

The Urgent Necessity of Spiritual Leadership

Books of Ezra and Nehemiah

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Please turn with me in your Bibles to the sixth chapter of Nehemiah, Nehemiah 6. We continue our look at this important chapter and continue our exposition of the books of Ezra-Nehemiah which as noted is originally one book in the Hebrew Old Testament, that it's divided in the later translations but really one theme unites the books and it was, as I said, it was one book in the Hebrew Bible, Hebrew Old Testament.

I do want to mention a guest reception, it was announced earlier, looking forward to that as an opportunity just for being with some of the other leaders to be there to meet some of you if you're new. We'd just really like the opportunity to get to know you a little bit and so we are going to be leaving, Patti and I are going to be stepping out during the last hymn to get out there so we can look forward to having the opportunity to spend some time with you. So I hope you'll come and take part in this. It's not going to be a long time, 20 minutes, 30 minutes, something like that. If you want to stay longer, we will stay and talk longer and chat longer but there's not any set program. So anyway, just to be aware of that.

The title of the message this morning is "The Urgent Necessity of Spiritual Leadership." The urgent necessity of spiritual leadership. I thought about using the title just a little more, sometimes you want to go more for attention-getting titles and so I thought about the title something like "Off with their Heads," the Queen of Hearts in Alice in Wonderland. The phrase was actually first used in Shakespeare in Henry VI, the king saying off with their heads, and the idea, the reason off with their heads is because what we see in the sixth chapter of Nehemiah is Satan's grand strategy to stop the work. Remember Ezra-Nehemiah, God is doing a great work in the people of God to rebuild the temple, to restore the law of God to the center of the life of the people of God, and to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem so that you have a worshiping community that is living by the word of God and is separate and distinct from the nations around them as a testimony to the glory of God, and this is all happening in the fifth century BC. And this great work that is being done now under Nehemiah is the rebuilding of the walls, that third stage in the process, the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem so that Jerusalem will be secure and that the worship of God will be secure and defended from the enemies of God, and we will see in a moment when we read again how Nehemiah says this great work he's doing, this great work, it's so important and yet the enemies of God hate the great work. They

understand the magnitude of the work. They understand the spiritual implications that if the people of God are worshiping God and they are pursuing holiness, and that's why we're taking this as our application to us today is not to build walls but it is to pursue holiness, to pursue separation and distinction from the world, to not be conformed to the world as Romans 12:2 says, "Do not be conformed to the world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind," to be in the world and not of the world, and this great work that is happening in Nehemiah's day and that we are instructed by today, is opposed throughout by the enemies of God. And we see behind it the great arch enemy of our soul, Satan, coordinating various attacks on the people of God and what we see in this chapter is that he understands that if he can sever the head of Judah, he will have won the war. We're going to see he tries to destroy Nehemiah, plots to murder him. If that doesn't work, he seeks to intimidate him to stop him in the work, and if he stops the work then the people stop the work, and if the intimidation, the murder doesn't work, the intimidation doesn't work, he seeks to discredit him with the people he leads. If he can discredit Nehemiah with the people he leads, then the work will stop, and so there's a sense in which Satan's goal really is to cut off the head.

God works through spiritual leadership and we're going to see and I'm going to show from the Scriptures how this reality of spiritual leadership is still an important part of the Christian life today. We all have an urgent need for spiritual leadership. We all need to be under spiritual authority. God still appoints leaders in the church and we neglect what God has set down, what God has designed, we neglect that to the peril of our own souls, and certainly to the peril of the work to which he's called us.

The urgent necessity of spiritual leadership. Let's read the text of Nehemiah 6:1 to 19, the entire chapter.

1 Now when it was reported to Sanballat, Tobiah, to Geshem the Arab and to the rest of our enemies that I had rebuilt the wall, and that no breach remained in it, although at that time I had not set up the doors in the gates, 2 then Sanballat and Geshem sent a message to me, saying, "Come, let us meet together at Chephirim in the plain of Ono." But they were planning to harm me. 3 So I sent messengers to them, saying, "I am doing a great work and I cannot come down. Why should the work stop while I leave it and come down to you?" 4 They sent messages to me four times in this manner, and I answered them in the same way. 5 Then Sanballat sent his servant to me in the same manner a fifth time with an open letter in his hand. 6 In it was written, "It is reported among the nations, and Gashmu says, that you and the Jews are planning to rebel; therefore you are rebuilding the wall. And you are to be their king, according to these reports. 7 You have also appointed prophets to proclaim in Jerusalem concerning you, 'A king is in Judah!' And now it will be reported to the king according to these reports. So come now, let us take counsel together." 8 Then I sent a message to him saying, "Such things as you are saying have not been done, but you are inventing them in your own mind." 9 For all of them were trying to frighten us, thinking, "They will become

