

The Reward of God's Blessing

Nehemiah 5:14-19

A number of years ago I listened to a man proclaim very publicly that he had recently accepted the pastorate of a large and well-known church because of the prestige of the position. In his consideration of that new pulpit, he admitted that it was a promotion. He admitted that himself in a sermon that he was preaching. And I was grieved as I listened, because I couldn't agree with his motive. He was moving up the corporate ladder, so to speak, and I could hardly restrain my concerns for the dear people of that church which he had just left, since he had come there just a year or two earlier. His decision to move on was a professional decision, based not upon the welfare of the church but his own advancement. He admitted as much himself! How sad it was to me, to see such secular business pattern carried out by one of my fellow ministers in the church of Jesus Christ.

Why do I mention that today? Because I want to begin with the realization that men are fallible, and that we sometimes make very bad and unwise decisions in the exercise of leadership. I must, of course, preach faithfully to myself and think deeply about these things for myself before I preach them to you. This message is appropriate for all of you, but especially for those in leadership, whether that is the official ordained leadership in the church of elder and deacon, or in other less formal exercises of leadership. It is appropriate for all you fathers, who have a God-given leadership role within your own family. And parents, together, leading your children. It relates to those of you who have leadership responsibilities in your employment. And it will certainly apply to those who lead in our civil governments.

The subject is leadership. And the method of teaching about leadership is by example. Nehemiah's good example as

contrasted with the bad example of leaders who had gone before him. We'll start with,

I. THE EXAMPLE OF BAD LEADERSHIP.

Nehemiah doesn't mention their names, but identifies them only as his predecessors.

v.15

Former governors. We know of two of them, from our previous study. Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel, though none after Zerubbabel are mentioned specifically. But their quality of leadership is.

Now, before I get specific, it is worth noting that because of man's sinful nature, because of the dominion of sin in those who are not regenerated and the remnants of the flesh in those who are, there is a universal propensity among those in leadership to abuse authority. And that propensity, that tendency to this particular sin, goes right back to Adam and Eve. Do you remember what God said about the relationship between Adam and Eve, as husband and wife, after they obtained the experiential knowledge of good and evil? What happened to the blissful and happy relationship of marriage which they had so richly enjoyed?

In particular, what happened to Adam's perfect and loving leadership which he had given Eve before the fall? It is actually described as part of the curse spoken to the woman, Eve.

Gen. 3:16 "To the woman He said: "I will greatly multiply your sorrow and your conception; In pain you shall bring forth children; Your desire shall be for your husband, And he shall rule over you."

"He shall rule over you." That isn't a command. Rather, it is a sad observation regarding the perversion of a good relationship,

for the implied sense of the word “rule” is to rule with oppression. It is to rule in a burdensome and domineering way. No longer would Adam’s rule be kind and gracious. No longer would he be a servant-leader, whose responsibility in leadership was to love his wife in such a way that in his leadership, he would be willing to lay down his life for her. No. Now he would seek to domineer over her.

Such bad leadership is so very prevalent today. The repeated declaration that “I wear the pants in this family, and you will do as I say” is not an expression of good leadership. It’s domineering. That places an unnecessary and unbiblical burden upon the ones who are led. And that is the example of bad leadership that Nehemiah describes for us in verse 15, “the former governors who were before me laid burdens on the people”. Heavy burdens, as the ESV accurately translates the Hebrews word. Indeed,

A. Leadership is misused when leaders place unnecessary burdens upon those whom they lead.

In this case, it was the burden of financial support. Nehemiah says that the previous governors took “bread and wine,” “their daily ration” as the ESV describes it. In other words, food to eat and drink. That, in addition to the heavy taxation of forty shekels of silver, which was nearly five pounds. Quite a valuable quantity. Those allowances clearly provided a life of luxury for the governors, and as one commentator puts it, “they squeezed the people to get all they could out of them.”

I can’t help but think of the leaders of our own country, who do, very often, make themselves rich at our expense, something our founding fathers had apparently worked hard to avoid. Indeed, those who hold public offices of leadership are rightly called public servants. Yet those leaders often place unnecessary

burdens upon people. It is the burden of taxation, heavy taxation, a burden our country feels very strongly. It was also the burden of domineering leadership, autocratic and dictatorial exercise of authority.

v.15b “Even their servants bore rule over the people.”

Those words reflect oppression, as does the ESV translation, “Their servants lorded it over the people.” They ruled in a burdensome way, an overbearing way, lording it over the people whom they had been called to serve.

Such authoritarian leadership is so specifically condemned in the NT, in the words of Peter.

1 Peter 5:1 “The elders who are among you I exhort, I who am a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that will be revealed: 2 Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; 3 nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock.”

Not lording it over those entrusted to you. Not domineering. Not laying upon people unnecessary burdens. To note Paul’s own example, he gave up his legitimate right to financial support, just to avoid the possibility of becoming a burden to the church in Corinth. Yet this has a whole lot more applications than merely taxation and money. For leadership can become burdensome in so many other ways, by arrogance. By personal indifference or un-involvement. By hypocrisy, unfairness, injustice, or inequity. Or simply by failing to demonstrate sincere graciousness. Or by oppression. And surely,

B. Leadership is misused when leaders begin to oppress those whom they lead.

The oppression in Nehemiah’s day had been the oppression

inflicted even by the governor's servants.

v.15b "Yes, even their servants bore rule over the people, but I did not do so, because of the fear of God."

