

Leading Like Nehemiah

Today we're going to start a series on Nehemiah. This series is going to help each of us grow in maturity and understanding. You may never have looked at Nehemiah much. Well, twelve weeks from now you'll know it intimately.

I want to begin with Proverbs 28:2 *"...a nation will be strong and endure when it has intelligent, sensible leaders."* You could also apply this verse to your family or a business, or a church. There are rapid changes and upheavals in our world today and we need strength and endurance.

Today we're going to begin an exciting discovery on principles from the book of Nehemiah on effectively organizing ourselves as believers. It's going to be our textbook. We're going to learn principles of organization from Nehemiah.

Today I'm going to give you the background of the book. But before that I want to give you six Leadership Principles, just to get us started.

1. Real Progress Requires Inspired Leadership. You can maintain things without real leadership, but you can't grow or develop. The Civil Rights movement wasn't as strong as it needed to be until people like Martin Luther King stood up and said, "I have a dream" and provided leadership. The NASA space program wasn't all that strong until John Kennedy said, "We're going to put a man on the moon by the end of the decade." A man by the name of Ray Crocks said, "I want food served quickly, in a convenient way, at a low price" and he invented an entire industry called fast food. The greatest problem today is a leadership shortage. We have a lot of people who want to be in charge, who want to have a say, who want to tell other people what to do. But our greatest need is for real, inspired, self-sacrificing, trained leaders.

Nehemiah knew that ungodly, poor leadership is what got the nation in the mess they were in in the first place. Nehemiah 9:34 says, *"Our kings, leaders, priests, and ancestors did not obey your Law or listen to the warnings in your commands and laws."* The cure is inspired leadership.

2. Influence Is a Basis of Leadership - Leadership is based on influence - for good or bad. There are positive leaders and negative leaders. If you ever go onto a playground at school, within five minutes you know who the leaders are. Sit in a committee meeting and you can figure out who the leader is, sometimes it's the chairperson, sometimes not. In 1 Timothy 4:12 Paul was instructing Timothy in leadership. He wrote, *"Do not let anyone look down on you because you are young, but be an example for the believers in your speech, your conduct, your love, faith, and purity."* So age has nothing to do with leadership. You can be an influence at any age and you're a model whether you like it or not. Everybody here today is a leader, just in different areas. The issue isn't whether you're a leader... you **ARE**. The issue is whether or not you're a good, positive, productive one. You are a leader - in your family, at home, at work, at school, at church, in the community.

Biblically, a leader is someone with God given ability and responsibility who influences a group of God's people to accomplish God's purpose. Nehemiah is an outstanding example in the Bible. He accomplished incredible things.

3. Modeling and Mentoring are Basics of Leadership. In 1 Corinthians 11:1 Paul said, *"Follow my example as I follow the example of Christ."* We all need models. Sure we're to follow Christ but we need human models to follow.

Leadership has absolutely nothing to do with titles or position. This is a mistake a lot of bureaucrats make. A guy thinks, because he has a title, things should automatically go the way he wants and that's not necessarily true at all. There is a big difference between having a boss and having a leader. Many people have authority but not leadership.

Leadership means helping people understand the whys as well as the what to dos. It's not just a matter of authority. According to the bylaws included in our United Methodist church Discipline, as the pastor of this church, I have a remarkable amount of authority. Technically, nothing can be done in this church without my authorization. No meeting can be held without my approval. No one but me has any say whatsoever about what we do in worship, including the style, time of day, type of music or place we gather. But there's no way that I would simply dictate any of that. The Sunday I stand up and say, "Folks, we're going to do it my way because I am the leader" - that's the Sunday I'm no longer a leader.

If your kid comes to you and says, "Why should I do this?" and you say, "Because I say so". That's a very weak way to try to motivate them. It doesn't work anywhere near as well as true leadership. Genuine, positive leaders don't force people to follow them.