discouraged with the work and it will not be done." But now, O God, strengthen my hands. 10 When I entered the house of Shemaiah the son of Delaiah, son of Mehetabel, who was confined at home, he said, "Let us meet together in the house of God, within the temple, and let us close the doors of the temple, for they are coming to kill you, and they are coming to kill you at night." 11 But I said, "Should a man like me flee? And could one such as I go into the temple to save his life? I will not go in." 12 Then I perceived that surely God had not sent him, but he uttered his prophecy against me because Tobiah and Sanballat had hired him. 13 He was hired for this reason, that I might become frightened and act accordingly and sin, so that they might have an evil report in order that they could reproach me. 14 Remember, O my God, Tobiah and Sanballat according to these works of theirs, and also Noadiah the prophetess and the rest of the prophets who were trying to frighten me. 15 So the wall was completed on the twenty-fifth of the month Elul, in fifty-two days. 16 When all our enemies heard of it, and all the nations surrounding us saw it, they lost their confidence; for they recognized that this work had been accomplished with the help of our God. 17 Also in those days many letters went from the nobles of Judah to Tobiah, and Tobiah's letters came to them. 18 For many in Judah were bound by oath to him because he was the son-in-law of Shecaniah the son of Arah, and his son Jehohanan had married the daughter of Meshullam the son of Berechiah. 19 Moreover, they were speaking about his good deeds in my presence and reported my words to him. Then Tobiah sent letters to frighten me.

Let's go to the Lord in prayer.

Our Father, we come this morning and we ask You, O Lord, that You would strengthen our hands, that You would strengthen our hearts through Your word, that You would grant us understanding of our condition, our need of the glory of Christ in His provision and sufficiency of it, and the perfection of His provision for us, and also, Lord, that You might help us to repent and to trust more fully in the greatness of His work. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

So the urgent need of spiritual leadership, the urgent necessity of spiritual leadership. We see in this chapter, well, first of all, the first point is the necessity of our spiritual leaders. The necessity of our spiritual leaders. We'll have three points this morning. The first point is the necessity of our spiritual leaders. We see in Nehemiah that as I've explained before and then we just read, that Sanballat, the governor of Samaria, Tobiah, the governor of Ammon, Geshem, the leader of the Arabs, the surrounding nations of Judah and Jerusalem are determined to stop the people from building the wall. They want to hinder the work of God and so they are determined to stop it, and we see behind these men the hatred of the god of this age, Satan himself who has blinded the eyes of unbelievers to the gospel, and who opposes everything that would exalt the glory of God, and the work that Nehemiah is committed to would exalt the glory of God in his day. So

they are determined to stop the work. They understand the greatness of the work as Nehemiah said, "I'm doing a great work," verse 3, "and I cannot come down."

So the goal of the opposition is to stop the work. He says it in verse 3, "Why should the work stop while I leave it and come down to you?" Interesting, there's a phrase, a Hebrew word that is repeated twice in the passage. Here it's translated "while I leave it," and the word literally means "to let go of something or to drop your hands; to have something you're doing work and you drop your hands, you drop it, you drop the work." So when he says, "Why should the work stop while I drop my hands, drop it and come down to you?" The same word occurs later to speak of the goal of the opposition in verse 9 after we've heard about Sanballat and Geshem's repeated, you know, envoys they send to Nehemiah and say, "Hey, come down and meet with us. Come down and meet with us. Come down and meet with us." Their goal is to assassinate him, to get him out from Jerusalem, to get him off somewhere private so that they can kill him without making too big of a scene because the reason they haven't already attacked, I think we can infer, is they understand that strictly speaking, Jerusalem is a part of the Persian Empire, Judah is a part of the Persian Empire, and the Persian king will not appreciate people just willy-nilly killing other people in his empire. So their goal really has been to intimidate them to think they're going to come. They hate them. They want to kill them and they hatched this plan that if they can get Nehemiah out from the city, out from the eyes of so many witnesses, then some harm can befall him and they can cover it up. So they hatch that plan and four times they send an envoy saying, "Hey, please come meet with us. We need to work on our relationship. We need to promote peace." They say, "Peace, peace," but in their hearts is no peace.

But they want to stop the work, and so they sent a fifth letter that is that slanderous letter, I mean, it's actually a letter, a written letter now that they send, an open letter sent in verse 5, Sanballat sends another servant, this time with an open letter in his hand, and this letter has the accusation that Nehemiah is rebuilding the walls because Nehemiah wants to become king of Judah and Jerusalem, and so this is basically seeking to intimidate him, to cause him to be afraid that if this word gets back to the king of Persia, he is basically being accused of treason, high treason punishable by death. So they are wanting to do anything they can to stop the leader of the people of God, to sever him from his people.

So in verse 9 after Nehemiah tells us his response in verse 8, "Such things as you are saying have not been done, but you are inventing them in your own mind." Then he comments, "For all of them were trying to frighten us, thinking, 'They will become discouraged with the work.'" The phrase "become discouraged" in English is that same Hebrew word, their hands will become weakened, they'll drop the work, "thinking that they can frighten us, our hands will become weak and we'll drop the work. That's their objective, to get us to stop the work," and to get the work to stop, they need to strike the leader, the leaders.

