

I will begin today with a very clear and concise statement, one that can be one of those if you hear and understand nothing else today but this, hang on to it. The statement is this: **“The work of God is to be done by the people of God giving according to the will of God.”**

Last week we spent our time together identifying Jesus, the Lamb of God, the Messiah, as the true champion. True champion of what; for what? Jesus is the true champion of all that God is and God does, all of the most important and necessary things we need for a fulfilling and faithful life: love, joy, grace, hope, peace, to name a few. And Jesus is the true champion for all of us (children of God) as he was sent by God in love as the light overcoming the darkness. And the good news continues. It was implied without much unpacking last week, but through faith in Jesus as the true champion, we, you and I and I would like to say millions of others, become champions alongside Jesus. Let’s let that sink in for a moment. Your faith in Jesus makes you a champion. You are a champion. Our faith in Jesus makes us champions. We are champions. Champions? Of What? How? For what? Champions of God called, claimed, and empowered through the Holy Spirit for the advancement of THE Cause (God’s Cause).

To be a faithful child of God, a champion of God advancing God’s cause (God’s will and way), it can be helpful for us to understand a principal known as “Constructive Contribution”, which means **“the work of God is to be done by the people of God giving according to the will of God.”** “Constructive Contribution” is about honoring the gifts God has given to us, you and me and the rest of the body of Christ, by using those gifts to glorify God.

In the 1700’s, there was a cleric and theologian and church leader called John Wesley. He became known to many as the father of Methodism, one of the reformed protestant denominations formed out of the Church of England and all-around Europe. John Wesley was once approached by one his parishioners, an earnest man who felt his service was unimportant. “If only I could preach like you, Mr. Wesley,” he said, “I would be so happy and fulfilled.” Wesley replied, “Sir, we are building God’s temple. Go now and read the third chapter of Nehemiah and learn that he who repaired the dung gate was counted of as much honor as he who worked on the gate of the fountain. All did their bit; you and I can do no more.”

“All did their bit; you and I can do no more.” In what? In building God’s temple. This claim from Wesley in this encounter highlights the core purpose for the body of Christ, the church (including you and me today). That core purpose is to build God’s temple. Building an actual temple or building for God to reside would have perhaps been easier to understand with logic

and reason, but Wesley was being metaphorical. Wesley was speaking of “building/ becoming/being” the church, a body of God’s faithful children revealing God’s glory, God’s will, and God’s way in the world.

In reflection of Wesley’s encounter and teaching, I think Wesley could have put it this way to the parishioner: “Sir, Mam, we are Champions of THE Cause (God’s Cause) in times of worship and throughout our lives. God doesn’t call us all to the same tasks. All are called to do their part. God will put us all together as God needs to fulfill God’s portrait of the church.”

Do you remember our statement for the day? **“The work of God is to be done by the people of God giving according to the will of God.”**

We find examples of this statement, again known as “constructive contribution,” throughout the bible, but perhaps the most memorable is the story of Nehemiah and the project to rebuild the wall around Jerusalem. This is the story Wesley refers to which is an actual building project. The lessons of that experience are profoundly instructive to anyone who desires to do the work of God according to the will of God.

Nehemiah was a trusted aide and advisor to King Artaxerxes I of Persia. While serving in the palace one day, he received a visit from his brother, Hanani, who brought news from Jerusalem. The report was not good: Hanani told him, “Those who survived the exile and are back in the province are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been burned with fire.” As an exiled Jew himself, Nehemiah was overwhelmed with the bad news. He sat down and wept, mourning and fasting and praying for several days. Then, with bold initiative, he asked for permission to go to Jerusalem to lead the effort to rebuild the wall. The king gave him his full blessing, plus access to vast resources of timber for the project. He even provided for Nehemiah to be accompanied by army officers and cavalry on the long journey. Upon arriving in Jerusalem, Nehemiah assessed the damage, determined his plan, and then rallied the people. “Come,” he told them, “let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, and we will no longer be in disgrace.” The people were stirred by his words and replied, “Let us start rebuilding!” And so, work began.

