

Pastor Jim Lloyd

Date: September 4, 2016

Title: A Wise Leader's Response to Solving Problems

Text: Nehemiah 5:1-19

Simply put, leadership is taking others from Point A to Point B and, in the process, taking projects from Point A to Point B. Leadership is pretty much about getting things done. These beginning chapters in Nehemiah have been challenging to preach from. Just about every practical principle within these first chapters, I can and should apply to being a pastor. I know that I haven't followed every taught principle consistently. I don't preach this to you because I've mastered it. I preach it to you and TO ME, because it's THE WORD and Nehemiah illustrates it very clearly. Know, too, that I am not the only leader here. God calls ALL of us to live in a way that others would follow; thus we are all called to LEAD – to be LEADERS.

Leadership is also about making wrong things right. When you're called into leadership, you're called to right the wrongs. You see kids hanging out in the street without direction in their lives – you're called into youth ministry. You see Sunday School classes with no teachers – you're called into teaching. You see a need not being met – you're called to get involved in meeting that need. THAT'S WHAT LEADERS DO!

ILLUSTRATION: I saw a commercial where two people are going up an escalator, and the escalator stops. Now what? They remain stranded on the escalator. One says, "Oh great, I don't need this. I'm late already." The other shouts out loudly: "There are two people stuck on an escalator and we need some help!" Finally, they give up, have a seat on the stairs, and wait for the repairman to come along and get them out of their predicament. (And, yes, I did say "escalator" NOT "elevator".) This is how some people go about solving problems. It's all they know to do: HOLLER for help and wait for someone else to save the day. Leaders, on the other hand, are intent on saving the day themselves. They know how to respond to problems.

Nehemiah knew how to respond to problems. It is amazing that a slave – whose primary job was to drink poison intended for the king – could be so skilled in leading people and managing situations. And yet, he was. Throughout the book of Nehemiah we see him respond to situations decisively and effectively. I think this is because Nehemiah knew all along that he was more than a slave.

I would guess that as Nehemiah lived and worked in close proximity to the king, he observed the king's reactions to various circumstances, and he learned from the king's example what it means to be a leader. Perhaps he told himself, "When and if I'm ever in a position to make decisions, I will handle a similar problem like the king did." Or maybe he said, "When I'm in a position to make decisions, I'll be careful NOT to make the same mistakes I've seen the king make." Nehemiah likely learned how to respond to problems because he kept a close eye on the king while he was serving him.

Another reason that Nehemiah was effective in dealing with situations is that he PRAYED like a leader should pray. Over and over in the book of Nehemiah we see him taking every aspect of this project before the throne of God: "God, use us. God, bless us. God, protect us. God, grant us success." Nehemiah understood that leadership involves solving problems. He never appears to have panicked. He never gave up in frustration. He never whined or cried or threw a fit when people didn't do what he wanted them to do. Rather he responded to each situation and resolved each problem by the power of the hand of God.

In your area of leadership, I want you to be able to do this, too. I want you to be able to respond to situations decisively and effectively, before they have a chance to get out of control. And this is something I certainly need to do as well. Nehemiah gives us a great example to follow. So today, as we look at Nehemiah 5, we learn how leaders should respond to and resolve problem situations. Here's the situation: Nehemiah 5:1-5 (MSG) ¹"A great protest was mounted by the people, including the wives, against their fellow Jews. ²Some said, 'We have big families, and we need food just to survive.' ³Others said, 'We're having to mortgage our fields and vineyards and homes to get enough grain to keep from starving.' ⁴And others said, 'We're having to borrow money to pay the royal tax on our fields and vineyards. ⁵Look: We're the same flesh and blood as our brothers here; our children are just as good as theirs. Yet here we are having to sell our children off as slaves – some of our daughters have already been sold – and we can't do anything about it because our fields and vineyards are owned by somebody else.'" Nehemiah was a Babylonian slave who became administrator of a project in Jerusalem to rebuild the walls of the city. He got permission from the king. He made the 800-mile journey to Jerusalem. He developed a plan for getting the job done. He recruited volunteers to help him, AND so far, he has dealt with criticism, opposition, and death threats.