So the goal is clear that to stop the work, the means to stop the work is to sever the leadership, to destroy the leadership in one way or another, either through assassination, through intimidation, or through character assassination, that is, to get the people to

believe things about Nehemiah that are not true so that they will stop following his leadership. That's the final part that we see in verses 10 to 14 where in the cleverness of these wicked men, Tobiah and Sanballat have hired a Jew that is renowned as a prophet among the people to tell Nehemiah, "You need to go hide in the temple." And they're doing that with clear purpose. Verse 13, "He was hired for this reason." In fact, three times you have this purpose clause upon purpose clause upon purpose clause in this passage. It's really unusual. He was hired for this reason, this is the reason he was hired, that's that first purpose clause "for this reason, that I might become frightened and then act accordingly, do what comes natural in fear so that they might have an evil report, so that my name might be damaged." An evil report could be translated "name is made bad." So that's the second purpose clause. "For this reason" was the first, "so that they might have an evil report," and then the third, "in order that they could reproach me." He was hired for the purpose of frightening me so that I would sin and my name would be damaged so that they could reproach me, so that they could make me an object of scorn, Nehemiah says, an object of ridicule, that's what the idea of reproach means, to move from being a respected leader to being a man despised by those he has led.

This is the plan. If they can't kill Nehemiah and they can't intimidate him, they will still seek to separate the people from their leader by lowering their view of him through deception in whatever means necessary. The key is to cut off the head. And Satan's strategy like so many things the Bible says, there's nothing new under the sun. We see the same things again and again throughout history and this is still Satan's strategy, one of his strategies to destroy the work of God in our day. We are called to build Jerusalem, remember that now we see in Hebrews 10 and in Revelation 21, that Jerusalem is the church, the bride of Christ, Revelation 21, is the church, and so Jerusalem was a type of the church and to build Jerusalem, to build the city of Jerusalem is to build the body of Christ, to build the temple is we are called the temple of God again and again throughout the New Testament. You are the temple. You are living stones being built into the temple. So when you build the temple, you build up one another in your faith and love for Christ. You build the walls, you build up one another in your separation from the world; in your thinking, you're becoming transformed by the renewing of your mind, not conformed, and we help one another to that. So that's the work we're called to do.

So one of Satan's means that we can expect is he will seek to cut off the people from their leaders. He will seek to disconnect, to build distrust among the people of God for their leaders. Now the Scripture is real clear about the qualifications for spiritual leadership. We're going to read some passages that show this. This is why spiritual leadership is so important in the church and the qualifications when you look at 1 Timothy 3, qualifications for overseers and deacons, and in Titus 1, the qualifications there for elders and elder equals overseer in the New Testament. You can just write this equation down: elder equals overseer equals shepherd equals pastor. All the same office. I'll show you some passages as we go through that will just make this clear because they are used interchangeably. Qualifications for an overseer in 1 Timothy 3, it's qualifications for an elder in Titus 1. They are the same. Then you have the work of shepherding, elders are called to shepherd, elders are called to oversee, you see, so overseer equals elder equals shepherd.

Well, the qualifications are high and we are all sinners but those who lead the church of God are to be those who are progressing in their growth in grace. It's all about character when you look at 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1. In the church, leadership is about character and what I want us to think about is that God has intended leadership in the church. This is an interesting paradox, in a way, because in the New Testament, in the new covenant, there are some radical things that happened, some doctrines that we believe the New Testament clearly teaches. One is the priesthood of the believer. We are now a kingdom of priests, 1 Peter 2:8 and 9, you are a chosen race, a holy nation, a royal priesthood. You, he's speaking to all the believers that he's speaking to in Asia and Bithynia that Peter is writing to, all the people in the churches, you're priests. You don't need anyone between you and God. Go directly to Christ, directly to God. And in the New Testament we see the democratization of the Holy Spirit, that is, the Holy Spirit comes upon every believer now, indwells every believer. Every believer has the opportunity by walking in humble pursuit of God to be filled with the Spirit, and there's a sense in which, as John says in his epistle, you don't need teachers, in some way. There is this balance. You now have the Holy Spirit but there is this balance of Scripture that says though in some way you need to understand that you have this grace to really understand as a Christian, you're not completely dependent upon other people but the balance is yet God puts elders and deacons in the church and he puts teachers in the church and he calls them shepherds and pastors, and he says that we are to not only just listen to them, we're to obey our leaders. I'll show you that passage in a little bit.

So you have this tension, every believer, in one sense, it's true the ground is level at the foot of the cross, that's why Jesus said you are to call no one father or no one rabbi except God as your Father, and Christ is truly our, in that sense, our one teacher, the Holy Spirit, and yet then he appoints and gifts the church with teachers, with pastor/teachers. And he gives two offices in the New Testament, the office of elder and the office of deacon. The office of elder is the office of shepherd, spiritual shepherding. The office of deacon is the office of servanthood, those who lead in service. And both are pictures of Christ because Christ is the preeminent shepherd. "I am the good shepherd." And so he, then, sets apart in each church men to shepherd the flock, under-shepherds. But he is the preeminent servant of God. He did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many. He is the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecies all about the suffering servant, the servant to come. "My servant will have My Spirit upon Him." Jesus is that servant and then he comes and what does he do? He humbly serves his people. He washes their feet. And then he sets apart an office of leadership in the church called diakonos, deacon, which means servant. So deacons lead out in following Christ as servants, and elders lead out in following Christ as our shepherd.

