



HUMILITY AND HOSPITALITY

Part 8 of Nehemiah

Pastor Mark Driscoll | Nehemiah 5:14-19 | April 22, 2007

You're listening to, "Nehemiah, building a city within the city," a teaching series by Pastor Mark Driscoll." The following is a presentation of Mars Hill Church in Seattle. For more audio and video content, visit marshillschurch.org.

[Music]

The hope of Mars Hill since the beginning is that Seattle is a great city and what it needs is a great city within that city, a city that loves Jesus, a city that believes Scripture, a city that lives for the good of the whole city, not just its own self-interest. And so Mars Hill started off as an experiment to see if we could build a city within the city that would love the city and seek the transformation of the city as the city meets Jesus.

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If you're new, my name is Mark, one of the pastors here at the church. And we believe that God speaks to us through Scripture, and we speak to God through prayer. And the purpose of our meeting together is to meet with God. So I'll go ahead and open our time in prayer and we'll speak to God in that way, and then we'll hear from God through the pages of Scripture.

If you have a Bible, you can go that Nehemiah 5. That's where we find ourselves. Generally speaking, we like to study books of the Bible, and we're taking preponderance of a year to go through a great book in the Old Testament called Nehemiah. So if you've got a Bible, you can follow along. We'll go ahead and pray and we'll get right to work.

Father, we thank you for being a living God who desires a relationship, who is willing to speak to us through Scripture, and who is willing to hear from us in prayer. And so God, as we open your Word today, it is our request that you would reveal to us your heart, your purpose for us individually and corporately, that the personal work of Jesus would be at the forefront of our studies, and that the Holy Spirit would come to illuminate the Scriptures which he has inspired to be written as we ask him as our great God to take the pages of the Scripture and apply them to our lives so that we might live lives patterned after the life of Jesus in whose name we pray, amen.

Let me get you up to speed on the book of Nehemiah. It's a great book in the Old Testament. And it revolves around the need of a great city, the city of Jerusalem. That city had fallen into disrepair. The church in that city had fallen into disrepair. And so God burdened a man named Nehemiah to move to the city of Jerusalem and to seek the rebuilding of the city and the building of a great city within that city, a church. And you'll hear me call the people in the Old Testament the church. The church. I'll explain that in more detail in coming weeks. And I'll call them Christians because their faith was in Jesus Christ and they were just awaiting his entrance into human history.

And so what we see is that their life is very much like ours. Their church is very much like ours. And they were called just as we are, to be the city within the city, a city that obeys and loves the God of the Bible, and also to seek the wellbeing and benefit and service of the whole city. And so we are undertaking the exact same project as God's people, the church, did in the days of Nehemiah.

And we looked at how in the early chapters, Nehemiah was opposed by outsiders who didn't want Christians moving into their area and building a city in a church. Having navigated through those obstacles and oppositions, we then saw last week how the real threat to their way of life came not from outside, but from inside, and the great trouble was not external. It was, in fact, internal, as those who were rich were taking advantage of those who were poor in an effort to make themselves even more rich.

Tragically as well, Nehemiah, himself the great leader, fell into that same temptation, succumbed to that same sin. And he himself had to repent publicly, call the other people who were rich and engaged in this unjust behavior to repent publicly. And a great leader practices repentance, demonstrates repentance, and followed it up with restitution whereby they repair everything that they wrongfully took from the poor.

And this week, we will see that Nehemiah's repentance and his restitution was not something that was a one-time event, but it becomes a habitual lifelong pattern for him of ongoing continual repentance and restitution. And in so doing, we'll learn some leadership principles that are exceedingly important for us all beginning in Verse 14.

He says there, "Moreover, from the time that I was appointed to be their governor" – so he was a political leader – "in the land of Judah from the 20th year to the 32nd year of Artaxerxes, the king" – that's the ruler in that day, a full 12 years during which Nehemiah was undertaking this great urban ministry project – "neither I nor my brothers at the food allowance of the governor."

The first thing is teaching us here is that to be a leader, we must understand the mission that God has called us to and we must accept the fact that there will be times when our personal interests and the need of the mission collide. And we must humbly serve the needs of the greater good and the overall mission sometimes oftentimes at our own personal expense.

What that means is, for example, you're a person who is wanting to be married and start a family. There will be times when in marriage, the needs of the marriage and the spouse will conflict with your personal needs and desires and what is best for you. And you humbly love and serve your spouse because the mission of Christian unity and loving marriage is most important.

You're gonna have children if you become a parent, if God would give you that wonderful gift. You're going to find that the needs of the parents and the needs of the children are often in conflict. Four in the morning, the kid, for example, needs to puke, and you need to sleep, just by way of example from my house very recently. The needs of the child overtake the needs of the parent because to be the leader means that you're the servant. You're the one who sets the overall welfare of others above your very own.

Same in ministry. A pastor is to set the needs of the people above them self, and do what is in the best interest of all people, not just what is in the self-interest of the leader. Same in business. If you're a godly business leader, you don't just take advantage of all your employees and clients. You do what is in the best interest to service your clients and employees, thereby setting an example of graciousness and of loving kindness.

And Nehemiah here is working in a situation where as governor, he has the legal right and the historical precedent to impose a heavy tax burden upon the citizenry to use that wealth to make himself very affluent and rich, to live a very nice lifestyle, to have a very nice staff, to pay himself a very nice salary, to have a very large significant expense account. And what he determines to do is not impose any additional tax burden on the people because they're giving to their church. They're serving the cause of the city. They're already very poor. They're in an economic depression and downturn. There's a famine and a drought.

