YOU’RE IN THE MINISTRY NOW!

Nehemiah 11:1-12:47

By

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February 2, 2003

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Nehemiah Lesson 12

You’re in the Ministry Now!
Nehemiah 11:1-12:47

If I were to ask, “How does a person go into the ministry?” many Christians would answer, “The person needs to go to Bible college or seminary. After he has served in a ministry position for a while, he needs to be ordained.”

All right, I admit that it was a trick question. The question itself and that answer reflect a deeply entrenched, but erroneous, mentality among God’s people, which divides people into two categories: those who are “in the ministry” (“clergy”) and those who are not (“laity”). To the extent that we buy into that mindset, the body of Christ will be crippled. Just a few will be committed to doing the work of the ministry, while the majority sit back and let them do it. But the biblical picture is that those who are gifted as pastor-teachers and evangelists are to equip the saints (all believers) for the work of the ministry (Eph. 4:11-12).

So the correct answer to the question, “How does a person go into the ministry?” is, “He or she trusts in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.” At the moment a person trusts Christ as Savior, the Holy Spirit baptizes him (or her) into the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:13). As members of His body, each one has a spiritual gift which he is to exercise for the building up of the body. It is proper and usually necessary for those who are gifted as pastor-teachers and evangelists to pursue formal training. It is also proper, according to Scripture (1 Tim. 5:17-18; 1 Cor. 9:14) to support those who devote themselves to these ministries. But it still is true that every believer has a spiritual gift that he or she is to use in ministry.

I’m talking primarily about a mindset where each of you sees yourself as entrusted by God with a vital ministry for which you will give an account. In the parable of the talents, it was the one-talent man who buried rather than invested his talent. Often in the body of Christ, it is the “one-talent” person who thinks, “I’m not gifted in an important way, so I can’t do much for the Lord.” That’s a wrong mentality that I want to challenge. The lesson I want to draw from our text is that...
All of God’s people should be ministry oriented.

Nehemiah 11 & 12 is another one of those portions of Scripture that you look at and think, “Why did God put this in His inspired Word?” From 11:3-12:26 there is a lengthy register of the names of the Jewish citizens. These two chapters include:

1. The families who repopulated Jerusalem (11:3-24)
   A. Lay families in Jerusalem (11:3-9)
   B. Priests in Jerusalem (11:10-14)
   C. Levites, gatekeepers, and temple servants in Jerusalem (11:15-24)
2. The families who lived in the cities of Judah and Benjamin (11:25-36)
3. The priests and Levites of Zerubbabel’s return (12:1-9)
4. The high priests (12:10-11)
5. The priests and Levites after Zerubbabel and Jeshua (12:12-26).
6. The dedication of the wall (12:26-43)
7. The organization of temple support (12:44-47)

Derek Kidner (Ezra & Nehemiah, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries [IVP], p. 117) aptly says,

It is not bureaucratic pedantry that has preserved these names. The point is, once more, that these people and their chronicler are conscious of their roots and of their structure as God’s company. This is no rabble of refugees, settling down anywhere: they have the dignity of order and of known relationships; above all, of their calling to be “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Ex. 19:6).

These people had willing hearts to do whatever God wanted them to do, and each functioned in their own unique capacity. As we examine the section that lists the names of the Jewish citizens, four factors emerge that help us define what ministry involves. The section dealing with the dedication of the wall reveals four requirements for the person involved in ministry (= every believer).

WHAT DOES MINISTRY INVOLVE?

1. Ministry involves a willingness to live where God wants you to live.

2
Nehemiah got the wall built, but there were not many people living in the city (7:4). When the people returned from the exile, the walls were torn down and there was a lot of rubble from the previous destruction. It would have required a lot of work to clear the rubble and restore the city. As the former capital, the restored city would have been a major target for enemies to attack. At first there wasn’t much economic opportunity there. It was far easier to settle out in the country and farm your own plot of ground. So most of the people had been content to live in the surrounding villages scattered across the land.

