growth of others can take place

This requires a rare form of courage, strength, patience, faith and love.

We see it in its perfect form, as the Son of God empties Himself of any human glory that would naturally occur because of His divine nature. He then submits to a humiliating life and death in order to secure the salvation and well-being of those who hated Him, and savagely nailed Him to a cross.

He became the least to save us from sin and death. He is now the greatest in the kingdom, because of this.

The dye is cast in Christ for all who wish to follow Him.

- He is impressed only by our willingness to deny ourselves, not promote ourselves.
- He considers as great only those who have given up the world, not those who try to conquer it or own a piece of it.
- He loves those who are eager to do His will, regardless of the task.
- He lifts up those who recognize that without Him, they are helpless and useless and He puts down those who are filled with their own importance, power or strength. For example, God answered Samson's prayer only after the strong man recognized that his true strength did not come from his body, it came from the Lord.


It is when we are weak that we can see God's strength. It is only when we humble ourselves that God will make us great. We cannot make ourselves great in His eyes, no matter how hard we try.

SUMMARY

Let us remember that this series is about Nehemiah, a great Old Testament servant of God. In this first lesson, I wanted to establish the nature of biblical greatness and what is required to achieve it.

- Obedience to the word
- Ministry of the word
- Humility before God and others

In the next chapter, we will look at the history and the background of Nehemiah's life and then profile the life of this great servant of God.



2. **The Character of Greatness** **Part 1**

The biblical character that we are studying in regard to greatness is Nehemiah. In the previous chapter we compared what elements were necessary to be great in this world (fame, wealth, skill, victory) to the elements that are necessary to make one great in the Kingdom of God (obedience to God's word, ministry of God's word and humility of spirit).

The point, therefore, was that the criteria for greatness in the world is very different than what is necessary for greatness in

the Kingdom of God. People err when they try to measure spiritual greatness using worldly standards.

Dr. Raymond Kelcy was a Bible professor at Oklahoma Christian University for many years and often participated in the Q&A sessions which were a feature of the annual Lectureships held at the college. During one of these sessions a man asked Dr. Kelcy the following question, "Who do you think is the greatest preacher in our brotherhood?"

Brother Kelcy showed his own wisdom and spiritual perception when he answered the following, "Probably someone we have never heard of, from an obscure place, doing the Lord's work quietly and effectively week after week with no fanfare."

The point, I believe that he was making, was that God knows who are the greatest in His kingdom, however, He gives everyone the way to arrive at that greatness through obedience, ministry and humility. He also provides the examples of great spiritual lives recorded in the Bible in order to give us a first-hand view of what great spiritual living is like in the real world - not just the theory.

Nehemiah is one such biblical character who demonstrated obedience, ministry/service, humility and other virtues that easily made him great in the Kingdom of God and a wonderful example for us to observe and emulate today.

Background on Nehemiah

Before we study Nehemiah's life, I'd like to do a quick review of Jewish history to help us situate Nehemiah in the timeline.

Old Testament Survey

PERIOD	TIME	MAJOR EVENTS / CHARACTERS	BOOKS
I. ANTE DELUVIAN	5000+ B.C.	Creation, Fall, Promise of Redemption, Increasing Sin, Noah, Flood	Genesis 1-8
II. POST DELUVIAN	3000 B.C.	Genealogies of Man Idolatry (Babel)	Genesis 9-11
III. PATRIARCHY	2000 B.C.	Abraham, Isaac, Jacob (12 Tribes)	Genesis 12-50 Job
VI. BONDAGE	1600 B.C.	400 years in Egypt, Moses, the Passover, Exodus	Exodus 1-12
V. CONQUEST	1400 B.C.	40 years in the desert, Arrival in Promised Land, Judges govern the 12 tribes, Samuel is the first of these judges	Exodus 13-40, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, I Samuel 1-10
VI. UNITED KINGDOM	1000 B.C.	Tribes Ruled by One King, Saul, David, Solomon	I Samuel 11-31, II Samuel, I Kings 1-11, I Chronicles, II Chronicles 1-9, Psalms, Proverbs, Song of Solomon, Ecclesiastes
VII. DIVIDED KINGDOM	800 B.C.	Establishment of North and South Kingdom, Apostasy, Destruction of Northern Kingdom, Emergence of Prophets	I Kings 12-22, II Kings, II Chronicles 10-36, Isaiah, Hosea, Micah, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Jeremiah, Zephaniah
VII. EXILE	600 B.C.	Destruction of Jerusalem, 70-year exile in Babylon	Jeremiah, Daniel, Ezekiel, Lamentations
IX. RESTORATION	500 B.C.	Return of Remnant from Babylon, The End of Idolatry	Ezra, Nehemiah , Esther, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi
X. SILENCE	400 B.C. to Jesus	Intertestamentary Period, Production of Apocryphal (Hidden) Writings	Esdras, Judith, Maccabees

Nehemiah was not a prophet, he did no miracles, he was not a priest, a teacher or a judge - he was a servant to a foreign king, and yet through him, God did great things and Nehemiah became a great man in the eyes of the Lord.