So rather than posing more difficulty upon the people, he foregoes his salary. He works for free for 12 years. He doesn't pay himself a dime. And furthermore, he pays for all of the expenses for his ministry and his political office out of his own pocket. How many of you truly would do this? If your boss came to you and said, "You know, times are lean. Could you work for free for the next 12 years? We'd also like you to buy your own cubicle, buy your own desk, buy your own laptop, pay for your own Wi-Fi and cell phone. Buy your own cell phone. We're gonna need you to drive around a lot for this job, so you're gonna need to buy a new car. You're gonna have to gas it up a lot. And you may die." You'd say, "You know, I think I could find a better job, a job that doesn't cost me hundreds of thousands of dollars and my life. I could find a better job than that."

Nehemiah is willing to set aside what is in his best interest and live without an income, a salary, and to service voluntarily even though his life was in danger. Furthermore, he tells us in Verse 15, "The former governors who were before me laid heavy burdens on the people and had took from them for their daily ration, 40 shekels of silver. Even their servants lorded over the people. But I did not do so because of the fear of God."

The second thing he says is this, is to begin any new ministry, business, season of life, comes at a personal financial cost to the founder and leader. And if he is going to found this city again and lead it into a new future, it will come at his personal expense. None of us would have looked at Nehemiah had he collected a salary and reimbursed some of his expenses and said, "What a godless man." He is going above and beyond the call of duty financially. And you will find that when you start a family, it costs a lotta money. Your wife gets pregnant, you want her to come home to watch the kids. You downsize to one income. It's a financial cost to start a family.

You want to start a business, you're going to starve to death for the first few years because all of your money is going toward seed capital to begin the business, and you're not going to have much to show for it until you're at least a few years in. Likewise in a ministry, it's just like birthing a child. It's gonna hurt. Somebody's gotta push and somebody's gonna bleed. That's how it is. You wanna birth something, a family, a ministry, a business, you gotta push. It's gonna hurt. Somebody's gonna bleed. That's just how it is. And it costs money to do so.

Now we see in this that Nehemiah must have been a rich man. I don't know about you. I can't take 12 years off of income. I mean, most of 12 days would put us into bankruptcy. Twelve years. He must have been a very rich man. But in this, we see that he's also a righteous man. He's using his money to be very generous, to not burden the poor, to help care for others in need. He's acting in a very righteous way with his riches.

And I'll tell you what. I've seen this in Mars Hill. I'll tell you a few stories from the early days of the church when we were absolutely flat college broke. Indy Rock broke, homeless street kid broke, which is a whole new level of broke. When we first started – I've told you this story – we started off about the size of a small Mormon family. There was about 12 of us in Bible study. And there was only two families that had jobs, and the rest were all college students, Indy Rockers, and street kids, alright? And these are people who by virtue of their own convictions had dedicated their life to poverty and anarchy, alright?

And my goal is to get them to give generously and become highly organized, which is the quintessential antithesis of their whole existence. And so early on, getting them organized was absolutely impossible and they had no money at all. I've had some people say, "Well, you went into the ministry for the money." Well, then I was stupid 'cause there was no money. And if you're in it for the money, you actually reach out to people who have some.

And our first offerings – I say in my first book – one of our offerings early on when we had like 40-50 people or something, was \$137.00 and there were actually some days where we had cigarettes in the offering baskets because I'd yell at the Indy Rockers. They'd be like, "Alright. Nine cigarettes for me. One for Jesus." That's all they had, so they tithed off their cigarettes. You're thinking, "Well, the American spirits are a kind gesture." We're not gonna pay the light bill. I guess I can go out and smoke till I have cancer and die, which may be the only way outta this ministry I've gotten myself

into. But that's how it was in the early years. And it comes at a personal cost, just like Nehemiah paid a financial price.

My wife and I were newly married, fresh outta college, trying to pay off college loans. My wife was working a job. I was working a job. We're starting the church. We had two cars that had a combined total of more than 400,000 miles on them, which is a round trip to Jesus Christ and back. We're absolutely flat broke. We had the church office in our house, all the meetings in our house, all the Bible studies in our house. Paid for all the entertaining and hospitality out of our private budget, trying to tithe off that as well, off our income.

And it reached the point where my wife, in working her job, started having a lot of health-related complications for three reasons. One, she had a very high-pressure, stressful job. Two, we were starting the church. And, three, she was married to me. And I have learned over the years, I am a very high-maintenance husband. I am. It's like having seven kids being married to me. I am – you've heard of the drama queen? I'm her brother. Anyways – I require a lot of emotional attention and affection. I just do. High-need husband. And so I'm looking forward to getting home.

So anyways, I'll move along quickly so I can do that. Anyways, she started having all these health-related complications and I'd have to rush her into the hospital a few times a month. So finally, I said, "You know what? Let's bring you home. Let's start making babies. Let's get that job out of our life and let's put the burden on me as the Bible says it should be." And so then I went out and raised support 'cause for the first three years of Mars Hill, I didn't get any salary, no income. I had people come in, they'd be like, "Well, you're not worth your wage." I'm like, "I don't have a wage. So I don't – I work for free."

I worked for free for three years. We raised a very small salary and we were in trouble. We ended up putting money on a credit card, got into debt, high stress. Freaked me out 'cause I don't like debt. And it came at a personal cost financially. And then, also, we finally got to move into a home. Somebody in the church was generous enough to give us a home that we could move into and work on and have sort of a lease-to-own situation. So we had renters and I worked on it, and I was trying to buy it by this deadline to get this super great deal on the house. And I couldn't pre-qualify for a loan, even with equity in it and tenants renting in it.

