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**Title: Leading with Purpose**

**Text: Nehemiah 1:1-11**

The book of Nehemiah has much to do with leadership. The next few weeks we will be looking at leadership – specifically, YOUR area of leadership. This series is about YOU. No matter WHO you are, no matter WHERE you are, no matter WHAT your circumstances, you are a leader. At least you have the potential for leadership. Some of you are already actively engaged in leadership at work, here at church, and at home with your family. Some might be here in the early stages of leadership. That is, God is preparing you to begin a new phase of accomplishment. I'd also guess that there are those here today that haven't taken advantage of their leadership opportunities. You could be doing more. You are living beneath your potential – perhaps you are coasting. Regardless of the current level of your involvement or lack of involvement, there's no question that you – as ALL leaders do – have room for growth and improvement.

Bill Hybels says that the greatest need in the 21<sup>st</sup> century church – not only in America, but throughout the entire world – is leadership. I probably wouldn't go so far as to say it is the GREATEST need, but I'm certain it is an important one. That's true of this church. We have SOME great leaders in place, but the fact is that WE NEED MORE! We always need more. This is true of every business, every volunteer organization, every sports franchise, every political ideology, and every family. We have a vast need in this generation for gifted, well-trained, committed, competent leaders. Because of that need, we'll be spending the next several weeks in Nehemiah.

Nehemiah may well be the ultimate leadership handbook. It's the story of a man who came from humble beginnings to accomplish great things for the glory of God. He was able to recruit thousands of others to share his vision, and to risk their time, money, personal comfort, and even their personal safety to help Nehemiah pursue the dream God had laid on his heart. In Nehemiah we will see what it takes to be a great leader.

Here's the back story. The events of Nehemiah take place beginning in 446 B.C. About 140 years earlier, Jerusalem had been attacked by the Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar. The temple was destroyed. The walls of the city were torn down, and tens of thousands of Israelites were taken to Babylon as slaves. Over the years, as new kings came to power, many of the Jewish slaves were allowed to return to Jerusalem. Jerusalem, which had been left in shambles after the invasion, slowly began to be restored. People returned, built houses, and became involved in commerce. The temple was rebuilt and rededicated, and people began to worship there. But all was not well. The walls of the city were still a pile of rubble. This wasn't good. A city without walls was practically an invitation to be raided – like leaving your keys in the car with the windows rolled down when you go to the mall. With no city walls, Jerusalem was in a vulnerable position. At this time, Nehemiah was a slave in Babylon. We'll likely talk about his position in a few minutes, but right now I'll say he had a pretty good life. He was a slave, true, BUT he lived in the king's palace.

One day his brother, who had been to Jerusalem, visited Nehemiah and began to tell him about the developments there. Even though Nehemiah had never been to Jerusalem, he had a strong emotional connection to this city because it was his heritage, the land of his ancestors, and, in his dreams, his future home. When his brother told him that the walls of the city had yet to be restored, Nehemiah felt something stir deep within him. Nehemiah went back to Jerusalem and he rebuilt the walls of the city. As a slave, he traveled hundreds of miles to a place he'd never been before. He analyzed the problem. He developed a strategy. He recruited a team to help him. He gave oversight to the project. He faced criticism and death threats, BUT...HE GOT THE JOB DONE! The book of Nehemiah dialogs the process. That's why the book of Nehemiah is such a great resource for leaders. No matter where you are on the leadership spectrum at this moment, you can learn from Nehemiah how to get to the next level.

Today we'll look at how he got started on his mission of rebuilding the walls in Jerusalem. The first chapter of Nehemiah shows us what it takes to be a leader. It shows us the kind of person that God is willing to place in a position of responsibility. The key word is WILLINGNESS. You have to be willing to do three things in order to become an effective leader. What are they?

