

Nehemiah: Building a City Within the City, week 18
Dedication and Delight (Nehemiah 12:27–43)

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Pastor Mark Driscoll

After lying in ruins for 141 years, the city of Jerusalem was rebuilt in fifty-two short days. Shortly thereafter, the city was revisited by roughly fifty thousand people. These people then gathered for a church service; God's Word was taught under the spiritual leadership of Ezra, the people repented of their sins, and revival broke out. Following that revival, the people responded by renewing their covenant with God to live in obedience to His Word in all areas of their life. We then witnessed the outworking of their urban missional strategy to bring the good news of the God of the Bible to every area in their city by sending people as missionaries to repopulate the various neighborhoods in their city.

This week, the story focuses on the enormous worship service that was thrown in honor of God to celebrate all that God had accomplished in their midst. To set the stage theologically for the text this week, we must first lay a theological foundation for worship so that we can more fully appreciate the worship event that is described in Nehemiah 12:27–43.

Worship is living our life individually and corporately as dedicated, continuous living sacrifices to the glory of a person or thing. This connection between glory and worship is clear in verses like Romans 11:36–12:1, which says, "To him be the *glory* forever. Amen. I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual *worship*." In this packed section of Scripture, Paul connects a number of vital truths regarding worship. First, we hold a person or thing in a place of glory. Second, we then worship that person or thing. Third, our worship of that person or thing we hold in glory requires making sacrifices or dedicating ourselves to that person/thing.

Glory means weightiness, importance, preeminence, priority, or that which is our greatest treasure, deepest longing, and fountain of hope. Functionally, what we hold in the place of glory is in effect our real god. People can and do hold various people and things in a position of glory and then worship them by making sacrifices. Because we have limited resources (time, energy, money), we must allocate those things to what we consider most important or glorious to us and in so doing make sacrifices for our functional god. Whatever we hold in the position of highest glory is by definition our god(s). Practically, worship is being dedicated to and making sacrifices for what we are living to glorify.

The biblical word for worship is also sometimes translated "dedication." This insight is helpful because who/what we are dedicated to reveals what we truly live to glorify and worship. For example, if we are dedicated to food we become gluttons, if we are dedicated to drink we become drunkards, and if we are dedicated to comfort we will neglect Christ and His commands to live for God and others. In short, we dedicate our time, energy, body, money, focus, devotion, and passion to that which we glorify most. We make sacrifices to worship that person or thing. Because we were made for the express purpose of worshiping God, everyone is a worshiper. The only difference is who or what we worship.

The opposite of worship is idolatry, or the worshiping of something or someone other than the One True God of the Bible alone. On this point, Christian

philosopher Peter Kreeft has said, “The alternative to theism is not atheism but idolatry.”¹ This theme of worship versus idolatry is in some ways the theme of the entire Old Testament. Romans articulates the pattern of false worship as failing to glorify God, which leads to an over-inflated and arrogant view of self that ends in worshiping created things rather than the Creator God alone. Paul describes idolatrous false worship: “For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles. Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.”²

At the root of all sin is the pagan confusion, or inversion, of Creator and creation. The worship of created things can be either the worship of things God has made, such as the environment or a pet or the human body, or things we have made, such as the television. The result of this error is that a good thing becomes inordinately elevated to a god-thing and therefore a bad thing because we live dedicated to someone/something above God. Often times, the god we worship is simply the one we see in the mirror every morning as we brush our teeth.

Having established a theological framework for worship defined as living dedicated lives marked by sacrifice for God’s glory, we are prepared to best understand the events that transpire in the twelfth chapter of Nehemiah.

²⁷ And at the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem they sought the Levites in all their places, to bring them to Jerusalem to celebrate the dedication with gladness, with thanksgivings and with singing, with cymbals, harps, and lyres. ²⁸ And the sons of the singers gathered together from the district surrounding Jerusalem and from the villages of the Netophathites; ²⁹ also from Beth-gilgal and from the region of Geba and Azmaveth, for the singers had built for themselves villages around Jerusalem. ³⁰ And the priests and the Levites purified themselves, and they purified the people and the gates and the wall.