'Cause I'd go in and they would say, "Okay. Well, what's your income?" and I'll tell 'em. They'd be like, "No, you're annual income." I'd be like, "Well, that's my annual" – they're like, "That's not your monthly?" "No. That's my annual income." They'd be like, "Well, maybe we could do something. Bring in the financials from the church," and it's like in crayon on a napkin. I'm like, "Well, here's our profit and loss statement. Here's where we're at on this deal.

So I couldn't buy this house in time. I still got a good deal on it, but not as good of a deal. I would submit to you that planning Mars Hill personally probably cost my family a couple hundred thousand dollars in lost income, wages, expenses, equity, those things. And like Nehemiah, I tell you that not say, "And I'm a really good guy, so you owe me," but to say instead, he says he did this because of the fear of the Lord. What Nehemiah is saying is, "You know what? I didn't do this 'cause I had to. I do this because I wanted to, and because to found something comes at an expense to the founder. And I love the Lord and I wanted to see what he was gonna do for the city and the church." And I agree with that.

My wife and I actually have no regret about it. And since that time, the church has grown and you guys pay me well and everything's cool and we're happy and so it's all good. But I had somebody recently ask me, they say, "Well, early on, it was so hard and you were so broke, was it worth it?" And I tell you what, occasionally, I get a snapshot of encouragement that just validates in my heart that, yeah, Mars Hill was absolutely worth whatever price we had to pay.

Nehemiah is saying, "God put this desire in my heart, and it was so worth it because I get to see people's lives changed." And I echo Nehemiah's statement that, yeah, to start a family is a lot of expense. Yeah, to start a business, to start a ministry, to start a church in particular, it comes at a great personal financial cost. But at the end of the day, it is absolutely worth it when you see what Jesus Christ does to change people's lives. It absolutely is worth it.

He then goes on with the next principle. Verse 16, "I also persevered in the work on this wall, and we acquired no land; and all my servants were gathered there for the work." A couple things here. The first is he mentions land. Let me tell ya how this would work. Let's say there was a depressed, devastated economic area, a city like Jerusalem. The people there were in very dire straits financially because it was a very devastated economy. On top of that, there was a famine.

What that means is, Nehemiah could've moved into town. He could have imposed a high tax burden on all the citizens, thereby bankrupting them. They're teetering on the brink nonetheless. He then could have purchased all of their land at very discounted rates, pennies on the dollar, and then rebuilt the city and the church, thereby inflating property values and making a great fortune. But to do so, he would have had to have taken advantage of people who were members of his own church, who were teetering on the brink of bankruptcy, and who themselves were giving a lot of their time, energy, prayer and money to build their church as the city within the city, and to build the city and make it a great city.

And what Nehemiah decided was, "I cannot do that. It may be legal. It's not ethical." It is a way for me to benefit myself, but it does not serve the whole city, and it does not serve God's people. And so he did not do that. So rather than taking economic advantage of people, what he does do, rather, is he, quote, preservers in the work. "Me and all my servants were gathered for the work." The principle here for leadership is that to really make a difference requires long obedience in the same direction.

Eugene Peterson's a great author and he uses this line of long obedience in the same direction. And what he says is that God blesses and God honors obedience that is long-suffering and has longevity.

See, many of you are young. And I look forward to the day when I'm old enough to be like a dad and grandpa. For the time being, I'll just be the crazy big brother here. But let me tell you that what happens is too many young people are too impatient, just too impatient. They try one religion, another religion, one church, another church, one theology, another theology, one relationship, another relationship, one degree, another degree, one job, another job, one line of work, another line of work, one city, another city. There's no long obedience. There's no long obedience.

Let me submit to you that change does not come quickly. There is no shortcut. If you want to grow as a Christian, it will take a long obedience. If you want to have a good marriage, it will take long obedience.

I met my wife, Grace, in 1988. We were high school sweethearts. We're coming up on 20 years of us being a couple, first seeing one another, and then being married. And I can tell you this. Where we're at now is better than any place we've been in the history of our marriage because long obedience builds intimacy. It builds trust. It builds oneness over time. In the first 20 days, in the first 20 months of our relationship, we did not have the relationship that we are looking at the benchmark of 20 years. It takes long obedience in the same direction.

Furthermore, some of you are going to be parents. And to raise a child takes long obedience in the same direction. You will start a company. You will work for a company. You'll start a line of work. It takes long obedience in the same direction. You want to start a ministry, grow a ministry. Some of you will be called of God to plant a church. And that, too, will take long obedience in the same direction. Too many people give up too quickly. Too many people have very short-sighted vision for their life.

One of the things I praise God for is that by age 25, my anchor had dropped. I knew my God was Jesus. I knew my authority was Scripture. I knew my wife was Grace. I knew my city was Seattle, and I knew Mars Hill Church was my life's work. And so I'm just working on long obedience in the same direction.

I tell this to my wife and kids, and I'll tell it to you, also. I have no desire to do anything else. I have no intention of going anywhere else. This is my city. This is our church. This is what I'm doing for the next 40 or 50 years until I'm done. That's it. Unless God should show up and make me go somewhere else, I'm not going anywhere. And my whole life is about long obedience in the same direction. How do I love the Lord Jesus, my wife, my kids, this church, and continue in relationship, to continue in service, long obedience in the same direction.

They say statistically, the average pastor doesn't see great fruit even in their ministry until Year 7 to 12. It takes seven years to get the wrong people out, the right people in, to figure out what you're doing, to get the right facilities, programs, systems, policies, procedures, dollars, pay off debts. It takes that long to build trust and theological infrastructure and undergirding for the church. The problem is, the average youth pastor lasts less than a year, and the average pastor lasts only two to three years.

