11/8/26 Build Up or Burnout Exodus 18:13-23

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Exodus 18 begins by telling us that, while Moses was off in Egypt serving the Lord and delivering the Israelites from slavery, his wife, Zipporah, and their two sons, Gershom and Eliezer, were staying with Zipporah's father, Jethro, and presumably, his wife. After what turned into a *very extended visit* by daughter and grandchildren, when Jethro hears what the Lord has done for Moses and the people of Israel in bringing them out of Egypt, Jethro is ready to return his daughter and grandchildren to his son-in-law, Moses, and have some peace and quiet restored to his tent. Surely, a dynamic some of you can appreciate. Jethro is as fine a father-in-law as a man could want. He returns Moses' family to him, they all have a warm reunion, and Jethro rejoices in Moses' success – and even pays for a nice dinner.

The next day, Jethro observed the frustration and problems that arise when the people and issues involved in a faith community are more than one person – even his son-in-law Moses – could handle. ***Exodus 18:13-23*** describes what was taking place.

"The next day Moses sat as judge for the people, while the people stood around him from morning until evening. When Moses' father-in-law saw all that he was doing for the people he said, *'What is this you are doing for the people? Why do you sit* ***alone****, while all the people stand around you from morning until evening?'* Moses said to his father-in-law, *'Because the people come to me to inquire of God. When they have a dispute, they come to me and I decide between one person and another, and I make known to them the statutes and instructions of God.'* Moses' father-in-law said to him, *'****What you are doing is not good****. **You will surely wear yourself out, both you and these people with you. For the task is too heavy for you; you cannot do it alone.** Now listen to me, I will give you counsel, and God be with you! **You should represent the people before God, and you should bring their cases before God; teach them the statutes and instructions and make known to them the way they are to go and the things they are to do**. You should also look for able men among all the people, men who **fear God, are trustworthy, and hate dishonest gain**; set such men over them as officers over thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens. Let them sit as judges for the people at all times; let them bring every important case to you, but decide every minor case themselves.*

So it will be easier for you, and they will bear the burden with you. *If you do this,* ***and God so commands you****, then you will be able to endure, and all these people will go to their home* ***in peace****.'"*

Unsolicited advice, whether from a father-in-law or mother-in-law (or anyone else, for that matter), is not always welcomed. However, Jethro had earned the right to speak into Moses' life by the love, loyalty, generosity, and commitment he had shared with Moses and his family. The quality of their relationship – and his manner of speaking – enabled Jethro to give his son-in-law advice in a way that could be received as help and assistance, rather than criticism and judgment.

I suspect many dads and moms can relate to Moses' frantic schedule, his going from sunrise to sunset, taking care of the needs and problems of others. In helping reduce Moses' workload and creating a more efficient organizational structure in which responsibility and authority are delegated to others, Jethro is helping to improve life for the people as a whole, as well as for his daughter and grandchildren. By encouraging Moses to focus on the key areas that only he could and should do as the leader – representing the people before God, teaching them God's instructions, casting vision, and telling them what they are to do and delegating the rest – Jethro is helping Moses concentrate on the areas he needs to, for the sake of the people, the mission, and himself. Jethro is supporting Zipporah and Moses in a significant way. He also helps to change the dynamic taking place – from one where all the people are dependent on Moses to one where there is a sense of interdependence between Moses, the appointed leaders, and all the people of God.

Many of us were raised to be independent, and to believe that "if you want a job done right…do it yourself." Think about that statement for a moment – if we do, we realize it implies that we are the only ones capable or able to accomplish a task – which is not humble on the one hand, and sets up an exhausting standard of perfection on the other. A much healthier way to go through life would be with a different mantra, like, ***"If you want something done right, find someone gifted, called, and able to do it – and ask them!"***

Leaders must recognize their limitations. Moses was capable, faithful, and committed, but he couldn't effectively do everything himself. **All of us can reach a point when we can't personally do all that we want to do or all that needs to be done – and in trying to do so, the quality of what we do may decline.** To

how many of us would Jethro say, ***"What you are doing is not good. You will surely wear yourself out, both you and these people with you. For the task is too heavy for you; you cannot do it alone"***?

We can observe in the people we care about – in our families or friendships – patterns of behavior, levels of stress or exhaustion that concern us because they aren't sustainable. Like Jethro, we may fear that if someone keeps going at their current pace, they will wear out. Parents and grandparents are susceptible to this because they're often the hubs of caring activity for many people.