4. Character, Not Charisma Is a Basis of Leadership - A lot of TV evangelists have had lots of charisma, but failed because of a lack of character. One foundation of true leadership is character. You don't have to have strong charisma to be a real leader. Reputation is what people say you are, character is what you really are. D. L. Moody said, "Character is what you are in the dark when nobody is looking." You do have to have character.

Leaders come in all types, shapes, sizes, backgrounds and temperaments. There's no **one** leadership personality. God wants to use your personality. Look at the various people God used as leaders in the Bible. They're as different as night and day. The thing they had in common was character. Some didn't start out that way, but they developed character and that made them powerful leaders.

Sometimes a person gets into leadership without character and then those character flaws cause their downfall. But some people have failed and fallen and then come back because they learned and grew.

As we look at Nehemiah, we're going to see a man of God who was an ordinary person but managed to do extraordinary things because he had character.

The thing is you have to be true to who you are and you'll likely burn out if you just try to imitate someone else's personality if it isn't really in line with yours. Leaders can be very different from one another. There's great diversity. But what great leaders do have in common is character. If who you are doesn't include character, that's a problem, because that's part of being a believer.

Hebrews 13:7 says, "*Remember your leaders who taught you the word of God. Think of all the good that has come from their lives, and follow the example of their faith.*" This passage gives us three characteristics of good leaders:

First, they have a message that comes from God's word. That means there is something worth remembering there.

Second, they have a lifestyle that's worthwhile. "*Think of all the good that has come from their lives.*" Does their walk match their talk? Does their life match what they say they are?

Third, they have a faith worth imitating. They give an example worth following. "*...follow the example of their faith.*" If you want to be a good leader, you need to develop a message worth remembering - what God wants to say to the world through you - have a lifestyle that's positive, and have a faith worth imitating.

5. Leadership Is a Learned Skill - If I didn't believe that we wouldn't be wasting time on this sermon. Every one of you can be a great leader. In Philippians 4:9 Paul tells the church that he founded in Philippi, "*Keep putting into practice all you learned and received from me—everything you heard from me and saw me doing.*" He's telling them to follow his lead. In essence he's teaching them to lead by his example. Leaders are grown, not born. They learn by experience and example.

There's no such thing as a born leader. Leaders are made as they respond to circumstances. You can put two people in exactly the same circumstances, one of them will end up being a leader, the other will wash out because of the choices and responses they make.

The priority of mentoring and modeling to make leaders is clearly shown in the ministry of Jesus. Mark 3:14 "*Then he appointed twelve of them and called them his apostles. They were to accompany him, and he would send them out to preach...*" Part of Jesus' ministry involved preaching, teaching and healing people along the way and crowds that gathered. But another part involved gathering a group of people to learn from him and then to go out and communicate the message as well. He was training the disciples to be leaders. Even within the twelve he had an inner circle -- Peter, James, John -- who got extra attention and became more important leaders. In Galatians, Paul said Peter, James and John were the pillars of the church. Jesus invested the maximum time with those who would bear the maximum responsibility. He fed and taught the masses but spent most of his time training the leadership because leadership can be learned.

6. If You Stop Learning, You Stop being a Real Leader - All real leaders are learners. The moment I stop learning, I stop leading. You must always be developing and growing and becoming what God wants you to be. Learning to be a leader takes a lifetime. We'll see it in the life of Nehemiah -- how God prepared him and God used him and how God used the lives of other people that Nehemiah taught.

The person who thinks, "I know it all" or even, "I know enough" is going to be left behind. It's the person who says, "I need to learn; I need to grow," that God is looking for. Jesus said in Matthew 13:12, "*To those who listen to my teaching, more understanding will be given, and they will have an abundance of knowledge. But for those who are not listening, even what little understanding they have will be taken away from them.*" Grow it or lose it.