Now, we get into chapter five, and ANOTHER PROBLEM rears its ugly head. This time it's not an EXTERNAL problem.

It's an INTERNAL problem. There's dissension in the group. Some members are taking advantage of others. The problem occurred because many people who were engaged in rebuilding the wall had to temporarily forego their normal means of livelihood, and so they were experiencing financial hardships. Landowners were forced to mortgage their properties in order to pay taxes and buy food for their families. The money was being lent by wealthy Jews living in Jerusalem, and they charged exorbitant interest rates. The situation was SO BAD that some people were forced to sell their children into slavery in order to meet their financial obligations. In other words, there were a few opportunists making big money off of the financial vulnerabilities of their own countrymen. It was a bad situation that needed to be resolved, and that's what Nehemiah did.

Today's text, Nehemiah chapter five, gives us five keys to problem-solving leadership. Let's take a look at them. When you're faced with a serious problem in your area of leadership, Nehemiah gives you a good example to follow for making something wrong into something right. Here's what you do.

- 1. Give yourself time to THINK IT THROUGH.** Listen to what Nehemiah says: ⁶*"When I heard their outcry and these charges, I WAS VERY ANGRY."* Is that a good or bad response? This is a NATURAL response to injustice, and it's a GOOD one. Seeing people taking advantage of others SHOULD make us angry. It should infuriate us, but it's not good to act too quickly on our anger. This often results in knee-jerk reactions that don't really resolve the problem. Psalm 4:4 says to *"Be angry and sin not."* It is better if we do what Nehemiah did. Notice what he says next: ⁷*"I pondered them in my mind and then accused the nobles and officials."* *"I pondered them in my mind,"* he said. The New American Standard says, *"I consulted with myself..."* The New King James says, *"After serious thought, I rebuked the nobles..."* The New Living Translation says, *"After thinking about the situation, I spoke out against these nobles and officials."* Nehemiah took quick and decisive action, but he wasn't impulsive about it. He THOUGHT IT OVER first. This is what problem solving involves. You have to think it through. We rarely solve problems on a whim. You can't fix situations on the strength of an emotional reaction. Many times your FIRST impulse isn't your BEST impulse. Though it is right to respond to injustice with righteous anger, anger CAN'T be your ONLY response – because anger often leads to irrationality. ILLUSTRATION: When I was teen in high school, it snowed and I wanted the day off. My problem was that I didn't want to go to school. There had been no announcements regarding the cancellation of schools yet. So I got what I thought to be a brilliant idea. I had a cassette recorder with an AM/FM radio. I recorded from the WEPM radio station some of the morning radio broadcast. I paused it. Then I recorded in the microphone, using my best announcer voice, saying, "We interrupt this broadcast to report that all schools in Berkeley County are closed for today. I repeat all schools in Berkeley County are closed today." Then I resumed recording the radio station. I played my recording. Everyone except me thought it was a live broadcast. My siblings got excited thinking there was no school. Mom said we could go back to bed. My quick, creative thinking solved my problem; I didn't have to go to school. BUT my quick thinking created other problems. What would happen when my mom saw the neighborhood kids lined up for the bus stop? What would happen when the school bus stopped to pick us up? What would happen when my father found out what I did and there WAS school? Suddenly I had bigger problems than before. Yes, I confessed to the error of my ways and went to school. Better to go to school than bear the wrath of an angry father. When faced with a problem, give yourself time to THINK IT THROUGH.
- 2. Address the problem HEAD-ON.** Delaying a response to a problem does NOT mean that you AVOID the problem. After you've had time to give it serious thought, you address the problem head-on. Some people think that if you ignore a problem long enough, it will go away. Does that ever really happen? If the brakes on your car are going out, they don't just suddenly get better without a little bit of mechanical intervention. If you're overdrawn at the bank, the money doesn't just suddenly appear in your account without you making a deposit. If you're hungry, you won't suddenly find yourself full, unless you get something to eat. Wrong things AREN'T made right without intervention, without someone addressing the problem. As Marcy E. Davis said, "Problems that go away by themselves also come back by themselves." Ignoring a problem is rarely a good strategy. You have to face it. You have to address it. This is what Nehemiah did: ⁷*"I pondered them in my mind and then accused the nobles and officials. I told them, 'You are exacting usury from your own countrymen. So I called together a large meeting to deal with them..."* In verse 9 he says, *"What you are doing is not right."* Nehemiah hit the problem head-on. He said, "This is what's happening – and IT'S WRONG!" Some of you who are working in areas of leadership need to do this same thing. You've got employees who are cutting corners, and you're pretending not to notice. You've got volunteers in your area of ministry who are not walking in obedience, and you're pretending not to know. Your children are speaking disrespectfully toward you and your spouse, and you're pretending not to hear. These problems will not go away by themselves; you have to

