

When the Critic Calls
Nehemiah 4:1-23
January 19, 2014

Introduction – Criticism is the Leader’s Companion

Not everyone aspires to be a leader. But virtually all of us are leaders on some level. If you’re a parent, you’re a leader. If you are an older sibling, you are a leader – even though you may not want that role. If you are a teacher, you are most definitely a leader. Most of us have influence to some degree and that makes you a leader of sorts.

But there are people who are compelled to lead. They’re not happy unless they’re leading. By nature, they are change agents, leading from the status quo to some new place. Every human organization needs those kinds of leaders, from as basic as a family to the complexity of a large corporation. The church needs leaders, too. If you are a true leader, you are bringing change.

Lots of folks don’t like that. You are a target for criticism. Get used to it.

I will never forget one of my students in the worship leadership program at Huntington University where I taught. Her name was Bethany. She was really a sweet and likable girl. A bit on the naïve side, too. She was in her second semester and was enrolled in my “Relationships in Christian Ministry” class. (No, it was a dating course...) I always loved the first day of classes. There was virtually no prep for me and I took just a bit of malicious joy in watching the students squirm as we unpacked the course syllabus. The students hated those days. After going through the first day of each course most of them would have what they called, “syllabus shock.” The whole semester was laid out in front of them and it inevitably seemed overwhelming. But they always got through. On the first day in my Relationships class, I would have each student introduce themselves, tell their degree focus in ministry and relate why they’ve chosen their path. For a class that was going to focus on relationships, I figured we needed to get to know each other. I’ll never forget Bethany’s reason for wanting to be a worship leader. She said, “I know that God has called me to be a worship leader because I love to make people happy.”

Not wanting to embarrass her, I kept myself from snickering as I recollected myself. I’ve been in ministry a long time. For most of that time, I was a minister of music – a worship pastor. I’ve observed youth pastors, children’s directors, adult ministry pastors and senior pastors. There is no role, by a long margin, that faces more criticism than the person who does music in the church – including the senior pastor. That’s because in the last forty years, music has been the arena of the most dramatic change in the American evangelical church.

I know criticism. It has been my constant companion for these many years.

But how do you face criticism? If you are a leader – and most of you are on some level – how do you stand without wilting before the attacks? How do you sleep at night? And how do you deal with your antagonists should their criticism become real threats?

Nehemiah was one of the greatest leaders, not only in the Bible, but in the course of human history. In chapter four, he faces mockery and threats. His response is a helpful model of how a godly leader handles criticism and danger.

Honest Prayer

Now when Sanballat heard that we were building the wall, he was angry and greatly enraged, and he jeered at the Jews. And he said in the presence of his brothers and of the army [*or wealthy men* (NASB)] of Samaria, “What are these feeble Jews doing? Will they restore it for themselves? Will they sacrifice? Will they finish up in a day? Will they revive the stones out of the heaps of rubbish, and burned ones at that?” Tobiah the Ammonite was beside him, and he said, “Yes, what they are building—if a fox goes up on it he will break down their stone wall!” (vss. 1-3)

Of course, we’ve met Sanballat and Tobiah before in this story. And we haven’t heard the last of them, either. Sanballat, if you recall, was the governor of Samaria, the region directly north of Jerusalem’s area of influence. The people of Samaria were half cousins of the Jews and worshipped the God of the Bible “in their own way” – which was not prescribed in Scripture and distorted. Sanballat thought he held influence and had a stake in Jerusalem. When Nehemiah first encountered him in chapter 2, he rebuked Sanballat and his cronies and told them in no uncertain terms that they had no rights in Jerusalem. And remember, Nehemiah had the authority of the Persian emperor behind him. Tobiah was an Ammonite – ancient enemies of the Jewish people. He, too, is a governor of sorts in the region and is a partner in crime with Sanballat.

Last week we considered how Nehemiah inspired the people of Jerusalem to work together. It is an incredible story of the power of teamwork. Sanballat’s mockery is intended to discourage and disillusion the people. It’s a common tactic of adversaries and it seems that no one needs to be taught how to do it. It’s the stuff of school-yard bullies, trash-talking athletes, and political pundits. Sanballat leads the way and Tobiah piles on. It sounds like a Jr. High school bus, if you ask me. Only these guys are grown men with political and military power at their disposal.