One of my mother's favorite stories was told by her father Rev. John Egner, who was a Presbyterian pastor. I've shared it before, but it seems appropriate for today.

There was a bricklayer who filled out an insurance form. This bricklayer had to move 500 pounds of bricks from the top of a four-story building to the street below. **The problem was he tried to do it all by himself.** He wrote on the insurance form: "It would have taken me too long to move the bricks by hand, so I decided to use a pulley on the top of the building. I secured it and ran a rope through and went down to the street and secured the rope. Then I went back on the roof and put the 500 pounds of bricks in the barrel. I went back down to the street and untied the rope to guide the bricks down. Unfortunately, since I only weigh 145 pounds, I was jerked off the ground so fast that I didn't even have time to think of letting go of the rope. As I passed between the 2nd and 3rd floors, I met the barrel coming down – that accounts for the bruises and lacerations on my upper body. I held on tightly to the rope until I reached the top and my hand became jammed in the pulley – which accounts for my broken thumb. At the same time, however, the barrel hit the sidewalk with a bang and the bottom fell out. With the weight of the bricks gone, the barrel only weighed around 40 pounds, and my 145-pound body began a swift descent, and I met the barrel coming up – this accounts for my broken ankle. Slowed only *slightly*, I continued my descent and landed on the pile of bricks – this accounts for my sprained back and broken collarbone. At this point, I lost my presence of mind completely and I let go of the rope, which brought the barrel crashing down on me, and this accounts for my head injuries. As for the last question on the form, *'What would you do if the same situation arose?', please be advised that* ***I am finished trying to do this job all by myself****."*

Moses had to come to the same realization – that he couldn't do the job all by himself. Moses was sitting all day, while people stood around him from morning until

evening, expecting him to resolve their disputes, care for their needs, and solve their issues. Moses was like a one-man customer service department for thousands and thousands of people with complaints and problems. Talk about a nightmare. Moses heard and appreciated Jethro's advice because he offered a solution that would make life better for Moses, his family, and for the people he was leading.

A saying we were taught growing up is, "It's not just what you say…it's how you say it." Even the way Jethro speaks reflects his wisdom. He doesn't say to Moses, "Are you nuts? Haven't you learned anything?"

Jethro **begins with a question** – to gain an understanding of the situation and to get Moses to express it in his own terms, so Moses can own both the problem and the potential solution. Moses explains that everyone is coming to him, and he is providing spiritual direction, administration, leadership, legal interpretation, conflict resolution, vision, strategy, and teaching. Then Jethro says, "Are you nuts? Haven't you learned anything?" No, he doesn't. More tactfully, and with genuine concern, he says, *"**What you are doing is not good**. You will surely wear yourself out, both you and these people with you. For the task is too heavy for you; you cannot do it alone."*

Whether one's leadership is in a family, at work, as a volunteer, or any calling or vocation in life – **our task is not to make and keep people dependent on us**, **but to equip and empower others to increasing levels of responsibility and freedom**. Our job, as parents, is not to do everything for our children, but to help our children learn how to do things for themselves.

Jethro shares a solution – out of his own wisdom and experience – that blesses Moses, his family, and the people. Jethro's organizational solution is **to clarify Moses' priorities**: to represent the people before God (to intercede on their behalf), and to teach them and guide them in God's ways of living. Moses' priorities are to be prayer, vision casting, teaching, and delegating leadership to other gifted, faithful people who *"**fear God, are trustworthy, and hate dishonest gain**."* These are qualities to look for in anyone who might serve in leadership because such people are not easily corrupted.

What are our priorities? If we had to name them, what would they be? Is our life organized around our priorities – or are they being pushed aside by things that may seem urgent and good, but are less important and less fulfilling? We can't do it all; there isn't enough time to do everything we would like to or want to do – much less what

others want us or expect us to do. So, we must decide what we're going to focus on. Clarifying our priorities and our purpose, as Jethro helps Moses to do, is important because **purpose gives us energy**. A purpose-filled life is one of energy, meaning, and significance, but it requires discipline and sustained effort.

