

The Enemy Within
Nehemiah 5:1-19
January 26, 2014

Introduction – Leaders Listen

It usually doesn't take too long. Put people together on a project and there will undoubtedly be some sort of friction. It's inevitable. Those who are in leadership must learn how to listen and act in order to effectively lead. If they don't, the results could be disastrous.

Take, for example, Henry Hudson, the seventeenth century explorer who discovered the vast expanse of water in Northeastern Canada that bears his name. He was determined to find the fabled Northwest Passage to Asia from Europe and made four disappointing attempts toward that end. But in his journeys he explored much of the Eastern Seaboard, including discovering the Hudson River. His exploration paved the way for eventual settlement of the New World. His fourth journey of exploration, however, ended in disaster because of his failure to listen and manage his crew.

In 1610, with his ship, *Discovery*, he sailed into the vast expanse of Hudson Bay. The explorer was convinced that he had discovered the elusive Northwestern Passage. But before it could be fully explored, the ship became icebound and his crew was forced to winter over in the brutal environment. When the ice cleared in 1611, Hudson was determined to push forward in his venture. The crew, prone to infighting, starving, sick and weary from their ordeal, mutinied and set the captain, his young son and several others adrift in a small lifeboat. The *Discovery* returned home and Hudson was never heard from again.

Nehemiah wasn't on a journey of exploration, but his project to rebuild the wall in Jerusalem was an enormous undertaking. Unlike Hudson, he was an excellent leader of his people. They had grasped the vision, overcome taunting from the outside and were making good progress on the reconstruction of the wall. It was a remarkable feat of teamwork. But the enterprise had put people together with diverse backgrounds, expectations, and needs. There were farmers, tradesmen, priests and nobles. They came from within the city walls and from the outlying villages. With such an assortment of different folks thrown into one demanding project, it was just a matter of time before sparks started to fly.

Text – Nehemiah 5:1-13

Now there arose a great outcry of the people and of their wives against their Jewish brothers. For there were those who said, "With our sons and our daughters, we are many. So let us get grain, that we may eat and keep alive." There were also those who said, "We are mortgaging our fields, our vineyards, and our houses to get grain because of the famine." And there were those who said, "We have borrowed money for the king's tax on our fields and our vineyards. Now our flesh is as the flesh of our brothers, our children are as their children. Yet we are forcing our sons

and our daughters to be slaves, and some of our daughters have already been enslaved, but it is not in our power to help it, for other men have our fields and our vineyards.”

I was very angry when I heard their outcry and these words. I took counsel with myself, and I brought charges against the nobles and the officials. I said to them, “You are exacting interest, each from his brother.” And I held a great assembly against them and said to them, “We, as far as we are able, have bought back our Jewish brothers who have been sold to the nations, but you even sell your brothers that they may be sold to us!” They were silent and could not find a word to say. So I said, “The thing that you are doing is not good. Ought you not to walk in the fear of our God to prevent the taunts of the nations our enemies? Moreover, I and my brothers and my servants are lending them money and grain. Let us abandon this exacting of interest. Return to them this very day their fields, their vineyards, their olive orchards, and their houses, and the percentage of money, grain, wine, and oil that you have been exacting from them.” Then they said, “We will restore these and require nothing from them. We will do as you say.” And I called the priests and made them swear to do as they had promised. I also shook out the fold of my garment and said, “So may God shake out every man from his house and from his labor who does not keep this promise. So may he be shaken out and emptied.” And all the assembly said “Amen” and praised the Lord. And the people did as they had promised.

