

A Spirit of Service

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[0 : 01] Thank you for that invitation, Lisa. Yes, I will. Good morning, everybody. How are you doing today? Good, good. Good to see you. Glad you're here. Those who are listening online, thank you for doing that. If you're new with us today, man, we are so privileged to have you join us.

And if you got your Bible, go ahead and turn to Nehemiah 10. We've been going through this series through the book of Nehemiah, and we're getting into towards the end of it. We only have a few weeks left, and trust it's been helpful for you.

It's been helpful for me. And we're going to start in verse 32 today. And if you don't have a Bible with you, you don't have to worry about it. We also are going to have verses up on the screen. And just by way of quick introduction, if you're new to the book of Nehemiah, this is a story about renewal of the city of Jerusalem.

And but even though it happened thousands of years ago, it still has importance for us today. There are parallels to what is going on in this story to what we are to do as the people of God and the church of God and what happens in the life of the church, what we do together as we seek to follow Jesus.

And last week, Elliot showed us how the people of God as one stepped up and took on the obligations of holy living as God's covenant people. God is a holy God, and he calls the people to covenant with, and he calls them to follow him in a certain way.

[1 : 18] And today is actually a continuation of that same commitment. And so without further ado, let's jump into Nehemiah 10, starting in verse 32. We also take on ourselves the obligation to give yearly a third part of a shekel for the service of the house of our God, for the showbread, the regular grain offering, the regular burnt offering, the Sabbaths, the new moons, the appointed feasts, the holy things, and the sin offerings to make atonement for Israel and for all the work of the house of our God.

We, the priests, the Levites, and the people have likewise cast lots for the wood offering, to bring it into the house of our God according to our father's houses, at times appointed year by year to burn on the altar of the Lord our God, as it is written in the law.

We obligate ourselves to bring the firstfruits of our ground and the firstfruits of all fruit of every tree year by year to the house of the Lord, also to bring to the house of our God to the priests who minister in the house of our God, the firstborn of our sons and of our cattle, as it is written in the law, and the firstborn of our herds and of our flocks, and to bring the first of our dough and our contributions, the fruit of every tree, the wine and the oil, to the priests, to the chambers of the house of our God, and to bring to the Levites the tithes from our ground, for it is the Levites who collect the tithes in all our towns where we labor.

And the priest, the son of Aaron, shall be with the Levites when the Levites receive the tithes. And the Levites shall bring up the tithe of the tithes to the house of our God, to the chambers of the storehouse, for the people of Israel and the sons of Levi shall bring the contribution of grain, wine, and oil to the chambers where the vessels of the sanctuary are, as well as the priests who minister, and the gatekeepers and the singers.

We will not neglect the house of our God. In chapter 11, now the leaders of the people lived in Jerusalem, and the rest of the people cast lots to bring one out of ten to live in Jerusalem, the holy city, while nine out of ten remained in the other towns, and the people blessed all the men who willingly offered to live in Jerusalem.

[3 : 30] This is God's word. So this part of the commitment shifts off what the people are doing, how they're living personally holy lives, and it shifts its focus to the temple.

The temple is the main idea here, and all these commitments and obligations that are being made. And the temple is actually what made Jerusalem such an important city.

As the city in Israel, it represented God's dwelling place among his people. It is where God's king sat. It's where he ruled and reigned on God's behalf.

And it was the place also where Israelites would come for feasts and festivals, and all throughout the year, they could come and draw near to God and worship him. But that worship required a lot of service and support, and God's people here, what they are doing is they are stepping up as one to meet all those needs.

And that is the main idea of today's sermon, is looking at how these people were living out a spirit of service. Now, we look at this, and we think serving is what we do in order to make worship happen, right?

[4 : 37] It's the thing that leads up to worship. We separate the two things. But I would argue from this text and throughout the Bible, from beginning to end, cover to cover, that the Bible makes no such distinction.

Serving is worship, and worship is serving. And God set it up that way right from the beginning. Go back to Genesis 2, right? God creates man, and it says he puts him into a garden to cultivate it.

And that word cultivate, it's a Hebrew word that means to work or to serve or worship. It can be translated in any one of those ways. You see, God created us, and he gave us this assignment.

What did he say? He's like, go fill the earth and subdue it. He puts man into the garden to what? Cultivate it. He, that idea is, hey, I made this creation, but you know what?