The result is, they don't have the long obedience to even get to the season whereby they have traction and momentum. And you could testify even in this church, we didn't really get great traction until about Year 7. We're in Year 10, approaching Year 11, and I pray that God gives us more the 12th year of fruitfulness.

But with that, let me just encourage you to be thinking about long obedience in the same direction, to be praying about what God would have you do with your life, your vocation and your relationships, your marriage, your ministry, your church, what God would have you. I believe God, the Holy Spirit, reveals that to people. I believe he gives us desires and convictions and that will help sustain us in those seasons of difficulty and hardships and trial when God is testing our obedience.

One thing that really encouraged me this last week by way of example, I was up in Canada teaching at a conference and one of the men who spoke at the conference as well was a man named J.I. Packer. Some of you may have heard of him. He's written a ton of books. He's been teaching the Bible for a long time. He is really, really, really, really old. He is very old. If you read Genesis 10, that huge genealogy, he's in the middle. He's in the middle of that genealogy. He's like in his 80s.

And it was amazing because he came out to teach on the sufficiency of Scripture. I stayed over a day just to hear him 'cause I've never had the pleasure of hearing him or meeting him. He's had a profound impact on my life through his writing, and it was really an honor to meet him.

And so as he lecturing, I looked around. Here's this 80-something year-old frail man who has his Bible open. He's wearing a suit. Just looks great. And I looked around, and in the room were hundreds of people and most of them were in their 20s. And it gave me great encouragement. Because here's a man who has had long obedience in the same direction. Here's a guy who has been faithfully teaching the Bible generation after generation, writing books, keeping Scripture open, pointing people to the Lord Jesus. He's been a very faithful man that God has blessed in a very significant way.

And it really encouraged me to see a man who has had long obedience in the same direction, and that even though he's in his 80s, he's not young, hip, or cool, but he has the Bible open talking about Jesus and 20 year olds come out to hear him because he's still relevant because he's talking about things that are eternal, which means they're always timely because they're timeless. And so it just encouraged me. I thought, "Someday, I'm gonna be really old and I hope I still get to teach the Bible at Mars Hill." I'll probably hate the band. You know what I'm saying?

Like if I do my job well, it'll be like, "That music is horrible," and all the 20 year olds will like it. And I'll just come out in my suit and do my cranky old man thing and open the Bible and talk about Jesus. And it is encouraging to see that long obedience in the same direction means that even at the end of your life, you don't just retire. You continue to serve faithfully and others continue to be encouraged by that example.

Now what Nehemiah is indicating to us here is that a leader must be willing to persevere, to give their life to a cause and to be willing to pay the price of

long obedience in the same direction. He then gives another leadership insight, beginning in Verse 17. "Moreover there were at my table" – okay? Now let me say this. Had you driven by Nehemiah's house, you might have written a nasty blog because he lived in a big house. You might have driven by and said, "Oh, here's another wealthy pastor with a big house. Must be a televangelist. I betcha he and his wife are in there right now sitting on gold thrones counting their money listening to bad '80s rock praise. That's probably what they're doing in there." Right?

Now Nehemiah did live in a big, fat house, a kinda MTV Crib kinda house. And if you remember early in Nehemiah, he went to the king and he said, "I want to rebuild a city in the church. And, oh, by the way, I need a big, fat house, so I need you to build me a big, fat house." And so he had a big, fat house. Let me submit this to you. There's nothing wrong with living in a big house. It just depends on what you do with the house. That's all.

Nehemiah used the house as his base of ministry operations. He's running his city rebuilding and his church planting effort out of his house. You'll see this office is in his house. He practices hospitality out of his house. He does a lot of things out of house. Let me go on a quick excursus.

When started, we couldn't afford a home. We'd now moved three times in five years, me and Driscoll nation, me and my wife, and my five kids. Moved three times in five years. We'd played the Seattle real estate game and did pretty good. So now by God's grace, we're in a home we really, really like. And I'm actually paid a decent salary so I'm not complaining. Thank you. It's not like it was early on.

And the result is that we've gotten to the place where our home can entertain, which we love. We get to have people over in large groups. You're gonna see he has large groups of people into his home. Recently, we've had as many as a hundred people in our house. We love to have people over and church planners, pastors, leaders, writers. All kinds of people come through town and we love to open our home. Furthermore, one of the cool things is I've been able to move my library home. If you're new, I love books. Books are wonderful.

If you don't have enough books, you should repent and go get some more. That's my encouragement to you. I love books. I have thousands of books. And we've moved Mars Hill so many times, we're such a transient church, that I got tired of moving my library all over the place, boxing it up, throwing it in my truck, loading and unloading it, so we built out at this new home a home library. And it actually has rows of bookshelves just like the public library, but only better 'cause they're all mine. And they have searchable Library of Congress database on them. So I have my own check-in, check-out, searchable database system. It's wonderful.

I have like a 20-foot desk and I just sit at it, smell books, and feel the presence of God, the Holy Spirit. And one of the cool things is that now that I have my office at home like Nehemiah, I get to work from home. I think in our age of telecommuting and technology, one of the great benefits is some of you get to work partially or full-time from home, which is a great benefit and blessing. And the cool thing for me, too, has been – and I guess I'm saying this to thank you on behalf of my family – my kids now get to see me study.

See, before – I think it's sad when a pastor goes to the office to study the Bible and the kids never get to see it. I want to study the Bible in my library. I want my kids to see it, and I want them to have access to my library. And it's actually worked. My son – I'll you a couple examples.