³¹ Then I brought the leaders of Judah up onto the wall and appointed two great choirs that gave thanks. One went to the south on the wall to the Dung Gate. ³² And after them went Hoshai and half of the leaders of Judah, ³³ and Azariah, Ezra, Meshullam, ³⁴ Judah, Benjamin, Shemaiah, and Jeremiah, ³⁵ and certain of the priests’ sons with trumpets: Zechariah the son of Jonathan, son of Shemaiah, son of Mattaniah, son of Micaiah, son of Zaccur, son of Asaph; ³⁶ and his relatives, Shemaiah, Azarel, Milalai, Gilalai, Maai, Nethanel, Judah, and Hanani, with the musical instruments of David the man of God. And Ezra the scribe went before them. ³⁷ At the Fountain Gate they went up straight before them by the stairs of the city of David, at the ascent of the wall, above the house of David, to the Water Gate on the east.

³⁸ The other choir of those who gave thanks went to the north, and I followed them with half of the people, on the wall, above the Tower of the Ovens, to the

¹ Peter Kreeft, *Christianity for Modern Pagans* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 50.

² Romans 1:21–25

Broad Wall,³⁹ and above the Gate of Ephraim, and by the Gate of Yeshanah, and by the Fish Gate and the Tower of Hananel and the Tower of the Hundred, to the Sheep Gate; and they came to a halt at the Gate of the Guard.⁴⁰ So both choirs of those who gave thanks stood in the house of God, and I and half of the officials with me;⁴¹ and the priests Eliakim, Maasejah, Miniamin, Micaiah, Elioenai, Zechariah, and Hananiah, with trumpets;⁴² and Maasejah, Shemaiah, Eleazar, Uzzi, Jehohanan, Malchijah, Elam, and Ezer. And the singers sang with Jezrahiah as their leader.⁴³ And they offered great sacrifices that day and rejoiced, for God had made them rejoice with great joy; the women and children also rejoiced. And the joy of Jerusalem was heard far away.

Dedication

Our English word “dedication” comes from the Latin word that means “to offer” or “to give.” The dedication that occurs in this chapter is part of their worship of God. It would have likely included ceremonial washings, reading of Scripture, repentance of sin, and possibly temporary abstinence from marital sexual intimacy to focus on God. Their dedication included the following three categories:

1. **Of Leaders** – because leaders set the example and pace of a people.
2. **Of People** – because sin effects us all and hinders our worship.
3. **Of Things** – because the money and stuff in our life is meant to be used in such a way that God is worshiped as we live as stewards.

Through these dedications, God’s people were showing that worship was a daily lifestyle with incredibly practical implications for them.

Delight

One of the innumerable glorious distinctions of Christianity from most other religions is the nature of the corporate worship of God’s people. In many religions, there is a noted absence of delightful joy among worshipers. In some religions, the people chant a few choruses that are more akin to a dirge. In other religions, the religious leaders sing but the people do not participate in songs to God. On the other hand, in Christianity, corporate worship includes joyous and enthusiastic singing in delightful response to who God is and what He has done and is doing for us through Jesus Christ. We see this truth shine forth in three ways in the example of Nehemiah 12.

First, there was delight in the people’s hearts for who God is and what God had done in their midst. As a result, the Scripture uses the words “gladness,” “thanksgiving,” “thanks,” “rejoiced,” “rejoice,” “great joy,” and “joy.”

Second, there were instruments in the people’s hands. They played cymbals, harps, lyres, trumpets, as well as other unnamed instruments.

Third, there were songs on the people’s lips. We are told that the choirs as well as the people sang in delight, with the words “singing,” songs that “gave thanks,” and “great sacrifices.” Summarizing this grand event, Nehemiah 12:43 reports, “And they offered great sacrifices that day and rejoiced, for God had

made them rejoice with great joy; the women and children also rejoiced. And the joy of Jerusalem was heard far away.”

By gathering to worship God through songs of rejoicing, they were showing that not only did they worship God while scattered throughout life, but also while gathered as His people to celebrate all that He had done for all the people.

In summary, people who have been loved and served by God respond by dedicating themselves and their things to God so that they worship individually as a daily lifestyle. They also gather together to delight in the goodness of God by singing with joy the praises of their good God.

Next week: Nehemiah 12:44–47