It was the oppression of demanding more from the people than they could ever provide, causing them to be in bondage, as it is mentioned in,

v.18

Thus the people had been in bondage, under the burdensome and oppressive leadership of the previous governors.

Now let me ask you a quick question to think about. Does that sort of leadership bring about good results? Does oppressive and burdensome leadership motivate people to honor their leaders? That's obvious, isn't it? No, of course it doesn't. But then, I would think, why do we still do it, as if it works? Why do employers often exercise oppressive oversight? Why do men lead over their wives and children as authoritarian dictators when they would get a lot more obedience and submission if they would only lead by the example of gentleness and servanthood? Why do we demand from those whom we lead that which we would much more likely receive if we would only lead by the example of our own lives?

Why? The answer is sin, of course. That's why men have to be commanded, above all else, to love their wives, not to enforce their authority and demand submission. Wives are called to grant that submission, but husbands are not given the right to demand it. That's why parents are called not to exasperate their children. Rather, they are called to love.

That's why the elders of the church are called to be examples to the flock, and to avoid lording it over them. We need those

commands, because in our own sinfulness, we, too, each one of us most likely, is given to bad leadership. And we need to change our ways. And so Nehemiah gives us his own worthy example,

II. THE EXAMPLE OF GOOD LEADERSHIP.

v.14

He was governor for 12 years, which commentators figure out to be about 445 to 433 BC. A little over four hundred years before Christ would come. Notice the measure of Nehemiah's good leadership. He chose not to eat the governor's provisions.

He had a legal right to eat them. A governor, in those days, had the right to collect taxes not only for the central treasury, but also for his own treasury. For his own personal use. Talk about the potential for abuse! Imagine giving that right to our president and congress today! Nehemiah had the right, and chose not to exercise it. For twelve years. And this was, no doubt, at great cost to himself, because as governor, he was expected to entertain a great deal.

v.17-18

Such wonderful graciousness. And,

A. Leadership must be exercised with a spirit of graciousness and generosity.

Graciousness. That word is losing its place in our vocabulary today, it's becoming archaic. We are losing the whole concept of what it means to be gracious, so self-absorbed we are in our own felt needs. We fail to be gracious with regard to the needs of others, willing and wishing rather to be generous with others than that to have our own needs fully met.

Here is what it means to be gracious and generous. Again,

the Apostle Paul, this time with the elders of the church at Ephesus. Their tearful, intimate farewell, which ended with the men weeping aloud and embracing Paul and repeatedly kissing him. Here's why. Listen to what he says about his own work among them.

Acts 20:35 "I have shown you in every way, by laboring like this, that you must support the weak. And remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'"

You need to ask yourself this very pointed question, "Do you believe that?" "Is it more blessed to give than to receive." That's the spirit of leadership. The graciousness and genuineness of a godly leader. More eager to give than to receive. Nehemiah's good example also shows us that,

B. Leadership must be exercised with a genuine fear of God.

Again, motivation is revealed. The reason for his actions are given.

v.15

He loved God, so he wouldn't take advantage of other men! Especially those among whom he was sent to lead. He feared God, so he loved men! Those two go together so perfectly. And they must go together. How sad it is when leaders, especially leaders in the church, lose their bearings, and lose their perspective. How sad it is when they lose the sense of the fear of God as the dominant motivation for their actions toward people.

Referring back to that minister I mentioned in my introduction, that's why I grieved so at his confession, saddened for the churches he had essentially used in rising the ladder of corporate success. Moved by selfish considerations far removed from the

fear of God. And how disastrous that is for the church of Jesus Christ when they have to endure such leaders.

Let me speak it positively, as was the case for Nehemiah. And the apostle Paul. And, many, many godly and faithful ministers of the gospel today. God's people flourish when their leaders abound and abide in the fear of God! I am convinced of it. The healthiest church is not the biggest church or the church with the largest budget or the most programs, it is the church which operates must fully in the fear of God, seeking to honor God and to glorify God at every turn! And such a church will, of necessity, be led by men with a genuine fear of God, men of gracious and generous disposition.

And men committed to the seeming paradox of servant-leadership.

C. Leadership must be exercised with a commitment to serve, not to be served.

Look at Nehemiah.

v.16 "16 Indeed, I also continued the work on this wall, and we did not buy any land. All my servants were gathered there for the work."

Nehemiah came to work. Not to get rich, or even to get paid. Just to work. He didn't come to buy land and settle himself down, but to serve the people who were already there.

This example was so perfectly expanded in Jesus. And Jesus' definition of leadership is transforming. It is revolutionary. It is countercultural. It goes against all the prevailing priorities of our age, as it probably did in his own day. Servant leadership.

