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Scripture: Nehemiah 6:1-9

Good is the enemy of great. Have you heard this expression? In one of the best books I have ever read on leadership, Good to Great, Author Jim Collins says, Good is the enemy of Great. But he goes further. Check out the opening lines of the book.

Good is the enemy of great. And that is one of the key reasons why we have so little that becomes great. We don't have great schools, principally because we have good schools. We don't have great government, principally because we have good government. Few people attain great lives, in large part because it is just so easy to settle for a good life. The vast majority of companies never become great, precisely because the vast majority become quite good-and that is their main problem. (Jim Collins. Good To Great. Page 1)

This paragraph challenges me. How often I settle for good when great is possible. Great is out there for the taking. As a husband, a father, as a friend, a pastor, a teacher. How often do I settle for good enough? That was good enough. What about you? Think back on your week. Were there times when you found your selves doing the good thing but maybe not the best, or great thing? Did you settle for good enough this week?

This past Tuesday was Carolyn's birthday. Now, birthdays are a big deal to Carolyn. Maybe I should clarify. Her own birthday is not such a big deal, but for those close to her, she goes all out.

I remember the special themed birthday parties that Carolyn organized for our children when they were growing up. Toy Story, Pocahontas, Little Mermaid. Johnny Bravo; Carolyn made cakes in the shape of characters and all the decorations were around the theme. One year, we even rented a Barney costume to surprise our two year old daughter with her favourite dinosaur. She cried the whole time. But year after year, Carolyn has hosted great parties.

For her own birthdays, she is a little more subdued but what she values most is a thoughtful card and family time. This year, I asked her where she would like to go for her birthday dinner and I was a little surprised when she said, that she would just like a quiet dinner at home. And I said, oh, that's a shame you have to cook on your own birthday. She kind of looked at me.

And that is when it dawned on me, Good is taking my wife out to a restaurant on her birthday, but great, Great to Carolyn, would be for me to take the time to make a special dinner at home. So, although it is certainly not a strength for me, with the help of my kids, we made Carolyn a meal and enjoyed celebrating how cherished she is to all of us.

Good is the enemy of Great

The truth is, sometimes all we have in the tank is to complete something, good enough and that is okay at times. But when we busy our lives with the good at the expense of the best, the great, then I think we need to take notice. Maybe that has been your experience.

If you are just joining us today, we are in the fourth week of a message series entitled, Count Me In. From Rubble to Renewal. It is a series on the Old Testament book of Nehemiah. Let me take a moment to give a bit of a review.

The book of Nehemiah, written around 445 BC is, for the most part the personal journal of Nehemiah. It recounts a bleak time in the history of God's people the Israelites. Their homeland has been invaded and destroyed, God's holy city, Jerusalem has been leveled. The buildings toppled. The wall surrounding the city has been demolished and the wooden gates burned. Most of the people had been taken prisoner to foreign lands. As we read in Nehemiah chapter 1, it has been about 141 years since the destruction and over this time, things settled down. Those Israelites taken into exile were given their freedom and allowed to return to their

homeland but many chose to stay where they were. They got jobs and raised their families on foreign soil. But two waves of exiles did return to Jerusalem but they were unable to restore the city to its former and rightful glory.

Nehemiah was an Israelite by heritage although he had never set foot in Jerusalem or had even seen his motherland. But, still he worshipped the Israel God, Yahweh and he knew the history and the traditions of his people. He had a very good and trusted position as a cup bearer to the king of Persia, and lived in its capital city Susa. But whenever someone passed through town that had been to Jerusalem, some 900 miles away, Nehemiah always wanted to know, what is going on there? How are the people, how is the city? The news he receives in chapter one is not good. Jerusalem was God's holy city. It was to be the beacon of light and hope of who God is and all that he has to offer his people. The fact that it had been allowed to sit in ruin and devastation was not only an affront to God, but also a disgrace to His people.

And it caused Nehemiah to weep. He wept over the city. He had a heart like Jesus who centuries later wept over the condition of the very same city. And we know from chapter 1 that Nehemiah not only wept but he fasted and prayed, for 3-4 months. God was stirring something in Him. In chapter 2 we found out that through this prayer and fasting, God prompted Nehemiah to take action. So he goes to his boss the king and dares to ask him if he will grant his most trusted employee time off. Which was a bold enough request but Nehemiah doesn't stop there. He also asks the King to give him written permission to travel to Jerusalem. Written permission to get the lumber and supplies, to basically fund the building project? And because the gracious hand of God was on Nehemiah, the king agrees to it all.

