



“A Good Leader”
Nehemiah 2:9-20

Idea: The world needs good leaders with their eyes on God.

Intro: Leadership...everyone understands how crucial it is, and everyone knows it when they see it. Remarkably, though, those leading often find it a daunting task and position.

Take Mike as an example. He sat in stunned silence, alone in the boardroom. He had appointments to keep, but they seemed irrelevant now. He remained frozen in his chair, trying to process the events of the previous hour. Mike was CEO of a software company. He was a young man – in his early thirties – bright, creative, and good at his job. Moreover, he was a committed Christian with a strong work ethic. He’d always considered his faith to be an asset to his career. But the morning’s executive team meeting had shattered that assumption. What began as a routine weekly meeting escalated into an acrimonious dispute, revealing a pervasive undercurrent of resentment toward him – more specifically toward his Christian beliefs. It seems a clear line had been drawn in the sand, with his executive team demanding he choose between his faith and his business. His staff seemed united on one thing

– that his agenda for the company did not match theirs. Mike was bewildered. He had a talented staff who knew their fields. Yet the majority were nonbelievers and several were disdainful of the Christian faith. He began to wonder if his job and his faith could no longer coexist.

Then there is Pastor Edwards who could hardly hold back his tears. He could still hear the deacons' voices as they walked down the hallway, away from his office. The group had arrived unexpectedly and lambasted him, blaming him for all the church's problems. And problems there were – lots of them! Two years ago Edwards had enthusiastically accepted the call to serve as pastor of the church, fully aware of some of the difficulties. After all, every church has issues. He was young and his faith was strong. He sincerely believed that prayer, biblical preaching, and loving guidance would bring the ailing church back to health. But now things were actually worse. Landmines seemed to explode under him no matter where he stepped. Several families requested more modern music in the services and he willingly obliged. In doing so he inadvertently alienated several others who were now withholding their tithes as well as their service in the church until the music was changed back to the style they enjoyed. One of the deacons was rumored to be in an adulterous relationship. An attempt to confront him had set the entire deacon body up in arms. They accused Edwards of witch hunting. They argued that this man had great influence in the community; they pointed out the sad truth the church could ill afford another public scandal. When Edwards proposed the hiring of a part-time student pastor, a battle erupted among several interest groups within the church, clamoring for their needs. Even his preaching had come under fire – too long, not enough humor. Edwards had been growing weary under stress, but he remained strong in his belief things would eventually get better. That was before this visit. Their words cut like a knife: “As representatives of this church, we feel obliged to tell you we can no longer follow your leadership. Perhaps you should begin circulating your resumé to other churches who might appreciate your style of leadership.” The pastor buried his face

in his hands, feeling like a failure. What more could he have done?

Leadership is a daunting task. James MacGregor Burns asserts that leadership is one of the most observed and least understood phenomena on earth. Countless books and materials have been published on the subject, yet there still seems to be a misunderstanding of what leadership is. J. Oswald Sanders in his book *Spiritual Leadership* provides a simple definition. He says, "Leadership is influence, the ability of one person to influence others." Viewing it through the lens of Christianity, Robert Clinton points out that the central task of leadership is influencing God's people toward God's purposes (*The Making of a Leader*).

Leadership is fundamental to the health and vitality of any organization. As John Maxwell reminds us, "Everything rises and falls on leadership." Therefore, as Christians we need good leaders leading in politics. We need good leaders leading in business. And we need good leaders leading in the church. This need causes us to ask the question, "What makes a good leader?" We find the answer in Nehemiah's leadership.

Read Nehemiah 2:9-20.

Inquiry: At this time in history, the once great and glorious Jerusalem lay in ruins. Its walls were broken and destroyed. Many of the people who had returned with Sheshbazzar, Zerubbabel, and Ezra had left to live in the countryside. The people were discouraged, the poor were suffering from high taxes, the Persians were taking all the revenue, and the neighboring groups were dominating in commerce and politics.

