

We Dedicate: the Language of Worship

Nehemiah 12

Let me ask you this question, and think about it for a few moments... “Why are you here in this worship service? Why did you get up this early on a Sunday morning, perhaps your only day off from work, and get dressed and come to church?”

Maybe you're here out of habit. You're family has come to this church on Sunday morning ever since you were a child and it's just always been something you've done so since it's Sunday, you're here.

Maybe you're here because you feel pressured to be here. Tony Evans said that growing up he had a drug problem...he was drug to church every Sunday morning, drug to church on Sunday night and maybe that's you. Maybe it's your parents, or a spouse that has compelled you to come by either force, threat, or guilt. And instead of fighting it every Sunday you've decided to just come to church to avoid the fight.

Or maybe you're here for the fellowship. Your friends are here and so this is a chance for you to get to catch up on the week's events, a chance to greet one another with a hug or a hand shake, a chance to have some company for a change.

Maybe you're here because you're hurting. It has been a rough week, and things aren't going as you think they should at work or at home, so you've come hoping to hear a solution to your problem and find some sense of hope and healing.

Or maybe you're here to be entertained and you're hoping we'll sing an old hymn that will take you back to yesteryear, or a new song that will motivate you. Or that you'll hear the preacher tell a funny story that you can tell over a cup of coffee tomorrow at work.

No matter what the reason for you coming today, I'm glad you're here and I hope you find what you are looking for. The church should be a part of your regular weekly routine and I do applaud parents who have the courage to make sure their kids are in church on Sunday. I hope you do find a rich fellowship here because that is one of the things God knows that we need as persons, to love and to be loved. If you are hurting I pray you hear a word that will heal your pain. A word of hope that will inspire you.....All of these things are benefits of worship. But they are not the reason for worship.

The primary reason for our gathering together during this our should be to connect with God in worship.

A.W. Tozer said, “Worship is the missing jewel of the church.”

Someone once said, “We have become a generation of people who worship our work, work at our play and play at our worship.” Certainly the worship of the Almighty God of the universe is worthy of more of an effort than that. So this morning we are going to be looking at Nehemiah 12 to see some Guidelines for Worship from the example of those who participated in the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem.

Worship is why God created you and why He redeemed you. Jesus said in John 4:23-24, **"But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him. God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth."**

The Father seeks people who would gratefully and willingly worship Him. We have been made to worship the Lord. If we've been made to magnify the Majesty of God, then we need to know how to do that.

Now you will notice that Nehemiah 12 begins with another long list of names, this time of the priests and Levites. These people were important because they served in the temple. They were the worship leaders of the congregation of Israel. Verse 24 helps us see that there were two choirs who stood opposite from each other **"to praise and give thanks."**

Then starting in verse 27 Nehemiah 12 tells the story of the dedication of the wall around Jerusalem. It describes a wonderful worship where everyone participated in honoring God for what He had done through them.

In today's scripture there is an air of excitement and great joy that seems to be bursting forth from every person regardless of age. They worship the Lord. Today I want to share with you four guidelines for worship from verses 27-47.

1. The Purpose of Worship. Let's start by looking at the purpose of worship. In verse 27 we read about a dedication service for the newly constructed wall.

27 Now at the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem they sought out the Levites in all their places, to bring them to Jerusalem to celebrate the dedication with gladness, both with thanksgivings and singing, with cymbals and stringed instruments and harps.

The Levites were brought **"to celebrate joyfully the dedication with songs of thanksgiving and with the music of cymbals, harps and lyres."** In this dedication service grateful celebration, thanksgiving, and dedication are the three main themes, and they take us to the heart of what worship is all about.

Robert Webber in his book "Worship is a Verb" says "The focus of worship is not human experience, not a lecture, not entertainment, but Jesus Christ—his life, death, and resurrection." We are here to celebrate the Lord Jesus Christ.

Celebration is a primary aspect of worship. It does not begin with us, but with who God is, what God has said, and what God has done. Worship focuses on the victory of Jesus Christ over sin, death, and over the powers of evil. Worship focuses on the sacrifice that Jesus made for our forgiveness and his resurrection which gives us eternal life. Worship is joyfully giving thanks for all God has done in Christ Jesus.

Thanksgiving is marveling at God's generosity. Verse 31 tells us that Nehemiah appointed two **"thanksgiving choirs"** (NKJV) or **"two large choirs to give thanks"** (NIV). That was their job or purpose. Thankfulness is always part of true celebration.

