

Motivating Like Nehemiah - 2:10-20

We're going to look at another important skill for believers. We've covered praying and planning. The next thing you do is you be able to get people to cooperate with you. Success is never a one-man show. Nehemiah knew that he could not rebuild the wall without the help of other people. When he goes to Jerusalem, the people are defeated, apathetic, living among ruins. Twice before in the last ninety years someone had tried to rebuild the wall. They've failed twice. The people have no confidence that anything can ever change. They're negative. For decades they've been saying it can't be done. Nehemiah arrives on the scene and within a matter of days he has rallied the support of the entire city. He puts them together, mobilizes them, rebuilds the wall in 52 days. This was something that they hadn't been able to pull off in 90 years. The question is how did Nehemiah pull it off when other people had failed? Was he a miracle worker? No. He was just a great leader. And he understood the principles of motivation.

How does a leader motivate other people? Let's look at how things went for Nehemiah and learn to respond the way that he did.

First, when you embark on a new endeavor remind yourself that you'll have to, **1. Expect Opposition** - The fact is, the moment you say, "Let's do something," someone will say, "Let's not." People are naturally resistant to change. They don't like it. They want the status quo, which is usually Latin for "the mess we're in". People resist change for a variety of reasons. It can help to figure out what those reasons are and deal with them as best you can. Nehemiah 2:10 says, "...when Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official heard of my arrival, they were very displeased that someone had come to help the people of Israel." He names two leaders of the opposition. You'll find these people all through the book of Nehemiah. Sanballat was the governor of Samaria, Tobiah was the leader of the Ammonites. Nehemiah had just arrived in the province. He hadn't even gotten to Jerusalem yet and there's already opposition!

Nehemiah knew opposition was coming. Paul knew that sort of thing too. In 1 Corinthians 16:8-9 Paul says, "...I will be staying here at Ephesus until the Festival of Pentecost. There is a wide-open door for a great work here, although many oppose me." Notice there's both opportunity and opposition. Always remember this: **There is almost never opportunity without opposition.** If you're going to help change conditions, situations or people, expect opposition.

Then next, you need to, **2. Choose Your Timing Carefully** - In motivating others and suggesting change, timing is important! Have you ever had a good idea killed because of bad timing? Timing makes a big difference. Nehemiah 2:11-12 says, "So I arrived in Jerusalem. Three days later, I slipped out during the night, taking only a few others with me. I had not told anyone about the plans God had put in my heart for Jerusalem..." He stops for three days. Nehemiah doesn't make a grand entrance, riding on a white horse. He did nothing people would notice for three days. What was he doing for those three days? We don't know but here are four probabilities.

First, he was probably recovering from a long journey. He had crossed part of a desert. **Never make a major decision when you're tired.** Fatigue clouds perspective.

Second, he may have been praying. We know he was into prayer. Before he even started out he'd prayed for weeks.

Third, he most likely was planning and reviewing his strategy.

Fourth, he must have been talking to some people because when he heads out, he takes some people with him. He didn't tell them his plans, but he must have felt out people he thought would be worth having along with him.

Fifth, he may have been allowing interest and curiosity to build. He arrives with a king's escort, into a town that is defeated and discouraged. He sets up a place to live and then he says nothing. Don't you think that caused a little curiosity? Do you think the people in the existing power structures were thinking, "What's this guy up to?" After three days absolutely **everyone** had probably heard of him.

Ecclesiastes 3:7 says, **There is "...A time to be quiet and a time to speak."** Ecclesiastes 8:6 says, **"...there is a time and a way for everything..."** Jesus demonstrated this sensibility. Many times he said, "It's not time yet. My time has not yet come."

Next, **3. You Have to Do Your Research** - In verses 12-16 we have Nehemiah's research party actually going out and inspecting the walls of Jerusalem. This is Nehemiah's midnight ride to survey the territory. He says, **"I slipped out during the night, taking only a few others with me. I had not told anyone about the plans God had put in my heart for Jerusalem. We took no pack animals with us except the donkey I was riding. After dark I went out**

through the Valley Gate, past the Jackal's Well, and over to the Dung Gate to inspect the broken walls and burned gates. Then I went to the Fountain Gate and to the King's Pool, but my donkey couldn't get through the rubble. So, though it was still dark, I went up the Kidron Valley instead, inspecting the wall before I turned back and entered again at the Valley Gate. The city officials did not know I had been out there or what I was doing, for I had not yet said anything to anyone about my plans. I had not yet spoken to the Jewish leaders—the priests, the nobles, the officials, or anyone else in the administration." He only involves a small group.