address them head-on. You have to say, “This is what is happening and IT’S NOT RIGHT!” You’ve got to address the problem. But there’s a little more to it than that. Not only do you address the problem, you need to...

- 3. Offer a WORKABLE SOLUTION.** Almost anyone can tell you what’s wrong with a situation. That often doesn’t require skill, knowledge or wisdom. It just takes a pair of eyes. Leaders, however, know how to take it ONE STEP FURTHER. They do more than say, “This is wrong.” They are able to say, “And HERE’S HOW TO MAKE IT RIGHT.” Effective leaders not only identify the problem, they IDENTIFY THE SOLUTION. A REAL solution. A solution that works. Many times people will offer so-called solutions to problems that can’t really be implemented. Or many times people will offer solutions that are so simplistic they are unrealistic. You want an example? Go to a football game and listen to the guy sitting in the stands behind you. You’ll hear things like, “What the defense needs to do is tackle.” Duh. “What the quarterback needs to do is throw to the open receiver.” Duh. “What our team needs to do is score more points – that’ll keep us from losing games.” Duh. While these statements are true, they’re not problem-solving solutions. They’re not workable, practical, or implementable. They’re just words; they don’t yield results. STORY: Here’s another story from my teens. I had met a young lady at Potomac Park during one of the camps. Dad called it “Puppy Love.” Camp had ended and she went home. Well, I wanted to go to Ellicott City and see her. So I asked my dad if I could use the car and go see her. He said an emphatic, “No!” I was heartbroken. So I wrote a little song: “I had a little problem. Didn’t know what to do. So I turned to Jesus. I knew He’d see me through. I started at the beginning and went on throughout the end. I had this talk with Jesus, ’cause He’s my dearest friend. (There were a few other verses.) Sometimes Christ says, ‘Yes,’ and sometimes He says, ‘No.’ And sometimes I just have to wait and see how things will go.” I shared my song with dad thinking it might get him to change his mind. No such luck. I pleaded with him. He remained firm in his answer. In desperation, I said, “Can’t you at least pray about it?” Then he said, “For you to go, God would have to speak audibly to me.” I knew the problem; what I needed was a workable solution. THERE WAS MY ANSWER – All I needed was for God to talk audibly to my dad. Yeah – like that’s going to happen. Then I remembered my cassette recorder. I found a 120-minute blank tape. I went to the end of the tape and recorded in my best God-like voice, “Let Jim go to Ellicott City.” I rewound the tape, put it under dad’s bed before he would retire for the night and hit the play button. Dad went to bed, and I waited. Dad went to sleep. I had second thoughts, but it was too late now. So for nearly an hour the blank tape played (no noise) while dad slept. Then from beneath my dad’s bed came my God-like voice – “Let Jim go to Ellicott City.” Now the rest of the story is kind of a blur. Dad came flying out of the bedroom. To this day, I don’t know what happened to my cassette recorder, BUT to make a long story short – I got to go to Ellicott City! I guess that’s not a very good illustration. You’d be better off to follow Nehemiah than me. Effective leaders know how to say, “Here’s the problem; here’s how to make it right.” That’s what Nehemiah did. He said, “What you are doing is wrong,” AND THEN he told the nobles and officials how to make it right. He told them to stop charging interest (v. 10); to give the people back their land (v. 11); and to return the interest that had been paid (v. 11). He was telling them, “This is what it will take to make this wrong thing right.” A problem that many employees and many volunteers and many children and many spouses have is that they don’t know what right looks like. They know that someone in charge is unhappy with them. They know that they aren’t measuring up to someone’s expectations. They know that they’re making too many mistakes. But, they don’t know exactly what they need to do to make things right. Leaders, spouses, parents: it’s your job to let them know. After you have identified the problem, after you have explained what is wrong, shut up about it. FOCUS ON THE SOLUTION! You say, “I won’t talk about the problem anymore. Let’s talk about the solution. This is how you make things right. This is what you need to do.” Next, I want you to see the fourth key to problem-solving leadership.
- 4. Call for COMMITMENT.** ¹²“Then I summoned the priests and made the nobles and officials take an oath to do what they had promised.” Nehemiah was saying, “We can solve this problem, and we can solve it today. It’s time to make a commitment.” There are times when leaders need to challenge people with ideas, to encourage them to think things through, to pray about their options. AND...there are times when leaders need to say, “This decision needs to be made now. Let’s not put it off any longer.” Effective leaders know the difference. There comes a time when leaders must say, “Today is the day. It’s time to choose sides. Are you ready to do what’s right? Are you ready to give your word?” Problem-solving leadership involves calling for commitment. Here’s the fifth key.
- 5. Lead by EXAMPLE.** If you want others to do the right thing, it helps if they can see YOU do the right thing. In verse 10 Nehemiah says, “I and my brothers and my men are also lending the people money and grain. But let the exacting of usury stop!” Most commentators say that this means Nehemiah was loaning money without

