



Nehemiah 5:1-19

The Test of Leadership

There is nothing like the test of your leadership from within your organization.

The emotional and spiritual stress can become unbearable upon the leader who is under pressure. Some leaders break under the pressure, others become too discouraged and quit, some build walls around themselves to insulate the hurts. Some become embattled, embittered, and vindictive and further isolated resulting in failure. Still others grow from the experience and become effective leaders under stress.

The whole project of rebuilding the Jerusalem wall was nearly wrecked by internal dissension and strife.

Famine, food crisis, taxation, made the times exceedingly difficult. But the problem was aggravated by self-indulgent standard of living by a few nobles. Selfishness and greed will destroy the most commendable project.

People who had been greatly united when opposed by the external enemy were threatened by internal strife and dissension.

If you want a work of God ruined, let misunderstanding, discouragement and mistrust arise.

THE GREAT OUTCRY OF THE PEOPLE

The grievances were no light matter. There was a great outcry of the people for help suggesting a heart full of deep distress. The women are at the forefront of the protest over the prevailing conditions of these families. The people living in Judah were living in miserable conditions. The women were panic-stricken. It is interesting that women are expressly mentioned only here in Ezra-Nehemiah suggesting that the situation is now life threatening. There is urgency in the matter. Their husbands have been working on the wall for about a month since it is half way completed.

"Now there was a great outcry of the people and of their wives against their Jewish brothers" (Nehemiah 5:1, NASB 1995).

Internal opposition

The internal problem Nehemiah faces has to deal with the division between rich and poor.

Destruction and despair marks the opening verses in Nehemiah 5:1-5. With this chapter we are face to face with an internal enemy which is potentially more dangerous than the others because it threatens their unity. It is the age-old gap between the rich and the poor. Instead of the rich Jewish leaders in Jerusalem helping their Jewish brothers, they were exploring the poor.

Many of the Jews who returned from Babylonian captivity came back well off financially (Ezra 1:11; 2 Chron. 36:18; Dan. 1:1-2). People gave generously when the Temple was rebuilt (Neh. 7:71-72).

Taking advantage of the poor

There was poverty beyond description leading to slavery. Selfishness and greed raised their ugly heads in a day of crisis. Some of the families did not have enough to eat. "For there were those who said, We, our sons and our daughters are many; therefore let us get grain that we may eat and live " (Nehemiah 5:2).

The families had mortgaged their farms. "There were others who said, We are mortgaging our fields, our vineyards and our houses that we might get grain because of the famine " (Nehemiah 5:3). Inflation was spiraling out of proportions. Crop failures had drastically reduced the family income. Because of the famine, money was unavailable for the farmers to pay their taxes. These taxes further reduced their holdings. The farmers' resources were used up and their farms were mortgaged so they were unable to pay. In desperation they were selling their children into slavery. Mortgage interest rates were enormous, and there was no relief in sight. The family farms were folding and as a result in despair they were selling their children into slavery.

The wealthier Jews had taken advantage of the terrible situation of those who were less fortunate and reduced many of them to slavery. They were taking advantage of the unfortunate situation of the poor Jews.

Everyone was affected by the famine and exploitation. A vicious cycle ensued. The famine led to inadequate food production with the farmers unable to pay mortgages and taxes. The problem kept going from bad to worse. Now it had reached a critical mass. I cannot help but wonder if these were the same "nobles" also referred in 2:5 who did not work on the wall.

"Also there were those who said, We have borrowed money for the king's tax on our fields and our vineyards. Now our flesh is like the flesh of our brothers, our children like their children. Yet behold, we are forcing our sons and our daughters to be slaves, and some of our daughters are forced into bondage already, and we are helpless because our fields and vineyards belong to others " (Nehemiah 5:4-5).

Despair was written all over their lives. We are forcing our sons and daughters to be slaves (v. 5). The creditors were taking the children of the farmers as slaves.

PERSONAL REACTION OF NEHEMIAH

"Then I was very angry when I had heard their outcry and these words" (Nehemiah 5:6).

Nehemiah got hot with anger because the nobles and leaders were disobeying the Law.

This is the anger of a righteous man. There is a time for anger.

Nehemiah acknowledged his reaction to what was happening to the common people. This is righteous anger of a righteous man. There are times when the only response to a situation is anger. Righteous anger is appropriate when the situation is called for. We should be angry when moral principles are at stake.

Competent leadership involves personal risks.

We live in a world largely motivated by selfishness, dominated by greed, and controlled by money. In such an atmosphere sacred things are ruthlessly sacrificed and even spiritual things commercialized and cheapened, writes Owen White.