Jethro helps Moses to think realistically about his situation, and to do things in order of importance. Moses receives help from Jethro that enables him to change, and solves a painful problem. Moses also deserves credit because, not only does he want to do a good job, but he's also **willing to listen to advice and counsel.** If Moses had responded to Jethro with, "Mind your own business," and ignored his counsel, nothing would have changed for the better. We need to be open to the wisdom and input of people we know care about us and whom we respect. In a sense, Jethro "invented what has become a thriving profession: Jethro is history's first recorded **management consultant**. He helped Moses to see that organization and structure are essential to effective operation. Not only is work accomplished more efficiently, but people are better served and supported in doing the work."[1]

Surely, Jethro was not the last father-in-law to tell his son-in-law that what he said was what God commanded him to do – but in this instance, he was right! Like the Israelites at the mountain of God, BBC wants to have an organizational structure that nurtures the health of our faith community, and delegates responsibility and authority for some tasks, while enabling our leaders to lead. Jethro advises Moses to look for people with virtually the same qualities as the twelve apostles suggest to the church, in *Acts 6:3*.

At that point in Acts, the early church had grown to such an extent that there was a crisis in member care – the Greek widows were being neglected in the distribution of food. There was also a need for an adjustment in leadership roles because the apostles, like Moses, were being pulled away from their primary calling to lead, preach the Word, and pray. As a faith community grows, **trustworthy, honest, respected, spirit-filled, wise men and women** need to be given – and need to accept – more responsibility, and the leaders need to be freed to lead.

Moses, and the apostles, were clearly gifted by God, but there is a limit to what any individual can do. A leader must continually delegate, and give away responsibility

[1] The Leadership Bible, NIV, 91.

and ministry. In his sincere attempt to be responsible and to serve everyone's needs, Moses was making things worse for himself, for the people he was seeking to serve, and for his family. Moses was also denying the people of God the opportunity to further share in the healthy functioning of an interdependent faith community.

While none of us is a leader like Moses, I suspect many of us can relate to his struggle. Jethro's advice for Moses is also appropriate for us. Following Jethro's example is good counsel for all of us to remember – in at least three areas.

1. We earn the right to speak into the lives of others through the love, loyalty, generosity, and commitment we share with them **first, before we speak**.

2. When we feel led to give advice, remember, like Jethro, that it's often better to **begin with a question** to gain an understanding of the situation and to get the other person to express it in his or her own terms, so he or she can own both the problem and the potential solution.

3. **Whatever leadership role we play, our task is not to make and keep people dependent on us, but to equip and empower others to increasing levels of responsibility and freedom.** Our job is not to do everything for others, but to help others learn how to do things for themselves.

What steps can you take, this week, to clarify your priorities? What can you do to equip and empower others to move them a little from dependence to interdependence?

For BBC to move effectively into the future, it will require that we, like Moses and the early church, identify, equip, and trust responsibility to more leaders, so the ministry can grow and spread. This may include trying to recruit and identify potential interns to help give people the opportunity to learn, grow, and serve, and to help prepare the next generation of church leaders. It will mean that some people will need to step into new roles.

When I read the scripture, I didn't share what happened next. Did Moses act on Jethro's advice, or not? ***Exodus 18:24-27*** gives us the answer, "**So Moses listened to his father-in-law and did all that he had said.** Moses chose able men from all Israel and appointed them as heads over the people, as officers over thousands, hundreds, fifties, and tens. And they judged the people at all times; hard cases they brought to Moses, but any minor case they decided themselves. Then Moses let his father-in-law depart, and he went off to his own country."

God grant that we all might have the wisdom, care, and generous spirit of Jethro, and the willingness of Moses to listen, learn, and lead.

Questions for Discussion or Reflection

1. In *Exodus 13:13-17*, what did Jethro observe about the way Moses was leading and the impact it was having on him and others? What are some dangers of a leader trying to do everything themselves?
2. In *Exodus 13:17-19*, Jethro lovingly confronts Moses about his leadership style and offers a different way forward. What can we learn from Jethro's approach? Why can it sometimes be difficult for us to recognize that we need to change the way we lead or share responsibility with others?
3. Jethro helps Moses clarify his priorities, telling him to teach the people God's statutes, and show them the way they should walk and the work they should do. What does this teach us about the responsibility leaders have to develop and prepare others? What are some practical ways we can intentionally invest in the growth and development of people around us?
4. In verse 21, what qualities does Jethro identify as important in those who are given responsibility? Why are these qualities important in a leader?
5. Why do you think leaders sometimes struggle to delegate, empower others, or share responsibility? Is it a matter of control, perfectionism, lack of trust, fear of being unnecessary, a lack of knowledge, or something else? What can we learn from Moses' example about the importance of sharing leadership?
6. Who are the people in your life, family, workplace, ministry, or church, who you could be intentionally developing, equipping, and empowering? What is one responsibility you could begin sharing with someone else, and what would you need to do to prepare that person for success?