Nehemiah was the cupbearer to King Artaxerxes, and he was in Susa when Hanani reported to him the desperate and shameful state of Jerusalem and its people. Upon hearing that report, Nehemiah immediately began to pray and seek God. He prayed for four months, while waiting for an opportunity to

approach the king. During those four months of prayer, Nehemiah also prepared.

Nehemiah believed God would act and be gracious toward the Jewish people in accordance with His word. So he persistently and patiently prayed for God to move. His faith also led him to make preparations so that when God did move, he would be ready. Finally, the time came for action. The opportunity to address the king presented itself (2:2-8), and Nehemiah shared the need with Artaxerxes. Then, shortly after that, he was on his way to Jerusalem.

Upon arrival, Nehemiah immediately went to work. He assessed the situation, shared the vision, and inspired the people to work. Under his leadership the wall was repaired and the gates restored in just fifty-two days (Neh 6:15). From him we learn five things about a good leader. These five traits apply to the Christian husband who seeks to lead in his home, the Christian businessman who seeks to lead in his company, the Christian teacher who seeks to lead at her school, the Christian small group leader who seeks to lead in his church, and the Christian politician who seeks to lead in his or her community. These traits are applicable in every area of life.

1. A good leader is first a good follower.

We are all too familiar with leaders who have abused their position and authority. We have observed people who sought out leadership positions for the wrong reasons. As a result many Christians have reservations about aspiring to leadership. Thankfully, the Lord has spoken to this issue.

The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task.

– 1 Timothy 3:1

And do you seek great things for yourself? Seek them not... – Jeremiah 45:5a

These two verses almost sound contradictory, but they are not. They do provide both a warning and an encouragement. There is no doubt that Christians must resist a certain kind of ambition and rid it from their lives. But we must also acknowledge other ambitions as noble, worthy, and honorable. (Secretary of Agriculture Sonny Perdue said yes to President Trump's invitation to join his cabinet last year because he sensed God's calling upon his life to serve in that capacity.) When our ambition is to be effective in the service of God – to realize God's highest potential for our lives – we can keep both of these verses in mind and hold them in tension.

Nehemiah did this. He aspired to help the people in Jerusalem, yet he never sought out a position of privilege for himself (5:14-19). When he heard the report of the shameful state of Jerusalem, he prayed and fasted before God (1:4). When the opportunity came to address the king about Jerusalem, Nehemiah again prayed to God (2:4). He had a clear vision of what to do and what was needed because he sought God, listened to God, and followed God (2:8, 12). He was a good leader because he first was a good follower.

If you desire to be a good leader, you must first follow the Leader, and the Leader is Jesus. Good leadership, biblical leadership, is first and foremost servant leadership. Jesus, addressing the subject with James and John's mother, declared that He *“came not to be served but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many”* (Matt 20:28). Jesus healed the sick, fed the hungry, comforted the broken, and gave His life on the cross for sinners. He served others. A good Christian leader follows the example set by Jesus. He or she will put others' needs above theirs. A good Christian leader also follows the words of Jesus. Nehemiah listened to and obeyed the words the Lord had put in his heart (2:12).

Those who desire to be a good, Godly leader will first be a good follower. You will seek out, listen to, and follow the direction of the Lord Jesus.

2. A good leader takes time to rest.

Rest is often times hard to come by today. It is perhaps even harder for leaders to find it. On top of the family obligations and needs, there is always another phone call to return, email to send, meeting to prepare for, visit to make, and staff to lead. With all the different needs pulling at the leader, it is commonly very difficult to take time to rest.

Nehemiah models for us the priority of rest. As he entered Jerusalem for the very first time, he saw the shameful state of the city. He witnessed the immediate need facing the people there. The work was great! There was much that needed to be done just to get the project up and running. But before Nehemiah did anything, he first rested (2:11). He understood that in order to be at his best, he first had to rest. He had prayed and fasted for four months. The trip from Susa to Jerusalem had also taken four months. As a result, Nehemiah was physically and spiritually exhausted.

