Jethro Visits Moses

“You can delegate authority but you cannot delegate responsibility” is a quote attributed to Senator Byron Dorgan. Harry Truman put it more succinctly when he said “The buck stops here”. As Steve would say, “It preaches easy but it lives hard”. While effective leaders must delegate work, they remain ultimately responsible for the results and therein lies the dilemma. A leader is held accountable for work that someone else does. They are expected to give credit to others when results are good and take the blame when things go wrong which is the opposite of the axiom “Success has many fathers but failure is an orphan”. Choosing the right subordinates to whom authority is delegated is critical to success. Often leaders get promoted based on their technical abilities and sometimes see themselves as the only one with the skills necessary for the task at hand. There can also be a hesitancy to delegate because we sometimes fear a subordinate might prove to be better at a job than we are. In the silent film “The Mysterious Lady”, a general tells his protégé “I taught you all you know but I didn’t teach you all I know”. In our study of Exodus chapter 18 we see Moses working dawn to dusk trying to do everything**.**

The chapter begins with Moses’ father-in-law Jethro hearing about how God had brought the Israelites out of Egypt. Apparently, Moses had previously sent his wife and sons to stay with Jethro during the period of plagues and Jethro was returning them to Moses. Jethro is first mentioned in Exodus chapter 2 as a priest of Midian (Ex. 2:16-18). He is also referred to as Reuel which means friend of God. Jethro praised God for rescuing the Israelites saying that the Lord was greater than all other gods. Commentaries are mixed regarding whether this meant that Jethro believed in multiple gods or that he was referring to false gods or human potentates.

The next day Jethro observed Moses tending to his duties as judge of the people and asked Moses why he did it. Moses replied that people came to him to seek God’s will in settling disputes. Jethro told Moses that he could not continue to handle every complaint as they were too numerous. He provided the following advice:

1. Moses should teach the people God’s laws and decrees
2. He should select capable men to whom he would delegate the authority to serve as judges for simple cases
3. Moses should continue to handle the more difficult cases

Moses did as Jethro suggested, appointing capable men to serve as judges. Verse 25 says that Moses made them leaders of thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens which may indicate some sort of hierarchy of cases or an appeal process. There had been elders among the Israelites (see Ex. 3:16 and 3:29), however they may have been patriarchs of families who provided no spiritual leadership.

Notice the qualifications that Jethro suggested for men chosen to be judges. They were to:

Be capable

Fear God

Hate dishonest gain

Given the obstinate, stiff-necked nature of the Israelites, it must have been quite a challenge to find men who met those qualifications. Nevertheless, judges provided a model for New Testament deacons (see Acts 6:3-6). They were to be men full of the Spirit and wisdom who could take on duties to free up the apostles to devote their time to spiritual matters.

There are lessons for the modern church in this chapter.

1. Pastors cannot tend to every detail in the church but should give their utmost attention to important matters.
2. Selection for a leadership position in the church should be based first on a solid, unshakeable personal relationship with Jesus as Lord and Savior.
3. The early deacons were wise. Wisdom is not always gained through knowledge.
4. People should be considered because of their abilities not longevity.
5. People must prove themselves capable before taking on more responsibility (see Matt. Chapter 25, The Parable of the Talents)
6. Pastors and deacons are accountable for the actions of those who are selected as leaders.
7. Older leaders are responsible for training the next generation of leaders and should not be slow to step down when the time is right.

Notice the end result of successful delegation of authority in the early church. *“So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith:”* (Acts. 6:7).

Below is a link to an interesting article entitled “29 quotes to Help You Delegate Like a Boss”

https://www.resourcefulmanager.com/delegating-quotes/