But Nehemiah knew that if the city was to be strong and prosperous and if the worship in the temple was to thrive, the city had to be well populated with citizens who could defend it in case of attack. As 11:1 notes, the leaders lived in Jerusalem, but most of the people did not. So they cast lots to pick one out of ten who would move to Jerusalem. It seems that some who were not chosen volunteered to move, either in place of or in addition to those who drew the lot (11:2). The ones who stayed in the villages blessed those who were willing to move to Jerusalem.

Those who moved had to pull up roots where they were already established, give up their acreage in the country, and move into what quickly became a somewhat crowded city. Based on the number of men who moved to the city (3,044), there were about 10,000, conservatively estimated, who moved into the city, with a total population of 100,000 Jews in the land (Howard Vos, cited by James Boice, Nehemiah: Learning to Lead [Revell], p. 175). Although it was inconvenient and less desirable in some ways to move from the country to the city, these people were willing to live where God wanted them to live in order to serve His purpose.

One of the first considerations that any servant of God should think about is, “Where does God want me to live?” That should be determined in large measure by the potential for your ministry in that locale. Is there a solid Bible-teaching church where you can grow and serve? If not, is God calling you to help start such a church? That should be a primary factor in any move that you make.

I meet many Christians who say things like, “I moved to Flagstaff because it was a small town and not too crowded. But it’s
becoming too big. I’m thinking of moving to (and they name some beautiful remote setting).” They haven’t given a minute’s thought to what sort of church may be there. Their main aim is to get away from people and the city.

Has it ever occurred to you that God pictures heaven as a city? It’s not pictured as a ranch or personal retreat, where you can live in seclusion and ignore others. It’s a city, the new Jerusalem! The reason Christians think about escaping from the city is that they don’t have a ministry mindset. If you’re thinking ministry, you’re thinking people. And while people live in the country and in suburbs, it is tragic that American evangelicals have, in large part, abandoned the cities. Rather than complaining about all the people in Flagstaff, we should view them as an opportunity for ministry!

2. Ministry involves serving in the sphere in which God calls you to serve.

Chapter 11 lists the heads of families in Jerusalem (11:3-9); the priests (11:10-14); the Levites (11:15-18); the gatekeepers and temple servants (11:19-21); various officials appointed by the king of Persia (11:22-24); and, the people who lived outside the city (11:25-36). Each served in his respective sphere for the effective operation of the city and the nation. Those who lived outside of the city had to farm the land to provide food for those in the city. Each had a different role, but each role was vital to the entire cause.

In the body of Christ, God has gifted us in different ways, but every part is vital for the overall functioning and health of the body (1 Cor. 12:12-30). We should learn to coordinate and complement each other without friction or rivalry. Problems often develop in the body because the eye looks at everyone from the perspective of the eye only, and the hand views everything from the perspective of the hand. But the eye should value the hand and the hand should value the eye.

I once heard Carl George make the astute observation that the things in the church that people usually complain about reveal the person’s area of spiritual gift. For example, if a person says, “This isn’t a caring church,” she is probably gifted in mercy. The one who says, “This church doesn’t emphasize outreach enough” is
probably an evangelist. The guy who says, “This church is a disorganized mess” is probably a gifted administrator.

The solution is not for the gifted person to sit around criticizing others for not doing what probably is not their area of gift, but rather to get involved in the areas that he thinks need fixing! The merciful person should help us all become more merciful by showing mercy. The evangelist should show us how to reach the lost. The administrator should help us get organized. God has made us all differently, and we only work as a body when we work in our sphere and affirm others in their sphere.

3. **Ministry involves a willingness to serve without acclaim.**

Most of these names mean nothing to us. Some aren’t even listed by name, but are lumped together with all of their kinsmen as a group (11:12-14). Zabdiel is named (11:14), although he means nothing to us, but 128 of his kinsmen go unnamed, except to say that they were valiant warriors. But 128 valiant warriors were no small part of a secure, safe city!