My nine-year-old daughter, Ashley, she's a spooky smart, great girl. Yesterday, I got home – (Laughs) it was crazy. I got home from doing a wedding and she says, "Daddy, when you did the wedding, did you think about me getting married?" And I started crying. I just said, "Honey, I'm not ready for that. We're not – I'm not there emotionally. Let's not talk about that." So – but she's a gal who's very smart, loves the Lord, loves her Bible. She started borrowing my reference material.

So I go out to my library and I'll go to my book shelf and I'll be like, "Hey, where's my Bible commentary and my dictionary and my Bible background survey, my Concordance?" And I'll go up to her room and she's got it laid out on her bed. Like, "What are you doing?" She's like, "Well, I was studying Ruth and I had some questions so I grabbed your reference material and you can't have it right now. I'm using it." She's in forth grade. She's nine. It's wonderful.

My seven-year-old son, Zach, has started doing the same thing. He's in first grade. In his top bunk, he's got a notebook, three translations of the Bible, and he grabs commentaries and Concordances, and he's doing word studies and he's trying to figure out theologically major themes of the New Testament. He's in first grade. Most first graders are not there. Most first graders – I've told you before, you ask 'em, "What's two plus two?" "Orange." I mean that's where they're at. (Laughs) Just not there.

But they've seen me use the reference material, and they've become accustomed to the books. And so they've learned how to use them because I get to study at home. It's a great honor, and I thank you on behalf of my family.

Nehemiah, likewise, gets to do a lot of his ministry from home. And he has people over into his house, and he offices from home., and he practices hospitality from his home. He says it this way, Verse 17 – I'm actually back to my point. That's what happens when you have OCD. You come back to where you were. Verse 17, "Moreover there were at my table a hundred and fifty men, Jews and officials, beside those who came to us from the nations that were around us." How many people came over to his house every night for dinner? A hundred and fifty. That's a big – and they sat where? "At my table." That is a big table, or very little people. Never know.

Verse 18, "Now what was prepared" – at whose expense? "My expense." Now how many of you – a dinner part every night for 150 people. That's a lotta money. Great expense. "Now what was prepared at my expense for each day was one ox, six choice sheep, and birds, and every ten days all kinds of wine in abundance." This is a big party. Okay? Hospitality's a good thing. As far as I could tell, Nehemiah is a single man practicing hospitality.

Let me say this, briefly. Many of you men are single. You need help to practice hospitality. You can't do chalupas for Christ, right? You have to – most single men eat many of their meals that were cooked by a high school student in a uniform and handed to them through a car window. To practice

hospitality, might I suggest to you, you will need a girl. You will need a girl. She could be a friend, a girlfriend. A wife is highly recommended. That's the best way to go. But you may need to get a girl to help you, right? Fork and spoon, no spork. These kind of discipleship opportunities for single men are very important.

He is a man who is throwing lavish parties, and he is having people over for dinner. "Yet for all this I did not demand the food allowance of the governor, because of the service was too heavy on these people." What's he's saying is, "It wouldn't have been wrong to expense this and get a reimbursement. But that would have come out of the taxation of the poor. They're already flat broke. That would have been unreasonable. I have the means, and so I will go the extra mile beyond the call of the duty and I will pick up the tab for 150 people for dinner." And this is a big staff. This is a huge home. This is a massive expense.

But here is the doctrine of Christian hospitality. It's something that is required of pastors in places like 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1. It's something that is also required of all Christians in places like Romans 16 where Paul commands the whole church there to practice hospitality. Hospitality is welcoming people into your home and your life, sitting them at your table, treating them in a gracious way, having a meal with them that they might become your friend.

And let me say to you that this is one way that the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ is made visible. It is made tangible to the world. I'll tell ya how this works from Genesis to Revelation, okay? Just hang with me. It'll just be a minute.

The story begins that God is Trinitarian God, a Father, Son, and Spirit, who lives in loving intimate relational community forever, that God made the earth, that God made a man in his image and likeness. And God said before a sinner entered the world, there was one thing that was not good, and that was that it was not good for the man to be alone. The man needed someone to have a relationship, a life with, somebody to eat his meals with. So God makes the woman to be his helper, his complement, to be his bride.

The man and the woman then do something very, very tragic. They eat a meal without God. The first sin was accepting the hospitality of Satan. It was eating a meal without God and eating a meal with Satan, treating Satan as a friend and accepting his invitation of hospitality. Sin came into history. Death ensued. And God made a promise in Genesis 3:15 that Jesus Christ, the second member of that trinity, God himself, would come into human history.

Later on, Jesus comes. And one of the things that Jesus does – now you look at Jesus' life and you would think Jesus is very important. He's God. But what does he take time to do? Eat a lot of meals with people. He begins his ministry at a wedding which lasted days, and it was a series of celebratory meals. Jesus Christ spends a good portion of his life having meals with sinners like Zacheus. The religious folk criticized him for it. "He says he's God. He can't be God. He's always going to parties and eating. Doesn't he have more important things to do?"

Well, that was very important to Jesus. Meals were very important. That's how he made enemies and strangers friends, was through meals. He sat down and has something to drink with people like the woman at the well in Samaria who was an outcast. He also made time to eat meals with his friends like Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. And then Jesus, as the cross was approaching and his death was imminent, had the most famous meal in all of human history, and that was the last supper that he ate with his disciples. Many paintings have been commissioned of that.

Jesus then went to the cross and died for our sins in our place. Three days later he rose to conquer Satan's sin and death. And what's one of the first things that the resurrected living Lord Jesus did? He ate a meal with his friends. He ate a meal with his friends. And the Lord Jesus instituted for us two things, the Lord's Table, which is what we practice every week at Mars Hill Church. It is eating a meal with Jesus. That's what it is. It's eating with Jesus. It's remembering through bread, Jesus' body broken, and through wine or juice, depending upon what your conscience would permit, the shed blood of Jesus. That through the Lord Jesus, we now can eat with God as friends.

