

Leadership Principles from Nehemiah

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Day One

I am examining some important leadership principles from the book of Nehemiah. You may wonder what an Old Testament saint could teach us about leadership today, but you'll discover these truths are timeless. Nehemiah was both an outstanding spiritual leader and a very good business manager, and we can learn a great deal from him.

One of the first principles we learn from Nehemiah is he knew how to handle bad news. We read in chapter one of Nehemiah that his brother brought him the bad news that Jerusalem's wall was broken down, its gates had been burned, and those who survived were in great trouble. Well, that would be enough to discourage anyone. But Nehemiah does not fall apart, even at this bad news.

Life is full of bad news. It could be a small disappointment to a catastrophic occurrence, but when bad news comes your way, how do you respond? A strong leader is not only able to take the bad news but wants to know it. Sticking your head in the sand is a sure sign of immaturity and lack of trust in God.

If you are a manager on your job, a leader in your church, or have an influential position of any kind, you need to make certain people around you don't hide the bad news from you. Of course, they'll be more likely to tell you bad news if they are confident your reaction will be reasonable and controlled. You can't let bad news rattle you. You will lose the confidence of those who look up to you, and it will make matters worse.

David had to face many bad news situations. In one case, he returned with his 600 soldiers to Ziklag and found the enemy had robbed them of everything and set fire to the city. His men were so upset they wanted to kill David. But David did not panic. The Bible says simply: *David found strength in the Lord his God* (1 Sam. 30:6b). Then he asks the Lord what to do, and under God's direction, he pursued the enemy and recovered all that was lost.

Interestingly, both David and Nehemiah mourned and wept at their bad news, but they didn't stay there. They prayed for guidance and obeyed the Lord.

Do you fall into depression when things do not go well? We can learn a very valuable lesson from Nehemiah on how to handle bad news.

Day Two

I am examining leadership principles from the life of Nehemiah. Now, maybe you're thinking you're not a leader, but all of us are, in some way or another. And these principles are relevant to everyone.

Yesterday we saw a leader knows how to handle bad news. In the second chapter of Nehemiah, we find he was open and vulnerable. You see, he worked for King Artaxerxes, and nobody was allowed to look sad or unhappy in the king's presence. In fact, the death penalty was the punishment for sad-

looking servants. But with a heavy heart about his people and the condition of Jerusalem, Nehemiah looked sad in the king's presence.

Nehemiah did not hide his grief and sadness. He wasn't trying to make others feel bad, but he wasn't putting on a "happy face," as we say.

Psychologists say 80 percent of our emotional strength frequently goes into wearing a mask, pretending to be someone we are not. Think about it—when you ask someone how they are doing, how often do people say anything except "fine." Now, I'm not suggesting we start dumping our problems on anyone who asks, "How are you?" But I do believe far too often we put on a mask and pretend to be who we are not, when we need to be openly honest.

There is great relief in developing this characteristic of not being afraid to reveal who we really are. You can be much more relaxed when you accept yourself the way you are, acknowledging your weaknesses and also recognizing your strengths. It is a sign of spiritual and emotional maturity to be honest about yourself.

I remember going to Uganda and Kenya to minister to women in Christian leadership, and the women were kind enough to write notes of appreciation for my teaching. I noticed many of them said things like, "Thank you for opening up to us," and "Thank you for speaking from personal experience." Being real and open can be used mightily by God to build bridges to other people and open up possibilities for ministry that would otherwise be closed.

Remember, God has called us to be authentic and not to wear a mask. As the Apostle Paul wrote, *By the grace of God I am who I am*, and there is no reason to cover up who we are in Christ.

Day Three

I wonder if you've read the book of Nehemiah lately. You'll find it in the Old Testament between Ezra and Esther, a book of thirteen chapters, and filled with practical help for us today. I encourage you to read it again or for the first time. You will be blessed to see how this man of God, Nehemiah, tackled what looked like an impossible task, rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem, and did it in record time.

In chapter two, verse eight, Nehemiah says,

Because the gracious hand of my God was upon me, the king granted my requests.

Nehemiah had asked his boss, the king, for some time off to go back to Jerusalem and repair the walls. This was a gutsy request on his part, and he prayed much before asking. But he believed it was God's will for him to do this, and he took courage and asked for permission.