"I consulted with myself"

"I consulted with myself and contended with the nobles and the rulers and said to them, You are exacting usury, each from his brother! Therefore, I held a great assembly against them" (Nehemiah 5:7).

Nehemiah thought the situation through before he expressed his anger. He did not fly off the handle or explode all over the place. He contained himself. Self-control is essential for every leader. The pastor who explodes will not be in the pastorate long. Find a quiet place alone and tell it all to God. He will quietly listen.

The word "consulted" means to give one self-advice, to counsel oneself. This is essential before confronting the individuals involved.

The nobles and the rulers were no doubt the power players. Every organization has these on board. Some are on the board of trustees, the deacons, WMU director, financial committee, etc.

Nehemiah refers to the redemption Jewish people who had been sold to the nations. Had the Jewish community been able to free some of their brethren from the Gentiles in recent years?

What a tragic contrast between this triumph of Jewish idealism and the current situation in which the Jews are themselves exploiting their own Jewish brethren.

The repetition of "selling" in v. 8 reinforces this problem. Nehemiah suggests that some of those who were being brought back from the nations had actually been sold off by Jews. If so, the presenting problem is even more tragic.

The confrontation

Nehemiah first confronted in privacy those who were exploiting the poor people.

"I consulted with myself and contended with the nobles and the rulers and said to them, You are exacting usury, each from his brother! Therefore, I held a great assembly against them" (Nehemiah 5:7).

Nehemiah tried to resolve the problem in private before going public. Apparently he did not succeed. Therefore he went public and called a "great assembly."

The Old Testament law was very clear regarding the abuse of the poor (Ex. 22:25; Lev. 25:35-41; Deut. 23:19-20). The Jewish people were not to exploit their own citizens. In doing so they were acting like their Gentile neighbors. They were not to take advantage of their own people.

After confronting the nobles privately, he proceeded to call a "great assembly against them" (v. 7). This is also the proper manner of confrontation taught by Jesus. "If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother. But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed" (Matthew 18:15-16).

What was the specific observable behavior that Nehemiah confronted? It is wrong to charge fellow Jews interest on loans, and force a fellow Jew into slavery (vv. 7-8).

Another factor for Nehemiah was the testimony of God's chosen people before the watching world was profaned. "Again I said, 'The thing which you are doing is not good; should you not walk in the fear of our God because of the reproach of the nations, our enemies?'" (Nehemiah 5:9).

A church split is an evil testimony before lost people. The devil applauds the loudest when a church is filled with dissension and conflicts.

The assembly Nehemiah called for brought together the powerful rich landlords and the poor disadvantaged residents.

Keep in mind this internal conflict between the rich and the poor had a negative effect on the rebuilding of the wall. The morale of the people was affected. It had reached a boiling point and had to be dealt with immediately. What good was it to build the wall, if inside the wall there were people who were exploiting one another? asks Frank Tillapaugh.

We face the same inner turmoil in evangelical Christianity. We need to stop calling the world to repent until we repent ourselves. Integrity begins at home. Judgment must begin in the house of the Lord.

The nobles in Jerusalem were disobeying the Word of God (Lev. 25:35-41; 23:19-20; Deut 23:19). We are held under stricter demands than the lost world. One day we will stand before the Lord God and give answer to Him. No Jew was ever to enslave another Jew. It was wrong to demand interest on a loan to a fellow Jew.

The nobles were looking out for number one. They had an eye for personal gain rather than for the good of Jerusalem. They were becoming rich at the expense of the poorer brethren. Love for money has not changed even in denominational circles. There is a great tendency to enjoy the good life at the expense of others. The perks that come with the office, the popularity and privileges can lead to arrogant pride and spiritual fall. What was happening in Jerusalem among the nobles was nothing short of evil.

Mosaic law was meant to create a very different kind of society from the surrounding Gentile nations. God intended for His people to be different.

Part of Nehemiah's argument is the injustice on the part of the Jewish people that reflected on the righteousness of God before a watching world. The character of the community reflects upon God. Israel was to be different from the rest of the world.

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Nehemiah called for specific observable action.

The only behavior that changes is observed behavior.

Nehemiah called upon the leaders to stop the evil behavior. "And likewise I, my brothers and my servants are lending them money and grain. Please, let us leave off this usury" (Nehemiah 5:10). Break the behavior pattern now. Immediate action was called for. He asked them for a specific time to implement the decision. "Please, give back to them this very day their fields, their vineyards, their olive groves and their houses, also the hundredth part of the money and of the grain, the new wine and the oil that you are exacting from them" (Nehemiah 5:11). He called on specific behavior to change and gave a time to begin.

Chuck Swindoll has some excellent words.