So you have this paradox and you see this, in fact, let's just turn to Jeremiah for a moment. You see that this was going to be the way it was going to be, that even in the new covenant there would be spiritual leadership. Even after the democratization of the Holy Spirit, even after we all become priests, God still was going to have leadership because God is a God of authority. Jeremiah 23. Here you see that one of the problems, now Jeremiah and Ezekiel both deal with this issue, they are exilic prophets, that is, they

prophesied during the exile, at the beginning of the exile. Now we're now after these guys, we're in Nehemiah 6, we're about 140 or 150 years after these two men are writing, okay? They're telling the people of Judah why you're going into exile, basically because you've been unfaithful to God and God is disciplining you. But one of the things they do is they prophesy of a coming day of restoration which the time of restoration under Nehemiah typifies but ultimately, it's about Christ and Jesus is coming. But one of the things they point out is that one of the problems for the nation of Israel that led to the exile was the fact that they had bad shepherds. The leadership among the people of God was evil.

Jeremiah 23:1 to 4 you see this. Jeremiah pronounces judgment upon the shepherds, those who were leading the people of Judah. "'Woe to the shepherds who are destroying and scattering the sheep of My pasture!' declares the LORD. Therefore thus says the LORD God of Israel concerning the shepherds who are tending My people: 'You have scattered My flock and driven them away, and have not attended to them; behold, I am about to attend to you for the evil of your deeds,' declares the LORD." Do you see that? God is a shepherd, Christ is a shepherd and he calls his shepherds to be faithful and he will hold them to account and that's what he does here. Look what he says next, though. It's not that the church needs no shepherds because you might think that, we're priests after all, right? Do we need shepherds anymore? Isn't Jesus our shepherd? Isn't God our shepherd? Isn't that enough? Look what he says in verse 3, "Then I Myself will gather the remnant of My flock out of all the countries," there's Jesus coming as shepherd, "where I have driven them and bring them back to their pasture, and they will be fruitful and multiply. I will also raise up shepherds over them and they will tend them; and they will not be afraid any longer, nor be terrified, nor will any be missing." He's still going to raise up shepherds over the new covenant flock.

And there's a wonderful verse in Jeremiah 3:15 that speaks of the character of these shepherds. He says, "Then I will give," this is Jeremiah 3:15, "Then I will give you shepherds after My own heart," I will give you shepherds. That had to resonate with those who read it, they'd think of David, David, a man after my own heart. God is going to give us shepherds like David, and he's going to give us better than that, he's going to give us shepherds like the son of David, like Christ who have the spirit of God in them. "I will give you shepherds after My own heart, who will feed you on knowledge and understanding." So in the new covenant there will still need to be shepherds who will feed God's people on knowledge and understanding. What did Jesus say to Peter when he talked to him after the resurrection? "If you love Me, feed My sheep."

So there is the necessity of spiritual leadership, there is the ongoing necessity even with the Holy Spirit, even with the doctrine of the priesthood of believers, and you see this clearly and let's turn to the New Testament now and look at this. We'll look first at Acts 14:23. This is the Apostle Paul's first missionary journey and we're told about the mission strategy, what they did. So they are evangelizing, they start out in each city they go to in the synagogue if there is a synagogue, they go there and they preach Christ. Then they continue to minister to Jews and Gentiles who come to faith. 14:23, "When they had appointed elders for them in every church, having prayed with fasting, they commended

them to the Lord in whom they had believed." They hadn't finished their work in a town until they had appointed elders, plural, in every church, singular. Each church was to have a plurality of elders or shepherds.

It's interesting that it says having prayed with fasting to discern God's will, the people prayed and fasted. This says something about the seriousness of nominating our leaders and it reminds me that week after next we have set aside a few days for prayer and fasting. You may remember from our members' meeting that we had a few weeks back that we mentioned Wednesday to Friday of Easter week, we encourage people to pray and fast. You fast in various ways, you fast food or you can fast food, not fast food, the same words but I don't mean it that way. I'm going to eat just fast food for these three days and really seek the Lord. That's a real sacrifice for me, I'm telling you. No, you can fast by not eating food, you can fast in various other ways. You could fast social media for three days. I think a good thing to do might be to do both. Probably everybody needs to think about fasting social media. What a difference that would make in the way that your mind stays focused on things other than just the inundation of information continually.

