

Pastor Jim Lloyd

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Title: A Leader Responds To Difficult Circumstances

Text: Nehemiah 13:1-31

Today we are going to look at the last chapter in the book of Nehemiah. I want to let you know that I'm not particularly anxious to preach this sermon today. It's a hard word to leaders. Rarely do you find someone who loves to DEAL with trouble. I've met a few that like to MAKE trouble. But that's part of being a leader. Psalm 23 speaks of the shepherd – the leader – leading his sheep through the valley of the shadow of death. That's the difficult place – the MOST difficult place. It's basically the closest place the sheep gets to death without dying. But sometimes you have to go through the HARD place to get to the BEST place. (Say that with me – Sometimes I have to go through the HARD place to get to the BEST place.) That was the scenario for Nehemiah when he was heading up the building of the wall. It's still true of Nehemiah now that he's governor. He's governor in both the good times and the bad times. There are a few reasons I'm not so anxious to preach this morning: For one, I'm not sure I understand EVERYTHING in this chapter. One thing we'll look at later appears rather extreme to me. Yet I know that sometimes the leader is called upon to deal with the extreme, and sometimes in dealing with the extreme he might have to GO to the extreme. Secondly, as I've already said – it contains a hard word. BUT, just like Nehemiah, as a leader, we sometimes have to do and say things we'd rather not do and rather not say. Such is the case with Nehemiah in this last chapter of Nehemiah.

Again, I remind you that Nehemiah was a slave to the king of Babylon. He became consumed with the idea of going to Jerusalem and rebuilding the walls of the city, which had been destroyed years earlier. Nehemiah oversaw the rebuilding of the walls, and was later appointed governor of Jerusalem. Catch that – he PROVED himself, and THEN became governor. Here's my proposal – my political portion of the sermon. (I'm saying this tongue in cheek.) Instead of the primaries and the worthless debates (I shouldn't have said that – forgive me), let's give each candidate a temporary measure of authority and support for a 3 to 6-month time frame to accomplish just one of the more important promises they have made to us, the American people. If they keep their promise, we give them the opportunity to really run for office. I suppose some think they have already proven themselves. Anyway, that's what I'm thinking, but nobody asked me.

Anyway, sometime after Nehemiah became governor, the people of Israel recognized that they had drifted into sin and they turned back to God. Revival broke out. The people of Israel made a commitment to God NOT to repeat the mistakes of their ancestors. They put it in writing. It's recorded in the last verse of chapter 9 and in the middle portion of chapter 10. Now, this would be a GREAT WAY for the story to end. Unfortunately, it doesn't end here. The Israelites mess things up ONE MORE TIME. Nehemiah had to leave Jerusalem for a couple of years, and when he returned, he found that things were NOT THE SAME as when he left. Things pretty much fell apart while he was gone. The Israelites went back to many of their old ways AND they abandoned the earlier commitments they had made to the Lord. Nehemiah – the LEADER – saw the need to make things right. In the process, he learned what all leaders must learn: a leader's work is never done. Eagles' drummer Don Henley once said that in order for someone to be successful in the music or entertainment business, that person must have a high tolerance for REPETITION. They have to be willing to do the same thing the same way again and again, night after night. It's that way for singers, musicians, actors in the theatre – you find yourself doing the same things again and again. Pretty much the same thing can be said for successful leaders. ANY PARENT knows that you can't just show your child how to walk (tie their shoes or ride a bike) one time, and then expect the child to do it right every time from that day on. You have to show them again and again. ANY COACH knows that you'll never get to the point where you don't have to drill your team on the fundamentals of the sport over and over again. That's because a leader's work is never done; a leader really never gets to the point where he or she can stop leading. AND, there's always the need for a leader – be it a parent, coach, teacher, director, boss, president, king, governor, EVEN a pastor. Today we'll look at three roads that leaders must travel AT LEAST SOMETIMES during the leadership process – probably many times.

