

## **Build Well by Serving**

### **Nehemiah 4:7-15**

We're engaged in a Sunday morning worship series with the theme *Build Well*. We're exploring timeless truths drawn from the book of Nehemiah. This Old Testament leader gives us insight into how we can build our lives and congregation on five central biblical principles. Last Sunday we considered our first purpose which is worship.

On this Mother's Day Sunday our *Build Well* theme focuses on our second purpose. It's something all mothers understand very well: Serving and organizing.

Follow along on your back page bulletin, if you wish. Here's a first truth to note:

#### **1. In order to build well, keep things simple.**

For such an enormous project Nehemiah had a simple plan. No complex charts. No bureaucratic organization. His plan was very simple. He organized around natural groupings. What were these natural groupings? In chapter 3 we read, for example, that "The Fish Gate was rebuilt by the sons of Hassenaah. They laid its beams and put its doors and bolts and bars in place" (Nehemiah 3:3). We also read of other basic groupings, such as the priests, the men of Jericho, and the men of Tekoa, and so on.

Nehemiah recognized that there were people already working together, people familiar with one another, people already associating with each other. Nehemiah kept things simple. He didn't create unnecessary structures or organizations when the old ones worked just fine. As they say, "If it isn't broke, don't fix it." What is the most basic, simple, natural group? It's the family. How did Nehemiah post the workers? Let's look at a verse from today's Scripture reading, "Therefore I stationed some of the people behind the lowest points of the wall at the exposed places, posting them by families, with their swords, spears and bows" (Nehemiah 4:13).

Like a multi-tasking mother, one of Nehemiah's strengths was his wise organizational skill. He knew that the strongest organizations are the simplest ones. He also knew that it was wise to build upon prior shared values, commitments and relationships. That's being well-organized! Then there's a second key to building well: Work with those who want to work.

#### **2. In order to build well, work with those who want to work.**

This is so basic we can miss it. Sometimes we try to jumpstart those that have no interest or intention in working on a project or activity, rather than moving forward with those who do. For instance, some church leaders will spend much time and energy trying to corral indifferent and apathetic "inactive" members than they should. Years ago, in fact, I attended a two-day conference entitled "Activating the Inactive." Unfortunately, those of us who tried to apply the lessons learned found it just didn't work. It was like trying herd cats or corral goats!

The call of God is that each of us serve and share Christ as Lord. We're to reach out to the lost sheep—to reach out to those who have yet to come to Christ. God's call to pastors is to lead and feed sheep, not to corral goats. God's call is also to work with those who want to work.

In Nehemiah's case, notice how almost everybody got involved. It was all hands on deck! There were young and old, men and women, people from the city and people from the country, there were perfume makers and goldsmiths. It seemed like almost everyone got involved. It was much like we try to do with our short-term, task specific, ministry teams here at the church. We call them LIGHT Teams because they serve Christ taking His light into our community and they serve our church Boards and congregation by doing ministry. And everyone can get involved—church members and friends, young and older, anyone and everyone.

Just as simplification is important, so is broad participation. Many hands make light work! So Nehemiah organized the people so that everyone got involved—government leaders

and business leaders and everyone else was moving bricks and making mortar. Everyone, except one little group, we learn in verse 5: “The next section was repaired by the men of Tekoa, but their nobles would not put their shoulders to the work under their supervisors” (Nehemiah 1:5).

Why do you suppose that the nobles wouldn’t pitch in? Maybe they thought they were too good for this kind of work! Maybe they thought the work was beneath them, moving bricks, making mortar, carrying beams and building the wall. It doesn’t say what excuse they gave, but isn’t it true that in every group, in every family, in every organization and yes, every church, we find these kinds of people? Someone has said that in every project there are two kinds of people: workers and shirkers! Well, Nehemiah’s response to the shirkers was to ignore them.

Notice that he didn’t focus on those who were unwilling to work. Instead, he focused on those who were willing to work. The organizational lesson here for us seems clear: Work with those who want to work. Celebrate those who participate! Then there’s a third key truth:

### **3. In order to build well, delegate with specific assignments**

Whether you’re leading a church Board or a LIGHT Team, whether you’re leading a volunteer organization or planning a family project, anytime you’re involved in organizing anything, it’s good to make specific assignments. It’s good to divide up the project in specific tasks, and assign specific people to those specific tasks.

You’ll recall that Nehemiah challenged the people to build amidst their problems. We read, “They replied, ‘Let us start rebuilding.’ So they began this good work” (Nehemiah 2:18b). What if Nehemiah then said, “Well, just go start working wherever you want to work.”? How would that have been? Not so good! One word describes what Nehemiah did do: He delegated. And that’s something that each of us need to do as we seek to develop our organizational skills.

One Old Testament commentator remarks that the most important word in this chapter is the word “section” which is used some 13 times. Nehemiah walks around the entire 2 mile wall perimeter and divides it up section by section. In developing our organizational skills, like Nehemiah, it’s good to keep things simple, to work with those who want to work and then to make specific assignments by delegating responsibility.

How do we delegate? What are key to delegation? Nehemiah helps us:

1. Break down major goals into smaller tasks. This is cutting problems down to size.
2. Develop clear job descriptions. Every one deserves to know what’s expected.
3. Match the right person with the right task. Guide people to what they’re good at.

Why should we delegate? You’ve probably heard the old saying: *Everybody’s responsibility is nobody’s responsibility*. Somebody needs to assume specific responsibility and this is often done through delegation. Then there’s a fourth truth.