Mat. 20:25 "But Jesus called them to him and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great

ones exercise authority over them. 26 It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, 27 and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, 28 even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

That’s leadership. “I came to serve, not to be served!” The greatest shall be your slave!

Now, remember the context for these words. Remember what Jesus has just been request.

Mat. 20:20 “Then the mother of Zebedee’s sons came to Him with her sons, kneeling down and asking something from Him. 21 And He said to her, “What do you wish?” She said to Him, “Grant that these two sons of mine may sit, one on Your right hand and the other on the left, in Your kingdom.”

James and John, the sons of Zebedee, along with their mother, hadn’t yet learned what leadership is all about. Leadership isn’t jockeying for position. It’s not the pursuit of accomplishment. It’s not the aspiration for greatness, unless, of course, you define greatness the way Jesus did! In terms of slavery! Servant leadership. Notice how that theme is repeated in the areas of leadership God defines. First, husbands.

Husbands, rule over your wives. To observe some husbands, you’d think that’s what the Bible says. Actually, it says something else. The husband is the head of his wife. He is her leader, and the leader of his home. He bears the ultimate authority for all that takes place within his home. And what is the one preeminent command given to husbands?

Eph.5:25 “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her.”

That’s servant leadership. And, of course, elders. I think again, as I do so often, of Paul’s farewell to those dear men whom he loved in Ephesus.

Act 20:24 “But none of these things move me; nor do I count my life dear to myself, so that I may finish my race with joy, and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God.”

Servant leadership. The willingness of a leader to sacrifice his own life and personal fortunes for the well-being of those whom he leads! And so if you want to become a great leader, if you want to become first, make yourself a slave. That’s the example of good leadership. And I’ll end with the rewards!

III. THE REWARD OF GOOD LEADERSHIP.

It is pretty simple. Look at,
v.19

Now, on the surface, perhaps, that would seem to contradict all that has been said so far, because surely good leaders don’t seek great rewards. That’s not the motivation. The fear of God is!

I don’t want to contradict that, but rather emphasize that when the motives are in order, when the heart is in the right place and when the authority of leadership is exercised with all godliness and wisdom, then there is great reward!

You can’t be motivated by that reward in any ultimate sense, but you shouldn’t ignore the existence of the reward either, as if doing our duty for God were some horrible and dreadful curse that would bring us no pleasure or delight. Quite the opposite, you will discover. True, genuine, godly servant leaders, moved and driven by a sense of the greatness and glory of God tend to

be very well satisfied with their lot in life. Servant leaders do tend to be happy people, because they know the presence and the pleasure of God.

And the first reward I want to mention and emphasize is so obvious that you might miss it, reading verse 19. The first reward of good leadership is quite simply,

A. The reward of a clear conscience.

It is the reward of having the freedom to pray as Nehemiah did in verse 19.

v.19

It is the reward of having such confidence, such boldness, such freedom to enter the very presence of God and seek his blessing. It takes a clear conscience to do that. It takes a clear conscience to come boldly before the throne of grace. And speaking of a clear conscience never implies that you are without sin, but it does mean that you have searched your heart and searched your own motives, that you are seeking God's blessing with the testimony of a consistent life.

A leader motivated by his own gain and personal well-being or advancement has no such freedom of conscience before the Lord! A man exercising any sort of leadership with mixed motives, will never be able to say, "Remember me, my God, for good, according to all that I have done for this people."

What a delight it would be to have such a clear conscience. What a delight it would be, what a refreshing experience, to be able to pray such a prayer. And know in your own heart that you have really acted as a servant. I have known a few men and women in my life that would have such a consistent, clear conscience, who have been evidently motivated by the fear of

God and the good of the people whom they serve. A few.

But most of the time, we just can't pray that way with a clear conscience, and we need to cry out to God in repentance, first. Instead of the words of verse 19, we need to pray, "O my God, forgive me of my sin and forgive me for pursuing my own well-being when I should have given myself in service to others. Forgive me for pursuing greatness apart from the pathway of slavery."

What a blessing it is to have a clear conscience, and as you search your own hearts, and seek to examine the motives of your own hearts, that clear conscience should be your goal, that you, too, could pray, "Remember me, my God, for good, according to all that I have done for this people."

The second reward is very much related, and very obvious from those words.

B. The reward of God's blessing.

God's blessing! For ministers, that in no way translates into the blessing of a bigger church. For fathers, that in no way translates into the blessing of greater prestige or earthly prosperity. For Christian businessmen, that blessing isn't defined by more money. All those things might be involved, but that's not the focus or definition of God's blessing. The real blessing is in none of them, but instead it is the blessing of God's approval. The blessing found in,

Mat. 25:23 "Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord."

Such is our greatest reward. A reward honoring those who have sought God's pleasure. God's approval. God's delight. And

in that context, ask yourself, What motivates you? God's pleasure, or your own. God's approval, or the praise of men. God's delight, or your own enjoyment?

If you are to be godly in heart and in motive, then you must be moved not by the desire for your own advancement, but by the zeal for God's glory. May this church, and our families and friendships, be led by such leaders!