What do you do, when you’re faced with this kind of criticism? No matter how thick-skinned you are, this kind of mockery, designed to demoralize you and your people, is troublesome. Nehemiah responds in prayer:

“Hear, O our God, for we are despised. Turn back their taunt on their own heads and give them up to be plundered in a land where they are captives. Do not cover their guilt, and let not their sin be blotted out from your sight, for they have provoked you to anger in the presence of the builders.” (vss. 4-5)

Nehemiah asks that the tables be turned on his enemies. For two generations, the Jews were held in Babylonian captivity. He asked that Sanballat and Tobiah experience the same devastation. His prayer is a cry for justice. He wants them to be held accountable for what they are doing. This kind of prayer is troublesome for many Christians. Some of the commentators that I read in studying this passage suggest that this kind of prayer was appropriate for the Old Testament, but not for us now.

I'm not sure I agree.

Nehemiah's prayer flows out of the tradition of lament which is found throughout the psalms. Psalm 5, which we read this morning, is an excellent example:

Give ear to my words, O Lord;
 consider my groaning.
 Give attention to the sound of my cry,
 my King and my God,
 for to you do I pray.
 O Lord, in the morning you hear my voice;
 in the morning I prepare a sacrifice for you and watch.

The life of the psalmist is an open book before the Lord. There is no hiding of feelings or circumstances. What is very significant in these verses is how the psalmist frames his whole life. Don't miss it:

This is not just his problem. It is God's.

We could stop the sermon here. That's it in a nutshell. All of life is set before God. Are you like that? Do you begin in the morning with God? Do you, as the psalmist does, “prepare a sacrifice [of worship to him] and watch [in faith for his answer]”? It is a question of how you frame your life. Are you living in God's world where he is King, or does God live in your world where his role is relegated to come to your assistance when you get in trouble? How you answer that question makes all the difference in the world.

The psalmist continues by rehearsing the covenant that God has established with his people: affirming the righteous but condemning evil.

For you are not a God who delights in wickedness;
 evil may not dwell with you.
 The boastful shall not stand before your eyes;
 you hate all evildoers.
 You destroy those who speak lies;
 the Lord abhors the bloodthirsty and deceitful man.

The psalmist then affirms that he is righteous, living out the covenant with God.

But I, through the abundance of your steadfast love,
 will enter your house.
 I will bow down toward your holy temple
 in the fear of you.

He then prays and asks for help:

Lead me, O Lord, in your righteousness
 because of my enemies;
 make your way straight before me.

In accordance with the promises of the covenant, he prays for justice. You can see Nehemiah's inspiration right here:

For there is no truth in their mouth;
 their inmost self is destruction;
 their throat is an open grave;
 they flatter with their tongue.
 Make them bear their guilt, O God;
 let them fall by their own counsels;
 because of the abundance of their transgressions cast them out,
 for they have rebelled against you.

Finally, the psalmist affirms his trust in God, that he will bring justice and protect the righteous:

But let all who take refuge in you rejoice;
 let them ever sing for joy,
 and spread your protection over them,
 that those who love your name may exult in you.
 For you bless the righteous, O Lord;

you cover him with favor as with a shield.

This is a powerful way to pray when faced with mockery and criticism by real enemies. Notice that Nehemiah prayed, “Hear O God...for they have provoked you to anger...” This is not just Nehemiah’s problem; Nehemiah places the responsibility for dealing with it squarely on God. It is the response of faith. Nehemiah is not out for revenge. He is out for justice. That should be our same approach when faced with criticism. It aligns perfectly with Jesus’ call for us to forgive and the Apostle Paul’s prohibition against revenge:

Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.”

Romans 12:17-19

Nehemiah’s prayer is a powerful way to pray for Christians who are living in God’s will and doing his work. But there are times when prayer alone is not enough. The story continues with verse 6:

Nehemiah 4:6-23

So we built the wall. And all the wall was joined together to half its height, for the people had a mind to work.

But when Sanballat and Tobiah and the Arabs and the Ammonites and the Ashdodites heard that the repairing of the walls of Jerusalem was going forward and that the breaches were beginning to be closed, they were very angry. And they all plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and to cause confusion in it. And we prayed to our God and set a guard as a protection against them day and night.

The next few verses explain in a bit more detail what happened:

In Judah it was said, “The strength of those who bear the burdens is failing. There is too much rubble. By ourselves we will not be able to rebuild the wall.” And our enemies said, “They will not know or see till we come among them and kill them and stop the work.” At that time the Jews who lived near them came from all directions and said to us ten times, “You must return to us.” So in the lowest parts of the space behind the wall, in open places, I stationed the people by their clans, with their swords, their spears, and their bows. And I looked and arose and said to the nobles and to the officials and to the rest of the people, “Do not be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome, and fight for your brothers, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your homes.”