When God shows us a particular sin that we are guilty of, He doesn't tell us to take our time dealing with it. No, He says, Deal with it NOW! When we realize what we are doing wrong, *now* is the time to stop it. Making long-range plans to correct a problem allows the sands of time to hone off the raw edges of God's reproof in our lives. We end up tolerating that sin and perhaps even protecting it. Such laxity greatly concerns our Lord. A prompt and thorough dealing with wrong in our lives is essential. As in finances, it is best to keep all accounts current (*Hand Me Another Brick*, p. 106).

Repentance

The response of the nobles at the public meeting was noble. "Then they said, We will give it back and will require nothing from them; we will do exactly as you say. So I called the priests and took an oath from them that they would do according to this promise" (Nehemiah 5:12).

Words are cheap, therefore, Nehemiah called for a public promise for change in behavior. It was a public hearing, a public declaration, and a public promise before God, says Swindoll.

Public Accountability

"I also shook out the front of my garment and said, Thus may God shake out every man from his house and from his possessions who does not fulfill this promise; even thus may he be shaken out and emptied. And all the assembly said, Amen! And they praised the Lord. Then the people did according to this promise" (Nehemiah 5:13).

The nobles and public officials took an oath before the priests. It was like calling in the notary public for an official statement that would be upheld in a court of law.

Nehemiah has been lending money too, but he was not guilty of usury (vv. 10, 12). Therefore, he can say with personal conviction, Please, let us leave off this usury (v. 10). In essence, he was telling the nobles, You made God a promise and that is not something to be taken lightly.

The symbolic act described in verse thirteen where Nehemiah is seen shaking out his garments as a prophetic warning that God would hold accountable anyone who had promised to do the right thing and disobey. Nehemiah was calling upon a prophetic judgment of God for disobedience. He believed that we will all one day answer to God for our actions. When Nehemiah shakes out his lap it is the equivalent of emptying his

day answer to God for our actions. When Nehemiah shakes out his lap it is the equivalent of emptying his pockets, symbolizing the loss of all that one has. If the people break their vow with God, Nehemiah invokes the judgment of God so they shall possess nothing. It was a serious matter.

Old Testament scholars Keil and Delitzsch write, "The symbolic action consisted in Nehemiah's gathering up his garment as if for the purpose of carrying something, and then shaking it out with the words above stated, which declared the meaning of the act. The whole congregation said Amen, and praised the Lord for the success with which God had blessed his efforts to help the poor. And the people did according to this promise, i.e. the community acted in accordance with the agreement entered into."

PERSONAL INTEGRITY OF NEHEMIAH

The secret to Nehemiah's focused leadership was a close relationship with God (vv. 14-19). Here he reflects on twelve years experience as governor of Judah. Probably sometimes while the wall of Jerusalem was being rebuilt, Nehemiah was appointed governor of Judah. This was the highest position of authority in the nation at that time.

"Moreover, from the day that I was appointed to be their governor in the land of Judah, from the twentieth year to the thirty-second year of King Artaxerxes, for twelve years, neither I nor my kinsmen have eaten the governor's food allowance. But the former governors who were before me laid burdens on the people and took from them bread and wine besides forty shekels of silver; even their servants domineered the people. But I did not do so because of the fear of God. I also applied myself to the work on this wall; we did not buy any land, and all my servants were gathered there for the work. Moreover, there were at my table one hundred and fifty Jews and officials, besides those who came to us from the nations that were around us. Now that which was prepared for each day was one ox and six choice sheep, also birds were prepared for me; and once in ten days all sorts of wine were furnished in abundance. Yet for all this I did not demand the governor's food allowance, because the servitude was heavy on this people. Remember me, O my God, for good, according to all that I have done for this people" (Nehemiah 5:14-19).

He was a man of integrity. Here is his personal testimony. He set an example and modeled for all great leaders in public life. He is a good example of servant leadership in which he did not lord it over the people. "He served the public with a pure heart and did not take advantage of them."

One of the advantages of being governor was the food allowance granted him by the Persian officials for entertaining guests. Nehemiah did not take advantage of this benefit that was rightfully his. He provided these needs from his own personal funds.

He did not take advantage of the perks that come with the job and leads the good life at the expense of the people. He stayed within his own means and used his personal wealth to feed the less fortunate. Nehemiah's life was a public demonstration of an honest administrator. There was no abuse or misuse of power, privilege or money.

The motive of service

The fear of God was the motive of Nehemiah's service. "But I did not do so because of the fear of God." Verse fifteen sets the contrast clearly between Nehemiah's fear of God and the former governors who were business as usual. The bottom line for Nehemiah was the fear of God which is equivalent to the love of Christ for the Christian. It is the love of Christ which constrains us. When His love controls us, everything else finds its rightful place in our lives.