NEHEMIAH'S SITUATION - 1:11; 1:1-3

Now I was the cupbearer to the king.
- Nehemiah 1:11b

Note that Nehemiah's role was that of a slave. He was a servant to a king in a foreign land where his people had been taken captive. He was a cupbearer, meaning that he was the wine taster whose assignment was the task of guarding the king against food poisoning. He also served as one of the king's counselors.

¹ The words of Nehemiah the son of Hacaliah. Now it happened in the month Chislev, in the twentieth year, while I was in Susa the capital, ² that Hanani, one of my brothers, and some men from Judah came; and I asked them concerning the Jews who had escaped and had survived the captivity, and about Jerusalem. ³ They said to me, "The remnant there in the province who survived the captivity are in great distress and reproach, and the wall of Jerusalem is broken down and its gates are burned with fire."
- Nehemiah 1:1-3

Here, Nehemiah introduces himself and his family (Jews). The month of Chislev is the period of November and December. It was the 20th year of the reign of Artaxerxes (465-424 = 445 BC).

Susa was the winter capital of Persian kings who had taken over the Babylonian empire which had originally conquered and deported the Jews. The Jews were deported in 606 B.C. by the

Babylonians and then the Babylonians returned to finish destroying the city and the temple 19 years later in 587 BC.

In verses two and three, we note that there were several groups that returned from foreign captivity in order to rebuild and repopulate the city of Jerusalem. The order of return was as follows:

1. 70 years after the original deportation (606 BC) a man named Zerubbabel led approximately 50,000 people back to Jerusalem to settle the land and rebuild the city and temple (536 BC). This fulfilled Jeremiah's prophecy made 100 years before that time.

¹¹ This whole land will be a desolation and a horror, and these nations will serve the king of Babylon seventy years. ¹² 'Then it will be when seventy years are completed I will punish the king of Babylon and that nation,' declares the Lord, 'for their iniquity, and the land of the Chaldeans; and I will make it an everlasting desolation.
- Jeremiah 25:11-12

The building program had many stops and starts, but the city and a much smaller version of the temple were rebuilt by 516 B.C.

2. Ezra was then chosen by the king to lead the next group back in 457 BC. He was in charge of Jewish affairs for the royal court. He served very much like a Secretary of State today but was in charge of Jewish affairs for the foreign leaders. He benefited from the influence of Esther, who was still reigning at that time. Aside from the continuing work of rebuilding the temple, Ezra reinstated temple worship and appointed priests and Levites to their specific tasks.

3. The third return is the one described by Nehemiah in 444 BC.

We note that in verses 2-3 Nehemiah receives the news concerning the condition of the city, temple and people who had returned from captivity. One of the gravest problems was that the neighboring countries did not want the Jews to rebuild their city and nation for fear that they would dominate them once again as they had done in the past. These people continually waged a diplomatic war by sending delegations to the court of Artaxerxes, the Persian king, in order to spread lies and accusations against the Jews. In modern terms, we would say that they were lobbyists sent to spread fake news. For example, they accused the Jews of plotting a rebellion against the king.

Because of this, the king had decreed that the building in Jerusalem was to stop. This, of course, was demoralizing to the people and left them vulnerable to the surrounding nations bent on destroying them. The city was partly built but had no protective walls or gates to provide security against their enemies. This was the situation as a few years later a group from Jerusalem came to Nehemiah to see if he would intervene with the king on their behalf. They described the plight of the city and its people as desperate and dangerous.

This was a difficult request to grant for Nehemiah because pleading a cause that contradicted the king's order could mean arrest and execution for him personally. At once we see that Nehemiah is caught between the desire to obey his God and help his people, and the threat of banishment from the royal court or death.

However, in this very difficult dilemma, we see one of Nehemiah's spiritual qualities that set him apart from ordinary men with ordinary problems. He was an ordinary man, but he had an extraordinary problem to solve.

He was a man with problems, but we learn that he was also a man that faced his problems with prayer. Yes, we're told to face

danger or problems with courage and determination, even cunning, but the great men of God go directly to prayer when faced with a challenge.

NEHEMIAH'S PRAYER - 1:4-11; 2:1

We can confidently say that a great man of God is first and foremost a man of prayer. In this story, we also learn that you can tell a lot about a man and about the nature of his greatness by examining his prayer. When we examine Nehemiah's prayer, this is what we find out about his character:

1. He was sincere

When I heard these words, I sat down and wept and mourned for days; and I was fasting and praying before the God of heaven.

