

Church Boundaries

Well, for this lecture, I want to talk about establishing some boundaries within the church or the ministry organization that each of us is involved in. To do that, I want to go back and review where we've been a little bit and remind us what boundaries are all about. As we talk about boundaries in relationship of the church, boundaries are those fences. They're those borders. They're those barriers of where we want to keep things in and to make sure that we keep things out. They keep us functioning properly.

The definition from Webster was something that indicates or fixes a limit or extent. Boundaries as we've talked about give us clarity. As we lead and serve and minister in the church of Jesus Christ, we're able to erect some proper barriers or some boundaries in relationship to people and activities when certain things are established. That's really what I want to use as the basis of this lecture is to talk about what we need to establish before we begin to really look at the nuts and bolts of church activities and the balance in our lives. I want to develop this—what we need to make sure is in our life or the foundation of building those boundaries in the church—I want to develop this by looking a biblical character by the name of Nehemiah.

This is a classic story. Nehemiah rose from total obscurity to national recognition. As an admirer of Theodore Roosevelt once exclaimed said, "Mr. Roosevelt, you are a great man." And Roosevelt replied, "No." Teddy Roosevelt is simply a plain, ordinary man who's highly motivated. Now it would probably be the best way to describe Nehemiah and probably all great leaders. But there is something more that Nehemiah had that I think is important for us to see as leaders, as followers of Jesus Christ, as those who are involved in the ministry of the church or in organization. I want to take a peek and you might want to go back and read the book of Nehemiah over these next several days after you watch this lecture.

Kind of a quick set-up for the biblical history of where we enter to the book of Nehemiah. In 586 BC, Babylon invades Jerusalem and the people are taken into captivity. The Babylonians burn the temple and even knock down the protective wall surrounding the city. You can read a little bit about that in 2 Chronicles 36. When Persia conquered Babylon, their king Cyrus was used by God to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem. The Book of Ezra which comes before Nehemiah records how the house of God was rebuilt in Jerusalem. But that temple went without protection for some ninety years until God led Nehemiah

and his people to rebuild the wall. So the temple was there but for ninety years there is not a protective wall around it which was huge in those societies of course because of invading armies.

When you read the Book of Nehemiah, it's an account of this project, this building project. But I think there's more to it than just bricks or mortar or rebuilding the wall. I want you to think about Nehemiah's impact, his leadership. Nehemiah works for a man whose name is a mouthful. His name is King Artaxerxes. Nehemiah gets permission from this king to go back to Judea to rebuild walls around Jerusalem. He returns as the governor because he's been given that responsibility by the king. He shows up in the context of an economy that is almost non-existent.

People had loaned money to people who couldn't pay them back. And so there are high costs for everything and the interest rates are sky-high. People are pledging their homes and fields. Eventually, they're even giving their wives and children as collateral for these loans. So the economic period at that time was devastating. Sounds kind of familiar to our day and age, maybe even a little bit more to the extreme.

Nehemiah shows up and he gets the people all psyched up to rebuild the wall. Nehemiah realizes that these people can't take time off from their work, from their jobs because they owe so much money. So Nehemiah himself bails the people out. He buys the people's loans, if you will, and charges the people absolutely no interest. Mark that down in your mind to begin with. Notice that. The people begin to complain all over again about not being able to work. And he realizes that just because the people's debts are paid off doesn't mean that they knew how to manage their finances properly.

The wealthy nobles had begun to re-loan money to the people and the same process started all over again. Here we go again. Even though their debts are there, they're going back into debt. The wealthy were undermining the rebuilding projects that Nehemiah had undertaken. Now if you take a glimpse at Nehemiah 6, you'll read that it was against the law to charge a fellow Jew interest. Nehemiah says to these wealthy CEOs who were in essence doing that to the people, "As far as it was possible, we brought back our countrymen and now we have to buy them back from you." He says to these wealthy CEOs, "Knock it off. Stop doing that."

Here's the interesting thing. That these nobles promised not to do it anymore and Nehemiah made them promise before the very priests of God. Hold on to that thought for a moment. The wealthy nobles at that time, these ruling class, these CEOs if you will, listen to Nehemiah, this nobody in essence. Oh, yeah. He'd been given the title of Governor from King Artaxerxes but he didn't own land. He didn't have

wealth. He didn't have power. And yet when Nehemiah says to them, "Stop doing that," they listened. I find that amazing.