Disenfranchised Brothers – vs. 1-5

It may be useful for us to review the progression of God’s enterprise through Nehemiah up to this point. If you recall, he was a cupbearer to the Persian king – a very high position in the empire. When he heard of the devastation and humiliation of Jerusalem, he was deeply grieved – the Scripture says he wept – and began to pray. After several months of prayer, he approached the king, requesting to go to Jerusalem to lead the effort in rebuilding the wall. King Artaxerxes not only granted his request, but gave him ample supplies and letters of authority. Upon arrival in Jerusalem, Nehemiah secretly inspected the walls, gave his report to the people and rallied them into the rebuilding project. Virtually everyone bought in and the work began. But the neighbors weren’t happy. They hadn’t applied for the proper permits from them (OK – perhaps that’s a little bit of added color) and they began to taunt and threaten the builders. Nehemiah quickly rallied his people and thwarted their enemy’s designs with a strategic defensive move. All was moving ahead wonderfully on the project.

Put people together working on a significant project and before long you will have tension. The surety of tension should not dissuade you from undertaking the project, but the wise leader will have his ear to the ground and be ready for it. Pastor Warren Wiersbe wisely observes:

Often when a church enters into a building program, all sorts of problems start to surface that people didn’t even know were there. A building program is a demanding thing that

tests our faith, our patience, and our priorities, and while it brings out the best in some people, it can often bring out the worst in others.¹

Friends, tension and conflict is not to be feared, but rather embraced. Nehemiah's building project didn't *cause* the problems we read about in this passage, it *revealed* them. Such a revelation is a very positive, though challenging development. When a problem comes to the surface, the sickness can be cured. And that's exactly what happened in this case.

What was it that was causing all the uproar? It was no small thing! Even the women were publically protesting – something that was never done in the ancient world. Simply put, the rich were oppressing the poor. The wall building project had made the problem come to the surface. The farmers in the outlying villages had been asked to come in to work on the wall so the work of cultivation and harvest had been set aside. Most likely, opposition from the surrounding nations had caused economic isolation. In addition, they were also experiencing some sort of famine, so any food was difficult to secure. The poor had mortgaged all of their property to the rich just to survive and now they carried not only the burden to repay their loans, but to pay interest as well. On top of it all, they had put themselves into debt and servitude to pay the Persian emperor's tax. Not only had they lost their property, but their children as well.

The Law of Moses provided for lending money or material goods to another Jew. But they were prohibited from extracting interest. The Law also allowed a debtor to put himself into service to another Jew, but the creditor was to always treat the debtor as a brother and not a slave. Clearly, the Law had been ignored and broken in Jerusalem. The story emphasizes their family relationship by citing the word *brother* at least six times in the text. Don't miss that. The great shame of the whole incident was that rich and powerful Jews were oppressing their own people! The building project had revealed an ugly societal cancer in the community – one of disobedience and dishonor for a people who were to bear God's name.

Rebuke – vs. 6-10

The Scripture says that Nehemiah was “very angry.” His fury was a righteous anger. The affront was not to him personally, but to the name and reputation of the Lord. Nehemiah was called to do God's work. He was a man of prayer. He knew the heart of God. And the heart of God was expressed through the prophet Isaiah five hundred years earlier:

“Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of wickedness,
to undo the straps of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?”

¹ Warren Wiersbe, *The Wiersbe Bible Commentary: OT Volume*, p. 766.

Is it not to share your bread with the hungry
 and bring the homeless poor into your house;
 when you see the naked, to cover him,
 and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?
 Then shall your light break forth like the dawn,
 and your healing shall spring up speedily;
 your righteousness shall go before you;
 the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard.
 Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer;
 you shall cry, and he will say, 'Here I am.'
 If you take away the yoke from your midst,
 the pointing of the finger, and speaking wickedness,
 if you pour yourself out for the hungry
 and satisfy the desire of the afflicted,
 then shall your light rise in the darkness
 and your gloom be as the noonday.
 And the Lord will guide you continually
 and satisfy your desire in scorched places
 and make your bones strong;
 and you shall be like a watered garden,
 like a spring of water,
 whose waters do not fail.
 And your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt;
 you shall raise up the foundations of many generations;
 you shall be called the repairer of the breach,
 the restorer of streets to dwell in.

Isa. 58:6-12

Nehemiah was beginning to see that his job involved much more than bricks and mortar. He would also bring spiritual renewal to a lapsed people.