- Nehemiah 1:4

Nehemiah wept over the ruins. He was emotionally involved with the problem of his people. His prayer was from the heart. He was in earnest prayer (days of prayer and fasting). He truly was seeking the Lord's will with all of his spiritual and emotional strength.

2. He was respectful

I said, "I beseech You, O Lord God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who preserves the covenant and lovingkindness for those who love Him and keep His commandments,

- Nehemiah 1:5

He began his prayer with proper respect and honor to God. He was emotional but maintained his sense of deference and reverence for God.

3. He was honest

⁶ let Your ear now be attentive and Your eyes open to hear the prayer of Your servant which I am praying before You now, day and night, on behalf of the sons of Israel Your servants, confessing the sins of the sons of Israel which we have sinned against You; I and my father's house have sinned. ⁷ We have acted very corruptly against You and have not kept the commandments, nor the statutes, nor the ordinances which You commanded Your servant Moses.
- Nehemiah 1:6-7

Nehemiah was quick to recognize and admit where and what the problem was. Sin was the problem and his people were guilty of it, and this is what caused their destruction in the first place. They wouldn't be in exile or have to rebuild their city if they had not fallen into idolatry even after repeated warnings from God.

4. Hew was intelligent

⁸ Remember the word which You commanded Your servant Moses, saying, 'If you are unfaithful I will scatter you among the peoples; ⁹ but if you return to Me and keep My commandments and do them, though those of you who have been scattered were in the most remote part of the heavens, I will gather them from there and will bring them to the place where I have chosen to cause My name to dwell.' ¹⁰ They are Your servants and Your people whom You redeemed by

Your great power and by Your strong hand.
- Nehemiah 1:8-10

Nehemiah knew God's promise regarding punishment and restoration (Jeremiah's prophecy). His prayer was in line with God's word and God's will.

5. He was specific

O Lord, I beseech You, may Your ear be attentive to the prayer of Your servant and the prayer of Your servants who delight to revere Your name, and make Your servant successful today and grant him compassion before this man."
- Nehemiah 1:11

He knew exactly what he wanted (to go to the king) and prayed for God to give him success. He may have found out that we often discover what the will of the Lord is while we are in prayer.

6. He was patient

And it came about in the month Nisan, in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, that wine was before him, and I took up the wine and gave it to the king. Now I had not been sad in his presence.
- Nehemiah 2:1

Nisan is the month of April. Four months had gone by between the time that the people came to see him and said, "we need your help" which moved him to prayer, and the opportunity he searched for appeared.

From his prayer we see a variety of qualities cultivated and practiced by those who would be great in the kingdom of God.

GOD'S ANSWER TO NEHEMIAH'S PRAYER - 2:2-8

² So the king said to me, "Why is your face sad though you are not sick? This is nothing but sadness of heart." Then I was very much afraid. ³ I said to the king, "Let the king live forever. Why should my face not be sad when the city, the place of my fathers' tombs, lies desolate and its gates have been consumed by fire?" ⁴ Then the king said to me, "What would you request?" So I prayed to the God of heaven. ⁵ I said to the king, "If it please the king, and if your servant has found favor before you, send me to Judah, to the city of my fathers' tombs, that I may rebuild it." ⁶ Then the king said to me, the queen sitting beside him, "How long will your journey be, and when will you return?" So it pleased the king to send me, and I gave him a definite time. ⁷ And I said to the king, "If it please the king, let letters be given me for the governors of the provinces beyond the River, that they may allow me to pass through until I come to Judah, ⁸ and a letter to Asaph the keeper of the king's forest, that he may give me timber to make beams for the gates of the fortress which is by the temple, for the wall of the city and for the house to which I will go." And the king granted them to me because the good hand of my God was on me.
- Nehemiah 2:2-8

We've seen that Nehemiah first prayed to God for help and nothing more. There is another reason why Nehemiah was limited in his actions concerning the request of his brethren from Jerusalem.

- Under the law of that time, it was forbidden for him to speak to the king unless the king spoke to him first. It was the same dilemma as Esther. Addressing the king without being called upon merited the death penalty.
- Notice in verse 1 that Nehemiah had not been sad in the king's presence, but in verse 2 the king discerned that Nehemiah was sad.
- Who do you think worked in the heart of the most powerful man in the world to note this condition? God, of course.
- This demonstrates clearly that the prayer of a great man of God is able to affect even the greatest man in the world at that time.
- Note also that the prayer was answered in great detail
 - The old order to stop building was canceled
 - The project gained the blessing of both the king and the queen
 - All the materials were supplied by the king
 - Nehemiah was guaranteed safe passage

All of this because of prayer; not action, strength, wisdom or wealth, but the prayer of a great man of God.