These people were thankful. You can well imagine what they were thankful for. They must have been grateful indeed for the godly leadership of Nehemiah. They

were thankful for God's moving of the king of Persia's heart that permitted this whole project to come into being. They were grateful for angelic protection that watched over them as the wall was being rebuilt. They were grateful for the wisdom of God that allowed them to overcome their enemies, for the spirit of unity and cooperation that prevailed, for strength to labor, and for the supply of food and shelter. I think primarily they were thankful for the will to work, which enabled the project to be carried through to completion.

We are always before God as those who are indebted to Him for His mercy, His kindness, His person. The bedrock of everything else that we say or do in worship needs to be an awareness that we are the beneficiaries of a good God. We have to build our worship on gratitude and thanksgiving.

Dedication. They were not only celebrating and giving thanks, but they were dedicating—not just the wall in Jerusalem, but dedicating themselves to the Lord as well. To dedicate is to set apart.

Every city in the ancient world was dedicated to some god or goddess. Whenever you approached a city, there to greet you was usually a monument or stature of that god. If you were Jewish, you were forbidden to make a statue of the LORD God. Instead you would dedicate the city to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob which means everything within the walls was dedicated to God.

That means every home in the city is dedicated to God and is God's home. Every family is God's family. Every business within the walls is God's business. And all of the people associated with that city are God's people and dedicated to God.

It also means that every area of our life and every part of our day is dedicated to God. A dedicated life leads to a holy lifestyle. If my life is dedicated to the Lord then my marriage is dedicated to God. If my life is dedicated to the Lord then my work belongs to God. If my life is dedicated to the Lord then my health is dedicated to God. If my life is dedicated to the Lord then my finances are dedicated to God. That can make all the difference in the world.

So they dedicated not just the wall, but themselves to the Lord. Verse 30 says, **"Then the priests and Levites purified themselves, and purified the people, the gates, and the wall."** Purification is necessary to dedication. You cannot truly worship with a hypocritical heart. You cannot celebrate with sin your heart. It becomes a festival of empty words. There is a need for purification.

Many people seem to be afraid of this word, purity. They think it describes a goody-goody two-shoes, self-righteous kind of person. But purification in the Christian life stems from the same idea that motivates us when we wash dishes. You do not set your table with dirty dishes, do you? If you do, don't invite me to dinner! No, we wash dishes frequently because they ought to be clean. We do not want to serve our guests with dirty dishes. And God does not do his work with dirty vessels!

We need a periodic cleansing of our lives and hearts. This is what is demonstrated here. The priests and the Levites had to purify themselves, and they purified the walls, the gates and the people because they were dedicating themselves to God.

How do we purify ourselves? In the New Testament, it is a simple process. It is not by some religious ritual, but by confessing our sins, and believing that God has forgiven them. It is that simple. Confess your failings, your sins, your mistakes. Admit them. Do not hide them. Do not blame somebody else for them. Do not gloss them over. Confess them. Not only to God, but to any who may be involved in them. Then believe that God cleanses you, that He forgives you, that He has restored you to His favor. This is what fills the heart with joy.

Remember how simply John puts that in his first letter: "**If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.**" {1 Jn 1:9}. We need to daily admit our weaknesses, our faults, our ugliness, our short tempers, and our hurtful words. When we do, we immediately receive from God the gift of forgiveness, and rise purified, to be an instrument of His working.

These three elements of celebration, thanksgiving and dedication are expressed by our total being. When we celebrate, we engage our minds by recalling what God has said and done. When we give thanks, we express our hearts in gratitude. And, in dedication we employ our wills by surrendering to Him.

Do you dedicate yourself to the Lord in worship?

2. The Joy of Worship. The secret of acceptable worship is not simply what we do but how we do it. The new residents of Jerusalem radiated joyful hearts with jubilant songs of thanksgiving. The opportunity to magnify God was a supremely happy occasion. Recall their response to the reading of Scripture in 8:12: "they celebrated with great joy, because they now understood the words that had been made known to them." When they made their 'twig tents' and celebrated the Feast of Tabernacles, "their joy was very great" (8:17).

Worship was never meant to be drab and boring. There was nothing stereotyped or monochrome about this thanksgiving service. A wide variety of musical gifts were used to express adoration and praise. In verse 27 we see that instrumentalists played "**cymbals and stringed instruments and harps.**" Verse 35 and verse 41 tell us that the priests played their trumpets. Choral music was given the most prominent place, as many singers joined the two large choirs to give thanks on behalf of all the people.

