

THE NUMBERED PEOPLE

NO. 1457A

A SERMON
WRITTEN AT MENTONE
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*“According to the commandment of the LORD they were numbered by the hand of Moses,
every one according to his service, and according to his burden:
thus were they numbered by him, as the LORD commanded Moses.”*
Numbers 4:49

ISRAEL in the wilderness is admitted in some respects to have been a type of the church in its present condition. The tribe of Levi was in a peculiar and inner sense the type of that peculiar people who under the great high priest are set apart for the service of the Lord and His church. To them the carriage of the holy vessels from place to place was committed, each family of the tribe being made responsible for the safe and reverent transport of a certain part of the sacred furniture.

Since nothing in the service of the God of order may be left to hazard, but everything must be done decently and according to arrangement, all the Levites were counted, and then appointed each man to his service. Those persons who in hackneyed phrase cry out against “system” ought to be told that the Lord has always had a system, not only in nature and providence, but also in His own courts.

There is an admirable “economy” in the palace of the great King—whatever of disorder, waste, and riot there may be surrounding other monarchs, nothing of the kind will be found beneath the shadow of the divine throne. He who counts the stars, and calls them all by their names, leaves nothing unarranged in His own service.

His church, therefore, should exhibit the discipline of an army, and all His warriors should know how to keep rank. Though we are not under the law, we are not without law to Christ, nor do we wish to be, for His commandments are not grievous.

At this season, when our church is making a most earnest effort to glorify the Lord by seeking conversions, we would muster all the servants of our Master, and summon each one to take his appointed place and service. The work of the Lord is to be done, and should be done well, and done by us all most cheerfully and heartily.

Gather, therefore, yourselves together, and let each redeemed one take up his burden, and bear it before the Lord in due order. To this end, like Moses, we would call you out one by one, and give you a charge as from the Lord.

Our text contains *authority for the muster roll, appointment for the individuals, and account of the actual execution of the command.* Upon each of these, an absent officer of your company will try to say a little as the Holy Spirit may enable him.

I. Here is, first, AUTHORITY FOR THE MUSTER ROLL.

“According to the commandment of the LORD they were numbered.” It was not left to Moses to number the people without divine sanction, else the deed might have been as evil in the sight of the Lord as that of David, when he made a census of the nation. Neither may any man at this day summon the saints of the Lord at his own discretion to enterprises for which they were never set apart.

The armies of Israel are none of ours to lead where we will, nor even to reckon up that the number may be told to our own honor. The counting of apostles and disciples is lawful enough, for it was frequently done in the best days of the church, but statistics may be taken in such a spirit as to be the occasion of sin. In no such manner would we now number the host unto the battle, but would summon the chosen of the Lord to the Lord’s work and in the Lord’s name.

Believers in Christ Jesus, you are now called forth to do suit and service, because like the tribe of Levi, *you are the Lord's*. He views you as the church of the firstborn, as the redeemed from among men, and as His peculiar portion and inheritance, and therefore above all other men you are under His special rule and governance.

The Lord said unto Moses, “The Levites shall be mine: I am the LORD,” and He has made the same declaration concerning all those that fear the Lord, and that think upon His name—“They shall be mine, saith the LORD, in the day when I make up my jewels.” Upon whom shall we call to perform the work of the Lord, but upon those who are His own?

To these belong a devout care for the interest of true religion, and an earnest zeal for the glory of God. Obligations as powerful as they are honorable are upon them. “Ye are not your own, ye are bought with a price, therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God's.” Do you feel a shrinking from being numbered and called out for active service? Is not this an evil and unworthy sensation? Should you not far rather account it your glory to be called out with the dedicated ones?

Brethren, you are further called because *this is a charge laid upon you of the Lord*, to whom you specially belong. The Levites (Num 4:3) were ordained “to do the work in the tabernacle of the congregation.” They were not numbered with the rest of the nation, for their vocation was altogether different, and their whole business was “about holy things.”

You see in this your calling, brethren, for hereunto are you also ordained that you may live unto the Lord alone. To whom does the work of God belong but to His children? Who should serve the Lord Christ, and gather in His wanderers, but those whom He has called to that office? If you refuse the honorable yoke, how will the work of mercy be done? Can it be left to hirelings, or will the spiritually dead perform the service of the living God? No, it is your charge, and look you to it.

Again, brethren, the Lord may well call you to this service, seeing *He has given you to His Son*, even as He gave the Levites to Aaron, as it is written (Num 3:9), “They are wholly given unto him out of the children of Israel.”

The Lord had also said, “Bring the tribe of Levi near, and present them before Aaron the priest, that they may minister unto him.” They were happy thus to serve the head of their own tribe, and more happy still are we to serve the Lord Christ, who is the firstborn among many brethren. Because you belong to Christ, therefore, hide not yourselves from His service, but come forward with alacrity.

Once more, *the Lord has constituted you the servants of all His people*, even as He said of the Levites that they were to “do the service of the children of Israel in the tabernacle of the congregation.” We are debtors to all our brethren, and we are their servants to the full extent of our power. The greater we are in the church, the more are we the servants of all. It is ours to fulfill this service, or else we are untrue to the position of Christians, who are all called in love to serve one another.

Here are a few of the claims which the Lord has upon you—will you not own the supreme authority which calls you to active service?