SUMMARY

Here are a few lessons on greatness we learn from this episode:

A. Greatness in the kingdom is not measured by accomplishments because those in the kingdom know that nothing is accomplished without God's resources, God's power or God's permission.


B. All we, in the Kingdom, can say is:

- If the Lord wills, this will be done
- Praise God for accomplishing such and such
- Thank you God for using me to accomplish this task or achievement no matter how small or how great.

C. We will accomplish great things only if we become:

- obedient to God's word
- involved in its ministry somehow
- humbled before God

Of course, Nehemiah offered prayers that were sincere, reverent, honest, intelligent and specific. If we pray in this way and wait patiently for His response, God will do great things through us, even greater than we could ever accomplish or even imagine on our own. Remember, however, that all of these things begin with sincere prayer.



3.

The Character of Greatness

Part 2

We continue with our look at Nehemiah, a profile of a man who achieved greatness in the service of God. We are studying his life in order to understand some of the qualities involved in becoming great in the Kingdom of God. In the previous chapter, we learned that the marks of personal greatness for the Kingdom of God are far different than what people strive for to be great in the world. In the world we confer greatness on those who are famous, wealthy or perhaps they're skilled in some thing or another and extraordinarily successful as a result.

In our study, we have seen that to be great in the Kingdom of Christ, one needs to cultivate things like obedience to God's word, the virtue of humility or service to God's kingdom. These are the types of things that we measure to determine if someone is great in the God's kingdom.

In our last chapter about Nehemiah we added the element of prayer and said that sincere, respectful, honest, intelligent,

specific and patient prayer is also a hallmark of the person who aspires to greatness in the Kingdom.

I also reviewed some of the facts about Nehemiah's personal situation and his calling into service:

- He was the slave of a foreign king who held the Jews in exile.
- Several groups of Jews had been released over the years in order to return to their homeland to rebuild the Temple and the city of Jerusalem.
- However, the nations that surrounded the rebuilt city were opposed to this construction and tried to shut it down.
- A delegation of Jewish leaders was then sent to Nehemiah asking him to intervene with the king. They complained that the protective wall around the city was destroyed and because of this they were vulnerable to attack from individuals and nations around them.

Nehemiah prays to God for help and his prayer is answered as the king permits him to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the wall and provides him with all the supplies needed to do the job. In this chapter we will add one more quality seen in those who are great in the Kingdom and that is effective service.

EFFECTIVE SERVICE

Nehemiah showed his faith and his maturity by going directly to God in prayer when faced with a challenge. Once God answered his prayer, however, Nehemiah demonstrated that he could also work effectively to take advantage of the blessings given to him. We pick up the story of Nehemiah and his return to Jerusalem in Nehemiah 2:11. Note that first and foremost Nehemiah had a strategy. Effective service goes beyond asking for blessings and

opportunities. When they come, a person has to provide effective service to turn these things into a reality. The next section will demonstrate the five aspects of Nehemiah's approach to his task that produced effective service.

1. He had a plan

¹¹ So I came to Jerusalem and was there three days. ¹² And I arose in the night, I and a few men with me. I did not tell anyone what my God was putting into my mind to do for Jerusalem and there was no animal with me except the animal on which I was riding. ¹³ So I went out at night by the Valley Gate in the direction of the Dragon's Well and on to the Refuse Gate, inspecting the walls of Jerusalem which were broken down and its gates which were consumed by fire. ¹⁴ Then I passed on to the Fountain Gate and the King's Pool, but there was no place for my mount to pass. ¹⁵ So I went up at night by the ravine and inspected the wall. Then I entered the Valley Gate again and returned. ¹⁶ The officials did not know where I had gone or what I had done; nor had I as yet told the Jews, the priests, the nobles, the officials or the rest who did the work.
- Nehemiah 2:11-16

Alan Redpath in his book, "Victorious Christian Service" says that a failure is not a person who fails to achieve his goals - no, a failure is a person who has not established any goals or plans. God never leaves his servants without a plan:

- Noah had a plan for the ark.
- Moses had a very exact plan for the tabernacle. In Exodus chapters 20-34 we note that at the beginning of each chapter God gave Moses a plan of action. We then note in Exodus chapter 35:1 to 39:43 the Jewish leader

and the people do exactly what God had laid out in His plan.

In the same way Nehemiah had a plan from God concerning what was to be done. To be great in the Kingdom we must be ready to put God's plan into action, not our own plan.