- 1. You must be willing to become more than you are.** *"I was cupbearer to the king"* (vs. 11). What is a cupbearer? He's a taste tester. He gets to drink everything the king drinks FIRST. He's the guy who drinks some of the king's drink before the king drinks it – so that, IN CASE the drink is poisoned, the cupbearer drops dead, NOT the king. This was a job typically given to a slave who was considered to be trustworthy. Nehemiah was such a slave. As the cupbearer, he was close to the king. Thus he enjoyed a rather comfortable standard of living. His life was relatively easy – so long as no one dropped any poison in the king's drink. I would think that ANY brave person

could do that. Being a slave, he didn't have a lot of responsibility. He was not in a position of authority. His job was simply to serve the king in this ONE capacity. I can see the interview now. The king's secretary come out and asks the one being interviewed, "Can I get you something to drink?" He says, "Yes." He drinks it. The secretary says, "Hired." Easiest test ever! Nehemiah could have lived the duration of his life in this manner: living in the king's palace, dining at the king's table. But, it wasn't enough for him. When he heard about the turmoil in Jerusalem, his heart was stirred and he decided to do something about it – even though he was just a slave, even though he had an easy life, even though he had never been to Jerusalem and the problems of this ancient and far-off city didn't really affect him personally, HE DECIDED TO GET INVOLVED. I hold that almost anyone can be a leader. Anyone can make a difference. It doesn't matter how low you are right now on the socio-economic scale. It doesn't matter how limited you are in experience, education and resources. You could be a slave whose primary responsibility on the job is to die before your boss does – and yet, you can become a great leader. IF you are willing to become more than you are right now, you are the kind of person God can use. ILLUSTRATION: J.C. Penney once said, "Give me a stock clerk with a goal and I'll give you a man who will make history. Give me a man with no goals, and I'll give you a stock clerk." Are you ready and willing to be stretched? Are you ready to become MORE than you are today? That's the requirement for greatness. It's NOT who you are TODAY that counts, it's WHO YOU ARE WILLING TO BECOME. You remember the story of David and Goliath – how God used a simple shepherd boy to defeat an enemy of the nation of Israel. That shepherd boy eventually became the greatest king in Israel's history and proved himself to be a man after God's own heart. Even though everything about his background and upbringing should have prepared him for a life as a simple farmer, DAVID WANTED TO DO SO MUCH MORE. And, God wanted so much more for David. He wants so much more for YOU, too. If you're willing to become more than you are today, willing to prepare your heart in devotion to God, willing to study and learn what needs to be learned, willing to sacrifice, willing to take chances, willing to change – God can use you!

- 2. You must have a compassionate heart that is sensitive to God's leading and an ear to hear his voice.** Nehemiah's brother, Hanani, came to visit him at the king's palace. He explained to Nehemiah that the city of Jerusalem was in deep trouble. He said, "The wall is broken down, and its gates have been burned with fire." Nehemiah cared deeply about the city of Jerusalem, and about his kinsmen living there. He didn't want Jerusalem to continue in disgrace. Earlier some improvements had been made in the Holy City, but it broke Nehemiah's heart to think that those achievements could be undone by an invading army. It broke his heart that no one in the city had taken it on themselves to oversee the rebuilding of the wall. It broke his heart that thousands of people were living in Jerusalem, oblivious to the danger, apathetic towards their responsibilities as citizens, helpless to get anything done. The Bible says in verse 4, "*When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven.*" The compassionate heart is often a broken heart. Nehemiah cared so much about his people and his home, that the situation made him weep. What makes YOU cry? What breaks YOUR heart? When your team loses the game? When your golf game gets rained out? When you miss your favorite TV show? I want to encourage you to think beyond that. Leaders are able to identify some type of injustice – some kind of wrong that needs to be made right – some kind of lack that needs to be fulfilled. It often keeps them up at night. There are thousands and thousands of good causes out there. One of them may be calling for you and your giftings. It causes you to say, "This isn't right. I can't ignore this any longer." We might call it "Holy Spirit discontent." There's something deep inside that is unsettling – something really bothersome. You just can't let it go. ILLUSTRATION: About 50 years ago, David Wilkerson was a pastor in rural Pennsylvania. One night he came across an article in Time Magazine about some teen-aged gang members on trial for murder in New York City. As he looked at sketches made by the court-room artist, he was overwhelmed by the hate in those young men's eyes. He couldn't shake it. He couldn't get it out of his mind. It broke his heart. By most standards, David Wilkerson was an unknown – a nobody. He was just a country preacher from a tiny church, living in a roach-infested parsonage. He had no influence and no resources at his disposal. He didn't even have a decent car. But, he couldn't stop thinking about those kids. His heart was broken for them. You probably know what happened. David Wilkerson went to New York to share the gospel with those boys. Teen Challenge was birthed because of his trip to New York City. Later it became known as World Challenge, which is devoted to reaching kids-at-risk throughout the world. He also founded Times Square Church in New York City, where some 8,000 or so people worship each week. It started because his heart was broken over the broken lives of some kids living in a ghetto in another city, in another state. God uses people who are willing to have a broken heart. What breaks your heart? Do you even know? What's your cause? Often it will find you before you find it. Could it be that God is calling you to devote your time and energy to something. It might well stir your spirit, ignite your soul, and