II. Under our second head we shall notice the APPOINTMENT OF THE INDIVIDUALS.

“Everyone according to his service, and according to his burden.” By our varied gifts, positions, offices, and opportunities, we are as much set apart to special services as were the sons of Kohath, Gershon, and Merari.

One family bore the ark, and the other the holy vessels, another had charge of the sacred hangings, and a third carried the boards and the pillars and framework of the tabernacle. But supreme authority had set each family its own special service and burden.

Even thus is it among ourselves, and let us see to it that we observe the divine appointment. “Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, whether ministry let us wait on our ministry, or he that teacheth, on teaching; or he that exhorteth, on exhortation: he that giveth, let him do it with simplicity; he that ruleth, with diligence; he that showeth mercy, with cheerfulness.”

Great evils arise out of persons mistaking their calling, and undertaking things of which they are not capable. And on the other hand, the success of Christian work, in a large measure, arises out of places of usefulness being filled by the right men.

In the march through the wilderness the sons of Merari never interfered with the burdens of the sons of Kohath, or the arrangements would have been sadly disturbed—each one took up his allotted load, and went on his way rejoicing, no one jostling his fellow. If we could bring all our workers into the same order, how like an army with banners would the church become, and how beautiful would be her battle array.

“A place for every one and every one in his place” should be the practical motto of our congregations, and the people should be numbered, not according to worldly rank or self-estimate, but “every one according to his service.”

It is to be noticed here that the Levites only rendered this service, “from thirty years old and upward, even unto fifty years old.” We rejoice that it is not so among us under the Gospel, for there is work for the young people and also for the aged. Little children, and young men and maidens, may take their places among the servitors of the Prince of Peace. And he who leans upon his staff for very age shall not find himself dismissed from his Master’s beloved service.

No women are mentioned as bearers of the tabernacle and its holy furniture. It was a work for which they were scarcely fitted, and an economy under which they were seldom employed. Here, too, we have a great change, for there is neither male nor female in Christ Jesus—and in their own way, the sisters are our fellow servants, even as they are our fellow heirs. Never can women be forgotten in any enumeration of the forces of the church. What could we do without them?

Let it not be forgotten, then, that our Lord Jesus Christ, the great Head of the church, calls out all His redeemed to His service, and that He lays upon each one a burden which no one else can carry. It should be the joy of each believer to know what it is that his shoulders are permitted to bear, and then he should gladly take up the ennobling load.

Exemption there can be none, unless a man will dare to claim that he is his own, and was never bought with a price. Each one throughout life must be “steadfast, unmovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord.”

III. Thirdly, our text is the summary of the chapter in which we have an ACCOUNT OF THE ACTUAL FULFILLMENT OF THE LORD’S COMMAND BY MOSES.

He numbered each family, and cast up the total of the tribe, at the same time mentioning in detail the peculiar service of each. We would imitate him at this important moment, and take the census of those who are consecrated to the Lord’s own service.

Where are you, then, who can bear the heavier service of the sanctuary, carrying its pillars, and the boards, and the sockets thereof? You are now needed to speak in the meetings, to lead the people in prayer, to order the assemblies, and to take the heavier work of this holy business. The Lord Jesus should have able men to speak for Him—He deserves the best of the best.

Now is the hour, where is the man? Let no diffidence or love of ease keep one back who might make known the Gospel and win a soul for Jesus. By the curse of Meroz when they came not to the help of the Lord against the mighty, we would charge all Christians of influence and ability to hasten to the field.

But where are you who can only carry the pins and the cords? Your burden is lighter, but probably your strength is also less—and lighter though your load may be, the matters which you carry are quite as essential as the pillars and the boards. Where are you? You who can say a few words to lonely inquiring ones, you who can do no more than pray, where are you?

At your posts or idling? Answer, and answer quickly, for time and need are pressing. If the load which you can carry is so very small, be all the more ready to bear it.

Are you a lover of the Lord Jesus and do you wish to be omitted from the roll call? If so, let it be known to yourself, and stated plainly to your conscience—do not pretend to be a laborer and remain a loiterer, but openly avow to your soul that you stand all the day idle, and feel fully justified in so doing.

Deny your Lord His due, but do it to His face. Tell Him openly that you do not mean to spend your days in glorifying His name.

Do you shrink from this honest refusal of service? You need not do so because it is at all unusual, for as Nabal said, “There are many servants nowadays that break away, every man from his master.” It is plain, however, that you have no stomach for so clear a rejection of your Lord.

Come, then, and take your place among those who are striving together to honor their Lord. At this time your help will be precious. Seek a new anointing, and then hasten to the work. Is not the Holy Ghost in you? Does He not prompt you to seek the salvation of others? Is not the Lord Jesus the model to which grace conforms you? How can this be if you have little or no love for the souls of your neighbors?

Your pastor calls you, though far away. By all our mutual love, he beseeches you to fulfill your ministry, every one according to his service, and according to his burden. But far above this, your God, your Savior, your Comforter call you with one voice. Can you refuse the heavenly vocation?

Taken from The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit C. H. Spurgeon Collection. Only necessary changes have been made, such as correcting spelling errors, some punctuation usage, capitalization of deity pronouns, and minimal updating of a few archaic words. The content is unabridged. Additional Bible-based resources are available at www.spurgeongems.org.