2. He mobilized everyone to the task

¹⁷ Then I said to them, "You see the bad situation we are in, that Jerusalem is desolate and its gates burned by fire. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem so that we will no longer be a reproach." ¹⁸ I told them how the hand of my God had been favorable to me and also about the king's words which he had spoken to me. Then they said, "Let us arise and build." So they put their hands to the good work.
- Nehemiah 2:17-18

Chapter 3:1-32 explains how Nehemiah organized the task to be done by all of the people working together. There was a fellowship of purpose and a complete participation in the overall effort. Each person rebuilt the wall nearest his own home and, because of this, was motivated to do a good job because if you had poor workmanship, it would be your home put at risk should the enemy breach the wall. We see, therefore, that Nehemiah did more than distribute the work, he also distributed a sense of ownership and responsibility to all of those who were working the plan.

3. He worked hard - 4:1-6

Building a wall was hard enough work but Nehemiah faced opposition to the construction they were trying to complete which made the task that much more difficult.

¹ Now it came about that when Sanballat heard that we were rebuilding the wall, he became furious and very angry and mocked the Jews. ² He spoke in the presence of his brothers and the wealthy men of Samaria and said, "What are these feeble Jews doing? Are they going to restore it for themselves? Can they offer sacrifices? Can they finish in a day? Can they revive the stones from the dusty rubble even the burned ones?" ³ Now Tobiah the Ammonite was near him and he said, "Even what they are building—if a fox should jump on it, he would break their stone wall down!"

- Nehemiah 4:1-3

They were mocked by others while they worked and faced a kind of psychological warfare wherein their pride was subject to attack by their enemy's ridicule.

⁴ Hear, O our God, how we are despised! Return their reproach on their own heads and give them up for plunder in a land of captivity. ⁵ Do not forgive their iniquity and let not their sin be blotted out before You, for they have demoralized the builders. ⁶ So we built the wall and the whole wall was joined together to half its height, for the people had a mind to work.

- Nehemiah 4:4-6

The people's response to these attacks was to simply bear down. Nehemiah didn't whine or complain to God, he refused to be frightened or discouraged. They weren't just busy, they poured their hearts into the project. This was important because both their lives and futures were at stake.

In the pursuit of effective service there is no substitute for hard work. It is, at times, inconvenient, discouraging to the mind and body, and expensive, however, in the end making an all-out effort is an irreplaceable component for a successful mission.

4. Nehemiah worked without fear - 4:7-23

⁷ Now when Sanballat, Tobiah, the Arabs, the Ammonites and the Ashdodites heard that the repair of the walls of Jerusalem went on, and that the breaches began to be closed, they were very angry. ⁸ All of them conspired together to come and fight against Jerusalem and to cause a disturbance in it. ⁹ But we prayed to our God, and because of them we set up a guard against them day and night. ¹⁰ Thus in Judah it was said, "The strength of the burden bearers is failing, Yet there is much rubbish; And we ourselves are unable To rebuild the wall."

¹¹ Our enemies said, "They will not know or see until we come among them, kill them and put a stop to the work." ¹² When the Jews who lived near them came and told us ten times, "They will come up against us from every place where you may turn," ¹³ then I stationed men in the lowest parts of the space behind the wall, the exposed places, and I stationed the people in families with their swords, spears and bows.

¹⁴ When I saw their fear, I rose and spoke to the nobles, the officials and the rest of the people: "Do not be afraid of them; remember the Lord who is great and awesome, and fight for your brothers, your sons, your daughters, your wives and your houses."

- Nehemiah 4:7-23

When their enemies mobilized to attack them, Nehemiah reminded the people whose side they were on. The difference between the Jews and their enemies was not the size of their armies but who they were fighting for and who their leaders were.

In the final verses of chapter four, we see the people responding to Nehemiah's call to not be afraid and remember that their protector was God Himself. All great servants of God had this in common (Elijah, David, Paul the Apostle). They were unafraid of their enemies and undaunted by their tasks because they were confident that their protector and supplier was the Lord.

If God is for us, who is against us?
- Romans 8:31b

5. Nehemiah finished - chapters 5-6

Building the wall was challenging enough but as I said, Nehemiah had many other obstacles and distractions.

Chapter 5

- We see a dispute arise among the rich and poor Jews because the poor were unable to pay their debts to the rich.
- Nehemiah encouraged the rich citizens to forgive the debts of the poor so that the work could go on.
- In addition to these local problems, he was still responsible to the king for governing the territory while supporting 150 people from his personal resources.

Chapter 6

- We read about his enemies trying to stop the construction by applying political pressure in denouncing him unjustly to the king.
- There was also a plot to kill him.

- Finally, there was pressure to make him compromise the project by exchanging a guarantee of peace for a cessation of the work.

All of these problems were taking place at the same time but in the midst of these we read a key verse:

So the wall was completed on the twenty-fifth of the month Elul, in fifty-two days.

- Nehemiah 6:15

They finished the wall! Nehemiah did not focus on the obstacles, he focused on the wall and completed it in 52 days!