Jesus said, "Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who enter through it. For the gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life, and there are few who find it" (Matthew 7:13-14).

Moreover, Nehemiah was a generous man as revealed in verses seventeen and eighteen.

Nehemiah could lay his head down to sleep at night and say, "Remember me, O my God, for good, according to all that I have done for this people" (v. 19).

What men think about our ministry or us becomes very insignificant when Christ speaks, and the charter of our freedom from them lies in our redemption by the blood of Jesus Christ. He is our Judge and the ideas of the men of the world are only vanity. "He that judges me is the Lord. 'So did not I, because of the fear of God."

When we love Him with all our heart, mind and personal being we can refuse to be one of the crowd. We have the inner power of the Holy Spirit if we desire only to love and serve Christ. It is the work of the Holy Spirit to glorify Christ. When you trust in Christ, God the Holy Spirit goes to work and empowers you to live His life in and through you to the glory of God the Father.

You have all the power of God the Holy Spirit within you from the moment you believed on Christ to save you. All you need to do to allow Christ to live through you is trust in Christ. "Lord, I can't live this day by myself. I'm trusting You. Here is my life. Come, live in me. In your frustration say to Him, "Lord, I need You. When you trust in Christ, God the Holy Spirit loves to go to work.

Stanley Toussaint, well said, "Some people think that the filling of the Spirit means that you receive more of the Holy Spirit. But the Holy Spirit is a person, not a divine liquid poured into a bottle. When you receive the Holy Spirit, you have all of the Holy Spirit you are ever going to receive. The issue is not getting more of the Holy Spirit. The issue is the Holy Spirit controlling more and more of us."

The world places a higher standard upon our Christianity than many Christians do. The world expects us to be different. Many Christians are eager to impress the world with their similarities in thinking and behavior. But Jesus permitted no such exceptions. He said clearly, "You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt has become tasteless, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled under foot by men. You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden; nor does anyone light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 5:13-16).

In what way has the contemporary church lowered the standard of thinking about moral issues? What does the Bible teach regarding abortion, homosexuality, and sexual practices? What about integrity in business practices?

Why should we lower our standard to the world's system of moral behavior? We do not answer to men of this world, but to the LORD God.

Without holiness no one can see God. When we fail we can flee to the blood of Jesus that cleanses from all sin and every stain of guilt. There is no other fountain for cleansing. Our lives have been made pure by His atoning sacrifice for sin.

The love of the Lord Jesus Christ is the only motive that inspires a person to stay right before God and keep his life pure and clean.

Where do we find the power to overcome? It is in the cross of Jesus. If every leader held that cross high the moral integrity of our churches, businesses and government would be a standard for all the world to follow.

The secret of triumph is found not only in saying *nó* to sin but also in saying *yés*; to God's will and purpose, writes Allan Redpath.

Integrity in preaching

Clarence Macartney said, Every evasion of duty, every indulgence of self, every compromise with evil, every unworthy thought, word, or deed, will be there at the head of the pulpit stairs to meet the minister on Sunday morning, to take the light from his eye, the power from his brow, the ring from his voice, and the joy from his heart. ”

Chuck Swindoll says, Sin follows you around like your shadow. ”

SOME ABIDING PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS

1. But I did not so because of the fear of God (v. 15) should be etched into our minds. Do you have a hard time saying *nó* to the world's standards? Do you have a tendency to drive near or to live near the precipice of the lure of that which is not like Christ? Wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to hell. Everyone's doing it, and everyone is going to hell. Do you want to go there with them? But I did not so because of the fear of God. If you do not have that kind of reverence for Him may God bring you to that degree of love for Him.
2. A person of integrity must be able to say *nó*. Unless you can say *nó* and do it often, your life will be shattered from the beginning. If you cannot say *nó* you are in trouble at the core of your integrity. A leader in crisis is one who cannot say *nó*. ”
3. When you have the fear of God and compassion for your people, you have character that makes for a great leader.
4. It is possible to maintain a façade of righteousness before men for a time, but not before God.
5. In response to a self-indulgent society of nobles, Nehemiah could respond, But I did not do so because of the fear of God. His life was absolutely beyond suspicion. His integrity was intact after twelve years of public service. In a time of moral confusion, he was able to stand before his people with a life that was lived above reproach.
6. The Christian is to live in such a way that men looking at him and seeing the quality of his life, will glorify God, says D. M. Lloyd-Jones.
7. No leader suddenly loses his integrity. It is a quiet and prolonged process. The erosion of sin goes on unnoticed until the fall becomes apparent.
8. You have to be absolutely ruthlessly honest with yourself when dealing with sin. Never put off what must

be done immediately.

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