Here's an important side note. As governor, Nehemiah himself was entitled to a certain amount of food from the people's crops. Taxes essentially, if you will, should have been given to him as payment. But Nehemiah took absolutely nothing from the people. He did it he says out of reverence for God. Nehemiah devoted himself to working on the wall. That was his project. That was his calling. In other words—and here's the key to understanding Nehemiah that lays the foundation for what to talk about in terms of boundaries in the church—he did what he asked everyone else to do. Every day he was out there with people laying stone and working on the project.

During his time, Nehemiah did not acquire any land. He didn't take advantage of the distressed prices to enrich himself or his friends which he could have very easily have done. He could have bought all kinds of land at bottom prices. Additionally, when you read the text, Nehemiah fed some one hundred and fifty other people out of his own pocket, not out of the money that we was entitled to as the governor. He didn't take that. But he paid for those people out of his own money. This is why he could stand up to the rich and powerful in the community because he wasn't asking them to do anything that he had not himself been doing for the past twelve years.

Now here's the point after having looked at that story. The basis of which we can speak into the church and talk about boundaries that leaders and other people will respect those boundaries that we set comes out of moral authority. It occurs when people begin to see an alignment between what we say and what we do. The majority of our leadership, of the ability to set boundaries within our own life and particularly in the life of the church will come from this well of our moral authority.

Here is something we need to remind ourselves. It can be very easily lost. In the United States, people expect their religious and their political leaders to have moral authority. That's why every time there is a scandal of someone in the church, it makes for headlines because people assume that it comes from a basis of moral authority. It may be okay for other people to do that, but not for these folks. Sometimes that's true of our political leaders as well though maybe that standard isn't quite as high as it should be these days for it certainly hasn't been lived up to.

But what we're saying is because we represent God, we speak on His behalf, there is a basis of moral authority that we're not asking people to do something we wouldn't do ourselves. Most of us

have experienced working for someone that we probably lost respect for. They may have had authority over us but we lost respect for them because of this very issue.

Moral authority is so important because for most of us in the area of ministry leadership within the church, our bottom line commodity is that of influence. At the end of the day, even most people we have authority over can leave anytime, they're volunteers, the basis of this is this issue of moral authority. Somebody put it this way. If there is not an alignment between creed and deed, all the leadership tricks in all the world will not overcome what people perceive as being sheer hypocrisy.

Amazingly, and you've probably seen this, people will follow even poor leaders if they believe that that man or woman is authentic, that they're genuine, that they're coming from a pool or reservoir of honesty or moral authority. They can draw us in even though they may not have any kind of official authority over us. We spend so much time learning information and skills and yet the most important thing that we have when it comes to church leadership is our character.

It's not something that we can learn intellectually. No amount of education or training or reading or practice will lead us by default into good character. We'll never drift into character. We have to be intentional about character formation and take some strategic steps every single day towards that, building those boundaries, building that margin into our life. So to be able to form character, we need a vision of what's possible. And when we get a clear picture of that vision, I think we do that by raising some of these questions.

First of all, what kind of person do I want to become? Secondly, what kind of character do I want to display? Third, what do I want to pour out of me when I get squeezed? When pressures begin to rise, and we've talked about that without boundaries, pressures will come, they'll come with us even with boundaries at times. But when we feel that pressure, what comes out of me? What is there? The most important decisions that we will make are pre-decisions, that we have set boundaries, that we've built a margin, or we have thought through scenarios of what will happen and we have decided beforehand how we will respond or how we will live, how we will act.

John Maxwell puts it this way. He said, "Anytime you break a moral principle, you create a small crack in the foundation of your integrity. Character isn't created in a crisis. It only comes to light. Everything you've done in the past and the things you've neglected to do come to a head when you're under pressure." That is so true and particularly in the life of the church. Integrity is never determined by our circumstances. You are responsible for the choices that you make, not your circumstances. You'll

either make some pre-decisions. You will thought that through. You will create boundaries. You'll do margin. Or you'll make some bad decisions.