This was quite a feat when you consider that this structure surrounded an entire city, was wide enough to ride a horse-drawn chariot on and high enough to post lookouts. Great servants of God glorify Him by finishing, not just starting. It's not considered effective service if you don't finish what God has given you to do.

MODERN APPLICATIONS

Nehemiah added effective service to an already strong prayer life. His service included certain key elements.

- He was careful to follow God's plan.
- He included everyone in God's service
- He worked hard
- He worked without fear.
- He focused on the task, not the obstacles.

His effective service educates us today on how to minister and serve the Lord and thus be considered great in the Kingdom, something we should all strive to be since this is pleasing to God.

What, then, does effective service in today's church look like?

1. Today's Servant Works God's Plan

Some will ask, "What plan?" God hasn't appeared to give us a special plan. In answer to this I say that today's servants work the plan given us by Christ, the same plan that will remain until He returns.

- II Timothy 3:16 - Tells us where to find the details of the plan, the Bible.
- I Timothy 2:4 - Tells us what the plan is.
- Matthew 28:18-19 - Tells us how to accomplish and perpetuate the plan.

That the church seeks and saves the lost has always been God's plan and will remain so until the end of time. If seeking and saving the lost is not the major plan we are working on in the church then we've got the wrong plan.

2. Today's Servants Work Together

Paul, the Apostle, encouraged the early church to work together. It seems that this has always been a challenge.

Therefore encourage one another and build up one another, just as you also are doing.

- I Thessalonians 5:11

Everyone in some way is serving someone else. No heroes, no one-man shows, no solitary Christians, no system where we pay

the "minister" to serve everyone else. Each servant has some kind of service to render. In our Christian lives we should be experiencing three things: our service to others, their service to us, and a shared concern about the overall welfare of the church felt by everyone in the church.

The Jews working with Nehemiah were concerned about the entire wall, not just the part closest to their house. It was their wall, just as it is our church, not my church or the minister's church. As servants, we work together to build it up and any weak part is a concern to all because all of us are affected by the one among us who is weak.

3. Today's Servants Work Hard

Many people become Christians but few Christians actually become effective in service because they don't like to be inconvenienced or asked to sacrifice. We get a lot of lip service but very few put their backs to the work. It requires effort to:

- Battle sin effectively
- Worship effectively
- Pray effectively
- Give effectively
- Serve effectively

The result is that we have many people serving with their lips and only a few serving with all their hearts and hands as well as their pocketbooks. One of the major reasons why various religious sects are growing faster than the church is because they work harder at spreading false doctrine than we do at spreading the Gospel!

Seed is seed, if you work harder at sowing weeds than sowing wheat, you're going to get more weeds than wheat.

4. Today's Servants are not Afraid

The results of sin and the threat of death are all around us, every day, even in our own lives and families. Satan uses every device to frighten us into thinking that:

- God has abandoned us
- We are not worthy
- The task is too great, we are too small
- We don't have enough to do the job
- Our enemies will win or they're right and we're wrong

The list of discouragements and threats go on and on but the promise of God to His servants remains the same today as it was then:

teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

- Matthew 28:20

And my God will supply all your needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus.

- Philippians 4:19

God promises to be with us and provide everything we need to do the job. What better guarantee can we ask for? God's great servants are not afraid because the one who protects, provides and promises is God Himself.

We may be bruised and scarred, even die in battle but the victory is secured so we should never fear.

5. Today's Servants are Finishers

Finishing, that is what great servants strive to do:

- Noah finished the ark.
- Moses finished the journey.
- Solomon finished the temple.
- Nehemiah finished the wall.
- Jesus finished His work on the cross.
- Peter and Paul finished their mission by bringing the Gospel to the world.

Why were they able to finish?

- Because they stayed focused on the finish line, not the obstacles.
- Because they knew that starting was easy and finishing was difficult. They knew this going in and they accepted the difficulty as the price to pay for finishing.
- Because they knew that the prize (heaven, being considered good and faithful servants, being great in the Kingdom) this prize only goes to the finishers, not the starters.


Effective servants finish what they start and in doing so, are rewarded with greater opportunities for service.

SUMMARY

Nehemiah shows us some of the elements that go into effective service, a virtue necessary to be great in the Kingdom. Hopefully, we've seen how these principles can be applied to our own service in the church today. Finally, I hope that we've also seen the relationship between effective service and greatness in the Kingdom.

- Effective service leads to opportunities for greater and more dynamic service in the Kingdom of God.
- Greater service enables one to bear more fruit to the glory of God and this makes one great in the Kingdom, not to mention joyful, full of peace and confident in our salvation.

I believe that this is what we all should be striving for in life, to be great in the Kingdom. Nehemiah, one of God's great servants, shows us how effective prayer and effective service helps in reaching that goal.