I'm delegating to you, and you are cooperating with me, and to go into this creation, and to bring about its beauty and flourishing. Not in order to one-up God and say, oh, look, we did something better than you.

[5 : 38] Rather, we get to participate in him, in bringing his creation into his fullness. That's what he invites us into, and that is a pretty cool purposeful life, if you think about it. Think about Adam's work in the garden.

It's service, and it is worship to God all at the same time. And here's the thing. That garden was the first temple. On all of Adam's cultivating and beauty-making brought God more and more glory as he did this.

Now, fast forward a little bit. You got sin. You got the fall. Then God's people enslaved in Egypt. And then God goes, and he sends Moses as his representative to go and rescue and pull his people out of Egypt.

And we see the same Hebrew word for work, service, or worship appear in Exodus 8.1. He says, then the Lord said to Moses, go into Pharaoh. Say to him, thus says the Lord, let my people go, that they may serve me.

Some translations, like the ESV, use the word serve. Other translations use the word worship, and both are right. Now, when Hebrews, when the Hebrew people in Nehemiah's day, when they think of worship to Yahweh, their covenant God, the God who made them his people, they not only think of hands lifted up and a song lifted up in worship, they also understand it is a life laid down in service as well.

[7 : 01] So both of those things are true. And this is the same pattern for us today as we follow Jesus when he saves us and he calls us into that. Paul the apostle wrote about this in Romans 12.

He talks about our spiritual worship, giving ourselves as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God. And then he goes on to talk about serving one another and using the gifts God has given us and to bless each other with.

Serving as worship and worship as serving is an important foundational truth. I would argue that is a kind of a necessary presupposition that we need to have because without it, serving will begin to feel like an unnecessary obligation and a burden.

But that truth alone, I would argue, also doesn't make our hearts sing over serving to God. Because there's another pivotal truth. I would say maybe one, a presupposition underneath that presupposition I just said.

There's another pivotal truth that we have that we need to become our conviction. And this truth isn't explicitly expressed in the passage we read today, but it is heavily implied.

[8 : 09] And it actually gets out the primary motivation and reason for serving. And it's this. We serve God because he is worthy of our service. We serve because God is worthy of our service.

And I'll admit, this makes sense to nobody unless you already know God. You know him and what he's done for you. And all I'm about to say on this particular point really only makes sense.

It really only works after you've gotten that revelation and believed it to be true. But even so, in a way, that principle, it makes sense to all of us because we honor something in proportion to its value.

Think about this. There is a reason Michelangelo's David is in museums and my fifth grade science diorama is not, right? There is a difference in quality and worth and value there.

In the Bible, giving honor simply meant returning praise or payment according to value. Think about this.

[9 : 15] Kings in those days, they would exact honor and tribute in the form of taxes. It was the way his subjects declared the value of his rule over them. And, you know, oftentimes it's not like his subjects had any choice in the matter.

You know, most kings set the amount themselves. And, like, the higher the value they set, it was kind of like a backdoor brag on themselves, right? But even so, subjects under a good king, they would gladly return the honor to a king who ruled well.

And they would do it with gratitude. And as much as we don't like to be put under obligations today, we have to realize and think about this. Isn't Jesus our king?

God didn't save us to become our cosmic butler. He didn't. He's not Santa Claus, right? He is God Most High.

And he rules over us as king. We have to realize, Elliot hit on this last week about a holy God. Him and us, we're not on the same level. We aren't.

[10 : 20] I mean, you might say, well, doesn't he save us as his sons? Yeah, we are his sons. Yes, and we are his servants. And both of those things are true. And these Israelites understood that relationship.

He is God in heaven. He is the Almighty. He is the creator of heaven and earth. And he, because of that, is worthy of more than we can ever give to him. It's why that lyric from that song, I have nothing that's fit for a king except for a song singing hallelujah.

Something is so true about that. And it resonates in our hearts. And we're like, yes and amen when we sing that. Because we know that we don't have anything to give God that truly can honor his worth.

And yet, here's the fascinating thing. He delights in receiving from us what we bring to him. Those hallelujahs, whatever reason, he delights in receiving them from us.

It's like when a five-year-old draws a picture and gives it to you as a gift, right? It isn't that impressive. But, man, if it's our kids' drawing, it's a masterpiece. We put it up on the fridge and we frame it, you know?

[11 : 27] And we think, man, the Mona Lisa has nothing on the stick figures made out of crayon on that piece of paper. See, God loves our service to him.