The church needs many people like that in order to function well. This place would shut down in a week if we didn’t have many who labor faithfully behind the scenes. You never see them up front, but they do what God has given them to do. They’re like your vital organs: you never see them, but when one of them shuts down, you’re in big trouble! Note two things about these people:

- Faithfulness, not fame, is the issue.
- God notices even if others do not.

Motive is what matters. If we serve to try to gain esteem and recognition, we’re doing it for the wrong reason. We’ll get angry when others do not give us the strokes that we’re seeking. Chuck Swindoll writes, “If you desire fame and recognition, you will most likely fail as a leader and your efforts will go unrewarded for all eternity. That’s not a threat; it’s a promise” ([Hand Me Another Brick][Thomas Nelson Publishers], p. 171). He goes on to cite Matthew 6:1, “Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them; otherwise you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven.”
God saw fit to record these names that mean absolutely nothing to us. But they meant something to God, and that’s what ultimately matters. If you’re getting upset because no one in the church notices all that you do, your focus is in the wrong place. Look to the Lord, whom you are serving. And remember Hebrews 6:10: “For God is not so unjust as to forget your work and the love which you have shown toward His name, in having ministered and in still ministering to the saints.”

4. Ministry involves people first and programs second.

These long lists underscore the importance of people to God. Each one of these strange, hard-to-pronounce names represents a person whom God loved and knew. Jesus said that the good shepherd “calls his own sheep by name” and that his “sheep follow him because they know his voice” (John 10:3, 4). The Christian faith is all about personal relationships, first with God, and then with one another (the two great commandments, Matt. 22:37-40).

Programs should always be the vehicle through which we minister to people. If a program is not doing that, we need to axe the program and replace it with something that ministers God’s Word to people. Apart from programs, if you have the proper ministry mindset, you will seek to relate to people. On Sunday mornings, take the initiative to meet new people. Make them feel welcome here. Introduce them to others. While we can’t get well acquainted with everyone, if it is a person to whom you can relate, set up a time to get together for coffee or have them over to dinner. Share your own testimony and ask them about how God has worked in their lives. Ministry takes place though relationships.

That threatens some people. It’s safer to work in a program, or to be involved in maintaining the building, where you can keep your distance from people. But God isn’t saving buildings or sanctifying programs. He is saving and sanctifying people, and He does that through His people reaching out in love to others.

Thus ministry involves a willingness to live where God wants you to live; to serve in the sphere where God wants you to serve; to serve without acclaim; and to put people ahead of programs.

What are some requirements for ministry?
Do you need seminary training? Do you need to know Hebrew, Greek, and theology? Those things may be helpful in some spheres of ministry. But they are not the main thing. The main requirement for being involved in ministry is that your heart is right before God. In the section describing the dedication of the wall (12:27-43) and the organization of temple support (12:44-47), there are four aspects of a heart that is right before God:

1. **A servant (= minister) needs a pure heart (12:30).**

   Before they dedicated the wall, the priests and Levites purified themselves, the people, the gates, and the wall. The Old Testament rituals for purification symbolize the fact that our hearts are sinful and God is absolutely holy. Those who serve Him must be cleansed from all known sin of thought, word, and deed.

   A scandal hit the front page of our local paper and the evening news this week, in which a man who was formerly an elder here, who also was in full time ministry, was charged with 17 counts of molesting girls who were at sleepovers with his daughters. When that sort of hypocrisy is exposed, the world mocks the name of Christ.

   All of us struggle against temptation. All of us are vulnerable to fall into sin. But if you are not guarding yourself from temptation and walking in consistent victory over sin, please do not make a claim of being a Christian. Don’t get involved in any sort of ministry. Rather, humble yourself before God, repent of all of your sins, and take measures to protect yourself from falling again. Purity on the heart level is an essential requirement for Christian service.

