

Josiah: Judah's Last Good King

Lessons in Leadership

Text:

II Kings 22: 3-7

In the eighteenth year of King Josiah, the king sent Shaphan the son of Azaliah, son of Meshullam, the secretary, to the house of the LORD, saying, "Go up to Hilkiah the high priest, that he may count the money that has been brought into the house of the LORD, which the keepers of the threshold have collected from the people. And let it be given into the hand of the workmen who have the oversight of the house of the LORD, and let them give it to the workmen who are at the house of the LORD, repairing the house (that is, to the carpenters, and to the builders, and to the masons), and let them use it for buying timber and quarried stone to repair the house. But no accounting shall be asked from them for the money that is delivered into their hand, for they deal honestly."

Zephaniah 1:1

The word of the LORD that came to Zephaniah the son of Cushi, son of Gedaliah, son of Amariah, son of Hezekiah, in the days of Josiah the son of Amon, king of Judah.

Zephaniah 3:1-5

Woe to her who is rebellious and defiled, the oppressing city! She listens to no voice; she accepts no correction. She does not trust in the LORD; she does not draw near to her God. Her officials within her are roaring lions; her judges are evening wolves that leave nothing till the morning. Her prophets are fickle, treacherous men; her priests profane what is holy; they do violence to the law. The LORD within her is righteous; he does no injustice; every morning he shows forth his justice; each dawn he does not fail; but the unjust knows no shame.

Introduction:

Zephaniah was preaching in Jerusalem at the same time Josiah was reigning. My reason for reading the passage from his prophecies is that it describes the lack of leadership in Jerusalem at the time Josiah began to reign. Jerusalem's leaders, political and spiritual, were all corrupt. No one was doing his job. All were seeking personal gain instead of the welfare of the city. The

result of this corruption was a general state of decay and disarray. Jerusalem was not a pleasant place to live in 630 B.C. The security, prosperity, and the overall well-being of nations and communities always depends on the competency, integrity, and industriousness of its leaders. When leaders know what they are doing and work energetically and unselfishly for the well-being of the community or country they represent, people flourish like plants in a well-tended garden, but when leaders are corrupt, self-serving, and indolent they languish. The importance of competent, compassionate and caring leaders cannot be overemphasized. It is difficult for any group to rise above the level of its leadership.

Ezekiel describes the disaster that follows bad leadership in the 34th chapter of his prophecies where God speaking says:

"Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel; prophesy, and say to them, even to the shepherds, Thus says the Lord GOD: Ah, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat ones, but you do not feed the sheep. The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the injured you have not bound up, the strayed you have not brought back, the lost you have not sought, and with force and harshness you have ruled them. So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd, and they became food for all the wild beasts. My sheep were scattered; they wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill. My sheep were scattered over all the face of the earth, with none to search or seek for them (Ezekiel 34: 3-6).

When shepherds do not care for the sheep they are scattered and become food for animals of prey. God give us leaders, at every level of life, who follow the example of the Good Shepherd and give their lives for the sheep.

I should point out here, before going further, that what we are saying about leadership applies to each of us more than we may think. It is easy for us to think about those who hold high profile positions of leadership and hold them responsible, and we should, but we must remember that almost all of us function as leaders at some level of life. We must not forget that the principles of good leadership are as important in small positions as in great positions. One of the most overlooked positions of leadership is that of parents. It may be the most important of all. Parents, you are the leaders of your family, and everything that we are going to see in this text about leadership has direct implications for you.

Into this leaderless city of Jerusalem comes the young king Josiah. Perhaps it was the preacher, Zephaniah, who had influenced him. He may have been related, for some believe, based on what we know about him, that Zephaniah was of royal descent. In any case, this young king

decided to be different. In a city where almost all in positions of leadership were acting out of self-interest, he, the king, decided to act for the well-being of his people. In so doing he becomes for us a paradigm of leadership, a model to follow. What can we learn from Josiah about leadership?

I. Good Leaders Lead by Example

The first and most important thing we learn from Josiah about being a leader is that we lead by example. Before Josiah led the people to seek the Lord, he set his own heart to seek the Lord. One thing that might puzzle us a bit in the account of his life is why the people did not more object to Josiah's destruction of their cherished high places. Was it not, perhaps, that by his own example of true worship he had already deflated any apologetic they might make for their worship of idols. Or, positively, perhaps, he had given them a thirst for the true and living God.