The passage tells us that Nehemiah "took counsel with himself." Always a wise thing to do when you are burning with anger. Take time to reflect. There are times, but very few, when a leader has to think and act on the spot. Impulsive action can get you into trouble. Nehemiah was wise to take time to reflect and sort things out. When it was time to act, he didn't call in a judge. He called them all together and called the offenders on the carpet in a great assembly of all the people. This was a big problem and it required a dramatic confrontation. He publically embarrassed the oppressors by reminding them how the Jews had waited so long and worked so hard to come out of the oppression of Babylonian exile only to be put back into shame and servitude by opportunistic businessmen. He kept the vision of Jerusalem as being the place

where God's name would dwell before them. He drove it home into their hearts, "The thing that you are doing is not good. Ought you not to walk in the fear of our God to prevent the taunts of the nations our enemies?" (vs. 9) Having shamed them in the name of the Lord, Nehemiah put his foot down and demanded, "Return to them **this very day** their fields, their vineyards, their olive orchards, and their houses, and the percentage of money, grain, wine, and oil that you have been exacting from them."

Repentance – vss. 11-13

The oppressor's response was truly remarkable. They repented without question or delay and did exactly what Nehemiah demanded. Friends, repentance is a word that we should become familiar with. It is necessary for spiritual health in our personal lives and in our life together as a church. Repentance means aligning with God's will and purpose. It requires that we change our thinking and our actions. It means turning around from our own agenda to a single-focused pursuit of God and his plan. I pray that we will be a people whose hearts are soft toward God and each other and that we will be quick to repent. Anything less is just playing church.

Words can be cheap. We need something tangible, something symbolic to keep us on track. Repentance and redirection for the people of Jerusalem was absolutely critical if the vision of a renewed people and city was to ever be realized. So Nehemiah gave them a visual picture. He emptied his pockets – shook them out – and declared in God's name that such would be the fate of anyone who went back on their word. And then he called the priests and had the people make a vow before God that they would undo the wrong that they had done. They'd think twice before they ever took advantage of a Jewish brother again.

The result was profound. It didn't take a lot of words to describe it. The people said "Amen" and did what they promised.

Rules for Leaders – Reminders for Communities

Nehemiah is such an incredible study for leaders. Popular authors like Chuck Swindoll and Andy Stanley have written best sellers about leadership based on the book. Google "Nehemiah" and you'll find a lot of sermon series that focus on the traits of godly and effective leadership. Our purpose in this study is much greater and deeper than strategies for effective leadership. Our purpose in studying this book is to discern what God is calling us a people to be and do so that First Baptist might be the place where God's name dwells. But Nehemiah's courageous and effective leadership in this chapter is compelling. As I said last week, most of us are leaders on some level. We can personally learn a lot from this passage to be a more godly and effective leader. I have a few observations that I have found to be helpful.

1. **Leaders listen to their people.** Some leaders are so insecure that they can only focus on what they want and how they want things to be done. That was Henry Hudson's

shortcoming and demise. Nehemiah was not only concerned with the physical objective of building a wall, he was concerned about the morale and well-being of his people. Leaders listen to their people. Those who don't are foolish and doomed to failure. Parents, are you listening to your children? Teachers, are you listening to your students? Bosses, are you listening to your employees? If you truly listen and hold their welfare as a primary concern, they will follow you.