That's why it's so important that we keep on learning and challenging ourselves, even when we are more spiritually mature. Proverbs 9:9 says, *"Instruct the wise, and they will be even wiser. Teach the righteous, and they will learn even more."* Proverbs 18:15 says, *"Intelligent people are always ready to learn. Their ears are open for knowledge."*

So, given all that as an introduction, let's look at **the background of Nehemiah's story**; In 586 BC the city of Jerusalem in Israel was destroyed. Jews were expelled and moved to Babylon which is now Iraq. They were to be kept there for generations. Cyrus the Great of the Persian Empire in 539 BC made the re-establishment of the city of Jerusalem and the rebuilding of the Temple possible and 22 years later in 517 the first group of Jews were allowed to return. By 516 the Temple was basically rebuilt. That's the same Temple that would be there during Jesus' time. In 458 Ezra led the second group of Jews back to Jerusalem. Then in 445 Nehemiah asked permission to return to Jerusalem with a third group to rebuild the city walls.

Today we use other means to protect our cities -- we don't need walls. But in those days walls were very important. A walled city could hold against an enemy for months - often long enough so that the enemy had to give up or we defeated. The Jewish people had been trickling back into the city, but it was still in ruins. The houses were heaps of rubble and the walls and gates were down. So the people were defenseless; vulnerable to attack and harassment because they had no protection. That meant they were unsettled, anxious, uncertain, and ready to bolt at a moment's notice.

When an army would take a city, the practice was to destroy the walls. That was to show that they were defeated and discourage and demoralize the people. They wanted them to feel helpless, disgraced, and defenseless. When the walls of the city of Jerusalem were torn down the people felt like God had forsaken them.

Now, the reason they were conquered and in captivity in the first place was due to their disobedience and sin. God had warned them, If you guys don't get your act together I'm going to allow an enemy nation to come in. They didn't, so he did. But now He's allowing them to come back, the Temple has been basically rebuilt but the city is still in rubble, a big mess, and the walls are still down. People are living with low morale, and they're defeated, discouraged, depressed. What do you do when you have that kind of situation? You need a leader.

Nehemiah 1 says, *"In late autumn, in the month of Kislev, in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes' reign, I was at the fortress of Susa. Hanani, one of my brothers, came to visit me with some other men who had just arrived from Judah. I asked them about the Jews who had returned there from captivity and about how things were going in Jerusalem. They said to me, "Things are not going well for those who returned to the province of Judah. They are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem has been torn down, and the gates have been destroyed by fire." When I heard this, I sat down and wept. In fact, for days I mourned, fasted, and prayed to the God of heaven. Then I said..."* the next verses get into his prayer.

Nehemiah first says "I was at the fortress of Susa". Notice this was written in first person. We're getting a personal account of a leader. This is his account of how he was about to get permission from a foreign king, who was not even a believer, to go back and rebuild the walls of Jerusalem when the foreign king had previously ordered that they not be rebuilt. So he was in the citadel of Susa. Susa was not the capital of the Persian Empire but was like a summer palace. Nehemiah is there in the king's summer palace. The town is now called Shush which is in Khuzestan in Iran, on the Iran - Iraq border by the Persian Gulf.

In verse 11, after he finishes his prayer, he says *"In those days I was the king's cup-bearer."* This tells us what Nehemiah did for a living, what his occupation was. The king was Artaxerxes -- King Artaxerxes was born during the reign of his grandfather Darius I. His father was Xerxes I. In 465 BC, Xerxes I and Crown Prince Darius, Artaxerxes' older brother, were murdered by Artabanus, the commander of the royal bodyguard. After Artaxerxes discovered the murder he killed Artabanus and his children. It was a rough time period!

Nehemiah was his cupbearer. A cupbearer was an officer of high rank in royal courts. On account of the constant fear of plots and intrigues, a person must be regarded as thoroughly trustworthy to hold the position. He must guard against poison in the king's cup and other threats to the king. His confidential relations with the king often gave him a position of great influence. The position of cup-bearer is greatly valued and given to only a select few throughout history.. He was the person the most trusted by the king. He was the king's personal security agent, and a government minister. There were a lot of assassination attempts in those days. Cupbearer was a pretty dangerous job, considering in those days a lot of people didn't like Artaxerxes.