After a month long journey, Nehemiah arrives in Jerusalem and takes time to survey the scene. He rallies people in the city to join the building project and many were more than willing to ban together and help out, working in community, side by side, as Matt shared last week. But Nehemiah faced some significant opposition. That is what chapters 4, 5 describe. Have you been reading along at home this week? And the opposition didn't just come from the outside. There was opposition to what Nehemiah was trying to accomplish even within his own ranks.

But he faced all the turmoil by calling on God and pointing his people to God's provision. And the city and the wall are beginning to take shape.

And today we come to Nehemiah 6 so, if you have your bibles, I invite you to turn to this section as we unpack it a little bit. As the chapter begins, we see that the assignment that God has laid upon Nehemiah's heart, the rebuilding of the city and the wall of Jerusalem is almost done. In fact, in

Nehemiah 6:1 it says,

When word came to Sanballat, Tobiah, Geshem the Arab and the rest of our enemies that I had rebuilt the wall and not a gap was left in it— though up to that time I had not set the doors in the gates—

There was not a gap left in the wall and the only thing to do was to hang the gates. This massive project is nearing completion, Nehemiah and his team have had to overcome adversity and opposition and now here they are, about to have the ceremonial ribbon cutting to unveil the new wall to the city.

Have you ever been a part of something like this? All the dreaming, the planning, the hard work. Everything starts off well enough, but you hit a few obstacles along the way. Doubt begins to enter the picture, a little fatigue but then there's a breakthrough. You are almost there, you can see the finish line. Maybe it was a group project at work, or a class assignment in school or maybe even a DIY (Do it Yourself) home renovation project. Or maybe you have been part of a sports team like this. It brings to mind our very own London Knights hockey team. Do you all know the Knights? Last year, on their road to winning the Canadian Junior Men's Hockey Championship, the Memorial Cup. They had a good team, very good. They started the season well, but soon a few obstacles, some injuries, some of their star players missed a few games because of the World Junior tournament. They ended up in second place but then in the playoffs, they went on a run, undefeated in 13 games to win the Ontario Championship.

Then onto the Memorial Cup where they dominated until the final game. Tied 2-2 as the seconds ticked down in regulation time. All the training, all the hard work, all the sacrifice came down to this. Sudden death overtime. First to score wins. They were so close. Just one more obstacle to overcome. Just one more goal.

A loss here would make it a good season but not a great one. With steely determination, they pulled it off, scoring in overtime to win their 17 consecutive game and the Memorial Cup. Have you ever been a part of something like this?

That is Nehemiah in this text. After all the blood, sweat and tears, the community pulling together amidst some pretty overwhelming odds, and they are almost done. God's Holy City, Jerusalem is rising up from the ashes. They are on the cusp of completing something great for God. And that's when the familiar enemy rears its ugly head once more. In this case, it's Sanballat, Tobiah and Gesham. Do you remember these guys? We're first introduced to them back in chapter 2.

They were against the rebuilding of Jerusalem right from the beginning. They were part of people groups that had been at odds with the Israelites for generations. They wanted nothing more than to see Jerusalem stay just as it was, vacant and in disrepair. And they were willing to do just about anything to bring down this God ordained project and its leader Nehemiah. As they see that the wall is almost completed, they try one last ditch attempt to derail it.

Look at *Nehemiah 6:2*, Nehemiah writes this,
Sanballat and Geshem sent me this message: "Come, let us meet together in one of the villages on the plain of Ono."

So with one last attempt to throw Nehemiah off his game, they send a message out, "Hey Nehemiah, we see your almost done. Well done. You just have the hanging of the gates. Impressive. Hey, why don't you take a break, leave your second in command to look after the details and come and meet with us. Just for a little coffee and a chat. We just want to tell you what a great job you have done. We have a perfect spot too. Let's meet in Ono.

Ono. The plain of Ono was about 50 kilometres from the city of Jerusalem. Which is about the distance from London to Woodstock. Why so far? Why won't they just meet Nehemiah in the city square? Distraction. There is something about taking the leader off of a project that seems to distract the regular routine. See for Nehemiah to get to Ono, it would have been a three to four day trip. 50 km one way, or 100 km round trip. On foot or by mule it would take three to four days at least.

To take this leader, Nehemiah away from this project for three to four days, right as it was nearing its completion had the potential to delay or set the project back.