When the king grants his request, he immediately gives praise and credit to the Lord and his gracious hand. Nehemiah was a truly humble man, who was quick to give God the glory for his success. He was not too proud to ask the king for this favor, and when the favor was granted, he was humble and not proud of it. No bragging on his part, but true humility.

You know, to be an effective leader, we must first know when we need help from others and how to ask for that help. Nehemiah made his request in a very respectful manner, fully aware of his position before the king. He could never have gone back to Jerusalem to build those walls without the king's permission, and once it was granted, he didn't gloat or take it for granted. He gave God praise.

I find one of the things a good leader must do is to know when to ask for help and where to go for that help. None of us is an island, as the poet reminds us, and we need others. Again and again in Scripture we see this principle of our dependence on each other in the body of Christ, and the importance of

working together. One of the lessons I've had to learn as a leader is that it is not a sign of weakness to admit you need help. Nor it is an imposition to ask others to help you. Most often you open up opportunities for others to use their gifts and be a part of the success by asking for their help.

Learn from Nehemiah's example of seeking help when needed, and giving credit where it is due. Again, it is the sign of a good leader and a mature person to acknowledge the part others have played and give them credit for their contributions.

Day Four

Do you know how to keep a secret? We are examining some principles from Nehemiah because he was a very successful leader and motivator, as well as a very godly man. And we can learn much from him.

One of his secrets of success was he knew how to keep a secret. After asking for and receiving permission from his boss, King Artaxerxes, to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the walls, he arrives there to do this seemingly impossible task. In chapter two verse twelve we read,

I had not told anyone what my God had put in my heart to do for Jerusalem (Nehemiah 2:12).

Now why was it important for Nehemiah to keep his own confidence? If he had ridden into Jerusalem and started pronouncing to everyone his intention to rebuild the broken walls, they would have thought he was mad. Who did he think he was anyway? He realized this had to be approached very wisely and carefully, and he had to show the people it could be done. He needed a plan and he needed to take his time to do it right. He kept his mouth shut until the appropriate time.

Those who guard their lips preserve their lives, but those who speak rashly will come to ruin (Proverbs 13:3).

Those who guard their mouths and their tongues keep themselves from calamity (Proverbs 21:23).

A trustworthy person keeps a secret (Proverbs 11:13).

Speaking rashly always leads to regrets. How many times have you wanted to cut your tongue out because you said something rashly, told something you should have kept in confidence or said something that was not carefully thought-out? It is so true guarding our mouths will keep us from calamity.

Nehemiah could have destroyed any possibility of rebuilding that wall—doing what God had called him to do—if he had not controlled his tongue and kept his own confidence until the time was appropriate. We can benefit greatly by following his example.

Day Five

Do you know how to motivate people? The ability to motivate people and inspire them is absolutely essential if you want to be an effective leader. Even as leaders in our homes, we need to know how to motivate our children and even our mates.

When I speak of motivation, I want to be clear I'm not speaking about manipulation. Trying to manipulate people to do what we want them to do is deceptive and wrong. But if we're doing something worthwhile and we need others to come alongside, then we must learn how to motivate them so they will take ownership and want to succeed with us.

We've looked at a few principles from the life of Nehemiah. He was called by God to do a monumental task—rebuild the broken walls of Jerusalem. Obviously, he needed help, and he had to find a way to motivate the few Jews that were left to undertake this huge project.

Then I said to them, "You see the trouble we are in: Jerusalem lies in ruins, and its gates have been burned with fire. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, and we will no longer be in disgrace." I also told them about the gracious hand of my God upon me and what the king had said to me. They replied, "Let us start rebuilding." So, they began this good work (Nehemiah 2:17-18).

Nehemiah presented the problem to them and underscored the fact it was a disgrace to them for the walls of Jerusalem to be in ruins. He assures them of God's guidance in this task and challenges them to join him in rebuilding the wall. And they readily agreed.

In motivating others, we must always present the challenge and the benefit. I find people really love to be challenged, to push the envelope and do what looks difficult or impossible. Presented in the right way, it will motivate people to join with you, provided they can see the need and the benefit.

Nehemiah told them what they already knew—that the ruined wall of Jerusalem was a disgrace to their nation. He motivated them through patriotism and loyalty to God. Once they shared Nehemiah's vision, they were willing to commit themselves to rebuild the wall.

Ask God to show you how to motivate others appropriately, how to cast the vision, and make the rewards and benefits obvious. It is a very important characteristic of an effective leader.