Before the work of rebuilding had even begun, Nehemiah had already accomplished much. Did you know that leaders will often times fall into depression or sin following a great accomplishment? I don't fully understand why it happens, but it does happen. I do believe the number one reason is simply due to fatigue. The leader leaned into and pressed hard in order to get the job done, so after it's finished he or she is exhausted and vulnerable. This very thing happened to Elijah in 1 Kings 19. After defeating the 450 prophets of Baal, he became weary and fearful of the queen. He was exhausted and needed to rest. Jesus understood this. He instructed his disciples after the great miracle of

feeding the 5,000, “*Come away by yourselves to a desolate place and rest a while*” (Mark 6:31).

Every person needs regular times of rest. God built a Sabbath day of rest into the framework of creation. You need times to have both your physical and spiritual tanks replenished.

- A good leader prioritizes sleep. You need to learn to put down the phone, step away from the computer, and say no to the request for your time. You need to make time for sleep.
- A good leader prioritizes times of retreat. There needs to be time in your life when you get away for the purpose of relaxing and hearing from God. For many leaders, their vacations don’t usually accommodate these purposes. Instead, they need a vacation to recover from vacation.

Work is demanding. Leadership is even more demanding. And spiritual leadership is even that much more demanding. If you want to be a good and more effective leader, learn to carve out regular and quiet times for rest in your life.

3. A good leader collaborates with others.

Nehemiah knew the great need in Jerusalem, but as he went out to inspect the walls and gates for himself, he took others along with him (2:12). He collaborated with a few men. He co-labored with them.

Nehemiah modeled for us a great leadership principle that John Maxwell calls “The Law of Significance.” In other words, “one is too small a number to achieve greatness.”

Illust: For some reason we admire solo achievement.

In high school I played football, basketball, baseball, and ran track. I loved all of those sports, but there was something special about track. I think what made it special was the fact that in most events, I competed alone. That meant if I won, I thought it was me who had won. Unfortunately, if I lost it also meant that it was me who had lost. The truth is even in my solo events, I still didn't get there on my own. I had a coach and teammates who challenged and encouraged me. I was part of a team that worked together to do great things even when competing as individuals.

The belief that one person can do something great is a myth. Nothing of significance was ever achieved by an individual acting alone. If you peek below the surface, you will find that all seemingly solo acts are really team efforts. Therefore, a good leader believes in the people around him or her. Paul believed in Timothy. Elijah believed in Elisha. Moses believed in Joshua. Jesus believed in Simon Peter – enough that He changed the disciple's name from “wavering one” to “the rock.” Nehemiah believed in the few men that he took on this short recon mission, and he believed in the men of Jerusalem who would rebuild the wall with him.

As a good leader co-labors with others, he or she also supports and invests in them. When the people became discouraged because of the threats from Sanballat, Tobiah, and the Arabs, Nehemiah encouraged the people (4:7-14). He didn't criticize them for their lack of faith. Instead, he called upon them to remember the Lord and His greatness. He invested in their spiritual lives. Nehemiah also challenged those he co-labored with on the project (2:17). He called them to a great task. He called them seek after God.

A good leader collaborates with others. He or she understands that it might be easier to go it alone, but going it alone will never produce something great.

Going it alone will never result in multiplication, and yet multiplication is what the Great Commission calls us too (Matt 28:18-20; 2 Tim 2:2). Small group leader, who are you co-laboring with today? Precious preschool worker who are you co-laboring with today? Who are you reproducing yourself in as a leader?

4. A good leader inspires others.

In sharing the vision the Lord had put in his heart, Nehemiah sought to inspire the people to join him in the work (2:17-18). They were going to be his teammates, coworkers, and colleagues. He needed them, and they needed him.

Here is a great principle to remember: “Great organizations are not built on programs and projects but on people.” A great church is not built on programs and projects; it is built on people being transformed by the grace and resurrection power of the Lord Jesus.