2. **Leaders reflect.** Hasty words and actions when you are angry – even if they are justified – will get you in trouble. Take the time to “consult with yourself” and reflect before you speak and act. Frankly, I don't trust myself. When I'm angry, it is a signal for me to slow down to pray and reflect.
3. **Leaders are motivated by the larger vision.** Nehemiah saw that the glory of God was at stake. An effective leader always has the big picture in mind, and that is what will motivate his actions. Some things will not affect the greater purpose and vision of an enterprise. Those little problems can be tolerated or dealt with lightly. Other things, sometimes very small, could eventually lead to disaster. A good parent should instinctively know the vision they have for their child. A good parent envisions their son or daughter as a healthy, godly and self-sufficient adult. It is that vision that will not allow a child to be willful and disrespectful. It is the same in the classroom or in any business venture. Ultimately, it is the vision that inspires and demands a leader's action.
4. **Leaders are courageous to confront.** Because the problem involved everyone and it was pervasive throughout the community, Nehemiah called the whole assembly together and publically confronted the oppressors. Some situations may require that kind of dramatic action. But typically, confrontation happens on a much smaller scale – usually one on one. Be like Nehemiah. He didn't mince words. He shot straight. But in his confrontation, he helped the people to see the evil of their oppression and how it was damaging to their overall vision of God's glory.
5. **Leaders confess their own shortcomings.** Nehemiah confessed that he, too, had been lending money and grain. He owned his own part in the problem. There are few things that will win over followers more than a leader's identification with them, especially in his shortcomings. And there are few things that will inspire more resentment in your people than hypocrisy. If you are a part of the problem, look there first and confess it. You'll show the way and open the door for their confession. Parents, this applies to you – especially when you are raising teenagers. Teachers – bosses – heed Nehemiah's example and you will cultivate loyal followers.
6. **Leaders offer a plan for correction.** This is where leaders need to be decisive. Having identified the problem and cultivated ownership, your followers need to know how to correct it and move forward.
7. **Leaders hold their people accountable.** Nehemiah employed symbolic action and had the people make a solemn vow. Effective leaders today may need to put the plan in writing with specific steps and deadlines. Parents and teachers, you know how to do this.

You've made charts on the refrigerator or the board. Bosses, you've written up plans. That's the first step. If the plans are to mean anything, the effective leader insures that the people are doing what they agreed to do in the plan. If the objectives aren't met, then the leader must mete out consequences.

The implications for us in this passage as a church are very plain. Being together - working together – as we will increasingly do in this year will reveal issues and problems that lie under the surface. Count on it. We should not fear this or be surprised by it. We will embrace the challenges that come upon us as an opportunity to address them and to grow in godliness. The problems in Jerusalem were ugly. The people did not love their brothers and sisters but were oppressing each other. It was a stain on people of God that needed to be washed away. The New Testament is clear that we are to always treat each other with love:

We love because [God] first loved us. If anyone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother.

I John 4:19-21

I am more and more convinced that God's vision for us is the same as he had for Jerusalem – that this would be the place where God's name dwells. When troubles come, and they will, let the rule of love always govern our relationships with each other. In that way, the world will see the glory of God manifested in us.

Jesus said it simply,

"Whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them,
for this is the Law and the Prophets."

Matthew 7:12

Those who aspire to be leaders for Christ must always lead by the Golden Rule. Nearly 500 years before the words came out of Jesus' mouth, Nehemiah modeled that kind of servant leadership.

Epilogue – Nehemiah's Servant Example – 5:14-19

Moreover, from the time that I was appointed to be their governor in the land of Judah, from the twentieth year to the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes the king, twelve years, neither I nor my

brothers ate the food allowance of the governor. The former governors who were before me laid heavy burdens on the people and took from them for their daily ration forty shekels of silver. Even their servants lorded it over the people. But I did not do so, because of the fear of God. I also persevered in the work on this wall, and we acquired no land, and all my servants were gathered there for the work. Moreover, there were at my table 150 men, Jews and officials, besides those who came to us from the nations that were around us. Now what was prepared at my expense for each day was one ox and six choice sheep and birds, and every ten days all kinds of wine in abundance. Yet for all this I did not demand the food allowance of the governor, because the service was too heavy on this people. Remember for my good, O my God, all that I have done for this people.

You see, Nehemiah wasn't just building a wall. He wasn't just serving and leading the people. He wasn't out to make a name for himself or to become loved by the people. In the end, his sole objective was to serve God and his purposes..

Song of Response – “By Faith”