On more than one occasion in his letters the Apostle Paul says: "follow me as I follow Christ". What people follow best is another person, not rules and regulations. This is a part of the genius of the incarnation. God became one of us, and lived among us so that we might know how to live. That is ultimate leadership.

II. Good Leaders Do the Right Thing Even When its Unpopular

If Josiah had ruled on the basis of public opinion, the high places would have remained intact, the temple would have remained in ruin, the law would have remained lost, and the people would have continued to languish. Revival came because Josiah was willing to do the right thing even when it was immensely unpopular. Had there been public opinion ratings in Jerusalem in 632-30 B. C., his ratings would have been lower than the present congressional ratings. Yet he persisted in his campaign to rid Judah of idolatry. He did this, not because he wanted to rile his subjects, but out of concern for their welfare. Had he been acting out of self-interest, like the leaders Zephaniah describes, he would have left the high places alone and let the people continue their headlong rush to disaster.

All who lead, all who truly act for the good of the community they represent, must sometimes do the unpopular thing in order to do the wise and righteous thing. People do not always want what is best. The simplest illustration of this is the family. One doesn't have to have a vivid imagination to envisage the chaos that would result if kids truly ruled. Yet parents sometimes have a difficult time pronouncing that simple two letter word "no". It may be unpopular, but it is essential. Many a child's life has been saved both figuratively and literally by a simple "no".

You will never be a leader unless you are willing to go against popular opinion when popular opinion is wrong.

III. Good Leaders Surround Themselves with Trustworthy People

I have a small problem with I Kings 23:7. Josiah has told Hilkiah that he is to distribute the money to the workers so that they can carry out the repairs to the Temple. He then tells him that those to whom he distributes the money need not account for the money. That, in my opinion, is not a good idea. There is a saying in French: "Good accounts make good friends". It is a good thing to keep records, and churches should be doubly careful to give good accounts of all the money that is entrusted to them. Everything should be done honestly and openly and clearly accounted for. I will say more about that in a moment. But what is important presently is what Josiah says to Hilkiah after he tells him that he need not account for the money. He says: "for they deal honestly". You don't have to worry about them, he says, they will do what they have been paid to do, and you won't have to check up on them. He has given responsibility to responsible people. No leader works alone. His success will depend on the dependability of those to whom he commits responsibility. Now everyone should give an account, but a wise leader will pick people that don't need to; people who act on the basis of their character and not because someone is watching them. Character is, in fact, the most important element of leadership. Ability without character is dangerous. Ability governed by character is a blessing. This is the reason why education at all levels must always be as concerned with forming character as it is with inculcating ability. No one is more dangerous than an unprincipled genius.

IV. Good Leaders Use the Money for which they are Responsible for its Intended Purpose

One last lesson of leadership we can learn from Josiah comes from the way he spent public funds. Spending other people's money is, most likely, the most common downfall of leaders. Greed easily gets the upper hand when one has access to the till. We saw last week how twenty three years of offerings produced no repairs on the temple in the time of Jehoash. Josiah, on the other hand, uses the money that has been given by the people for its intended purpose and restores the temple. The Bible is filled with examples of leaders both political and spiritual, who were overcome by greed. Paul is especially concerned with this problem in the Pastoral Epistles. He writes to Timothy:

But they that will be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and *into* many foolish and hurtful lusts, which drown men in destruction and perdition. For the love of money is the root of all evil: which while some coveted after, they have erred from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows. But thou, O man of God, flee these things; and follow after righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, meekness. (I Timothy 6:9-11).

All who would be leaders must eradicate greed from their hearts; they must be tenaciously honest in handling the finances of others. Communal funds are for the communal good. They are to be spent wisely and cautiously. Much of the present economic malaise we are presently experiencing could have been eliminated if leaders at every level of life had followed the example of Josiah and simply used the money for what it was intended, and done so with a deep sense of responsibility to the people who had entrusted it to them either by paying taxes, by investing, by depositing, or by contributing. All such funds are committed to those responsible for them in good faith by the general population. The one most important thing that always stands between those who earn the money by the sweat of their brow and financial fiasco is the good character of those to whom the money is committed. That is the reason why the way leaders take care of the money entrusted to them is one of the great test of the collective character of a people.

Therefore, I conclude by summarizing. Good leaders are essential to the health of a nation, a community, an industry, an organization, a church, and even a family. Good leadership depends on good character. We must, therefore, be relentless in our pursuit of character formation for good, honest, and compassionate societies only exist because they are led by good, honest, and compassionate leaders. God give us Josiah's who will beget other Josiah's.