- 1. Assert your authority.** While Nehemiah was in Jerusalem, a priest named Eliashib offered a large room in the temple to Tobiah. You may recognize that name from the earlier chapters in this book – chapters 2, 4 & 6. Tobiah had challenged Nehemiah's authority during the building of the wall, and he had even gone so far as trying to get Nehemiah killed. When Nehemiah came back to find Tobiah living in the house of God, he responded AUTHORITATIVELY. *7 "...Here I learned about the evil thing Eliashib had done in providing Tobiah a room in the courts of the house of God. 8 I was greatly displeased and threw all Tobiah's household goods out of*

the room. ⁹I gave orders to purify the rooms...” Nehemiah wanted everyone in the city of Jerusalem to remember – in case they had forgotten – that HE is the Governor, and HE is in charge. If anyone had any doubts about who was boss, I’m guessing that seeing Tobiah’s belongings in the street MIGHT have helped them get the picture. Most leaders don’t like a power struggle (myself included), but a good leader DOESN’T RUN FROM ONE. Leaders must be willing to assert their authority, and sometimes reassert their authority when necessary – NOT abuse their authority. Let me take a poll here: Which would you prefer – a nice president or a hard president? Let me add to that: Which would you prefer – a nice president who doesn’t get the job done or a hard president who gets the job done? True or False – Sometimes it takes being a hard president to get the job done. ILLUSTRATION: A certain pastor – I’ll call him John because that’s his name – was in a board meeting at the church he had been serving for almost 10 years. A board member named Gary said, “Pastor John, you’re talking too much about the Holy Spirit in your sermons, and it’s making some people uncomfortable. You need to back off a little bit and preach something less offensive for a while.” Is that acceptable OR is that unacceptable? Without saying a word, Pastor John got up and left the room. The board members didn’t know what to think. A minute or so later, the pastor returned, carrying a large Bible. He laid the Bible down on the table and said, “Gentlemen, my sermons come from this book by inspiration of its Author. That’s the way it’s ALWAYS been AND that’s the way it will ALWAYS be! If you have a problem with that, YOU’RE in the wrong church.” The room was silent. Then Pastor John did something that REALLY surprised them – we call it asserting one’s authority. (Note: When you assert or try to assert your authority, you want to make sure you HAVE some authority. You might not want to assert authority that you don’t have.) He said, “I have no choice but to ask Gary to resign his position on the board. We CANNOT have a leader in this church who thinks his OWN opinion carries more weight than God’s Word.” The room went from being silent to being deathly silent. Gary finally spoke. He apologized. The men reconciled. The pastor realized that this was a rather extreme way to handle the situation. He later confided to a friend, “If I hadn’t been so uncompromising at that meeting, every sermon I preached from that day on would have been up for vote.” Let’s look at another example of one asserting their authority: When Jesus entered the temple and found the merchants selling sacrificial animals and others exchanging money at exorbitant rates, JESUS TOOK CHARGE – that is, HE ASSERTED HIS AUTHORITY. He made a whip and drove them all out – the cattle, the sheep, AND the men – and He knocked their tables over and scattered their money across the floor. He was reminding His followers, and everyone else, that HE IS LORD; He is THE LEADER. Sometimes people forget who’s in charge. When it happens, leaders have to ASSERT THEIR AUTHORITY.