But anyway, so we're going to be doing that in a week and a half, but the point here is Paul and Barnabas did this as they went and evangelized, the believers were being built up and growing and there was a church now, they had to have leadership in place before they left. It's a necessary thing. You see it also in 1 Timothy 3. I mentioned this earlier, this is one of the passages that outlines the character of leaders. I'm not going to read it all. It starts off with verse 1, "It is a trustworthy statement: if any man aspires to the office of overseer, it is a fine work he desires to do. An overseer, then, must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, temperate, prudent, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not addicted to wine or pugnacious, but gentle, peaceable," etc. etc. etc. all these character qualities. An overseer, that's the Greek word "episkopos." It means literally "to oversee; to manage; to watch over; to guard." And the qualities are there in verses 1 to 7. Then in verse 8, he says, "Deacons likewise must be men of dignity, not double-tongued, or addicted to much wine or fond of sordid gain." So 1-7 talks about elders and their qualifications, verses 8 to 13 talk about deacons and their qualifications, and then verses 14 and 15 he says this, he's telling Timothy his purpose in writing the letter, "I am writing these things to you," Timothy, Timothy is a young pastor, an associate of Paul who now is pastoring in Ephesus, "I am writing these things to you, hoping to come to you before long; but in case I am delayed, I write so that you will know how one ought to conduct himself in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth. Listen, I'm writing so you'll know how to carry on and how the church needs to be run. How do you live, what do you do in the body of Christ, this is what I'm telling you, Timothy." Well, the whole book is about that of 1 Timothy, but isn't it instructive that he comes, that comes to mind right after he said you need elders or overseers and you need deacons, and that calls to mind Paul, "Listen, the reason I'm writing to tell you how to set up the church, how to run the church. You've got to have these two offices."

So these are of fundamental importance for the church. There is an urgent need for spiritual leadership in the body of Christ and Satan's strategy is going to be to disconnect people from their leaders. That's the necessity of our spiritual leaders. The second point this morning is the responsibility of our spiritual leaders or the responsibilities of our spiritual leaders. 1 Timothy 3 doesn't really go into the responsibilities other than maybe an allusion to teaching. One of the things is that they must be able to teach. But Titus 1, turn over a couple of books, right after 2 Timothy is Titus. Titus is also a pastor, that's why these are called the pastoral epistles. 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus are written by the Apostle Paul to pastors directly, not to churches. Paul writes to the Corinthians, that's to the church, the whole church of the Corinthians, or the Philippians, that's the whole church. Here he writes to the pastors themselves to give them instructions and so he writes to Titus and he says in verse 5 of chapter 1, "For this reason I left you in Crete, that you would set in order what remains," I left you in Crete so that you could fix all the stuff that needed to be done. And what does he say first? "And appoint elders in every city as I directed you." Elders, plural, in every city, singular, as I directed you, "namely, if any man is above reproach, the husband of one wife, having children who believe, not accused of dissipation or rebellion. For the overseer must be above reproach as God's steward, not self-willed, not quick-tempered, not addicted to wine, not pugnacious, not fond of sordid gain, but hospitable, loving what is good, sensible, just, devout, self-controlled, holding fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching," here's the responsibility, "so that he will be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict." The shepherds, the elders, the overseers are to be those who have a hold of the faithful word. They understand the word to such a level that they are able to exhort in sound doctrine. They are to promote the spiritual health of the body of Christ by teaching the word, and they also can refute those who contradict. They are to feed the sheep. John 21:15 to 17 is where Jesus says that to Peter. "If you love Me, feed My sheep. If you love Me, tend My lambs. If you love Me, feed My lambs."

Let's look at another passage that talks about the responsibilities of spiritual leadership, Acts 20, back to the book of Acts. Here Paul makes a special trip out of his way to Miletus. He stops and he sends for the elders of the church of Ephesus to come to him and he has a time with them and verses 17 to the end of the chapter are his exhortation to these elders to do their work. Verse 17 says, "From Miletus I sent to Ephesus and called to him," or this is actually Luke writing, "From Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called to him," that is, Paul sent to Ephesus and called to him, "the elders of the church. And when they had come to him, he said to them," and he starts speaking to them and here he records that from verse 18 to 38 what he said. In the middle of it in verse 28 he really lays out their responsibilities and here you're going to see that elder equals overseer equals shepherd. He's talking to who? The elders. And then he says, "This is what you're to do, Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers." Wait a minute, Paul, we're elders, we're not overseers. Yeah, you are, you're an elder and an overseer. The Holy Spirit has made you overseers and what does an overseer do? He "shepherds the church of God which He purchased with His own blood." You are to guard the flock as an overseer by shepherding the church of God and the church of God is precious to him, he purchased it with his own blood. And why do they need to be guarded? Look at verse 29, "I know that after my departure savage

wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock." That is, the church will be beset by false teachers who seek to lead the faithful of God away from the things of God, and the elders are there to guard the flock just like Titus said, to teach sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict.

So you could say the responsibility if you want to think of it, I think there's four responsibilities in the New Testament that elders have. The first is to feed the sheep, Titus 1, John 21. To protect the sheep, Acts 20:28. Third, to lead the sheep. I'll just mention the passage, you can write it down, 1 Peter 5:1 to 4. The Apostle Peter, amazing text, he says, "I exhort you as your fellow elder." Peter doesn't claim to be the Pope, he claims to be a fellow elder of the other elders in the New Testament, okay? You read the Bible carefully, it makes it clear that that is a false teaching. He did not claim a preeminent position. He says, "I, Peter, an elder, exhort you as fellow elders to shepherd the flock," exercising oversight, not with compulsion but willingly, being examples to the flock. So the idea of being examples, you're to lead, the elders are called to lead, to be examples, to be people who can say, "Follow me as I follow Christ."