God has extended hospitality to us through Jesus. He's welcomed us into relationship with him, that as sin separates, so Jesus takes away sin and reconciles. And we eat it together because our reconciliation is not just with God. It's also with one another. So Jesus taking away of sin allows us to have a relationship with God and a relationship with one another. And we demonstrate that by taking communion, participating in Lord's Table together.

Also, God has instituted for us hospitality where we welcome people into our home and into our life, where we welcome people to sit at our dinner table as Nehemiah did. And we do so showing them that we love them with God's love and we welcome them as friends as God and Jesus Christ welcomes them to new life, a friendship. And it's a showing of the person and the work of Jesus to the world.

Now we also know that Jesus ascended into Heaven. The book of Revelation is the last book of the Bible. And it's interesting because in the first few chapters of Genesis, the book of beginnings, we see a meal eaten without God that ruined everything. It created death and destruction and depravity where God created everything good. Yet, the book of Revelation is the book of conclusions. It serves as the antithesis to the book of Genesis – the culmination of the book of Genesis.

And if you come a few chapters from the end of the book of Revelation, you're going to see one other meal. It's called the wedding supper of the lamb. It's the party at the end of the age where all of God's people from all nations, races, tribes, tongues, languages, whose faith is in Jesus sit together in his eternal kingdom for a great lavish meal.

Some of you have a very wrong picture of Heaven. You've watched the cartoons. You think, "I don't wanna go to Heaven. I'll be fat. I'll wear a diaper. I'll sit on a cloud. I'll play a harp. I'm gonna jump off that cloud and kill myself and go to Hell where they're having fun. Heaven doesn't look like any fun at all." That is not the biblical view of Heaven.

The biblical view of heaven is that there is a new earth. We have new bodies. And everything is made new and perfect. And the world is as it should have been minus sin. My kids ask me, "Daddy, do we get to go swimming, play t-ball, climb trees, wrestle?" My three-year-old daughter always wants to know, "Can we sing and dance in Heaven?" Yes, because none of that's a sin. Heaven is life without sin or death because the curse is lifted.

And what we see in Revelation 19 is that Heaven is a party. I mean think music and food and friendship and feasting and joy and laughter and a great time, the best party you've ever been to. It's a meal eaten with Jesus Christ. Isaiah 25:6 says that that meal will have the best wine and the best meat to which we at Mars Hill thank God. We thank God for red wine and red meat. Right? They go together. They're red. Thank God for that.

And we get to eat together. And so when we practice hospitality and we open our home and we have people over, what we're saying is, "This is a little practice for Heaven." This is what the Lord Jesus does. He makes friends out of strangers and enemies. He reconciles us to God and one another. Gives us a new life marked by joy and feasting that isn't gluttony and drinking, that isn't drunkenness. And friendship that is not manipulation and abuse, but just deep and abiding faithful love.

Now the reason this is important is because what Nehemiah is seeking to do is transform a city. And he determines that one of the most effective ways to do that is through the dinner table. And might I suggest to you that Seattle will not be transformed by my preaching. Seattle will be transformed by your hospitality. That is you open your home and your life and your table and your fridge to serve, to host parties, to invite strangers over to become friends. You will be doing something that is exceedingly countercultural.

We live in a day when hospitality does not exist as it should. People are isolated and lonely. There's a book called *Bowling Alone* in which a Harvard professor chronicles sociologically and statistically the decline in hospitality in the last few decades. Here are some of his findings. The number of people playing cards together is down 25 percent. The number of bars, nightclubs, and taverns where people used to congregate is down 40 percent. Full-service restaurants where people walk in, sit down, and have a meal are down 25 percent, but the number of fast-food restaurants are up 100 percent because so many people eat so many of their meals alone in their car.

Also, having a social evening with a neighbor is down 33 percent. Family dinners are down 33 percent. Having friends over to your home is down 45 percent. From 1985 to 1999, the readiness of Americans to make friends is down 33 percent.

The Bible says we are to love our neighbor and practice hospitality. Many of us don't even know our neighbor, or dorm or apartment or condo or town home or house or neighborhood. We don't even know our neighbors. Might I submit to you that one of the things that you and I can do to help to see the forward progress of the gospel and justice in our city is to love our neighbors. And part of that is inviting them into our homes and seating them at our table. If you live in a condo, rent the big room in the condo that is meant for parties, and invite everybody in the condo. Do whatever it takes.

And the thing that I find that is curious in Seattle, this is a town filled with single lonely isolated people who all convene at coffee shops to ignore one another. Have you noticed that? It is the weirdest phenomenon ever. "We're all very lonely, detached, isolated. Let's all go together, pay way too much for bad coffee. Let's put on our iPods so no one could talk to us. Let's browse the Internet on our laptops. Let's look at our phone and let's ignore one another. But let's do it together so we don't feel lonely."

Here's what you need to do. First of all, welcome people at church so that there's a bit of hospitality here. One of the complaints at Mars Hill is that we're not a hospitable bunch. So you repent of that and say, "Hi," to people and sit next to them and introduce yourself, unless, of course, you're a stalker, and then no. If you're one of those guys, don't do it.

Now, also, what I dare you to do is next time you near a coffee shop, just go around introducing yourself. You'll just freak people out just break the ice. Just walk up, say, "Hi. My name's so and so. Do you wanna play *Battlestar Galactica*? That's a trench coat. How many comic books do you own?" stuff like that. (Laughs) That was a good line. That was a great line.