2. **A servant needs a worshipful heart (12:27, 31-43).**

   The dedication of the wall was a time, not to praise Nehemiah, but to praise the Lord. Nehemiah organized two choirs to walk in opposite directions on top of the wall until they converged at the temple. They sang praises to the accompaniment of cymbals, harps, and lyres. The chapter refers six times to David, who is twice called “the man of God” (12:24, 36, 37 [twice], 45, & 46). David was a man after God’s heart because he was a worshiper of God. He had set up the whole system of worship that these people were seeking to follow (12:46).
God doesn’t want your work if He doesn’t have your worship. To worship God is to rejoice in and extol His great attributes and actions. It is to reverence God above all else. True worship is not just outward, but inward. It engages the mind, the heart, the will, and the emotions. Whether you’re setting up chairs or preaching a sermon, it ought to flow out of a heart of worship for God.

3. A servant needs a joyful heart (12:43).

As you read the account of this dedication service, you get the distinct impression that these people were enjoying themselves! Chuck Swindoll (p. 186) pictures it as a sort of Jewish Disneyland Parade! Note the emphasis on joy in 12:43: it is mentioned four times in that verse, and again in 12:44. It says, “the joy of Jerusalem was heard from afar.” It wasn’t their song that was heard from afar, but their joy (Swindoll, p. 188). Outsiders heard their joy!

Have you ever been outside of a stadium when a ball game was going on inside, and suddenly the crowd roars? You know when that happens that something good happened inside! Probably someone for the home team just hit a homerun. In the same way, people should be able to walk by the church and think, “Something good is going on in there!” In fact, God has hit a grand-slam homerun for us through Jesus Christ. We need to be so caught up with what God has done that His great joy radiates from this place!

A servant needs a pure heart, a worshipful heart, and a joyful heart. Finally,

4. A servant needs a giving heart (12:44-47).

These people gave joyfully so that God’s work could go forward. They saw the importance of worship at the temple and they were willing to give the necessary offerings to support the many priests, Levites, gatekeepers, and singers who served there. The people did it because they “rejoiced over the priests and Levites who served” (12:44).

Have you ever been attracted to a stingy, tight-fisted person? No, we’re all attracted to warm, generous people who freely share what is theirs with others. As I mentioned last week, one of the most reliable gauges of your heart before God is your checkbook. If God is going to use you to minister to others, you need to have a generous heart. You will see the importance of supporting those
who are called to serve God on the mission field. You will see the importance of supporting the local church. Just before Peter exhorts us to use our spiritual gifts in serving one another, he says, “Be hospitable to one another without complaint” (1 Pet. 4:9).

Conclusion

The pioneer missionary, William Carey, was a cobbler before he left for the mission field. He would keep a map of India before him in his shop, stopping every so often to study it. He longed to go there and preach the gospel.

He did a lot of preaching and teaching on the side, with the result that his trade dwindled. One day a friend admonished him for neglecting his business. “Neglecting my business?” Carey said. “My business is to extend the kingdom of God. I only cobble shoes to pay expenses.”

That should be the mindset of every Christian. If you know Christ as your Savior, you’re in the ministry now! But may I ask, Are you ministry-oriented? Is that your mindset? Are there people in your schedule on a regular basis? When you gather with God’s people, are you thinking about others and how you can show the love of Christ to them? If you’ve been coming here for more than three or four weeks and you’re thinking, “This is an unfriendly church,” you may be part of the problem! The solution is for you to reach out in friendliness to others. Rather than coming to get your needs met, come to meet the needs of others.

I heard about the son of a pastor who also decided to become a pastor. The dad told the son, “Keep close to God, keep close to men. And bring God and men together.” That’s ministry! God’s people should stay close to Him and close to people and bring the two together.
Discussion Questions

1. To what extent (if any) do our desires enter into the question of where God wants us to live? How can we know His will in this decision?

2. How can a Christian determine what His spiritual gifts are?

3. To what extent does a naturally shy person need to overcome this trait in order to minister effectively to people?

4. To what extent does a believer need to “have it all together” before he/ she gets involved in ministry?

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