Whenever you are trying to win a battle or a war, you always try to take the leader out don't you? That is what we saw with the war on terror, in the Middle East. Do you remember the dogged pursuit of Osama Bin Laden and Saddam Hussein? Get the leader out of the way and it causes confusion and throws things into turmoil. It breaks the momentum and that is what is happening in this text. But Nehemiah knew their true motive. They weren't looking for some harmless, "get to know you" meeting,

Look how *Nehemiah 6:2* continues,
But they were scheming to harm me;

Because of his close relationship with God and his constant prayer, Nehemiah recognizes the scheme, the distraction and I love the way he responds, to their invitation.

Nehemiah 6:3;
so I sent messengers to them with this reply: "I am carrying on a great project and cannot go down. Why should the work stop while I leave it and go down to you?"

"I am carrying on a great project and cannot go down. I love this guy. Let's just say for a moment that Sanballat and Geshem really did just want to spend some time with Nehemiah. They just wanted to get to know him better, encourage him in the work he was doing. That they meant him no harm. Let's imagine for a moment that their intentions were good and not bad. I think Nehemiah's response would have been exactly the same. "I am carrying on a great project and cannot go down. Good can be the enemy of Great, can't it? Even in the church. Do you know that almost every week, we get requests and invitations for North Park to partner with various Christian organizations or to participate in various activities and just about every one of them are good? Good groups, good people. Good causes.

And just about all of the requests would require an outlay of our time, money and resources. But if we are not mindful and diligent, most of them can be distractions from the GREAT things that we believe God has called us to.

The Great things that North Park is to be about in the community and the city. The things God has laid on our hearts. Do you understand that? That is why we are in the midst of a strategic planning season here at North Park. To ensure that we are crystal clear on the great things we are to be about and limit any distractions as good as they can be.

How are you with distractions? Just think of your own life. Where is the good getting in the way of the best that God has for you? God has given you gifts and talents and maybe even a burden, he has stirred something deep inside of you and you know that there are distractions, sometimes even good things getting in the way of you giving your best to great things God has for you. Maybe you are distracted by the same old nemesis like Nehemiah. For him, it was Tobiah, Sanballat and Geshem, but for you maybe it's guilt, lack of faith, or lack of time.

When God has given you great things to do, is it always the same things or people that distract you? I tend to be a people pleaser. Anyone like that? I think that is the danger for pastors because for the most part we are pastors because we have a heart for people, usually. And I want to be available to people's needs and concerns. But earlier on in my ministry I discovered that good things, which usually involved good people, were at times getting in the way a great thing God had called me too. God has called me to be a great husband to my wife, Carolyn. God has called me to be a great father to my children. And there was some real pain for Carolyn and I as we had to figure this whole thing out. To set some boundaries, to learn to say NO sometimes to good things for the sake of a great thing. Sometimes great is being still with your family not busy with the world.

Wedding season is coming soon with all the engagements at Christmas and soon Valentine's Day. I can officiate at anywhere from 7-12 weddings a year. I love weddings. I love doing the pre- marriage counselling, talking to young, starry eyed love birds. I love and believe in marriage. My dilemma was that doing up to 12 weddings a year also meant that I did the rehearsals on Friday night. I was usually invited to the rehearsal party. I officiate the wedding the next day and then most people invite me to the wedding reception usually on Saturday nights. Which is a good and kind gesture, and for a few years I tried to fulfill each invitation. But if you think about it, that can be almost a ¼ of the Friday and Saturday nights in a year. That was a lot of time spent away from my family, on the

weekends, when their time is usually freed up to do something.

These days, unless I know the couple well, I respond to wedding invitations with, Thank you for the invite. It is an honour to officiate at your wedding but I will not be able to attend the reception. Thank you for thinking of me. And I am sure I have offended some people but it is about my family. Good vs Great. Time with my family, the great thing, do you understand? If I blow up my family, where would my ministry be? I am carrying on a great project and cannot go down

How are you doing in this area of your life? Oh, there are a lot of good things to do. But are they the great things for you and your family? Are they the things God wants you to do? The things he has placed on your heart?

But it is hard to say "no" isn't it? And some people just don't take no for an answer. Look back at the text.

Nehemiah 6:4

4 Four times they sent me the same message, and each time I gave them the same answer.

I admire Nehemiah's resolve. But for a people pleaser, that is hard to do, to say No? Hey, come down and meet with us. No, I can't. I am doing a great work. Hey, come down and meet with us. No, I can't, I am doing a great work. Come on, just for a minute, it won't take long. Okay, okay, I will come down but just for a minute. Is that you? We give in. We cave to the good and you know what happens, we end up resenting it or them, we do it out of guilt and we burn out, when we put the good or mediocre things above the great things God has for us.

Four times in this text, Nehemiah says no to his distractors and they come at him a fifth time with a little different tactic.