2. **Focus on priorities.** Nehemiah also discovered that the people who were to live and work in the temple had not been paid. Since they weren’t getting paid, they left the temple and went to work in the fields where they WERE getting paid. Nehemiah was not pleased... ¹¹“So I rebuked the officials and asked them, ‘Why is the house of God neglected?’ Then I called them together and stationed them at their posts.” Several times throughout this series we have seen that a crucial characteristic of leadership is the ability to stay focused on a goal, and to keep first things first. We see it again here. The people of Israel were enjoying prosperity and freedom. It became easy for them to forget the importance of their responsibilities to the house of God. Everyone wants to enjoy the blessings of God, BUT not everyone wants to live in a fashion that makes sure the blessings by God. That is, some never lift a hand to do the work of God. Some never GIVE to further the work of God. Nehemiah says, “Shame on you!” Nehemiah got them back on track by helping them to REMEMBER THEIR PRIORITIES. ILLUSTRATION: Robert Schuller once said that he chose to fail so he could succeed. He said, “I chose to fail at golf, because I wanted to succeed as a father.” Though he loved golf, he knew that he could never devote adequate time to his job, his hobby, AND his family – so he gave up his hobby. A great leader once summed up the art of leadership this way: “The MAIN THING is to keep the MAIN THING the MAIN THING.” Leaders must be willing to direct and redirect people to their priorities. It is a road that leaders must travel many, many times.
3. **Enforce the rules.** In chapter 10 the people of Israel made a commitment to keep a list of promises, including: following all of the commands, regulations and decrees of the Lord, paying the temple tax and giving the first part of the harvest, observing the Sabbath and not intermarrying with other cultures. They did this during a time of national repentance. They put their commitment in writing, binding themselves with a curse and an oath. When Nehemiah returned from Jerusalem, he discovered that they were NOT keeping their commitment. ¹⁵“In those days I saw men in Judah treading winepresses on the Sabbath and bringing in grain and loading it on donkeys...” ²³“Moreover, in those days I saw men of Judah who had married women from Ashdod, Ammon and Moab.” Leaders are often tempted to overlook these lapses when everything else is going well. No one wants to create conflict when things are running smoothly. Nehemiah was not willing to look the other way. He

rebuked the nobles for desecrating the Sabbath, and he insisted that the people begin observing the Sabbath again. And as for those who intermarried with other nations... ²⁵*"I rebuked them and called curses down upon them. I beat some of the men and pulled out their hair."* (Here's where I had some trouble. I'm well aware you might not agree with me here.) So folks, if you don't get serious about your promises to the Lord, and you don't get regular in your church attendance and the giving of your tithes and offerings, and you don't quit marrying those outside the church – I'll be by to beat you and pull out your hair – unannounced, of course. Nehemiah sounds more like a professional wrestler than a spiritual leader. The many translations I read pretty much say the same thing. Some scholars indicate it was the pulling of the beard. Some indicated it was the shaving of the hair, and that it was shameful to be bald or unshaven. Here's my best attempt at making this practical (and I'm sure someone here can do better). Sometimes extreme behavior requires extreme action or extreme correction. (That's what I take from this.) It IS possible to apply Nehemiah's principles of leadership without using his identical methods. Ezra, in Ezra chapter 9, deals with similar trouble and scripture says he pulled hair from his OWN beard and head and sat down appalled. So relax (Some of you were really nervous weren't you?) – it is highly UNLIKELY that I'll be by to beat you or pull your hair. But I may be home pulling my own hair if you turn your back on God and cease to keep your promises to God. I suppose that the effective leader does whatever works. Anyway, after Nehemiah knocked their heads, he made them take another oath. ²⁵*"You are not to give your daughters in marriage to their sons, nor are you to take their daughters in marriage for your sons or for yourselves."* ²⁶*"Was it not because of marriages like these that Solomon king of Israel sinned? Among the many nations there was no king like him...but even he was led into sin."* Ultimately, Nehemiah's intent was to help. A paraphrase of another verse of scripture would be, "Whom Nehemiah loveth, he chaseneth." Sound familiar? *"Whom the LORD loveth, he chaseneth."* Leaders recognize that little things add up. If we don't take care of problems when they're small, they have the potential to become BIG problems. Anyone recall "Mayberry RFD? (or the Andy Griffith show)? Anyone remember the skinny, high strung Barney Fife? His favorite saying – his favorite way of dealing with problems was: "Nip it in the bud!" A little old lady was jaywalking, and Barney said that if he and Andy didn't nip it right then, Mayberry would turn into "SIN-town." Barney may have taken things too far, but he had the right idea. We need to know when to "nip it in the bud."

- 4. Conclusion.** Nehemiah illustrates to us in the closing chapter of his book that a leader's work is never done. There are many roads that a leader must travel again and again, and if one wants to be a great leader, one must be willing to travel that road as many times as is necessary. That's because a leader NEVER gets to the point where he or she can stop leading. There are many lessons in leadership to be found throughout this little book. Probably the most important is the one we just learned. Leadership is a never-ending process; your work is NEVER DONE. Leadership isn't a part-time job – it's a FULL-TIME COMMITMENT. Leadership is not something you DO; a leader is something you ARE!