

Dear all, greetings.

I have just finished reading Ezra and Nehemiah, two incredible stories of leaders who were committed to God. I want to reflect for a few moments with you on the example of Nehemiah.

Having just completed the wall – without the help of the nobles, who were related by marriage and politics to the Samaritans, the people sensed in Nehemiah a leader not in the usual cynical and self-enriching manner of their typical “Deep State” nobles and officials, and petitioned him for justice. "With our sons and our daughters, we are many; we must get grain, so that we may eat and stay alive." There were also those who said, "We are having to pledge our fields, our vineyards, and our houses in order to get grain during the famine." And there were those who said, "We are having to borrow money on our fields and vineyards to pay the king's tax. Now our flesh is the same as that of our kindred; our children are the same as their children; and yet we are forcing our sons and daughters to be slaves, and some of our daughters have been ravished; we are powerless, and our fields and vineyards now belong to others" (Neh. 5:2-5). Those in leadership positions responsible for upholding justice and the well-being of the community were instead enriching themselves at the expense of the wider community. And so, when a leader comes along who acts in the interests of the people, they turn to him for redress of their grievances.

Nehemiah experienced a deep righteous indignation on behalf of the people when he heard these complaints, and decided to bring charges against the Deep State, i.e. the nobles and the officials (v. 6). His rebuke in v. 9 is critical: “Should you not walk in the fear of our God, to prevent the taunts of the nations our enemies?”

Clearly, without being guided by the fear of God, the nobles and officials no longer served the people, but themselves, and abuse of power was the inevitable result. When leaders do not lead in the fear of God, recognizing that they are themselves accountable before God for how they lead, then human suffering is the outcome. They use their positions of leadership as opportunities for personal enrichment rather than to advance the interests of the people.

In contrast, Nehemiah records that for all the years while he was governor, he deliberately and intentionally did not lay any burdens on the people greater than were absolutely necessary. This was in sharp contradistinction to the practices of the former governors (v. 15). Why was this? “Because of the fear of God” (v. 15).

Nehemiah and his entourage devoted themselves to the building of the walls of Jerusalem – which benefitted the entire community, and refused to acquire land for themselves, i.e. to enrich themselves by exploiting their leadership positions. His leadership was lived in the conscious presence of God, so Nehemiah could plead with God, “Remember for my good, O my God, all that I have done for this people.”

This story in Nehemiah 5 gives us two models of leadership:

- 1) Leaders who do not act in the fear of God, without any sense of accountability for their actions. Such leadership leads to oppression, injustice, a wanton disregard for the interests of the community in favor of the accumulation of power and wealth by the leaders. Leaders view position as the means to enrich themselves rather than a platform to bless their community. Injustice, suffering and oppression are the result. The community become cynical about their leaders, social trust erodes, and leaders come to exercise power by brute force rather than leadership by common consent.
- 2) Leaders who do act in the fear of God, who have a profound sense of accountability before God, i.e. that one day they will have to answer for every word and deed and motive of their heart while they were in leadership roles. Such leadership focusses on what is a blessing for the community, and results in willful and deliberate self-denial on the part of leaders that they may set an example before a community long weary and overly cynical of leaders who promise much...but only deliver for themselves.

The fundamental difference between these two kinds of leadership is whether or not the leader acts and lives in the fear of God. When the Greatest Commandment is followed, the Second Commandment follows naturally. Jesus affirmed these lessons of God's accountability for leaders within the Body of Christ in Matt. 24.45-51, the Parable of the Faithful or the Unfaithful Slave.

God has called us to leadership in many spheres of life. In our families, projects, communities, communities of faith, and within our own ministry. My prayer is that we all may choose, each day, to lead as did Nehemiah: in the fear of God; daily conscious of our accountability before God for how we treat others; managing in such a way as to enrich and bless those we lead and serve rather than ourselves, and always in hope of the ultimate reward from Jesus, "Well done, good and faithful servant."

Have a blessed Sabbath!