[Applause]

That was a great line. The other thing I dare you to do is when you're on an elevator, just turn around. "Hi. My name's Mark. Anything I can pray for you guys about?" Just – (Laughs) just do it. It's exciting. It's fun. It'll give you something to blog about later. But in this, we're sort of cutting against the cultural grain of we're strangers. Well, we're strangers until we practice hospitality, and then we become friends.

How many of you honestly who are Christians, it was hospitality that was used of God in a very significant way to bring you to an understanding of the person and work of Jesus? People have you over for dinner, bought you coffee, took you out? Okay. Look at the hands. I mean this is a big deal that the gospel tends to move most effectively along relational lines in hospitality.

It then concludes with Nehemiah's reflection on this series of sacrifices that he has made for the cause of the mission that God has called him to. He says in Verse 19, "Remember for my good, O my God, all that I have done for this people." How many of you at first glance read that, it sounds more than pretentious? "And dear God, please remember all that I have done. Amen." It seems a bit much, does it not? Use my preacher voice, also, my, "Hey, I'm your dad. Knock it off," voice. (Laughs) It's the same voice.

Anyways, how many of you hearing that you say, "That sounds kinda arrogant, right? 'Remember me God, for all that I have done for this people'" Okay, for both you who were paying attention early on in the book, where are we obtaining this information? Where does it come from? His personal journal. He's not blogging his achievements to the world. "And here are Nehemiah's latest humble accomplishments." (Laughs)

He is giving us here a page out of his journal. This is a personal prayer. What Nehemiah is saying is, "I am spending hundreds of thousands, perhaps

the equivalent of millions of dollars. I'm giving 12 years of my life. People aren't gonna thank me. They're not gonna appreciate me. They're not gonna even acknowledge much of what I am doing." But what he is asking is this, "God, please, make note of my life. I'm trying to do as Jesus told us and store up my treasures in Heaven." That's all he's trying to do.

Later on, Jesus will come and say, "Store up your treasures in Heaven." Nehemiah is asking God to keep account of his works because he is seeking to store up his treasures in Heaven. He's getting rid of all of his treasures on earth. He's blowing through his money in such short order that his treasures will not be here. But he's storing up his spiritual treasures in God's eternal Kingdom.

Let me say this. You and I will be judged according to our works, how faithful we have been with the things in life that God has given us to do. If you're here and you're not a Christian, there are varying degrees of punishment in Hell and you will stand before the Lord Jesus and give an account, and you will have punishment in Hell in accordance with your sin. So there is absolute perfect justice. Likewise, if you are a Christian, you will stand before the Lord Jesus at the end of the age and you will be judged, not to determine whether you go to Heaven or Hell. That was already decided on the cross of Jesus Christ. But you will be judged according to the faithfulness of the life that you have lived and the works that you've performed, because that is what God has called of you in this life.

Now this is included in your notes. There's a number of verses listed therein on this issue of the doctrine of rewards, the doctrine of eternal rewards. It's a doctrine that is sadly, I believe, not taught often enough to God's people. You can go home and look up those verses, and I would encourage you this week in your community group, to look up those verses and discuss this issue.

Somebody says, "What's a community group?" Glad you asked. Here's what it is. We gather together and practice hospitality in homes. I think there's about 150 groups now roughly throughout the whole region, different kinds of people meeting in different places, usually a home, have a bite to eat, prayer, open the Bible, hospitality, friendship, love, community.

If you're not connected, we would encourage you to join a community group. You can sign up for one on the way out or at the Web site at marshillchurch.org. We want to practice hospitality, welcome you in, make you part of the family, not just a stranger, but a friend. And the community groups are where we discuss the sermons and work out the practical details for our life. And so this would be a good exercise for you to do personally, and then to discuss corporately in your community group.

Now let me explain this to you. You're saved by grace and you're judged for your works. It's taught in Scripture, Ephesians 2:8, 9, and 10, "For it is by grace you have been saved through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ." This is a gift of God, not of your own works, so you have nothing to boast about. Here's what Paul is saying. We've sinned against God. We can't do anything to pay God back or earn our salvation and forgiveness. So Jesus death, burial, and resurrection is substitutionary. He died for my sins. He rose for my salvation. My faith, my trust is in Jesus. Not me. And my salvation is a gift that Jesus gives me. It's not a right that I obtained through being a good person, reincarnating, karma, good works, being moral, spiritual, tithing, none of that. Salvation is a gift given to me through the Lord Jesus Christ that I received by personal faith.

And then in Ephesians 2:10, the very next verse, he says we were saved to do the good works which God prepared in advance for us to do. We're saved by grace to a life of good works, to a life of good works. We're not saved by our good works. We're saved to our good works by Jesus. We will then be judge according to our works, according to our works.

Let me explain this to you. I know many of you are young, but I assure you of this. Life is very, very short, and eternity is forever. And that in this life if you serve God faithfully, you will be judged before Jesus at then end of your life, and you will receive a reward that is eternal and goes on forever.

So often we can get shortsighted. We can think that this life is a little more important than perhaps it should be, that we should be living this life in light of the one to come. And we should be living in such a way that we're storing up our treasures in Heaven and we're waiting for our eternal reward. And we're living for that day when we stand before Jesus. And it should be our sole aim to hear, "Well done, good and faithful servant. Here's a hammock." That's what he says, "Enter into your rest." I see a hammock.