Nehemiah 6:5,

Then, the fifth time, Sanballat sent his aide to me with the same message, and in his hand was an unsealed letter

An unsealed letter. In this day, letters were a very common way to correspond. Do you remember those days? They were often delivered between towns by messengers but the letters were almost always rolled up and sealed with an insignia or a wax seal on each end

to protect its confidentiality. If a letter was delivered with the seal broken, it usually resulted in severe punishment for the messenger.

Notice this letter Sanballat sent to Nehemiah was intentionally unsealed. Which means that as the messenger sets out to deliver it to Nehemiah, he could have people in the street yelling at him, Hey Jimmy watcha doing? Ah, I just have this note from my boss to that guy that is leading the rebuilding of the wall over in Jerusalem. Oh yeah. Hey it's open, what does it say? And they would gather around the messenger and read the note. And each step along the way of delivering this letter to Nehemiah, people would want to look at the letter and read it.

Look at what the letter says, or rather, what it accuses Nehemiah of,

Nehemiah 6:6-7

"It is reported among the nations—and Geshem says it is true—that you and the Jews are plotting to revolt, and therefore you are building the wall. Moreover, according to these reports you are about to become their king 7 and have even appointed prophets to make this proclamation about you in Jerusalem: 'There is a king in Judah!' Now this report will get back to the king; so come, let us meet together."

In this open letter, Sanballat accuses Nehemiah of treason, wanting to be king when there was already a king in place. It was a very serious accusation. But this was the enemy's next tactic to throw Nehemiah off from completing the wall. It was to discredit him. They sought to discredit him by intentionally sending an open letter for everyone to read, filled with rumours, innuendo and slander or to use the buzz word of the week, alternative facts. It was malicious. And the real tragedy is that some people believed it without checking the facts or clarifying with the person.

Have you ever been touched by this sort of diversion? Someone trying to discredit you? Get you off the task of a great thing you are doing for God by bringing down your reputation? Spreading unconfirmed rumours and gossip? It is tough to combat. Someone spreading rumours is hard to defend. It would be like going on top of a building and ripping open a feather filled pillow and the feathers go everywhere. Imagine having to try and pick up all those feathers that have traveled in the wind and have spread all over the city. That is what

uncontrolled gossip and rumours look like. It is damaging when someone tries to discredit you. Some of you know because it has happened to you. How did you respond? Listen to the way Nehemiah responds,

Nehemiah 6:8,

I sent him this reply: "Nothing like what you are saying is happening; you are just making it up out of your head."

Nehemiah speaks into the lies but he doesn't try to go and pick up all the feathers. He doesn't go around to everyone who may have heard the lies and try and make it right. He lets God be his defender.

When we have been unfairly judged or discredited we want to save face. But when we are about the things of God, He will defend us. Let God be your defender. Some of us spend a lot of time worrying about what people think of us, don't we? When we are about the things of God and keep our eyes and heart on Him, He will be our defender.

In *Nehemiah 6:9*, as Nehemiah ponders the deception of his enemies to discredit and distract him, he writes,

They were all trying to frighten us, thinking, "Their hands will get too weak for the work, and it will not be completed."

And I am sure many of us have cried out to God in a similar way. When it seems like the obstacles and difficulties in our lives are too much to bear, we cry out, God, in the midst of my life there are some things that are just overwhelming, too much, it is interfering with my ability to serve you, to live for you. And then, what do most of us pray for God to do? God take it away. That's what I have a tendency to do? God, take it away. Take away the opposition. Take away the annoying person. Take away the distraction. Take it away God so I can concentrate fully on you and I am not distracted by anything. Take it away God!

That is not what Nehemiah prayed.

In *Nehemiah 6:9*, he says,

But I prayed, "Now strengthen my hands."

When I first came across this passage a number of years ago, these four words, touched something deep within me. If I was Nehemiah, I would have been praying, get

rid of these guys, God. I have given some of the best days of my life to you. You called me to rebuild this wall and now I have to deal with these bozos. Get rid of the opposition, God.

Nehemiah's prayer has become one of my life verses. I send this passage to people often who write me and say that they are experiencing difficult times or circumstances. When opposition builds up against us in whatever we are doing for God, it is tempting to pray, God take it all away or God, get me out of this situation,

But Nehemiah prayed,

"Now strengthen my hands" Let me dig in!

Give me the strength to do what you have called me to do, what you have stirred in me. God, may I not give in to the distractions, the deception or the discrediting of the enemy. Strength my hands God, Strengthen my hands.

In *John 16:33*,

Jesus says, In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."