4. The Reward for Greatness

We've been studying the life of Nehemiah in order to discover the pattern of living and the type of virtues necessary to be great in the Kingdom of God. As I said in our previous chapter, "Striving to be "great" in the Kingdom of God is a legitimate goal and one that God encourages us to use" (Matthew 18:4; Matthew 20:26). Striving to be great in the Kingdom is to make an effort to be more like Christ, and this is certainly pleasing in the sight of God.

In our study so far, we have learned that a group of Jews have come from Jerusalem to seek Nehemiah's help in building a wall around the city of Jerusalem. Nehemiah's greatness is demonstrated as we see him go directly to God in prayer for help. Next, when God answers his prayer and moves the king to permit Nehemiah to return to do the work and also provides the materials to do the job, we see other elements in Nehemiah's character that separate him as a great servant of God.

For example, we observe as Nehemiah works God's plan in the rebuilding scheme; he then mobilizes everyone to serve and encourages the people to work hard and trust God. Finally, we

note that he perseveres to the end despite the many obstacles he faced.

The following, therefore, are some (not all) of the virtues that make a person great in the eyes of God.

- strong prayer life
- eagerness to do God's will
- sensitivity to the body of the believers
- perseverance in work and faith
- courage to finish the task that you've been given by God

We see that after Nehemiah finished the job, God rewarded him. As we close out our brief study, we'll look at how God rewards his great servants.

THE REWARDS FOR GREATNESS

God rewards those who achieve greatness in His kingdom and the reward is not simply the promise of heaven. God rewards His good and faithful servants with greater opportunities to bear fruit to His glory. Someone may ask, "Well, how is this a reward?" It's a reward because the greater our service and fruitfulness, the greater our joy, peace and confidence in the Kingdom to come.

Nehemiah went from restoring the wall around the city of God's people, to restoring the people of God themselves. His reward for a good job on the wall was the opportunity to work on the nation itself.

NEHEMIAH'S RESTORATION

We read that Nehemiah's restoration of the people took place in four stages. Those who have the responsibility of working with

people can once again learn about great leadership from Nehemiah's approach.

Phase #1 - He restored order

⁴ Now the city was large and spacious, but the people in it were few and the houses were not built. ⁵ Then my God put it into my heart to assemble the nobles, the officials and the people to be enrolled by genealogies. Then I found the book of the genealogy of those who came up first in which I found the following record:
- Nehemiah 7:4-5

Nehemiah began by establishing social order. In chapter 7:6-73, we see him organizing the people to live in various cities according to their genealogies. He appointed priests to serve at the Temple and gathered funds to pay for their work.

Once the wall was built and the people were secure, it was time to return to living an ordered life and Nehemiah followed God's lead in reorganizing the society.

Phase #2 - He restored organized teaching

¹ And all the people gathered as one man at the square which was in front of the Water Gate, and they asked Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the law of Moses which the Lord had given to Israel. ² Then Ezra the priest brought the law before the assembly of men, women and all who could listen with understanding, on the first day of the seventh month. ³ He read from it before the square which was in front of the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of men and women, those who could understand; and all

the people were attentive to the book of the law. ⁴ Ezra the scribe stood at a wooden podium which they had made for the purpose. And beside him stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiah, and Maaseiah on his right hand; and Pedaiah, Mishael, Malchijah, Hashum, Hashbaddanah, Zechariah and Meshullam on his left hand. ⁵ Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people for he was standing above all the people; and when he opened it, all the people stood up. ⁶ Then Ezra blessed the Lord the great God. And all the people answered, "Amen, Amen!" while lifting up their hands; then they bowed low and worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground. ⁷ Also Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiah, the Levites, explained the law to the people while the people remained in their place. ⁸ They read from the book, from the law of God, translating to give the sense so that they understood the reading.

⁹ Then Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, "This day is holy to the Lord your God; do not mourn or weep." For all the people were weeping when they heard the words of the law.

- Nehemiah 8:1-9

Nehemiah re-instituted detailed education for the people in the law and word of God (details in verses 10-18). He knew that the wall protected the city, but it was God's word that protected the heart. They had been defeated and exiled because of their sins and ignorance - Nehemiah addressed this danger repeating itself by educating the people in God's will.

Phase #3 - He restored pure and acceptable conduct

¹ Now on the twenty-fourth day of this month the sons of Israel assembled with fasting, in sackcloth and with dirt upon them. ² The descendants of Israel separated themselves from all foreigners, and stood and confessed their sins and the iniquities of their fathers. ³ While they stood in their place, they read from the book of the law of the Lord their God for a fourth of the day; and for another fourth they confessed and worshiped the Lord their God.
- Nehemiah 9:1-3

No more mixed marriages with pagans. The people acknowledged sin and repented. They recommitted themselves to God's service. Chapters 9-11 describe how the people publicly and sincerely rededicated themselves to holy living, beginning with an offering of their wealth to the service of the Temple. A change in lifestyle and conduct are not complete unless one also finds a way to directly serve the Lord.