The work then continued:

When our enemies heard that it was known to us and that God had frustrated their plan, we all returned to the wall, each to his work. From that day on, half of my servants worked on construction, and half held the spears, shields, bows, and coats of mail. And the leaders stood behind the whole house of Judah, who were building on the wall. Those who carried burdens were loaded in such a way that each labored on the work with one hand and held his weapon with the other. And each of the builders had his sword strapped at his side while he built. The man who sounded the trumpet was beside me. And I said to the nobles and to the officials and to the rest of the people, “The work is great and widely spread, and we are separated on the wall, far from one another. In the place where you hear the sound of the trumpet, rally to us there. Our God will fight for us.”

So we labored at the work, and half of them held the spears from the break of dawn until the stars came out. I also said to the people at that time, “Let every man and his servant pass the night within Jerusalem, that they may be a guard for us by night and may labor by day.” So neither I nor my brothers nor my servants nor the men of the guard who followed me, none of us took off our clothes; each kept his weapon at his right hand.

Practical Planning

The narrative here is pretty clear. The Ashdodites, which were remnants of the old Philistines, were located to the south and the west. With Sanballat to the north, Tobiah to the east, and the Arabs to the south, Jerusalem was surrounded with increasingly aggressive enemies. The war of words threatened to escalate to physical combat. Mockery and criticism had deteriorated to real threats.

The people heard of the threats and became afraid. Nehemiah mobilized. I love that! The effective leader is not only interested in the progress of the project, but the morale of the people is a primary concern. He gathered them together. First, he reminded them that they were doing God’s work, “Do not be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome.” (14) He kept the vision before the people. Jerusalem would be “the place where God’s name dwelt.” And then he gave them an effective strategy for defending themselves and completing the work.

It was masterful leadership. In the end, the attack never came. Those who sought to demoralize were themselves demoralized by the preparation and perseverance of the people.

The Balance of Prayer and Planning

What can we gain from this story? Simply put, effective leadership requires both prayer and planning. There are those who think it is somehow unspiritual to plan. They want to “go with the flow” and follow the “leading of the Spirit.” On the other hand, there are those who make

the plans, do the work and then ask God to bless it like a stamp of approval. God's work, like Jesus himself, always has two natures: divine and human. Through prayer, we frame the issues of our life within God's enterprise, just as Nehemiah and the psalms do. But just as God became flesh and blood through Jesus Christ, so God uses our intellect and imagination to plan as well as our hands and feet to do his will. Prayer and planning do not cancel each other out. Both are God's gifts to us to do his work.

In the realm in which you find yourself as a leader – and all of us are leaders on some level – pray when you face criticism because it is God's work that you are doing. Remember the question we asked,

“Are you living in God's world where he is King, or does God live in your world where his role is relegated to come to your assistance when you get in trouble?”

It doesn't matter if your sphere of influence is in the family, the corporate world, or in the church. Live God's way as it is his world and you can deflect all criticism toward him. It's not just your problem. It's God's problem. And then plan, prepare, and work with all the imagination and resources that God has given you.

The lesson of this passage also applies to us as a church. We must always begin with prayer and recognize that we are God's enterprise. This has to be more than pretense or playing church. We must be convinced to our core that this place is to be the place where God's name dwells and pray with a passion towards that end. Know that criticism, opposition, and perhaps threats will even come towards the progress of God's work among us. We meet those obstacles with prayer – remembering that we are God's work and let him be the ultimate judge of people and programs.

But along with prayer, we will also plan. We got a good start last week. If you were unable to participate in last week's brainstorming sessions, you can still send in your ideas to the church office to be included in the process, if you'll do that by the end of this week. In the bulletin, I've laid out the process that we will use to develop a strategic plan.

Church family, these are exciting days. But let us not be naïve. There will be struggles. There will be opposition. If we truly mobilize and if you and I are willing to be changed, then Satan will not be happy. The great hymn says, “His craft and power are great, and armed with cruel hate.” But Satan is defeated already. Jesus Christ crushed him through his death and resurrection. May we always keep the cross before us as we pray, plan, and work to make this the place where God's name dwells.

Prayer

Hymn #30 – A Mighty Fortress is Our God