The truth is that life can be difficult sometimes. For some, more so than others. But there is purpose in these times. Trouble and adversity come so that faith may increase, it is a refining process of building us into people of character, strength and integrity for Jesus Christ. I don't know what obstacles you are encountering today. I don't know what passion or burden God has placed on your heart. I don't know what discouragement you are facing. But can I challenge you to pray as Nehemiah did? Not God remove all my troubles but God, Strengthen my hands. Strengthen my hands.

Just try it. Nehemiah had such a steadfast focus on what God had called him to do that even when those around him sought to oppose him with deception, distraction and to discredit him, he remained committed to the cause and prayed God, Strengthen my hands. I am doing a great work for you and I can't come down. Sanballat, Tobiah and Geshem, their despicable tactics were futile because they were not just fighting against Nehemiah. They were fighting against the very plans of God.

On January 8, 1956, 61 years ago, five Christian missionaries were murdered in the remote jungles of Ecuador by the savage Auca Indians. Among the victims were Jim Elliott and Nate Saint.

When the bodies were discovered, newspaper headlines around the world screamed things like, "Tragedy in Ecuador!" "Five Missionaries Slaughtered!" "Five Young Lives Wasted!" Certainly this was a devastating event in the lives of five families who lost husbands, fathers, and sons. But the violent and highly publicized deaths of these five men also caused distress among global mission agencies. They wondered how this threat of persecution and martyrdom might now affect the recruitment and sending of missionaries to some of more difficult and dangerous places in the world.

Were these murders a win for the enemy and a set-back for the advancement of gospel into all the world? God is not the author of evil but he can work to redeem any situation. While most of the world expected the wives and children of these five men to flee from Ecuador and return to the safety of their country of origin. They didn't. In fact their resolve became even more steadfast. God had given them a burden for the people of Ecuador. Lord, strength my grip. We are doing a great work. And they dug in. Elisabeth Elliott, the widow of Jim Elliot, remained in Ecuador with her ten month old daughter and continued to work with the very people who had killed her husband, the Aucas. The gospel was eventually established throughout the region including converts to Christianity of some of the very men that participated in the killing of the 5 missionaries. Elisabeth Elliott went on to be a prolific writer and speaker and is considered to be one of the most influential Christian women of the 20th century.

Rachel Saint (Nate's sister) invested the remaining decades of her life in ministry among the Aucas and upon her request, when she died, she was buried there in Ecuador with them. Steve Saint (Nate's son) returned to Ecuador as an adult and responsibly transitioned the Auca Church and culture into the 21st Century. The initial concern of the impact these five deaths would have on the gospel of Jesus Christ going forth was proven to be unwarranted. By God's grace, instead of fewer missionaries, mission agencies were inundated with applications of those willing to serve. Vast numbers of missionaries throughout the 1960s, '70s, '80s, and '90s, and even up to today, testify that the killing of the Ecuador Five is what God used to stir their heart, caused them to weep for the world and compelled them into mission. Nearly three generations of missionaries, tens of thousands of them, have been catapulted into the worldwide mission, which has impacted millions of lives for Jesus. All because of this one incident and the faith

filled and determined response of the families to stay steadfast to the mission that God had given them no matter what the obstacle.

Strengthen our hands, Lord. We are doing a great work for you and we can't come down.

Where does this message meet you today? Is God stirring your heart these days, causing you to weep? Are you praying for direction? Are you taking action? Are you asking God for big things? Are you working side by side with others? And when opposition comes your way are you running away, quitting or giving in? Or are you praying,

God, Strengthen my hands. I am doing a great work for you and I can't come down.

Strengthen my hands, Lord, Strengthen my hands.

Amen? Amen.

Let's Pray

Points to Ponder
Nehemiah 6
Count Me In. From Rubble to Renewal

With a friend, your family or in your small group, discuss the following questions.

1. In your group, discuss this idea of Good is the enemy of Great. Share some examples from your own life when doing the good thing has actually taken away from doing the great thing.
2. Think of some of the ways Nehemiah's opposition tried to throw him off completing the project God had given him. Deceive. Distract. Discredit. Share some examples in your life when you have been subjected to these same tactics in the midst of doing something for God.
3. How often do you pray, God take away my problems? What do you think of the concept that it is in the difficulties of life that God can do some of His best work? Look back on some difficult times in your life and share where and how you saw God at work. How did it impact who you are?

Prayer and Action Item

Take some time to pray for one another out of the key points that were discussed. Perhaps you want to share an example of a situation where you feel discouraged. You feel like you want to give up. Can you pray for one another, Strengthen my hands, Lord. I am doing a great work for you and I can't come down?