

Sunday, July 24, 2022 pm

PRINCIPLES FOR GROWTH FROM NEHEMIAH (1)

Nehemiah 4:6

From time to time, I like to present lessons associated with evangelism and church growth. This is a subject that needs to be frequently addressed. Usually, what is said is simply a reminder of things we already know, but we need to be prodded and encouraged to keep going. It is with that in mind that I share tonight's lesson. This lesson is based upon studies while I was in Illinois recently studying together with other gospel preachers. Each morning, we began the day with a short talk. This year, that talk was taken from the book of Nehemiah. Over 5 days, we noted 10 principles that can help us to grow if we will all strive to apply these. I would like to share his thoughts and add a couple of my own in 2 lessons.

I. Background

- a. Nehemiah is a book that dates to around 450-430 BC. History reveals that Nehemiah served under the Persian ruler, Artaxerxes from ~445-433 BC. He was cupbearer to the king in the region of Babylon. Historically, Israel had been in captivity for 70 years and permitted to return around 536 BC. Ezra records the rebuilding of the temple (which itself took more than 20 years and was finished around ~515 BC), but some 70 years later the city was still in ruins. There was still rubble from the city's destruction in 586 BC (think about that – for 140 years they had settled on living in broken down and vulnerable conditions. They were just existing and complacent. Clearly this was not what God wanted for His people.
- b. That brings us to the book of Nehemiah and our subject. Nehemiah, inquired about the condition of the city and was moved to act. Even though he is more than 1000 miles journey away, he is concerned about the welfare of Jerusalem, makes arrangements to go there and leads the people to rebuild the walls of the city in just 52 days (Nehemiah 6:15). In this lesson we want to notice the first 6 steps he took (next lesson, 6 more).
- c. FIRST, what is the point for us? We know that God, and our Lord are concerned about His body growing. We are entrusted with the responsibility to preserve the purity of the church AND to grow as much as we can. That is what the great commission is about (Matthew 28:19-20, Mark 16:15-16) and that is what God desires of churches (Ephesians 4:16, cf. 1 Thessalonians 1:8-9). That is why we continually emphasize evangelism and church growth. IF there is going to be a church (here) for the next generation, it is up to us to be willing to step up and take action. We can learn from the book of Nehemiah some things we can do that, if implemented, will help us to grow and THRIVE as the Lord's body in this location.

II. 12 Principles to promote growth (I have added 2)

a. *We have to care*

- i. Nehemiah 1:1-4 - The book of Nehemiah begins with one of his brethren meeting Nehemiah in Shushan (Susa). Nehemiah inquires about the people and the city. He is told of its condition. Nehemiah weeps and mourns for days. Clearly, he has a genuine concern for the city and its welfare. Consider how he is in the king's palace, and though a servant, he likely was living a good and comfortable life.
- ii. Caring is where change begins to take place. We see it all around us – the upkeep of property, success in business, how healthy a society is, etc. When people care things get done. When people don't care, things begin to fall apart. Proverbs 24:30-34 describes the home and field of the lazy man. It is broken down.
- iii. This is equally true where the church is concerned. If we are to grow, it is going to begin with everyone genuinely being concerned about it.

1. If there is something wrong, we need to care about it. And not just flippantly (saying, "Oh well, I hope someone takes care of that").
2. IF we are not growing, we need to care. If there is disunity among brethren, if our worship services are tedious and stale, if our facilities are not being kept – we need to care about it. Furthermore, do you care about the lost?
3. Caring is where change is going to begin. Typically, when enough people care, or the RIGHT people care (i.e. leaders), we can start to make meaningful plans.

b. We need to pray about it

- i. Nehemiah 1:4-11. The first thing Nehemiah does is he prays to God. And it is a solemn prayer. He acknowledges God and His desires and promises. He also confesses his sins and the sins of the people. He also asks for help and guidance as he moves forward. It is a wonder prayer worthy of examination alone.
- ii. Prayer is greatly emphasized both in the Old and New Testaments. Great men of faith in the Bible were men of prayer – Abraham, Moses, David, Daniel, Nehemiah, Paul, Peter, etc. Even Jesus was a man of prayer – which tells me how much I need to pray.
- iii. Scriptures continually address our need to pray often. Jesus taught parables about it – Luke 11:1-10, 18:1-8. He taught His disciples how to pray and emphasized its importance.
- iv. We are to be praying often – for the church, open doors, ourselves, etc. No too long ago we presented 2 lessons addressing prayer and evangelism.
- v. If we see a problem with the Lord's church or our own lives, IF WE CARE, we need to pray to God about it. 1 Peter 5:6-7, in humility we cast all our cares on Him. James 5:16 tells us the effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man accomplishes much.
- vi. And we pray from the very beginning! When it comes to HIS church and His word, we dare not leave Him out of our actions.

c. We need to make plans

- i. Nehemiah 2 – You find several things associated with his planning. (2:1-10) He first goes to the king because he needs permission. And when he goes, he has obviously been thinking about it and answers the king with specific details. He is granted permission by the king to go to Jerusalem and take care of the problem.
(2:11-16) THEN he arrives at Jerusalem and for 3 days, he assesses the damage to the walls and city. (2:16-18) He then meets with the leaders and explains their problem and challenges them to get to work. He INCLUDES God in his conversation – E.g. This is what God wants. He motivated the people and they got to work.
- ii. If we are to grow, we need to have some direction. We need to make plans.
 1. The Bible is full of examples of making plans – STARTING with God. The universe, the plan of redemption AND the church were all part of God's plans. He gives us a pattern that will work, if we are willing to work the plan.
 2. All the good intentions in the world are useless, if we do not have a direction. It has been said, "A church that fails to plan, plans to fail." That is a sad reality. Churches all across this country are closing their doors. I cannot speak for all of them, but I believe I am accurate in saying that many will cease to exist because they had no plan in place to move forward and secure their future.
 3. That obviously includes the leadership, as well as all who will be part of the execution of that plan. Everyone needs to be willing to do their part.
- iii. Part of the planning process includes examination of where we are and compare that to where we need to be.
 1. Cf. Hebrews 5:12-14 – by this time you ought to be teachers.
 2. 2 Corinthians 13:5 – each of us as individuals needs to examine ourselves to see where we are.