Any good leader knows what Nehemiah's doing. He's doing his homework. This is a part of leadership nobody sees: doing your preparation, checking the situation, getting the facts. He finds out it's pretty bad. Proverbs 18:13 says, "*Spouting off before listening to the facts is both shameful and foolish.*" You have to check things out. Proverbs 14:15 says, "*Only simpletons believe everything they're told! The prudent carefully consider their steps.*"

Why is Nehemiah being so secretive about this survey? Because he doesn't want to show his hand before he knows his facts. He doesn't want the plan to be stalled before it gets out of the starting gate. There had been 90 years of negativism and it's far easier to kill a good idea than it is to promote one. Let me ask you this: Have you ever noticed that negative people tend to be more vocal than positive people? If someone is against something they tend to grumble about it. If someone is happy with it, they don't tend to say anything. **Smart leaders protect their plans from premature death.**

Nehemiah has scoped out his opposition, he's gathered the facts... Now he's ready to get started. He's ready to make use of the fourth key to motivating people. **4. Face the Facts and Put Your Cards on the Table** - You have to be honest and open about just how difficult the situation is and what needs to happen. Nehemiah says in verse 17, "*But now I said to them, "You know very well what trouble we are in. Jerusalem lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire. Let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem and end this disgrace!"*" Notice that he's talking about them doing it together. This requires all of them. They have to be part of it.

Rather than minimizing the problem, he emphasizes it, he makes them face up to it. He uses emotional words. He's underlining the seriousness of this. Why? Because these guys had been living with this for years. They were used to it - this was just their experience of how things are. Isn't it a fact of life that when you live with a situation long enough, you start ignoring it; start accepting it as normal? When you live with a situation long enough you can become resigned to it being that way. He refocuses their attention on the problem "We've got a mess here." He's getting them to face the facts.

Change never occurs until we face the facts and become discontent. If you want to create change, one mark of real leaders is that they create discontent. If you're a leader that means you're going to have to put up with criticism, Anyone who rocks the boat, gets push-back.

Nehemiah appealed to their self esteem. He said, "We've got to do this; we're in disgrace. We could do so much better. We're God's people and we're living in rubble. It's a mess." They were God's people and the world was laughing at them: "Those poor idiots! They say they worship the one true all-powerful God and they can't even rebuild their own city. They say their God's the greatest God, but they're living in the rubble." It was an embarrassment.

He didn't pussyfoot around, he put his cards on the table and asked for a response. You don't just say, we've got to do this, you ask for commitment. Nehemiah says, "Let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem and end this disgrace." He calls for action; he asks for a specific response.

Nehemiah knew what this would involve because he got the facts during his research. He saw really how tough things were and he was honest about it. But he's also hopeful about the situation. After honestly laying out the problem, he doesn't give up, he says, "Let's rebuild." Let's not sit here thinking back on better times, let's do something about conditions as they are now.

Believers - and particularly leaders of believers - need to see both the real and the ideal; To see what is but also see what can be. People who just see what can be and don't see what is, aren't leaders; they've just got a good imagination. People who see what is real but don't see the ideal aren't leaders; they're accountants or managers. To be a leader or to even be an effective Christian believer you've got to see both the actual and the possible.

The wall around Jerusalem was not going to be built until someone stood up and said, "It's going to take sacrifice. We're going to have to put time, money, effort, energy to do this." We need to ask people for a specific response.

Next, **5. Relate it to Your Own Calling and Commitment** - In verse 18 we have Nehemiah's personal story: *"Then I told them about how the gracious hand of God had been on me, and about my conversation with the king."* He tells them about how God had called him to the project; about how he prayed about it and how God answered his prayer and gave him a vision. He told them how God had given him courage, had helped in his preparations and in his conversation with the king and how the king had said yes.

It's legitimate for someone to want to know if you are truly committed; if you've gone to God and prayed; if you have a vision that God has provided. They need to know that you're not just going through the motions; that you have been called to do this and that you are committed to it.

Nehemiah shares his testimony of how God had called him and the circumstances confirmed his calling. Verse 18b is the people's response, *"They replied at once, 'Yes, let's rebuild the wall!' So they began the good work."* The people he shared with were excited! Nehemiah comes saying, "God's put me here to do this." And he helps them to understand his vision and they get it. As we'll see, not everyone got it, but these folk did. The vision has been transferred. At first only he had this vision. He guarded it very carefully at first - he didn't tell anyone. He went out and did research in secret. He was waiting for the right time. Once he had all the facts, he spelled out the situation, he asked for a specific response and then encouraged them with his own personal testimony about how God called him to do this. Now the vision's been transferred. It's not just Nehemiah's vision anymore; there are people who share it.

Why did Nehemiah use his personal testimony in motivation? It wasn't because he felt it was all about him. It was because they needed to know his heart, his call and commitment if they were going to be willing to follow his lead.

In 1 Corinthians 10:33 to 11:1 NCV, Paul says, *"I am not trying to do what is good for me but what is good for most people so they can be saved. Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ."* Why should anybody follow your lead? Why should they accept what you say is the way to go? It can't be because of your desires or preferences. You have to show that you are willing to go there; to do what's necessary. They have to see God's hand in your life. As your pastor, if you can't see that I am committed to God's Spirit in my life, don't follow me! But if you do see my commitment to following God's Spirit in my life, then you ought to do what you can to support my leadership and cooperate with my leadership. And that's true of my listening to you as well. Can I see God's hand on your life? Can I see your commitment to following God's Spirit in your life? Are you willing to do what is necessary for people to be saved? Are you willing to imitate Christ? That's the test. Not age. Not longevity of membership. Not education. Not talent. There are a lot of talented people you shouldn't follow. There are a lot of people with credentials that you shouldn't follow. But does God have his hand on your life?