And from our part, it may not feel like much. It may feel like in our service, we are just giving him a stick figure crayon picture when he deserves the Sistine Chapel.

Nevertheless, he loves to receive our service when we do it in the right heart. And that last part that I said is important, the right heart. These guys weren't moaning, oh, we got to take on obligations.

I guess I have to serve. Man, God, you're so bossy. What an ego you have. No, they are stepping in, committing to serve faithfully here.

Because in their heart, all the tithes they can give, the offerings they can bring, the work and the sacrifice, they were all doing the same thing. They were going toward declaring God's glory.

[12 : 29] Serving is worship, and worship is all about glorifying God. See, when we serve, we cultivate God's glory in this world. And this shouldn't be the side hustle of our lives.

This should be the main focus, okay? It's what Os Guinness, kind of a Christian writer, thinker, he calls our primary calling. We can be so many things. You can be a dad.

You could be a mom. You could be a friend. You could be a teacher. You could be a business owner. You could be a real estate agent. You could be a construction worker. You could be any of those things. And that's a calling.

But your primary calling, first and foremost, is bringing glory to God in how you live. Everything tucks in behind that. Which is why the Israelites didn't bring God their leftovers.

They obligated to bring the first fruits of their crops, the first fruits of their vineyards, of their trees. They said, you know what? The firstborn of our flocks and herds, we are going to bring those to God.

[13 : 29] Because those are quality gifts, and the quality of their gifts declared God's value. They obligated themselves to serve God by bringing their first and their best.

And that is worship as serving and serving as worship. Think about your own giving and serving. What does it declare about God's value, how you value him?

Is it cultivating and declaring his glory? I mean, gifts can tell people how much they are valued, right? And I give my wife a diamond necklace. It says to her, man, you are high in value.

I give her a gift card. It's like, eh, okay. Not bad. I give her socks. I've went wrong somewhere, didn't I? When we serve, it's not just an obligation.

It is an opportunity. For what? To cultivate and declare God's glory. I tithe because God is worthy, and I believe that he could take that 10% that I am giving and returning to him and use it to cultivate beauty through the work of the ministry that is done in and through his church.

[14 : 42] Serving, same thing. God can take our service and multiply it in redemptive ways that go far beyond what we can hope or imagine. And you guys may not know this, but people in this city and beyond and around the world have been directly and indirectly blessed by the generous giving and serving of this church.

God takes our contributions. He takes our faithfulness, and he multiplies them. And here is what's amazing. And in doing that, he cultivates his glory, and we get to participate in that.

And here's another thing about that. As long as I've been following God, he has never failed to vindicate those who serve them, serve him in this way, giving their first and their best, because God is faithful.

Now, I say that, but it doesn't mean we just become foolish with our serving, right? We don't serve to be blessed. We don't like, man, I'm going to serve extra hard and double serve because I want to be double blessed.

God calls us to faithful service. But as we see in this passage, it is also reasonable, and it is in proportion to circumstance and calling.

[15 : 58] Serving as a community means we all contribute in both common ways, but also with different roles. I mean, think about it. God never called a mute person to be a prophet unless he opened his mouth to speak.

He had a different calling and level of temple service for Levites and priests than the rest of the population. Yes, God wants our hearts.

God wants our service, and he wants us to put him first, but he calls us to that in a reasonable manner that works in this life that we're living where we also got to work hard to pay bills and eat, right?

There's reasonableness here. I mean, just look at this. Take the third of a shekel that they contributed. That was doable for everyone, rich or poor. If you want to nerd out, you can go research this, and some of you are already doing that, right?

Just like, how much is a third of a shekel? Well, it's an amount somewhere, you know, there's debate on this, but it's somewhere in the range of, like, change you might find in your couch cushions all the way up to a third of what a laborer would make in a day.

[17 : 03] But that would be one contribution one time a year. That is very doable. Paying that amount once a year, that wasn't going to be a hardship. And yet, at the same time, you think, like, well, it's kind of an inconsequential amount, but when everybody joins in and does it, it starts to add up to something significant.

It was a contribution they all had in common, and another common obligation that we see here that they took upon themselves was paying the tithe. Everybody, rich or poor, they would bring in 10% of what they had, of what their fields produced and their herds produced and what they had in their homes, with the oil and the dough and the grain.

But then they set up another kind of obligation to support the temple worship. We see in verse 24 this rotating firewood delivery service that got set up in this moment, which is kind of weird, but the temple needed lots of firewood.