Another responsibility of the leaders and the necessity why this is so important is found in Ephesians 4 where we have a description of why God has given to the church certain leaders. This is a familiar passage we've looked at a number of times because it's so relevant to what we're talking about in Nehemiah. It's talking about how we build one another up. Look what it says in verse 11, "He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ." The reason pastors and teachers, the reason shepherds are there is to equip the saints for the work. Now you see, if you can get rid of the shepherds, the work is not going to happen. If you can neutralize, intimidate the shepherds, you can see that the shepherds are ill-equipped to do their work, they're not able to feed well, they are not able to protect. What happens? The work stops.

So the responsibility of spiritual leaders is significant, to feed, to protect, to lead, to equip, the image of shepherding sheep. Sheep need to be fed. They need to be led to pasture. They need to be protected because sheep, and we are all sheep, that's the amazing thing is some of the sheep are challenged with being shepherds but they're really sheep themselves who need the shepherding of Christ. So it's really all about Jesus but God works through means and he works through the means of actual leaders in the church, human beings who are set apart to these offices. We don't like that in general. I don't like to be under authority but in reality, we all are under authority. In fact, as a pastor I'm under the authority of my brother elders. If they together tell me something that I need to do, I'm going to do it, unless I can find clear biblical reason to say that what you're saying is wrong. I'm going to submit to them because this is the way God has set this up. It's not about us. It's not about people. It's about the Lord and the way he has set up his church. Jesus said, "I will build My church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it." He's building his church and he's building his temple and the way he does it is he appoints leaders.

Now that's the responsibilities of our spiritual leaders. We saw the necessity, first point, the necessity of our spiritual leaders, secondly, the responsibilities of our spiritual leaders, and thirdly, we need to consider our responsibilities to our spiritual leaders because the New Testament has a lot to say about this as well. One of the first things that we need to understand is turning back to Acts 17:11, there is this tension again. Remember, we are, the ground is level at the foot of the cross. We all go directly to God. We all have the Holy Spirit. We all have the word of God. Any believer can confront any other believer. It's not that you're to sit back and say nothing. No, if you see me sinning or any other elder sinning, you are to confront them. You are to admonish them. Every believer is adequate to do that because you are filled with all goodness and you're able to admonish one another, Romans 15:14. But that still doesn't mean, we tend to take that and think, "Well, that means I don't need anybody else over me." No, it doesn't mean that. The Scripture is clear we are still under authority, but here is a balance, this balancing thing we have to keep in mind. Acts 17:11, I love this verse. Luke is commenting about the people in Berea. Let me read verse 10 first, "The brethren immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea, and when they arrived, they went into the synagogue of the Jews." And he's going to give us a summary of what the people of Berea, the believers in Berea became like. Now they're evangelizing them and this is his summary of what they were like, their faith, "these were more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica," the Bereans were more noble-minded than the Thessalonians. That is high praise, read 1 and 2 Thessalonians. They were exemplary, the Thessalonians were way better than the Corinthians. Read the Corinthian letters. I mean, they were always getting it wrong. The Thessalonians were doing great and Luke says the Bereans were even better in their faith. Why?

"Now these were more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with great eagerness," they were eagerly receiving the word and as they eagerly received it, they were humble and they were receptive, but they were "examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were true." They were humbly receiving from their leaders the word but they were also checking it out by reading their Bible to make sure it was right. That's the balance. God doesn't put anybody in authority to rule according to their own whim. No, it's the word of God that rules. Christ rules. Christ is King. There's only one King and it's Jesus.

So you have that balance but then you have the other side of the tension, so turn with me to Hebrews 13 at the back of your Bible right before James, right after Titus, Philemon, where we were a moment ago. Hebrews 13:7, we're talking about our responsibilities to our leaders. Acts 17:11 says we are supposed to hold them accountable to the word but what does Hebrews 13:7 say, "Remember those who led you, who spoke the word of God to you; and considering the result of their conduct, imitate their faith." So you're to not forget those who God put in leadership over you but you are to imitate their faith, to mimic their lifestyle.

Look at verse 17, writing to the Hebrew believers who are in churches and he says, "Obey your leaders and submit to them." That's something, obey your leaders and submit to them. The same Bible that says check out what they say, Acts 17:11, or 1

Thessalonians 5:15, test everything and hold to that which is good. It doesn't mean don't be a constructively critical listener. No, check out what is being taught. See if the Bible says that. Be willing to even express that. You should be willing to come to me anytime you have a concern, "I'm not sure I saw what you were saying from the passage. You know, it seems like it's saying this. Well, what about this?" And all of our Bible teachers, all of our elders, everybody that teaches a Bible study whether it's a ladies' Bible study in our church, a men's Bible study, we all want to be under the word of God and we're under the correction of any other believer who comes with a Bible and says, "I think you might have missed this part." But nevertheless you have a command like this, "Obey your leaders and submit to them." Two verbs, obey and submit. Wouldn't "obey" have been enough? I think God knows how we resist authority and you think about it, what's the essence of sin? A throwing off of authority. What is the temptation that Adam gave to Eve? "You will be like God. You'll determine things for yourself." What was Satan's fall? He wanted to be like the Most High according to Ezekiel 28. Satan was not content with his station as the highest created being. He was the highest, most noble of all the angels and yet that wasn't good enough for him. Lucifer, the angel, wanted to be like the Most High, evil was in his heart and he rebelled against God. He did not want to be under authority.

