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PRINCIPLE ONE ACCOUNTABILITY BEGINS WITH BROKENNESS, CONFESSION, AND REPENTANCE



The Story of Nehemiah

In Jewish history God has at times become angry enough with Jewish disobedience that he has allowed the enemies of the Jews to have their way. Such was the case in the sixth century BC, and this time the Babylonian empire was the conquering enemy. The occupation strategy of the Babylonians was often to take captured people to Babylonian territory and cities in order to assimilate them into Babylonian culture. Sadly the ten northern tribes of Israel had succumbed to this strategy. Some of those assimilated peoples became the Samaritans with whom so much conflict was to develop with those faithful Jews of the two southern tribes. Later in our story we will see it is one of those Samaritans, Sanballat the Horonite, who is the main enemy of the rebuilding project Nehemiah undertakes.

Nehemiah was a descendant of the Jewish population that had been taken captive to Babylon in 587-586 BC. In 539 BC Cyrus the Persian gained control over all of Mesopotamia, and the Persian Empire was to rule this area until the time of Alexander the Great. Cyrus was a benevolent man and permitted the Jewish exiles to return to the city of Jerusalem. This return, however, was not well received by the exiles' neighbors, including the Samaritans, and any rebuilding project had continually been defeated. Nearly a century later, in Nehemiah's time, the Persian ruler was Artaxerxes I Macrocheir, who ruled between 465 BC and 424 BC. Nehemiah was not a descendant of the exiles who had returned to Jerusalem. Instead he was still in Persia and had continued to participate in Persian life and culture. Nehemiah was the personal cupbearer to King Artaxerxes. Because terrorism existed in those days, Nehemiah's job was to make sure no one was trying to poison the king. It was a somewhat dangerous job, but it did allow him to "hang out" with the most powerful man in the universe.

In 445 BC Nehemiah learned of the deplorable condition of the returned exiles in Jerusalem. It was probably because of his proximity to the power of the day that a delegation from Jerusalem, including Hanani, who Nehemiah claims as one of his brothers, came to see him. At that time he was in Susa, a citadel. They told Nehemiah that the wall of the city was broken down, the gates were burned, and the people were in distress. This is the sad and depressing opening of our story.

Brokenness

We know that Nehemiah is going to be a great leader and reformer. So as our story opens what would you expect a great

leader to do when he hears the news of such destruction? Have you ever been to a leadership conference in one of our great churches such as Willow Creek Church? If so, what have you heard about how a leader would react? Would he not take charge and have an idea of what to do next? That might be a legitimate expectation, but that is not Nehemiah at this point. Nehemiah, himself, says, “When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven” (Neh. 1:4).

Nehemiah was sad and broken. There is nothing about this sadness in our stereotypes of what a leader should be like. On second thought, however, maybe there is. Remember that for about one hundred years every attempt to rebuild Jerusalem had failed. At this point, Ezra, who was so successful at religious reforms (see chaps. 8–10), was already in Jerusalem and had been for thirteen years. Many things about the condition of Jerusalem had improved, but a city without protection was a city vulnerable to constant attack and plunder. To not have a walled city with protection was a sign of considerable disgrace to the Jews of that time. Nehemiah had no reason to believe he could be more successful in any rebuilding effort. He had no experience in building. He was simply discouraged and sad and was so for days. Perhaps that is where true leadership begins. It doesn’t start with a sense of personal strength. Rather, it begins with a sense of one’s own limitations and a belief that he or she really needs God.

Those who are confident don’t think they need to be accountable. They don’t think they need any help. Perhaps they are overconfident and even self-centered. They won’t ask for help. On the other hand, those who are broken know they need help. They also know that if they are going to do anything, including

changing something, they will need to be accountable. Nehemiah needed to change something, one hundred years of frustration and despair in Jerusalem. Yet he had no idea at this point about how to do that.

☼ **POINT TO PONDER**

Accountability can only begin when we know that we need help and that we can't do it alone.

☼ **QUESTIONS TO PONDER**

- Have you ever heard news that caused you to feel overwhelmed with sadness?
- Have you ever been discouraged by some project or task?
- Have you ever tried to do or change something and failed miserably?
- How are you at asking for help?
- Do you ever allow yourself to feel sad and to express that sadness?

Confession

So being broken, Nehemiah starts where we all should start. He asks God for help and prays a prayer. The first part of the prayer is a prayer of confession. Nehemiah prays, "I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself and my father's house, have committed against you. We have acted very wickedly toward you. We have not obeyed the commands, decrees and laws you gave your servant Moses" (1:6-7). Nehemiah recognizes that sin has had something to do with the miserable condition of the Jews in Jerusalem. They had not trusted God and had not obeyed his commands. Nehemiah knew that the covenant relationship the Jews had with God required them to be obedient and that when they weren't, they were subject to God's punishment.