And instead of it falling on one family and a couple of Levites over-functioning and doing too much, they all signed up to this rotation. And in this way, the burden was shared, and the fires for the sacrifices kept burning without burning people out.

See, God cares about the work, but not at the expense of his workers. That's why he gave us a Sabbath from the get-go. God doesn't devalue work, but he is also a God who values for us to rest and rest in him.

[18 : 32] Jesus calls us to serve him under his light and easy yoke. He is not a hard taskmaster that treats us like expendable slaves. Now, we can hear that, and we can just be like, we can swing the pendulum too far and do our best to avoid serving and sanctify it.

And I would say this, even though Jesus' yoke is light and easy, we still need, we are still called to step up and pitch in and play our part. And that's what's happening all throughout chapter 11.

And I got into the first two verses, and, you know, go back and read all of the rest of chapter 11, because it's beautiful. It has all these difficult names to pronounce, but it also talks about the different roles that they played in supporting the temple.

And there's janitors, and there's handymen, and there's singers, and there's musicians, and there's judges, and there's overseers, and there's priests that are ministering in the temple and helping offer the sacrifices and praying over the people of God and interceding for them.

All these things are happening. Different roles assigned to teams of people rotating in to these service, these assigned service times. And what all this does, it creates an ecosystem where there is leadership, and there is wise counsel, and there is praise, and there is sacrifice, and there is justice, and there is prayer, and there is thanksgiving.

[19 : 50] All this is going on, and yet it's done in a way that it didn't crush the workers. That is an ecosystem where God's people can serve and flourish.

And it is also an ecosystem where God is glorified. Because when we all step up and serve as one, it is worship that glorifies God.

And for the people, I'm going to say this, Nehemiah 10 39, for the people of Israel and the sons of Levi shall bring the contribution of grain, wine, and oil to the chambers where the vessels of the sanctuary are, as well as the priests who minister and the gatekeepers and the singers.

And here we see what they were doing. We see the heart of the people as one. We will not neglect the house of our God.

So for the sake of God's glory, let us not neglect his house. Remember, Jerusalem is not just any city. It was the capital city.

[20 : 54] It was the city of God, the place of his presence and power. It was where God's appointed king reigned over God's people according to God's law. And it is fair to say that the state of Jerusalem reflected on the power and glory of Jerusalem's God, which in turn had an effect on God's people.

A mighty Jerusalem, a built up Jerusalem, a beautiful and thriving Jerusalem. It was the glory of God and it was the pride of Israel. They could say, look at this place.

Our God is strong and mighty. He loves us and watches over us. He provides and protects and sustains. He is with us. He is in our midst. A strong and thriving Jerusalem was a boast to the other nations that the God of Israel, their God, was greater than all gods.

And that Israel, his people, was this God's special people. Now, here is an interesting thought and I think a challenging one.

And one that warns us that we should wrestle with because I'm sure these Israelites did. See, prior to all this happening that we just read about, all this renewal that's happening in Jerusalem, Jerusalem's God orchestrated the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple.

[22 : 09] He chose to demolish all the signs pointing to his power and glory. Why? Because it had become full of people whose hearts were far from him.

Jerusalem had been teeming with people. Temple worship was taking place, but they weren't really serving the God of Israel.

Their serving wasn't worship. And God warned them time and time again through prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah. He says to them, you draw near with your mouth. You honor me with your lips.

And yet your hearts are so far from me. You practice injustice. You oppress the poor. You strengthen the hand of evildoers. These were the things that could be said of the people of God.

God is indicting his own people on these things. They had drifted. God wasn't first anymore. He was just another part of their lives. Another God among the gods of the surrounding nations. And so they begin to drift and they begin to neglect the house of God and the ways of God.

[23 : 06] And so God did something out of his great love for his people. He humiliated himself among the nations by destroying Jerusalem and the temple. And it seems unimaginable, but he did it.

And there is a lesson in there for us. Today, God displays his manifold wisdom, glory, and power through his church. That's who we are.

We are the temple of God. We are the new Jerusalem. Every church is God's community called to serve him, called to put him first. This is our worship. And when we live in this manner, we become like Jesus.

When people saw Jesus, they saw the fulfillment of the scripture, zeal for your house consumes me. That's what it said about him. Hebrews 2, 1 and 3 kind of puts it that way.

We must not neglect the truths of the gospel that reveal Jesus and his ways. And it isn't enough to just know these truths. We have to live them. We need to become them.