As God’s people came together to do God’s work according to God’s will, they committed their resources, their time, and their energies to the task. And there was no shortage of challenges, for God’s will, as it turned out, did not allow for the wall to be rebuilt without a struggle. (Things worth doing and for great reward hardly ever come without some struggle and strain.) Before the job was even half-done, the workers were bombarded with sarcasm and criticism. One loathsome opponent, a government official named Sanballat, “became angry and was greatly incensed. He ridiculed the Jews, and in the presence of his associates and the army of

Samaria, he said, “What are those feeble Jews doing? Will they restore their wall? Will they offer their sacrifices? Will they finish in a day? Can they bring the stones back to life from those heaps of rubble- burned as they are?” And, as if his attacks weren’t enough, another enemy, Tobiah, said, “What they are building- if even a fox climbed up on it, he would break down their wall of stones!”

The criticism was prompted by progress, which often occurs when God’s people start to make things happen. The devotion and determination of this small band of Jews ought to have evoked admiration, but it wasn’t to be. The opponents simply couldn’t bear to see anything positive happening. To them, any change in the status quo was a threat; and, even though Sanballat and Tobiah weren’t the best of friends, they were drawn together by mutual hatred of God’s servants. Critics usually run with critics; and while not all criticism is of the devil, this certainly was.

In their pursuit to be champions of God’s cause through constructive contribution, the problems became numerous: anger, ridicule, questioning, criticism, sarcasm, treachery, threats. The enemies called the rebuilding project the Jew’s wall, which in fact it was God’s wall. In reality, they were criticizing God. Nehemiah recognized this, and he took decisive action to counteract the opposition. First, Nehemiah prayed. “Hear us, O our God, for we are despised. Turn their insults back on their own heads. Give them over as plunder in a land of captivity.” Nehemiah’s prayer seems severe until we remember that God had already pronounced judgment on the enemies of Israel. Nehemiah was simply asking God to fulfill that judgment. The battle against God’s foes would be waged first of all in prayer. Nehemiah didn’t throw punches; he prayed. He resisted the temptation to strike back because he knew that God was in control. He and the people persisted against the time of opposition. “So, we rebuilt the wall till all of it reached half its height, for the people worked with all their heart.”

For 52 days, the work of God was done by the people of God giving according to the will of God, and despite all that stood in the way, the wall was rebuilt, and the people celebrated God’s blessing and empowerment.

What can we glean from this and apply to our lives today?

Pray Actively. Not just occasionally or when we think about it. We need to intensify our persistence in prayer. The waves of persecution never let up while the rebuilding went on, but God’s people had a stronger weapon: “We prayed to our God and posted a guard day and night to meet this threat.” Exercising common sense, they set up a defense. They did what was necessary to complement their prayers. If you want to counteract your home being burglarized, don’t just pray, put in an alarm system.

Expect difficulty when you do what's right. Great opportunity is often accompanied by great opposition. The Apostle Paul said of the work in Ephesus, "A great door for effective ministry has opened to me, and there are many who oppose me (1 Corinthians 16:9)." He chose to think primarily about the great open door, not the daunting opponents. The easiest thing to do when confronted by difficulty is to give up, and nothing pleases Satan or the critics more than for the negative to cancel or neutralize the positive. It's crucial to keep going, no matter what is in the way, no matter what threatens to prevent you from doing God's will.

Don't give up or give in. Nehemiah and the workers were invincible because they were in the very center of God's will. They would not give up or give in. Faced with deceit, distraction and discouragement on all sides, they kept relying on God's power and God led them to victory. God's promise to us is no different from the one those believers carried in their hearts. John's first epistle reminds us: "You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world (1 John 4:6)."

We are to make no mistake. Being champions of God's cause, advancing God's will and God's way, is our main purpose as the body of Christ, the church. It is the why behind every prayer, decision, action, teaching, mission. It is the why behind our giving of money and our time and energy. It is the why behind the glue and glitter with children, late night talks with youth on a trip, and missed notes during choir rehearsal. It is our why behind our worship. It is our why behind our budget and personnel and facilities. And it is to be our why behind our daily living.

"The work of God done by the people of God giving according to the will of God."

Let all God's people say... Amen.

*The core of this message is derived from *The 33 Laws of Stewardship: Principles for a Life of True Fulfillment*, by Dave Sutherland and Kirk Nowery- Chapter 11, pages 53- 57, "The Law of Constructive Contribution"*