God is a God who loves authority. There's authority in the Trinity. The Son submits to the Father. The Holy Spirit follows the directions of the Father and the Son. This is the economy of the Triune God. If you hate authority, you're hating who God is. Now it doesn't mean authority is not, all authorities, earthly authorities are under the authority of God. All of them stand accountable to the word of God. But we have to see this is the way the Bible lays it out. The Lord makes authority in the home, he makes authority in the church, he makes authority in life. We have to obey our governing authorities, Romans 13.

And why do we submit to them? They keep watch over your souls, as those who will give an account. That's the sober part for those in authority, they're going to give an account, we are going to give an account for the charge directly to God. That's something to be legitimately frightened about.

Turn back over to 1 Thessalonians, right before 1 and 2 Timothy, you find the letters to the Thessalonians. I said earlier it was 1 Thessalonians 5:15, I meant 1 Thessalonians 5:21, I mean, I said it wrong, "examine everything carefully; hold fast to that which is good." That was about our responsibilities of checking out what they're saying but I want us to look also at verse 12 and 13, our responsibility to our leaders, "we request of you, brethren, that you appreciate those who diligently labor among you, and have charge over you in the Lord and give you instruction, and that you esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Live in peace with one another." Paul writing to the Thessalonians says, "Listen, you need to appreciate those who diligently labor." The NIV says "acknowledge." The ESV says "respect." The King James says "know." The word there actually is an interesting word which means "to turn the eyes toward; to give attention to; to pay attention to." He says, "We request of you, brethren, that you pay attention to those who diligently labor among you, that you give heed to what they're saying because they

have charge over you." That's an interesting phrase as well. The Greek word means God had, it literally means "to stand in front; to be placed in front." He says, "Those who are leading you are the ones I have placed in front of you and that you are to listen to them." We are to listen to our leaders. We are to give attention to what they have to say.

Now think about how if we need spiritual leaders because they do the things that we said they do, they feed us, they protect us, they lead us, they equip us, if the Scripture is trying to tell us we're to esteem them highly, we're to obey and to submit, we're to appreciate, to listen carefully, and if they're the ones that equip us for the work, doesn't it make sense that the great work God has called us to do, Satan is going to seek to destroy the connection between the Christian and the leadership? He's going to do what he can.

Now at times, obviously, leaders must be held to a standard and it's real clear in 1 Timothy 5 that when leaders sin, they are to be publicly rebuked in the presence of all, 1 Timothy 5 verses like 17 and following. The standard is high and the consequences for sin are high for leaders but what we have here is really I think this is such an urgent thing in our day, and I sense that the enemy is making a lot of hay in the church particularly in the last year in this area. I think what's happening is he's separating people from one another. He's separating us from each other. That's his intention.

So think about this. As you pay attention to politics and you read on social media, or you read on the internet and you get worked up about your political position whether you're on the right or on the left politically, you get worked up about your political position, what does that do to your attitudes toward your brothers and sisters in Christ? Does that bring you closer or does that create more distance? Does that create more distrust? Think about it also with your leaders, the same thing. So you're reading about social justice. You have your concern, your views, or you're reading, your burdens about these things whichever side of the various issues that you're on, are your burdens about these things separating you from your brothers and sisters or are they bringing you closer together?

The coronavirus. I know you wish I would stop talking about it. Some of you really do. I kind of wish I would too. What do you think about it? Whatever your position is, whether you think people are being irresponsible in not wearing masks, or people are being irresponsible in wearing masks, whether you think we need to be more careful or whether you think we need to be, you know, less focused on it, whatever you think, if you're reading about it and thinking about it is distancing you from believers, if you're reading about it and thinking about it and it's making you distrust your spiritual leadership, examine yourself. All things are lawful for me but not all things are profitable.

You know, the spiritual leaders God puts in our lives are all, I mean, frail and imperfect. There's no question about it, we are frail and imperfect as your elders, your deacons. We are frail and imperfect. We need to be reprov'd. We need you to tell us when you see us out of line and there are times where you need to do that but you don't need to be getting estranged emotionally from us, attitudinally from us. If you have a concern, you need to come and share it. And the same with every other brother and sister.

I've thought a lot about this. I said a few things about Dr. Fauci a few weeks back and I didn't work it out very well and I certainly sin sometimes in the way I don't carry things through. It was a sin of omission in not explaining more carefully. Maybe it was a sin of commission by even bringing it up. I'm not sure but I want to clarify some things and he is an expert in the area of science, I'm not. He's an epidemiologist, I'm not. We, as elders, are not any of us trained in that area, but when he speaks about strategies of how to deal with the epidemic, the fact that human beings are whole people, that we are not just a physical body and then separated from that over here our soul. We are a unity of body and soul so that even though we need to learn to stay in our lanes in some way, I need to stay in my lane and my lane is not to be a doctor of the body, my lane is to be a doctor of the soul. But he needs to stay in his lane too and when he's irresponsible in claiming things or saying things that aren't certainly proven and then encouraging people to take actions that are damaging socially to people or psychologically to people, and I use that word as the word in Greek means, the study of the soul, psuche is the soul, and if it's damaging people's souls, then we have a responsibility to speak, and if your focus is merely to look out for your body, you need to hear us reprove you and say, "Listen, what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world but loses his soul?"