### **4. In order to build well, help others take ownership**

One of the most amazing aspects of Nehemiah’s life and leadership is his ability to motivate. Think about it! Nehemiah leads a defeated and discouraged rag-tag group of people to do in 52 days what others were unable to do in over 52 years. He helped people take ownership, to feel like this was their project. While there are many examples of this in this book, look at this verse from chapter 3: “Beyond them, Benjamin and Hasshub made repairs in front of their house; and next to them, Azariah son of Maaseiah, the son of Ananiah, made repairs beside his house” (Nehemiah 3:23).

Try to imagine yourself in Jerusalem. You’re part of the group of a few thousand exiles, weary and discouraged, living amid the problems of rubble and ruins. Where would you most likely want to be building the wall? By your house!

We’re most motivated in areas that most concern us. One reason we seek to build ministry teams or LIGHT Teams is that members of many teams have a personal interest in their ministry. For example, who better to serve on a middle school youth ministry team than a few

parents of middle schoolers, as well as a middle school student and others with special interest in middle school-age youth? It only makes sense that those who take ownership in something will be more motivated.

In commenting on this passage, Dr. Rick Warren says, “As concerns the returning exiles in Jerusalem, if I’m building the part of the wall that’s going to protect my house, I’ll do a better job. Hey, it also saves time; there’s no commuting. Walk out in the morning and start to work! Go home for lunch! Turn around and you’re back on the job! There’s always a little extra motivation, isn’t there, in working on matters that you have a personal interest in!” Then there’s a fifth truth we need to note.

#### **5. In order to build well, build teamwork**

As you read through the book of Nehemiah, do you see how Nehemiah encouraged teamwork? We read about several extended family groups, about clusters of people who did the same kind of work, and about neighbors who lived next door and worked together on the wall. Do you see the evidence of teamwork and cooperation here? Again and again Nehemiah writes phrases like, “next to him” or “next to them.” In fact we find these phrases some twenty times as Nehemiah works clockwise around the entire wall. They helped each other. They encouraged each other and at the heart of their success was cooperation.

Someone has said, “Coming together is a beginning, keeping together is progress, thinking together is unity, working together is success.” Together, in Christ, we can do great things. Paul writes about what we, as unified believers can do together in Christ: “Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen” (Ephesians 3:20-21).

When the New Testament refers to believers in the church, the phrase “one another” is used 58 times. It’s as if God’s saying, “Get the message! Work together! Be a team. There is tremendous power in cooperation. Rick Warren notes that God can overlook almost anything in a church: poor facilities, poor music, poor preaching, not that we have any of that! But the one thing that God will not overlook is disunity. In the book of Acts, ten times it says, “they were of one accord... of one heart ... unified.”

When we have unity like they did in Acts we will begin to have the spiritual power and blessing found in the Book of Acts. Then there is a sixth and final truth to note.

#### **6. In order to build well, affirm and appreciate others**

We know that there are some lengthy lists of almost unpronounceable names in the book of Nehemiah. While we might struggle with these lengthy lists of Hebrew names, as found in passages like Nehemiah 3, the Lord knows each one of them. Much like the unique and very special mothers and grandmothers which each of us are blessed to know and love, beyond their families they may be otherwise unknown.

Just as the people who served well and rebuilt that ancient wall around Jerusalem some 2500 years ago, God counts these persons as honorable and esteemed as the leaders listed in Hebrews 11 and elsewhere in the Bible where we find honor rolls of faith and service.

By analogy it’s clear that mothers and grandmothers who faithfully serve and guide their families are also honored and esteemed by the Lord. Even though the names of our mothers and grandmothers might not be part of a biblical honor roll, we’ll do well to be like Nehemiah and give credit where credit is due. Thank you, Moms!

When it comes to affirmation and appreciation, it’s clear that Nehemiah knew their names—all 38 individuals listed in chapter 3 whom Nehemiah commended for their work. Perhaps one question for us is this: Do we do enough affirming and appreciating? Are you someone to give a pat on the back and a cheer in the ear? Are you someone who tells others

when they're doing a good job? Do you offer words of affirmation and appreciation? It's something we all need and it's something we can do.

In Nehemiah's lengthy honor roll one man especially stands out. We read, "Next to him, Baruch son of Zabbai zealously repaired another section, from the angle to the entrance of the house of Eliashib the high priest" (Nehemiah 3:20). This one individual zealously and enthusiastically did his work. Now, 2500 years later, we know it! We don't know exactly what he did. Maybe he worked extra fast. Maybe he worked extra long hours, maybe he had an especially positive attitude.

The point is if you want to be recognized in your work, do it with enthusiasm. God notices enthusiasm. It's in the Bible. God notices whether I'm working and serving enthusiastically or not. Enthusiasm is a Greek word that means, "God-filled or God-empowered." When you're filled by God's Spirit—with the fruits of the Spirit within—you'll be enthusiastic! How is it for you?

How are you doing when it comes to building your life for the Lord? How about building and serving here at West Shore Baptist? The keys, according to Nehemiah, are: Simplification, participation, delegation, motivation, cooperation and appreciation. These are the ways God helps us to build well. Not surprisingly these are also six of the special loving traits of many of the treasured mothers and grand-mothers with whom God has blessed and guided our lives and our church.

May the Lord grant you His joy in building well! And, may the Lord bless our mothers and grandmothers on this Mother's Day!

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