

A Pattern of Leadership

- Nehemiah 5:14-19
- When we were last in Jerusalem, the scandal of oppression had been revealed, as Nehemiah was told that the nobles and the officials had been fleecing the people, loaning them money at interest so they could feed their families during the famine, then taking their lands and orchards and vineyards and houses, and even their children, when they could not re-pay the loans. And you will remember that Nehemiah confronted the nobles and the officials, who would not admit to the charges. So he called an assembly of all the people, stopped the work on the wall to deal with this internal conflict that threatened to undo all that had been done so far. As we said last time, what good is it to have a wall to keep the enemies outside from coming in if the people on the inside are stealing from one another? It's often not the fighting without but the fears within, to paraphrase Paul, that causes the most destruction. Nehemiah called everyone together, confronted the nobles and the officials, challenged them to walk in the fear of God and return everything they had taken from their fellow Jews. They said they would do that, but Nehemiah said, 'that is not enough.' He called in the priests and made them take an oath before God and everybody that they would keep their word. Still not satisfied, Nehemiah then had a fit, shaking his garments and saying that in the same way, God would shake THEM out if they did not keep their word. And all the people said "Amen" and praised the Lord. Last line: "And the people (meaning, the nobles and officials) did what they had promised." What a powerful illustration of how godly leadership can work to restore the damage and right the ship.
- As Nehemiah continues to write in his journal about these days in Jerusalem, he takes a moment to reflect on the pattern of leadership he followed during his governorship. How long was he the governor, the first time, in Jerusalem? Right, twelve years. He tells us that in verse 14, that he was governor from the 20th year of Artaxerxes to the 32nd year. And for those who are mathematically challenged, he does the subtraction for us. He knows that 5 out of every 3 people have trouble with math. Ok, sorry. What was the pattern of leadership that Nehemiah followed as governor? I see two habits that Nehemiah had put in place for his relationship with the people that set him apart, and I am going to share them in reverse order, saving what I believe is the most important for last. First, he worked with them. Second, he did not take from them.
- **He worked with them.**
- See that in verse 16. He persevered in the work on the wall. We joke about government jobs where there are five people standing and talking and, you know, supervising, and one guy doing all the work. This was not a government job, which is why it got done in the first place and why it only took 52 days, and Nehemiah was anything BUT a passive bystander. He had a job as leader, and that included getting his hands dirty doing actual work. Let's be honest, a lot of people have never been taught how to work. Or even how to get a job. This comes from an online archive of rejected job applications. One applicant included a cover letter by his mother. Another was asked why he wanted the job and he said, 'To keep my parole officer happy.' Another was asked to list his achievements and he boasted of graduating in the top 85% of his class. I know that's a math thing again, but it means that he graduated in the bottom 15%! Another lady said this when asked about her qualifications: "my twin sister graduated with an accounting degree, so I know I'm good with numbers." For references, one guy wrote, "Bill, Tom, and Eric." For a former employer, one person put: "Mom." (must have been a homeschooler.)
- Nehemiah worked with the people. And his servants worked with the people! Well of course they did. But the previous governors had created a culture of entitlement for themselves and even their servants so that their servants were strutting around Jerusalem posturing and demanding and generally making everybody nauseous. See that in verse 15b? "Even their servants lorded it over the people." It reminds me of Proverbs 30 where Agur says there are four things under which the earth CANNOT bear up, and one of them is when a slave becomes king. Or servants acting like they

are kings. Not Nehemiah. Not his servants. And what did Jesus say about this? “You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all.” (Mark 10:42-44)