So we have to factor everything in, and so when we're thinking about what we're doing for our bodies, we have to think about it's not just about protecting from the coronavirus, it is about glorifying God and reaching people for Christ in the limited, tiny lifespan that you have, that Scripture says your life is a vapor, it's there and it's gone. Now that said, you're also to take care of your temple, you are to care for it, you are to be prudent. The Bible talks about that. Yes, all of these things are there but if we are harboring attitudes and, listen, I understand what it's like, you read stuff, you see stuff, you wish people would, don't we all kind of wish everybody would agree with us? It would just be so simple, right? Yet we all feel that way, 7 ½ billion people who feel that way. No, we can't do that but we can all agree with Jesus. We can all submit ourselves to Christ and have this mind in ourselves which was also in Christ Jesus. We look not for our own interests but also the interest of others. We can love one another fervently from the heart because of what Christ has done in us, and we can guard the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. We can diligently protect it. We can understand that our enemy of our souls wants to destroy the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace because it is the one place where the glory of Christ is set on display visibly in this world, and he hates that.

So we must fight to preserve it and part of that means we have to humble ourselves and love one another and have hard conversations and part of it means we have to fight and crucify our own pride that divides us from other believers, and part of what we see here is it means we need to be willing to listen to other Christians before we listen to worldly people. I mean, you've got to listen. You know I want to go to a good doctor, not necessarily a Christian doctor. I understand that. If you're going to have surgery, you want the best doctor, not necessarily the best Christian. Has the best quiet times, he's the best Bible teacher but he's really not that good taken out dealing with cancer. I'll take the guy that's really good dealing with cancer if I have cancer. But it doesn't mean that it's irrelevant, that spiritual things are irrelevant.

No, it means that we must pursue all of it together and Satan's strategy has always been that way. He did it throughout the New Testament. He tried to separate the apostles and the leaders of the church, the godly elders from the people again and again and again. There would be false teachers who would come in, in the name of Christ, and they would be teaching things that lead people astray from their spiritual leaders. The whole book of 2 Corinthians is written for that. Paul is defending his life and his ministry because the Corinthians are now listening to false teachers who are leading them away from the true and pure gospel of Christ. Now these guys are not like just unbelievers, they're professing believers who are saying things, "You need to be living this way," and Paul says, "Listen, they're false teachers," and he says in 2 Corinthians 6:14, he says, "Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. Come out from them and be separate." He's not talking about marriage, it does apply to marriage. Do you know what he's talking about? He's talking about to the Christians at Corinth, "You are listening and giving authority in your life to ungodly professing Christians who are teaching the word supposedly but they're not faithful to the gospel, and by giving your heart to them and your loyalty to them, you are turning your back on Christ. What fellowship," he says. He's not talking about the unbeliever. He's talking about people who say they love Jesus and they say things that are completely contradictory to the Scriptures and Paul says, "Come out from them and be separate. What fellowship has Christ and Belial?" That is, the devil. "What fellowship does Christ and the devil have? You're listening to the devil." If you're listening to people in the name of Christ who are causing your heart and affection to be led away from the purity of devotion to Christ and to the spiritual leadership of your church, you need to examine yourself and see if that doesn't apply to you. Come out from them and be separate. That is a serious word but the Apostle Paul said it. Read it in 2 Corinthians 6:14-18.

And we have to all do that. Like I said earlier, when we are getting worked up where we're getting all emotionally distraught, when we're getting attitudes in our hearts, we need to come out from, that's worldly, that's not Jesus. Come out from that and be separate and let's pursue the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace through the gospel. Jesus who died for us, his cross which reconciles us to God through faith and repentance in him, his cross also demolishes the dividing wall of hostility between us. There is no division, there is no legitimate division in the church. Yeah, we have to work to understand each other, we all need to be corrected, we all need to be understanding of one another, but we must pursue that kind of unity for the glory of God. Jesus prayed, "Father, may they be one even as We are One. You in Me and I in You, that the world may know that You sent Me."

Let's go to the Lord in prayer.

Our Father, we thank You for Your grace and Your kindness, Your patience. Lord, we confess our own pride and vanity. We laugh when we say we want everybody else to agree with us but in our hearts there's just too much of that wicked attitude. Lord, make our longing just to be submitted to Jesus in every thought, every thought captive to the obedience of Christ, and let us be servants like Him. Let us love one another and delight in doing good to one another. Let us delight in speaking the truth to one another and

admonishing one another and encouraging one another and lifting up one another and praying for one another and confessing our sins to one another. And Lord, by Your Holy Spirit and the power of Your word, make Your people one. In a day like today, Lord, what an opportunity. The world is becoming more polarized. Let the church become more unified and then they'll know, they'll have no other explanation but that You are the Son of God sent by the Father. We pray this in Your name and for Your glory. Amen.