[24 : 17] They need to be integrated into who we are. And as we do that, we become more and more like him. Zeal for God's house consumes us. Zeal for his glory consumes us.

Zeal for his glory consumes us. And the question for us is this. Is he worthy? Is he worthy? Think about what happened at the beginning of chapter 11.

10% of the people left their inheritance to go live in Jerusalem. We can like pass by that pretty easily. That piece of land, that inheritance they left behind, that had been allotted to them when they came in and conquered Canaan.

And at the end of Joshua, all these tribes and all these families were allotted their special place of land. It was a heritage and inheritance promised by God, given to them and their posterity for the generations to come.

And they had held on to that land as the evidence of God's promise and goodness to them from one generation to the next. It was handed down from family, from one generation of family to the next.

[25 : 19] And here, one in 10 are called to leave it. There's no argument. They leave it behind. And it says they did it willingly.

What got them there? Zeal for God's glory above all things. He was found worthy. Friends, we as the church or the city of God, we are God's temple.

And we are his temple built with resurrected stones. We are God's people chosen by him to serve him because serving is worship and worship is serving. And we can do this because we owe it all to Jesus.

As beautiful, I'm going to end with this. As beautiful as this moment is in the Nehemiah story, God's people would go on to fail the very obligations they made this day. They drifted again.

They became complacent again. They stopped putting God first. They grew in zeal for other things, the pursuit of wealth and power and pleasure. And that zeal took them in all kinds of different directions except towards the God of Jerusalem.

[26 : 28] And God would wait patiently for hundreds of years until in AD 70, the temple and Jerusalem fell for one last time. But here's the thing.

Before they were torn down, who they represented was torn down. Jesus was the fullness of God's presence in the flesh.

He was the true and better temple. Jesus was the seat of God's power and authority here on earth, the king of heaven who brought the kingdom to earth. And this Jesus came, and you know what he did?

He died on a cross, his body temple destroyed by human hands. And on the cross, he endured the wrath of God for our sins because of our lack of zeal for God's house.

And in Jesus, God humiliated himself once again, bringing his glorious temple to nothing. Why? Because through his death, he would defeat death.

[27 : 32] He would rise again. And this Jesus, he is the first fruits of a greater resurrection. He is the evidence of a new kind of stone, a new temple, a new Jerusalem that we are being built upon as his living stones.

And as we come to him in faith, we join in that resurrection. We participate in his resurrection. We become those living stones. And we are called into this life of following him to become like him in every way that zeal for God's house may consume us.

We are brought out of death into resurrection life to serve him who raised us from the dead into his marvelous life. And we serve because serving is worship.

And worship is serving. And the band comes up and we respond. If you're here, you're not yet a follower of Jesus, I want to appeal to you today. No amount of serving can save you.

Come to this Savior who died in your place. Come to him. Respond to him today. He died in your place. He died for your sins.

[28 : 41] And he bids you come to him. And by faith in him, you die to all that you are, all your failures, all you're not measuring up. And he calls you into a beautiful life, a resurrection life with him.

In a moment, there's going to be an opportunity to respond. There's going to be a prayer up on the screen for you to pray. And I urge you today, if that's you, pray that prayer and you will be saved. Now, if you're here and you're already a follower of Jesus, how is God calling you and me to respond today?

Okay. Is he still worthy? In our hearts, is he still worthy? I want to give us a time to just examine that thought.

To do some work. Come before God and be honest with him. You know, his grace is sufficient for everything. He already knows where your heart's at. He's just trying to get us to see where our hearts are at sometimes.

And I'm not saying that's true for everybody in here. But maybe for some of us. Maybe some of us were just like, man, Lord, I'm there, but like, keep me there. Some of us, it's like, man, Lord, I've drifted.

[29 : 49] Help me to get back to that. But come to him and examine our hearts. And then after you've examined your hearts, go and take communion. And your communion is coming to these symbols and signs of the death of Jesus Christ, his body broken, his blood shed for us.

And come to the table nearest you and take it back to your seat. And when you're ready, take it. So, Lord, I just want to pray over this moment. And I want to pray for everybody in the room, Lord, that you would be working in our hearts the reality and the truth, the revelation that you and you alone are worthy.

And where we fall short, Lord, show us that we might step back into that, that we might repent and turn and stir in us this zeal for your house, this zeal for your glory once again.

Amen. Amen. Amen.