

LEADERSHIP AND PRAYER

How should a leader pray?

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Do you listen to yourself praying? It has been said that if you really want to know a person, listen to her/him pray. How we pray and what we pray about reveals our attitude toward God, our expectations of God, our view of the world, ourselves and our circumstances, and where we believe we “fit” in the grand scheme of things. Jesus made this clear in the following parable:

“Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.’

“But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, ‘God, have mercy on me a sinner.’

“I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

Luke 18:10 – 14 NIV

As leaders, our prayers say much about our view of leadership, our expectations of ourselves, and most importantly, our relationship with God.

There are many lessons about leadership to be learned from Nehemiah, cup-bearer to Queen Esther’s step-son, King Artaxerxes (ruled Persia 465 – 424 BC). Viewed through our 21st century eyes, he held the near-perfect position. His responsibilities were clearly defined (to ensure the quality and safety of liquids prepared for and consumed by the king and those in his presence); he had the authority and the person-power to carry them out; performance measurements were clear and applied daily (if he got sick or died from tasting the contents, he lost his job); and he reported to only one boss.

But no lesson he can teach us is more important than what we learn from him about prayer.

We will focus on only one of his prayers, the one he prayed when he knew he had to leave his position of trust and comfort and undertake responsibilities that were clearly beyond his experience and skill, among people with whom he had no credibility, in daunting terrain amongst enemies who would resort to any measure, including assassination, to prevent him from fulfilling his mission. His story is told in his memoirs, the biblical book of Nehemiah.

Nehemiah goes through several stages in accepting his new mission. First, he asked for and received news of his fellow Jews who had returned to Jerusalem from their exile in Babylon (at that time part of the Persian kingdom). Their plight was serious – although God’s Temple had been restored, they were living in a ruined city with no walls to protect them from their enemies, in a state of spiritual, moral, and physical decay.

Secondly, he understood that he was in a position to do something about their situation, at great personal risk. Thirdly, he did not act precipitously. He took time to formulate a detailed plan. Finally, he sought his employer’s permission, guidance, and intervention before undertaking his mission.

But most importantly, before moving to stages 2 through 4, he prayed. Let’s listen in on his prayer (Nehemiah 1:5 – 11).

God is greater than humans. God initiates, enters into, and keeps agreements with people, based on His love for humanity, and our love for and obedience to Him. “O LORD, God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of unfailing love with those who love him and obey his commands” (all quotations are from *The New Living Translation* of the Bible)

God wants to be invited in. Nehemiah prayed, “... listen to my prayer! Look down and see me praying night and day”

Others come first. “see me praying ... for your people Israel.”

We need to acknowledge our sin, and pray for others who are also sinners. “I confess that we have sinned against you. Yes, even my own family and I have sinned! We have sinned terribly by not obeying the commands, laws, and regulations that you gave us through your servant Moses.”

God is true to His word. “Please remember what you told your servant Moses: ‘If you sin, I will scatter you among the nations. But if you return to me and obey my commands, even if you are exiled to the ends of the earth, I will bring you back to the place I have chosen for my name to be honored.’”

Even though we delight in honouring God, we stand in need of His grace. “We are your servants, the people you rescued by your great power and might. O LORD, please hear my prayer! Listen to the prayers of those of us who delight in honoring you.”

God wants us to pray for specific outcomes. But we need to carefully consider what those outcomes should be. Note that Nehemiah does not specify what “success” is to be; he leaves it up to God to determine it. Nehemiah asks only that God will make the king receptive to his approach. We would do well to emulate his example. “Please grant me success now as I go to ask the king for a great favor. Put it into his heart to be kind to me.”

Answers to prayer are not always immediate. Nehemiah prayed in November or December; it was not until the following April or May that the opportunity arose for him to make his request to the king. In our age of immediate gratification we need to remember that God’s time horizon is often different from ours.

Perhaps the greatest lesson to be learned is that **Our business is His business entrusted to us.**