Finally, **6. Be Prepared to Deal with Challengers** - People will disparage you. They may look at whatever you do in the worst light they can. Verse 19 says, *"But when Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem the Arab heard of our plan, they scoffed contemptuously. 'What are you doing? Are you rebelling against the king?' they asked."* In verse 10, before Nehemiah arrived only Sanballat and Tobiah were in opposition. Now the opposition is expanding. Opposition usually grows as a project continues. As we get further into Nehemiah we'll find there were many more sources of opposition. He got it from every side! The opposition's first strategy was, *"they scoffed contemptuously."* They made fun of his ideas and plans. "It'll never work! You're never going to get it built." The second thing they did was they accused them of rebelling against the king - of acting in violation of the way you're supposed to do things. In Ezra 4:13 that was the very accusation that got the wall stopped the last time. It had worked before when Ezra was trying to get it rebuilt. Since it had worked before with the previous guy who tried to lead in a direction they didn't like, they tried it again with this guy. But now it didn't work. The reason it didn't work now is because Nehemiah knows his stuff; he's done his research. And Nehemiah is no pushover. He's more interested in what God has called him to do than in what they want him to do.

Verse 20 says, *"I replied, 'The God of heaven will help us succeed. We, his servants, will start rebuilding this wall. But you have no share, legal right, or historic claim in Jerusalem.'"* Nehemiah refused to argue. If you're wise you won't argue with the opposition. Instead he points out that it's God's project and God's idea. God put the burden on him. It wasn't his idea to rebuild the wall, it was God's idea. Since it was God's idea they would trust God for its success.

The other thing he does is expose the selfish motives they had. They felt they had a stake in Jerusalem and wanted it the way it was because under the current conditions, they could have things the way they wanted them. He exposes the motives of the opposition.

This only stopped the opposition temporarily. They came back several more times. For now, though, it probably boosted the morale of the people in Jerusalem to hear him speak up for what God wanted to do. They had been feeling defeated for years and finally here's a guy who is not afraid to stand up against the naysayers.

If you start working for God, expect opposition. The moment you hang your sign out, somebody is going to start throwing rocks at it. The only way to not be criticized in life is to do nothing, be nothing, say nothing. If you decide that you're going to live for Jesus Christ somebody is going to start mocking you. Let them!

People will question your motives like they questioned Nehemiah's. That's part of the price of being a Christian and that's part of the price of following God's lead. People will oppose you. Answer opposition confidently!

Nehemiah came into a situation where everybody had been saying, "It can't be done!" And where everyone wanted things to be done in the way that best benefitted them or so they could have things the way they liked them. It took courage and will to stand against opposition and the momentum of the events of the time and say, "Let's go for it!"

Nehemiah motivated the people, despite the fact that things had been going downhill for decades and didn't look good for the future. So how do you motivate people to be part of a team and serve? You focus and stay laser-focused on a vision and a mission and you tailor your strategy toward that vision and eliminate ALL other options. Nehemiah didn't call them to a series of optional ways forward.

When the mission, vision, strategy and values of an organization are crystal clear, it leaves little room for the competing agendas, differing strategies or conflicting objectives that sideline so many churches.

Unfortunately, most churches won't do this well. And the reason they won't do it is because it requires eliminating the other options. You have to say no to dozens of other visions, strategies, ways of being the church, program ideas and anything that would add complexity or would compete with the mission vision and strategy. Saying no to many things allows you to say yes to the great thing God wants you to do. That takes courage - courage that Nehemiah had.

One of the lessons we learn from Nehemiah is that there are going to be things God wants to do in your life and through your life that other people are not going to get excited about. Realize that. They are not always going to agree with the direction that God is leading you, people won't always agree with the direction that God is leading the church, but sometimes you have to take a stand like Nehemiah.

When John Wesley hit the road and started bringing disreputable, uncouth people and younger, less experienced people, and people who needed to grow spiritually to Christ and organized them to be effective, motivated, leaders in the midst of a declining, hide-bound church, he was criticized and attacked. Mobs through rotten food at him; some tried to stone him. Church leaders spoke against him and urged people to desert, disown, and disrespect him.

When Martin Boehm, one of the two founders of the United Brethren Church took it upon himself to affirm the sorts of things that John Wesley said and practiced and take those ideas to German speaking people, he was excommunicated by the Mennonites.

In Nehemiah's time and Jesus' time and Paul's time and throughout history and right up to this day, when you stand up for the Lord, people will try to knock you down. Sometimes it will be very genuine people who have a sense that they're doing it for the right reason. Most of the people who opposed Jesus and Paul and Luther and Wesley and so many others, were sincere, faithful people who simply didn't see that God was leading in a new direction.

The thing is, if you think that everybody is going to be positive about your decision to live for the Lord, think again! If you think that everybody is going to be positive about where the Lord directs us to go as a church, think again! You need to be prepared for criticism and ridicule. You need to decide that you're going to live for Jesus Christ no matter what anybody else thinks. That's part of what it means to be a believer.