Phase #4 - He restored acceptable worship

²⁷ Now at the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem they sought out the Levites from all their places, to bring them to Jerusalem so that they might celebrate the dedication with gladness, with hymns of thanksgiving and with songs to the accompaniment of cymbals, harps and lyres. ²⁸ So the sons of the singers were assembled from the district around Jerusalem, and from the villages of the Netophathites, ²⁹ from Bethgilgal and from their fields in Geba and Azmaveth, for the singers had built themselves villages around

Jerusalem.³⁰ The priests and the Levites purified themselves; they also purified the people, the gates and the wall.

- Nehemiah 12:27-30

We see in this passage the climax of Nehemiah's work in both the rebuilding of the wall and the people of God. He indeed achieves a great thing in God's eyes. He turns the people back towards God in acceptable worship. He rebuilt the wall. He reorganized the people. He taught them God's Word. He restored a sense of purity in their living. All of this was done so they could go before God and rededicate the wall, the city, the Temple and themselves back into God's service.

Nehemiah achieved the greatest task for a servant of God, he created another servant. Nehemiah's great achievement was that for a time he transformed the people of Israel into an entire nation of servants, wholly devoted to God's service.

LESSONS FROM A GREAT SERVANT

In our quest to become great in the Kingdom, we can learn several key lessons from one who actually achieved that status.

Lesson #1 - Faithful in little, trusted with a lot

Nehemiah was a faithful slave to a foreign king and God gave him a wall to build. He continued to serve faithfully and so God gave him a nation to build. This same principle is at work today in our lives. If we're faithful in small matters as Christians (church attendance, study and prayer, personal conduct, etc.) God will give us greater opportunities for service and personal growth (teaching, leadership, evangelism, service to others etc.).

If our Christian experience is dull, it is usually because we're not in the action, we're not in the thick of battle and service. If we are

faithful in doing the little things right, God will reward us with bigger opportunities for service.

Lesson #2 - There is only one objective

God's great servants in every age, including this age, are serving others with the goal of restoring them to a right relationship with God. We've seen from Nehemiah's example that there is a definite pattern to this task of restoring people to a right relationship with God.

A. Help restore order in their lives

Nehemiah sent them to their cities, established proper worship, etc. Today, we provide counseling, benevolence, assistance in getting them through a crisis, whatever that is.

B. We teach them God's word

Once they have found their balance, their safety and their needs are met, they need to hear the gospel. People need to hear the gospel if they are to be restored to God, it's not enough just to fill their bellies, you've got to fill their souls as well.

C. Integrate them

Nehemiah put all the people to work, first to rebuild the wall and defend the city, and then to worship God together. We have to integrate souls into the life of the church (pure living, fellowship, service). One or two ministers cannot have a meaningful relationship with 400 people. Somewhere along the line we need to each take someone into our lives in order to help them become truly integrated into the body of Christ.

And so, everything we do, in our service to God is related in some way to one of three things that I just mentioned. We're working

or serving in an effort to either restore order and teach about the Christ or integrate people into the church.

Whether we smile and hug a visitor, deliver groceries, visit the sick, alone or imprisoned; teach, preach, clean, or serve in some way, everything works towards restoring other people to a right relationship with God. This is the goal of great servants in the Kingdom.

Lesson #3 - There's no day off

After completing two major tasks for the Lord, Nehemiah returned to Babylon to resume his position at the Persian court. Once there, he receives news that he is again needed back in Jerusalem. He returns to the city to find the people once again unfaithful to God:

- Mixed marriages with pagans
- Abandoning the care of the Temple and worship
- Breaking the Sabbath

Nehemiah does not allow this discouragement to defeat him as he once again works hard to restore order, worship and purity among the people. Of course, I'm not suggesting that there is no need for a time of rest, recreation and diversion. These are all important to stay healthy and to be able to do our work.

What Nehemiah's return teaches us is that the job goes on because the saved forget and become distracted, and the lost go further and further into the darkness without the light.

We have to be careful because many churches, after they finish a building/renovation project for example, want to sit back, relax and enjoy the new furniture for a while. They think that once the building is done, the big job is done.

Of course, we know the job is just beginning at this point. Our wall (building) has been built for many years now, our task today is to build up the church that meets in the building.

We need to build up the church so it can become active and effective in helping the community, nation and world - to be restored to a right relationship with God, and this requires those who aspire to be great in the Kingdom of God to complete this holy and blessed task.



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