- **He did not take from them.**
- Before Nehemiah showed up in Jerusalem, the people had gotten used to the governor taking his food allowance and then taking extra cash from them on top of that. The governor’s expense account every day was more than most of the people made in a month, but that was just the way it went, and though the burden was heavy, there was nothing they could do. Then Nehemiah showed up, and the people lined up, expecting to pay up...but the new governor said no. He said no to the per diem food budget. He said no to the extra cash that they had been scraping together to pay the guys before him. He said no.
- Nehemiah did not take anything from the people even though he was certainly entitled to it. Granted, Nehemiah was in a position to take care of his own needs and the needs of many others, because he was well-paid and well-supplied by Artaxerxes. He did not need the money. But this still speaks to his character, doesn’t it? He had every opportunity to line his pockets and get even richer than he already was, and no one would have batted an eye. Verse 16 he says, “we acquired no land.” At a time when the economy was struggling to survive, Nehemiah could have bought up half the city for a song. But he acquired no land, because he would not take from them. He would not take advantage of other people’s distress. Some would call that being a bad businessman. I think God would call that being a good man and a great leader.
- The love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, Paul said in 1 Timothy 6:10. “It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves through with many pangs.” That reminds me of an illustration I read recently in Kyle Idleman’s book, *The End of Me*. It appears that being covered up by an avalanche of snow can have the same effect of falling in love with money and things. You get turned around, disoriented. And it turns out that one of the biggest mistakes people make when they get covered by snow in an avalanche is that they just blindly start trying to dig their way out. Digging is a great idea when you’re buried in snow. Blindly digging, not so much. One victim found in an avalanche had dug thirty feet in the wrong direction. He didn’t know which way was up, so he started digging, and buried himself even deeper. Popular Science magazine says that if you are buried in snow, dig some of it away from your face, and then...spit straight up. Before you dig, spit. Why? Because if the spit falls away from you, you know that’s the very opposite of the way you should dig. If the spit falls back into your face, the ground is below you and the surface is up, so start digging!
- The country went nuts over the 1.6 billion dollar Powerball a few weeks ago, didn’t it? There were 635 million tickets sold, at \$2-3 dollars apiece, and when there’s the possibility of winning that much money, down looks like up and up looks like down. Maybe instead of buying a ticket, people should have just...spit on the ground.
- Nehemiah was not confused about up or down. He did not come to Jerusalem to get richer. He not only did not take the daily allowance of food, he FED 150 people PLUS visitors from other nations...every day! Every day he was sending people to the market with a grocery list of one ox, 6 choice sheep and birds, and every tenth day, an abundance of wine. Which he paid for out of his own pocket. Why was Nehemiah this kind of leader? And more importantly, **how can we be like this, too?**
- He tells us in verse 15b: “I did not do so (Lord it over the people) because of the fear of God.” Needlepoint that! “Because of the fear of God.” God has been reminding me recently about how important that is to my survival, not to mention any success I might ever achieve. My survival as a husband who desperately wants to be faithful to my wife depends on it: the fear of God. Your

survival as a follower of Jesus in a world turned upside down depends on it: the fear of God. Our survival as a church in a culture that hates who we are and what we believe depends on it: the fear of God. The Bible uses the word fear more than 300 times in reference to God. The midwives in Egypt spared the Hebrew babies because they feared God (Ex. 1:17) Moses told Pharaoh why the ruler was willing to stand by and watch while his nation was destroyed: "I know that you do not yet fear God." (Ex. 9:30) Moses chose leaders for the people on the basis of two characteristics, that they feared God and would not accept a bribe. And I'm guessing they would not take a bribe because they feared God! (Ex. 18:21) Jesus made it even stronger, telling us not to fear the one who could destroy the body but cannot destroy the soul. (that's anything on the planet or in the heavenlies besides God). "Rather, fear Him who can destroy both soul and body in hell." (Matt. 10:28) We are to fear God. But at the same time, 1 John 4:18 says, "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear." So the question is, how does fear of God, who is perfect love, take away fear? Here's what William D. Eisenhower wrote for *Christianity Today*:

- "Unfortunately, many of us presume that the world is the ultimate threat and that God's function is to offset it. How different this is from the biblical position that God is far scarier than the world.... When we assume that the world is the ultimate threat, we give it unwarranted power, for in truth, the world's threats are temporary. When we expect God to balance the stress of the world, we reduce him to the world's equal.... As I walk with the Lord, I discover that God poses an ominous threat to my ego, but not to me. He rescues me from my delusions, so he may reveal the truth that sets me free. He casts me down, only to lift me up again. He sits in judgment of my sin, but forgives me nevertheless. Fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, but love from the Lord is its completion." AMEN!
- Nehemiah would not take advantage of the people he had come to serve, because he feared the Lord and because he loved the people of God.
- That's a pattern of leadership we can all imitate.