charging interest, as everyone should have been doing. Others speculate that perhaps Nehemiah and his brothers and his men were also involved with wrongful interest, and now Nehemiah is having a change of heart about it. Either way, he's saying, "I'm ready to take the lead in this. Watch my example." In verse 14-18 Nehemiah explains: *"When I was appointed to be their governor in the land of Judah...neither I nor my brothers ate the food allotted to the governor. The earlier governors – those preceding me – placed a heavy burden on the people...But out of reverence for God I did not act like that...I never demanded the food allotted to the governor, because the demands were heavy on these people."* Nehemiah is saying, "Look, if anyone could have gotten rich in this situation, if anyone could be living a life of luxury, it's me. BUT, I didn't do it. I didn't take advantage of these opportunities because I didn't want to benefit from the burdens of others. And if I, the leader of this project and now the governor of this territory, have not benefitted from my position, neither should you." Nehemiah led by example; it's what effective leaders do. A pastor cannot challenge his people to pray if he has no prayer life of his own. He cannot challenge his people to spend time in the Word if he's not in the Word himself. Leaders cannot expect their people to be punctual if they are not punctual themselves. Parents cannot expect their children to speak with respect if the parents themselves speak to others with disrespect. The things that you expect from others need to be visible in your life as well. If you're not an example to follow, you will have a difficult time resolving problems effectively in your area of leadership.

6. **Conclusion.** Leadership is about getting things done. It's not enough to be righteously indignant about this or that injustice. It's not enough merely to point out what needs to change. Leaders see more than the problem. **LEADERS SEE THE SOLUTION.** Effective leadership is about identifying the problem, developing a solution and motivating people to take action. Leadership is about solving problems. It's about making wrong things right. This is the kind of leader we must all strive to be.