The point is that Nehemiah had to be absolutely loyal and trustworthy. He was Jewish but probably born in Babylon because they'd been in captivity there generations, but he was not a Persian and he is second in command. Isn't it neat how God has a way of always getting the right person in the right position at the right time?

So his brother had been on a trip to Jerusalem. Jerusalem is about 900 miles from Susa. In those days that would take probably about two months travel across the desert. Nehemiah asks what's happening over there in Jerusalem. Hanani says, "It's all bad news, the people are in bad shape, our relatives are discouraged, the walls haven't been rebuilt. Besides the temple, the whole city lies in ruin. It's bad news!"

Nehemiah's reaction is in verse 4 " *When I heard this, I sat down and wept. In fact, for days I mourned, fasted, and prayed to the God of heaven.*" Nehemiah's reaction was four things: he wept, he mourned, he fasted, he prayed. He's really taking this seriously. He's genuinely saddened. Notice it says, "for some days". How long did he do it? In v. 1 he tells us this is the month of Chislev when he heard about it. In chapter 2, the very first verse, he says it's the month of Nisan of the twentieth year of king Artaxerxes. From these two Persian months it was four months. He took this very deeply to heart. Nehemiah is a man of prayer. There are more prayers in this book than in almost any other book in the Bible.

So what was it that turned Nehemiah from a government official into a truly effective leader? Of all the people why did God inspire Nehemiah, the cupbearer to a pagan king to lead the people?

1. Nehemiah Responded to the Needs of Hurting People - His reaction is pretty incredible. He had it made. He's at the peak of his career, living on easy street. He's got a great life, he doesn't need to rock the boat. He could just deal with the needs of the people right there where he served - that's what people around him would think he should do. He's never even seen Jerusalem. but when he hears about people depressed and defeated, he takes it seriously.

For most of us, life is really relatively easy compared to the rest of the world. Most of the world would love to have our problems. Their problems are "Am I going to have food this today?" We live in a place that is, in many ways, insulated from the problems the rest of the world faces.

The point I want to make is this: The people that God uses are people who care about the things God cares about. And God cared about the fact that the walls of Jerusalem were broken down and people were hurting. God had a purpose for his people that wasn't being fulfilled. God cared about it, so Nehemiah cared about it and that made him a leader.

Bob Pierce, the founder of World Vision, used to say, "Let my heart be broken with the things that break the heart of God." That's the first step in being a great leader.

2. Nehemiah Was Committed and Dedicated - We see that the king considered him so trustworthy he gave him the most responsible and trusted position of the kingdom: cupbearer. He entrusted his personal security to him. There was enormous confidence in him. His dedication was exceptional. God uses people who are fully committed.

There are many ways to test our faithfulness. One of the ways God tests us is seeing how we serve in another person's ministry before God gives us our own. How you serve when it's not something that you're personally benefitting from shows how dedicated you are. Another test is in what we do with our finances. Your giving determines to a great degree how much you can be trusted with. If you can't be trusted with common things who's going to trust you with true riches?

3. Nehemiah Took Initiative and Stepped Up - When the situation needed a leader, Nehemiah said, "I volunteer! Here am I, send me!" He had the job, the position that everybody else wanted and the problem presented to him was a thousand miles and two months away across the desert, but he says, "I'll go!" There's nothing to indicate that he had any skills for that particular job but God still chose him because he was responsive, and he was committed and he was willing.

God is not looking for ability in leaders as much as he's looking for responsibility, commitment, and willingness. Those qualities are a matter of choice. You may say, "I don't have certain gifts or talents or intellect." That doesn't matter. What matters is, do you care about the needs? Do you have character and are you committed to do God's will? dependable? Can God rely on you? Are you willing to make yourself available?

Nothing much good happens until someone provides leadership for it. God wants to use you as a leader in your home, your community, your church. Over the next few weeks, we'll learn major principles from God's word on how to live out an incredibly effective life as a believer and as a leader in our world.