Now in this, many people live their life discouraged thinking, "I won't have much rewards for me at the end." I'll close with a story that I'm stealing this week. In Canada, I got dinner a few times with a dear friend of mine, Dr. John Piper, very good Bible teacher and a friend. And he told a story about one of my great heroes, a man named Billy Graham. I love Billy Graham. I totally respect Billy Graham. Some people criticize Billy Graham and they will be judged for that. Okay? (Laughs)

Seriously, if you criticize Billy Graham, it's not gonna be a good day when you stand before Jesus. I know he's not perfect, but he's Billy Graham. (Laughs) And he told a story about Billy Graham, a personal hero of mine, a man as well who has long obedience in the same direction. And Billy Graham brought together his staff, people who stuff envelopes, sweep floors, answer phone calls. They do sort of hidden, often times unappreciated or underappreciated work.

And he had a Bible study with them on the doctrine of rewards, and he told his people, he said, "Your reward in Heaven will be greater than mine." And a bunch of people rolled their eyes and sighed and was like, "Come on. I put things in envelopes. You're Billy Graham. When we get to Heaven, if one of us is gonna be the king and one of us gonna be the janitor, I'm pretty sure who the janitor is."

And now Billy – (Laughs) I appreciate that. It's been a long day. Alright?

[Applause]

Seriously, if you wanna laugh at my jokes, that's great. I'm all for it. Usually it's just my wife. And so – what happened then – back to the OCD, right back to point, is that Billy look at them very sternly, sort of with a fatherly tone and said, “No, never forget this. The Lord rewards faithfulness, not just fruitfulness.” I wanna leave you with that encouragement. God rewards, the Lord Jesus rewards faithfulness, not just fruitfulness. And I tell you this with all sorrow that I know pastors that have big ministries but are not faithful to their wife or the Scriptures. I know people who have large businesses but they're not faithful to the teaching of Scripture. They've obtained their wealth in a very crooked way.

There are a lot of people who, by all accounts, appear to be very fruitful. I mean there's a lot going on in their life. But I may not be because they were faithful. It may just be because God is faithful. And Scripture says in the New Testament that even when we're faithless, God's still faithful. So you can't look at someone's life, see a lotta fruit, good things going on and say, “Well, they must be faithful.”

No, God might be the only one who's being faithful. They might be living in a way that is unfaithful. Some of you right now, you're not repenting of sin. You're not having any sense of urgency for a life change because your life is going well. And though you are not being faithful, you don't think God has a problem with it because you assume he's blessing you. Let me submit this to you. He is blessing in spite of you, not because of you. God is God of grace. And you may be receiving a lot of grace, but God's kindness should lead you to repentance and not an abuse of that grace.

Likewise, some of you are here today and you look at your life and you think, “I wish I were more fruitful. I'm single. I would like to be married.” I'm not discouraging you from that aspiration. But let me encourage you to be faithful in your season of singleness.

Some of you get married and you want to have children and you want to be fruitful. I would encourage you to keep that desire, but to be faithful before you have children. If God should only give you one child and you struggle with infertility or you have to adopt, to be faithful to the child or children that God has given you. If God has given you a job and you say, “I wish I had a more important job,” well, I'm telling you, that's not a bad desire. But be faithful to the job that God has given you.

You may have a ministry and say, “I wish I had a bigger impact and more disciples and influence in my place of service to God.” And I would say to you, be faithful. Be faithful and let God make you fruitful if that is what he decides. But there are many who are faithful and they don't have the most fruit. But I think Billy Graham is absolutely right, that God rewards faithfulness, not just fruitfulness. And when you stand before the Lord Jesus, it won't be, “How many children did you have? How much money did you make? How many clients did you serve in your business? How many people did you disciple in your ministry?” It will be matters of the heart, “Were you faithful to me? Were you obedient? Were you faithful to the things and the people and the opportunities that I set before you?”

And Jesus Christ does judge and reward according to faithfulness. My exhortation to you today is to pursue with all of your heart and all of the grace that God would give you, faithfulness. What we're seeing with Nehemiah is faithfulness. And his prayer to God is, “Reward me for my faithfulness in Heaven. I'm a patient man. This life is very short. I'll wait to see you on that last day.”

We now give you an opportunity to respond. You can respond by becoming a Christian, repenting of your sin and trusting in Jesus. If you're Christian that has been living in a way that is not faithful, to repent to come to a faithfulness. Nehemiah models that. He went from taking money from people to being one of the most generous men in all of Scripture. That's what repentance looks like.

Some of you as well, I want you to be encouraged. Your life is not in vain. And what you seem to perhaps think are menial and undeserving and ignoble tasks, they may very well be like the things Jesus did that seemed very simple, but in God's economy, they're very significant. And God will reward you for your faithfulness and you'll have an eternity in which the Lord Jesus will give you appropriate commendation for your humble obedience.

I want you to be encouraged. When you're ready, you can respond by taking communion, which is remembering the hospitality of God through the body and blood of Jesus. We'll give of our tithes and offerings and act of generosity to follow the example of Nehemiah. And we're gonna sing and celebrate because that, too, is preparation for God's eternal Kingdom and its participation in the life of the Trinitarian God we share in their love and adoration.

Father, we come to you in prayer, thanking you that you are a living, loving good God. Lord God, as we look at the example of our brother, Nehemiah, we're reminded the Lord Jesus. We thank you that the Lord Jesus put the mission of your glory and our salvation above his person interests. We thank you that as Paul says, though Jesus was rich, he became poor for our sake.

We thank you, Lord Jesus, for giving your life to the cause of our salvation and the Father's glory. We thank you, Lord Jesus, for opening up Heaven, our eternal home, and being willing to practice hospitality to us. And Jesus, we thank you that treasures awaited you in Heaven. Though you did not receive your full reward on the earth, you are in glory today as you should be.

And, Lord Jesus, may we live for –