This passage is filled with superlatives. In verse 27 they celebrate "**with gladness.**" The choirs are not just choirs but "**large choirs**" in verse 31. In verse 43 the priests "**offered great sacrifices, and rejoiced, for God had made them rejoice with great joy; the women and the children also rejoiced, so that the joy of Jerusalem was heard afar off.**" There is nothing half-hearted about their joyful worship because it is the outflow of supremely grateful hearts from people who have personally experienced the lavish generosity of God.

Is your worship full of joy?

3. The Witness of Worship. Verses 31-39 tell us that the leaders went up on the top of the wall. The Jews were accustomed to having workers and watchers on the walls, now the people are assigned to be worshippers on the walls. The two large choirs walked on top of the wall, one to the right, and the other one went to the left. Ezra was one of the worship leaders and Nehemiah led the other choir.

This worship service could have taken place at the temple area, but instead Nehemiah wanted it to take place on the walls themselves. I think he did this for at least three reasons.

First, it was important for the people to see and touch the walls during this dedication service. It was a visual reminder of God's faithfulness.

Secondly, the people were bearing witness to the watching world that God had done the work, and He alone should be glorified. The enemy had said in 4:3 that the walls were so weak that a fox could knock them down, but here the people are marching on the walls! It was another opportunity to prove the truth of 6:16: "...this work had been done with the help of our God." As they marched on top of the walls, everyone could see what was happening, and for miles around unbelievers heard the sound of praise. Look at verse 43: "The sound of rejoicing in Jerusalem could be heard far away."

Why do you think that they went to all the trouble to go up on the wall? Who do you think was on the other side of that wall? Do you suppose that Tobiah and Sanballat and all of their enemies were out there? How bold was that! And it was there that they chose to celebrate their accomplishment. There they stood, before a watching world. And they praised God at the top of their lungs. They were two great big, loud thanksgivings. And everybody could see them.

Let me suggest a third reason for this march around the walls. It was a symbolic act by which they stepped out in faith to claim God's blessing. In that day, to walk on a piece of property meant to claim it as your own. In Joshua 1:3, God said to Joshua, "I will give you every place where you set your foot, as I promised Moses."

What kind of sacrifices did they offer? GREAT sacrifices. How were they rejoicing? With God-given GREAT joy. They were so loud if they had neighbors they would have called the cops on them for disturbing the peace. That's how loud they were celebrating.

That sounds like God-focused, Spirit-lead worship to me. I would say that the greatness of their celebration was only matched by the greatness of the work that God had accomplished through them, wouldn't you?

So how are we going to celebrate? I'm talking about real, joyous celebration; the kind of celebration that begins with a pure heart and a pure house; the kind of celebration that is boldly in the face of a lost and dying world; the kind of celebration that joyfully brags on what the Lord is doing in and through each of us; the kind of celebration that blows the roof off of God's house here at New Covenant. That kind of celebration is what I'm talking about.

Are we ever going to celebrate like that? We will when we really understand the depths of our lostness from which Jesus has saved us. We will, when we really understand the boldness of the righteousness with which He's clothed us. We will, when we really understand the Good News of the message He's given us to proclaim to the world. We will, when we really understand the awesomeness of the work He's accomplishing through us. And we will, when we really bring all of that understanding back to His house.

Does your worship bear witness to God's greatness?

4. The Response of Worship. The concluding verses present us with another aspect of authentic worship: the offering of ourselves, our money, our time and service for the Lord's work. After the exciting service of dedication was over, provision must be made for the continuing worship of God's people. Verse 47 says, **"In the days of Zerubbabel and in the days of Nehemiah all Israel gave the portions for the singers and the gatekeepers, a portion for each day. They also consecrated holy things for the Levites, and the Levites consecrated them for the children of Aaron."**

It was organized, specific, grateful, regular and universal. But most of all, the people gave in response to who God is and what He had done on their behalf. Thomas Adams, a colonial Puritan, said this: "Let us do good with our goods while we live...to part with what we cannot keep, that we may get what we cannot lose."

In his book, *Psalms of the Heart*, George Sweeting illustrated a great truth from the experience of two Moody Bible Institute graduates, John and Elaine Beekman. God called them to missionary work among the Chol Indians of southern Mexico. Sweeting reports that they rode mules and traveled by dugout canoes to reach this tribe. They labored 25 years with other missionaries to translate the New Testament into the language of the Chol Indians. Today the Chol Church is thriving. More than 12,000 Christians make up the Chol Christian community, which is financially self-supporting. What's interesting is that when the missionaries came, the Chol Indians didn't know how to sing. With the coming of the gospel, however, the believers in the tribe became known as "the singers". "They love to sing now," Sweeting commented, "because they have something to sing about."

Do you have something to sing about? Do you know Jesus? Have you experienced his forgiveness and love?