As a good leader Nehemiah inspired the people to look beyond themselves and accomplish something they couldn't have done on their own. How did he inspire them?

- He believed in the people.
“Come, let us build the wall of Jerusalem, that we may no longer suffer derision.”

By inviting the people to join him, Nehemiah expressed his belief in them. He was not willing to allow them to continue being satisfied with the spiritual stagnation in their lives.

- He invested in the people.
“And I told them of the hand of my God that had been upon me for good, and also of the words that the king had spoken to me.”

Nehemiah shared his story and modeled faithfulness by example. He didn't call them to a spiritual idealism, a place that not even he was able to achieve. He called them to join him where he was and was going.

Here is another great principle to remember: "If you want others to grow, you need to grow." The leader who is not growing is no longer leading because you can never expect others to be more serious than you are.

"Your example is a lot more inspiring than your exhortation." – Johnny Hunt

The example set forth by Nehemiah inspired the people in Jerusalem to the work. *"And they said, 'Let us rise up and build.'"*

A good leader inspires others. They understand that the business at hand is about the people.

5. A good leader deals with conflict.

Conflict is inevitable. It is not, "if it's going to happen," but "when will it happen." Nehemiah was not surprised by the conflict that he faced with Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem. In fact he anticipated some level of conflict with King Artaxerxes (1:11; 2:4). He was ready for the conflict, and he dealt with it.

I am convinced that this is the one area of leadership that most leaders shy away from the most, and it is understandable. No one likes conflict. The leader who thrives on conflict, is the leader that needs to be avoided. We shouldn't like conflict, but neither should we avoid it. There are times when the leader must address an issue or problem. That time had come for Nehemiah. His three rivals were spreading rumors and

telling lies about his plans. They were seeking to create fear in the hearts of the Jews. As the God-appointed leader, Nehemiah could no longer stand by and do nothing. As a good leader he dealt with the conflict (2:20).

How should Christians deal with conflict? Fortunately, we have the good example of Nehemiah and the wise words of Jesus in Matthew 18. Here are three things to remember when dealing with conflict:

1) Keep your head.

Nehemiah didn't yell, scream, threaten, or curse the three men spreading lies about them. He kept his head, and spoke calmly yet confidently. Loosing your head won't accomplish anything positive.

"When you get in the mud with the pig, you both get dirty."

Keep your head. Take some time to think through the issue. Ask the Lord to speak and reveal anything truthful about the accusation or problem. Ask for Him to show you your blind spots. Learn from the conflict. Never react out of emotion.

2) Keep your faith.

Remember that God is bigger than the conflict you are facing. Its reality was no surprise to Him. Trust that in God's sovereignty, He is using this trial to deepen your faith and character. Trust that He will see you through to the end.

Nehemiah's faith was not shaken by the lies and rumors being spread. He didn't fear repercussions from the king because he trusted in the God who had given him favor with that king.

Don't be so easily shaken in your faith. As a leader constantly lean into the promises of God's Word.

3) Speak the truth.

Nehemiah spoke the truth into the face of those creating the conflict (2:20). He reminded Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem that the fate of their project rested in the hands of the God of heaven. He reminded them that they were going to rise and build just as God was leading them to do. And he reminded them that they had no right or claim to the land.

When dealing with conflict, always speak the truth in love. Shoot straight with those creating the problem. Address it personally first. Then, if needed, begin to involve others when there is no repentance.

Dealing with conflict is never fun. But I have learned that the longer a leader allows the turmoil to fester the more dangerous and disastrous it will become.

Illust: It is like a tiny rusty splinter that gets under your skin. You can deal with it quickly, which will hurt. Or you can deal with it later after infection has set in and spread, which will be even more painful and costly.

Conclusion: Everything rises and falls on leadership. It is absolutely crucial in every organization and at every level of society. It is paramount in the church too. We know how easily it can be abused, but we also know and see in Nehemiah the blessing it is when used for the glory of God and benefit of others. He gives us five traits of a good leader. How are you doing in these five areas? How is your leadership?