That's why athletes will practice their skills over and over and over again. That's why soldiers march. That's why we practice spiritual discipline. They make us people of instinct when situations get difficult. That's why we argue that we need to build in margin into our lives. Again, this is the foundation for the kind of decisions and the ability to go to leadership in the church and say, "Here is what we need to do in terms of for my own life, for your life, and for others. It's on this basis of moral authority."

If you're a leader, you most likely been hurt, even stabbed in the back. You've been betrayed. You've not gotten your fair share. You've not been recognized when you should have. Jesus reminds us that that comes with following him. For He said, "The servant is never greater than his master." This happened to him, so why would you think it wouldn't happen to you?

Some leaders' stories are difficult and we want to give them a pass. You say, "Boy, if that ever happened to me, I'd respond that way as well." We don't want them to forgive the people who have hurt them because they have hurt them so deeply. I never cease to be amazed sometimes of what Christians can say and do to other Christians. But there's no excuse for bitter, angry church leaders because when we are, we lose this moral authority. You can't help others forgive from their heart when you yourself are not forgiving. Not easy. Not at all. Because sometimes those are tough situations and people have been hurt very, very deeply.

We have to warn ourselves, and this comes to the margin and boundary of our lives. Don't bring unresolved junk into the context of ministry. We have been forgiven and we must go through that difficult process of forgiving other people. So this is that whole area of forgiveness that we need to wrestle with. Perhaps the boldest leadership move that you or I can make is to get on our knees and to release all the junk that we've been holding on to for so long. If you're ever going to speak or teach or counsel or encourage in the area of forgiveness, you and I need to do so as one who have been forgiven. That's moral authority.

Now let me just add real quick. It's not easy. Some will want to say, "Well, you can nurture and hold on to that a little bit." We have to ask ourselves how long will we allow someone to hold sway over us, control us because we're not willing to let go of that. There's sort of that sense of we like to pull out those past grievances and past pains and sort of look them over again and sort of cuddle them and nurture them and feel that all over again instead of giving that up and forgiving those people in Christ

even though they may not deserve being forgiven. Recognize something in forgiveness and its power in our lives because without doing that, we are allowing that person to have control and sway over us though they may have long forgotten about the whole situation.

The other area is in finances. Most of us work for non-profit organizations and ministry. Even if you're in the public sector these days, the way the economy is, you're working non-profit it seems like. If you're working in an organization where your paycheck comes from people's donations, then you must have moral authority in your finances. In other words, we need to practice good stewardship. You want to lead generous people? Then you need to be a generous person. You need to set some boundaries, some guidelines for your own finances.

Don't worry about this verse in the New Testament or the Old Testament. What am I supposed to give? Be generous. Give safe and live on the rest. I remember hearing Dave Ramsey in Financial Peace University say, "What if everyone in your church organization had been giving first, saving next, and living on the rest?" He says, "The Christians in our country will be able to stand up and say that God's financial principles are the ones that work because when the rest of you are in a mess, huh, we're doing okay."

It's interesting to see that many churches are not struggling so much because of the economy. But we're struggling because of the people who have not practiced those biblical practices over a period of time. We've got to model this. We've got to make sure that these are part of the margins and boundaries that we're creating in our own lives to demonstrate the heart of moral authority. When we speak of finances, we're living out of that.

The best leadership decision that Nehemiah made is when he walked into Jerusalem and he said, "I'm not taking my fair share. I'm not demanding anything. I'm not flexing my power muscle." People will have confidence in us as leaders, as ministers in the gospel if we're authentic, when our walk matches our talk. It really is about moral authority and all of that takes place before we're ever put in a position of leadership or oversight. If we don't get this right, everything else that we say will bounce right off of people because no one cares what we say if we don't follow our own advice.

So in the realm of boundaries particularly within the church—and we'll talk more about some of the nuts and bolts issues in future lectures. But I think this is foundational for us, for us to be able to proclaim with authority the truth of the Word of God. We need to apply it to our own lives. We need to create some of those boundaries, those margins, those limits in our life.

The 19th century clergyman Phillips Brooks said, “Character is made in the small moments of our lives.” We must learn to do the small things well no matter how insignificant they may seem because we are to live our lives not just in light of people watching us, our public ministry, but making sure that we take care of our hearts and our lives that give us the basis of moral authority as we minister in His church.