3. ALSO, consider the 7 churches of Asia in Revelation 2 &3. Each congregation was examined and given instructions.
 4. The growth of the church depends on this.
- iv. But examination is not enough. All that does is identify the problem, and possibly what resources we have available. But then we need to formulate a plan to move from where we are to where we need to be.
1. Luke 14:28-29 – Jesus taught us to count the cost of being a disciple. He gave examples of a man building a tower without proper planning. While the situation is clearly different, the principle is there. You need to know what to do as you move ahead.
 2. James 4:13-15 – we must include God in our plans
 3. Proverbs 21:5, *The plans of the diligent lead surely to plenty, But those of everyone who is hasty, surely to poverty.*
 4. I know of churches that on a yearly basis release a plan of action. Individuals set yearly spiritual goals and put plans in place to carry out those goals.
- v. And the plan needs to be workable. Not something that is overwhelming, too complicated, or impossible. Sometimes plans fail because not enough time was taken to develop a sensible plan. AND our plans should not be overly simplistic or vague – e.g. “We need to grow this year”, “Let’s improve our attitudes in worship”, etc.

d. We need to get to work –

- i. Nehemiah 2:18 notes, *“So they said, ‘Let us rise up and build.’ Then they set their hands to this good work.”* (NKJV) The power of the book of Nehemiah is seen in their implementation of the plan. They got to work and started building, and they kept at it until the task was done.
- ii. When we see a problem, we **have to** actually do something! All the planning in the world is meaningless if we do not implement the plan.
- iii. We have continually emphasized that our faith is an active faith.
 1. The great commission says, “Go” (Mark 16:15, Matthew 28:19-20), not stay around and wait.
 2. James 1:22 tells us to be doers of the word and not hearers only.
 3. James 2:18, I will show you my faith by my works. James is clear that our faith need to be active.
 4. Hebrews 6:9-12 – the writer noted, “We are confident of better things concerning you... show diligence... do not become sluggish...”
- iv. The bottom line. If we fail to work, nothing will ever get done.

e. We should ignore the critics

- i. Nehemiah 2:18-20, 4:1-3. As Israel set their minds to work, Sanballat, Tobiah, and Gesham, foreigners in their midst, began mocking them. Challenging their actions: Are they rebelling against the king? (You can’t do that, it’s illegal, etc.); What you are doing is worthless and won’t work? (Criticizing methods and the way people are doing something).
- ii. When we set out to accomplish something – either something done a new way (but still scriptural) or that has not been done in a while – prepare for critics. Critics may come from without or within (or likely both). They are different, but both become a challenge.
- iii. We must NOT let critics keep us from doing what needs to be done.
 1. Often their motives are sinister, or maybe in ignorance. But they can be discouraging and hinder what needs to be done.
 2. Realize that criticism is not unusual for the unfamiliar and in anything good that you are doing, especially if it involves substantial change.

3. Jesus was often criticized – at times He answered and at other times He ignored it and moved on.
 4. 1 Corinthians 4:2-5 – Paul did not let the critics stop him. He was MORE concerned about what the Lord thought.
 5. Sometimes the best thing we can do is put it in God’s hands and do the best we can.
 6. Ecclesiastes 7:21-22, *Also do not take to heart everything people say, Lest you hear your servant cursing you. For many times, also, your own heart has known That even you have cursed others.*
- iv. Note: This is not saying to ignore genuine problems (we will deal with this later), but it is telling not to let insults and words keep us from working.

f. We need every worker working – teamwork

- i. Nehemiah 3 lists various families and individuals who got to work and where. This is one of those passages that it is easy to skim over because of the hard names and length of this list. But a careful study of the list (which we are not doing) yields worthy observations. But some things worthy of note:
 1. They all got to work
 2. Some of the leaders got involved and did the work – Nehemiah 3:1 records Eliashib the High Priest with his brethren building the sheep gate. 3:18-19 district leaders got to work.
 3. “Next to” is recorded 16 times in Nehemiah 3:2ff. You also find the expression, “after him” several times. They were working side by side. One person did his part, the next person did the next thing they were capable of doing.
 4. People used their skills to do what needed to be done. Everyone has different talents, but all can do something to help the task.
 5. Some worked in front of their own house – vs. 29.
- ii. If we are to grow, we need EVERYONE doing what they are able to do.
 1. Ephesians 4:16 – speaks of every part doing its share
 2. 1 Corinthians 12:12-27 describes us as a functioning body because every “part” has a job and is carrying that job out.
 3. Anytime someone is NOT doing their part, it puts an undue burden on the rest.
- iii. If we desire to grow, each of us needs to be willing to do our part. This will render the greatest effect in whatever the work might be.

And thus, we can see the beginning of the work of rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem back then. But more importantly, we see principles that we need to consider if we are to grow as the Lord’s church in this area. In our next lesson we will notice some more principles to consider. But for now, let me simply encourage you to examine yourself in these matters. Are you doing what you can do? Think about it!

Next lesson:

- a. I need to work, even when others won’t
- b. Do not go looking for trouble
- c. Be willing to work hard
- d. Deal with internal problems
- e. Stay focused.
- f. Maintain the work -