break your heart. W. Clement Stone said, "When you discover your mission, you will feel its demand." It gets ahold of you and it doesn't let go. In response to the news about Jerusalem, Nehemiah said, "*for some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven.*" He couldn't forget about it. He couldn't ignore it. He prayed, he fasted, he cried. The more time he spent thinking about it and praying about it, the greater was the resolve to do something.

- 3. You must be willing to be a catalyst.** If you've read any of John Maxwell's works, you've probably seen the word "catalyst." He says that catalysts are people who know how to get things done, AND THEN SOME. He also said this: "Catalysts are NOT consultants. They don't recommend a course of action. A catalyst takes responsibility for making it happen." It's easy to identify problems. As a pastor, I've found that many church folks are particularly gifted in that area. It's easy. It's not even that hard to propose a solution. "Someone needs to go to those poor people and teach them how to make more money and manage it better. Someone needs to talk to these dropouts and tell them to stay in school. Someone needs to minister to the boys & girls of our community. Someone needs to approach the lost people in our city and tell them about Jesus Christ." It's not that hard to propose a solution or recommend a course of action. Almost ANYONE can do it. But, I have found that a handful of people are willing to MAKE IT HAPPEN themselves. Catalysts are people who take responsibility. They are the people who say, "If not me, then who? If not now, then when?" They're not content with saying, "That's a shame." They say, "I'VE got to do something. I'LL take responsibility for making this happen." That's what catalysts do: they take responsibility. It's what Nehemiah did. After days of fasting and mourning and praying, he said, <sup>6</sup>"*I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself and my father's house, have committed against you. <sup>7</sup>We have acted very wickedly toward you. We have not obeyed the commands, decrees and laws you gave your servant Moses*" (vs. 6-7). He's saying, "I'll take responsibility for my actions, for my negligence, for the role I played in this disaster..." He also said, "God, I'm asking you to make this situation right, and use ME to do it." He prayed, "*Give your servant success today by granting him favor in the presence of this man [the King]*" (vs. 11). And from there, Nehemiah took action. He poured HIS HEART OUT to God, he APPROACHED THE KING, he TRAVELED hundreds of miles, endured OPPOSITION, put in the LONG HOURS, PAID THE PRICE, AND HE – MADE – IT – HAPPEN! He got the job done, AND THEN SOME! ILLUSTRATION: John Maxwell tells a story about a businessman named Eugene Lang. Eugene was giving a speech in 1981 to a group of 61 middle-schoolers in New York City. He knew that, statistically, 75% of those students would never graduate, so he gave them the typical rah-rah stay in school speech, BUT on the spur of the moment, he decided to move from being a consultant to being a CATALYST. He promised those students if they would finish high school, he would pay their way to college. Six years later, over half the students took him up on that offer. Lang's idea developed into the *I Have A Dream Foundation*, sponsoring 160 projects in 57 cities. That's what happens when you decide to be a catalyst. You MAKE THINGS HAPPEN. You see results.
- 4. Conclusion.** God uses people who are willing to be used. That's the bottom line. That's pretty much where leadership starts. It doesn't matter who you are right now; it only matters who you're willing to become. It matters how much you're willing to care, how much of your heart you're willing to give. And it only matters how much you're willing to do, to what extent you're willing to take responsibility, and how far you'll go to make things happen. YOU could be the next Nehemiah – in this community, in your neighborhood, in your family, in this CHURCH. You can lead in such a way that YOU make things happen, that you restore what was once destroyed, that you bring dignity back to what has been devalued. Before God can use you to do anything great, YOU MUST BE WILLING! ARE YOU WILLING?