

Laying Down Our Rights

Sabbath School Feature for Sabbath, November 16, 2019

Nehemiah was angry. He paced the garden, fuming. He had just listened to multiple cries for justice from the poor. Though they had tried every means within their power to escape, the people were still locked in poverty. Now they appealed to him.

Nehemiah burned with anger at the injustices he had heard. But he knew that he must take time to reflect, to consider, and to pray before reacting.

What was he to do? Something must be done to help the people, but what? He weighed his options. He could alleviate some of their suffering by dipping into his own wealth. He could use his own means to provide for their needs. But how long would that last? Wealth was finite. He dismissed that option.

As he pondered, considering the matter seriously, an insight came to him. What was needed was a change of hearts, a change in behaviour. He recognized that the wealthy were within their rights, though their benefit came at the cost of oppression. But if what one deserves results in loss of love for God or for others, then it is much better to lay down those rights.

After much prayer, Nehemiah knew how to address the problem. In the morning, he would begin.

This quarterly has revealed to us several powerful and inspiring examples of Nehemiah's leadership, and of his heart that beat in tune with God's. Like our God, Nehemiah was unable to rest amidst cries for mercy and justice. Rather, he took practical steps to right the wrongs.

In our study, we saw that he first gave serious thought to the situation. This implies that no matter how he felt, he gave himself time to consider all the issues and angles before deciding on a plan of action.

From what we know of Nehemiah thus far, it is safe to assume that he spent a considerable amount of time in prayer, consulting with God on the best course of action.

Finally, Nehemiah followed through on his decision.

ADRA follows similar steps in responding to the cries for mercy and justice that go up around the world. Angered by the brokenness of our world that causes suffering, ADRA is propelled by Micah 6:8 to do something to right the wrongs. *"He has shown you,*

O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.” (Micah 6:8, NIV)

Following in Nehemiah’s example, ADRA first gives serious thought to the issues, asking many questions. Where is the need greatest? What kind of response will make a lasting difference? Do we have partners with whom we can work? Is there funding available?

As we consider, we also pray. We pray even if – and especially if – we cannot respond to a particular need. This may be due to a lack of funding, or because a country is closed to humanitarian organizations, or because we are not able to find partners with whom to work in that country. We pray for wisdom and for guidance. We surrender our response to God, trusting that He will reveal His will to us, opening doors and making a way for us to help.

Finally, we respond. Like Nehemiah, we find that a change in behaviour is among the most effective ways to make a lasting difference.

In many countries today, gender equality is far from a reality. Rwanda is often touted as a world leader in female empowerment with a Parliament boasting over 60% women and many policies passed to help lift women’s status. They have more rights now than just 30 years ago, including opening their own bank accounts without permission from their closest male relative. The crime of sexual violence is now prosecuted more sternly than that of petty thievery. Yet, at the grassroots level, beliefs and practices about men and women still lead to violence, abuse, and economic, academic, and health inequalities.

ADRA is working with communities in Rwanda to show what gender equality is and what its benefits are. Through community groups, ADRA addresses issues such as gender-based violence in the home, the detriments of excluding wives from economic decisions that impact the family, and the unequal labour load between men and women at home.

Innocent* joined an ADRA community group after he saw the benefits it was bringing to his wife. Gender equality and gender equity were new concepts for him. Before, he believed that it was enough that he went out to find work. When he came home, he would be tired. It never occurred to him to help his wife with cooking, cleaning, or childcare.

Through the trainings, however, Innocent began to make changes. He saw that his wife was tired, too, and that it was too much for her to do all the work at home by herself. He began to help. He learned to cook. He learned to play with his children and to

be more involved in raising them. He learned how to work in their garden to ensure they all had a healthier diet.

Now that he's doing "women's work," there are some men in the village who tease him. They make fun of him, giving him a hard time for "being less manly." But Innocent doesn't pay them any attention. The positive changes that have come about in his family have overwhelmed him and drowned out the teasing. He sees the importance of being with his wife and working together with her. Their relationship has improved a lot. His wife is much happier and thanks him many times for his help. As their relationship has sweetened, so too has that of the whole family.

According to Innocent's society, he was well within his rights to do his work, have his life, and leave the rest to his wife. But he saw that this way of living was causing a lack of love in his family and was leading down a road to brokenness. Against social norms, he laid down his rights as "man of the house" and chose instead to nurture love and healing through helping and real teamwork. The resulting life from that choice he found to be far better than when he had held on to his rights.

Nehemiah's heart burned for justice. ADRA was established because our church could not sit on the sidelines while many in the world suffered. Do we have hearts for justice? Do we have compassion on those in need, wherever they may be? Let us each consider how, as individuals and as a body of believers, we can answer God's call to love, mercy, and justice, even when it means laying down our rights.