In the New Testament James tell us how important confession is: "Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective" (James 5:16). Confession is totally necessary when we first know we need help and we are humble and broken. When we think we don't need help, we often lie to others who ask us how we're doing and we say, "Fine." For most of us, most of the time, that is just not true.

✳ POINT TO PONDER

We can only be accountable and receive God's grace and help when we truly get honest with God and with others. This is what confession is all about.

✳ QUESTIONS TO PONDER

- Are there any behaviors in your life you are ashamed of and have not told anyone about?

- Is the behavior you want to change one you have never discussed with anyone or asked anyone for help with?
- Have you ever confessed a sin to someone such as your spouse, friends, or pastor/priest?
- If you have, what did it feel like to do so?
- Would you be willing to schedule a time to do so with someone you consider an important spiritual influence in your life?

Repentance

The next part of Nehemiah's prayer is talking to God about repentance. In Neh. 1:8-9 he "reminds" God of a promise that if the Jewish people will return to God and obey God's commandments, God will return them to their home even if they are scattered to the farthest corner of the earth.

My favorite story of repentance is that of the prodigal son in Luke 15. Jesus is painting a picture of the powerful love of a father who continually waits for his son to return. In describing the degradation of a son who has wasted his dad's money in a foreign land, Jesus says that the son sunk so low he wound up feeding pigs. He is literally in the pigpen. The son even longs to eat the pods that pigs eat, but no one will even give him those. This image is quite powerful because, as you know, Jews don't eat

pigs. To not even be able to eat what pigs eat is about as low as a Jew could sink. In the midst of that scene the son comes to his senses and realizes he should return to his father, and on the way he practices his confession. He is willing to even live as one of his father's servants. Don't we love the ending to this story in which Jesus tells us that even when the son is a long way off, his father rushes out to meet him.

This is quite the picture because to run out to meet his son, the father has to pick up his robes. To expose your feet and legs in this way was terribly against Jewish culture and a true sign of humility or degradation. In other words, the father humbles himself. Jesus is preparing the listener for the true character of God. When we humble ourselves, become willing to confess and repent, God will rush out to meet us. Later, Jesus will humble himself even to the point of death so that God's grace can be freely given to us.

In our story of Nehemiah an essential part of his humility and brokenness is his willingness to confess the sins of the Jewish people and to tell God they will be repentant. This sets up the rest of the story in which Nehemiah himself will return to the home of the Jews, Jerusalem.

Most of us are familiar with the concept of repentance. We often have opportunities in our church services for those who want to repent to come forward in addition to those who want to accept Christ for the first time. In my experience, what we are not so good at in the church is having opportunities to confess.

Understand that our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters have considered confession an act of reconciliation, and as such it is a sacrament. There are regular and frequent opportunities for them to go to a priest and unburden themselves of their sins. Perhaps

it is time, in my opinion, for us Protestants to come up with regular ways in which we can confess our sins to a pastor or church leader. I'm not talking about some printed confession in the Sunday bulletin. No, face-to-face confession, I believe, is much more important.

The twelve-step program of Alcoholics Anonymous has built confession into the process of getting sober. In the fourth step, AA asks the addict to make a "searching and fearless moral inventory."² Step five then asks the addict to directly confess that inventory to someone else.³ I have always believed that the person to whom I need to confess must be a person I consider a spiritual authority. That is the only way I will feel that he or she has the power to remind me of God's grace.

Many of you may be carrying around guilt and shame from behaviors you have never told anyone about. The weight of that guilt and shame has kept you bogged down in an endless dark hole. Change is often hard if not impossible when we carry the weight of our sins around with us. You have probably thought that if anyone knew these behaviors, he or she would reject you and leave you. This might be especially true of your spouse. I have always found that usually the opposite happens. When a person gets truly humble and honest, other people begin to be "Jesus with skin on."

In my experience we learn a lot about confession and a willingness to ask for help in our families. What was your life like in your family and in the culture around you? Did your parents, caregivers, teachers, pastors, or friends ever say, "I'm sorry? I made a mistake. It was my fault. Can you please forgive me?" If this kind of modeling was not a part of your life, you learned to deny your sins, minimize them, or blame others for why bad things happen.

✦ **POINT TO PONDER**

Accountability demands us to be humble, broken, and willing to ask for help, confess, and repent.

✦ **QUESTIONS TO PONDER**

- Have you ever felt completely ashamed of a behavior you haven't been able to change?
- Do you recognize that this behavior might be the result or consequence of being disobedient to God?
- Have you ever realized you need to return to God's commandments?
- Has your shame prevented you from wanting to talk to anybody about it?
- Has your shame kept you stuck in a dark place and immobilized you?
- Try to imagine the image of God rushing out to meet you if you would decide to return to him?