

Message #34

Exodus 18:13-27

Sometimes “in laws” can be wonderful and sometimes they can be a big pain in the neck. There was a son-in-law who was fed up with his mother-in-law and one day the mother-in-law called to talk with the daughter. The phone rang and the son-in-law answered and said “hello.” They did not have caller ID, so he had no idea who was calling. He immediately heard the mother-in-law’s voice so he said to his wife—“Here, tell your mother we are out. She won’t believe me.”

But then there are times when in-laws are a joy to have around. There are those in-laws who can be so helpful and so encouraging and even so used by God and that is the case with the father-in-law of Moses.

We actually don’t know what the relationship was between Moses and his wife. We know from Exodus 4:25-26 that it had been strained and we know from Exodus 18:2 that Moses had “sent her away.” We may speculate that they ended up having a good relationship or we may speculate that they ended up having a bad relationship; the truth is we don’t know. But what we do know is that Moses had a good relationship with his father-in-law.

Last time, we saw that Moses’ father-in-law came to understand truth about the true God of the Bible; the God of Israel. This was a major turning point in his life. He ended up realizing he needed to offer the proper sacrifices to be right with this God and that is exactly what he did.

But Moses’ father-in-law was a wise man even though he had been an old Midianite priest. Now that he was in a right relationship with God, God was going to use him and his wisdom to make a real difference in the life of Moses. He was about to help him in a way that was critical to Moses’ life and ministry.

There can be some real wisdom with the older people. Older people can help to bring real stability to things. That is obvious from this text. The point we clearly see here is this:

MOSES’ FATHER-IN-LAW IS USED BY GOD TO HELP MOSES ORGANIZE AND DELEGATE RESPONSIBILITY SO THAT HE COULD KEEP HIS TOTAL FOCUS ON GOD AND THE COMMUNICATION OF GOD’S WORD.

There are many lessons to learn from this text, but clearly one of the most important lessons to learn here is that **God’s leader must not get bogged down with things that other people can handle because he needs to keep his focus on what God has called him to do, which is specifically to communicate to people the truth of God and the Word of God.**

Now there are certain historical realities we want to observe:

HISTORICAL REALITY #1 – Moses sat to judge the people from morning to evening.

18:13

In various contexts, someone who is not a judge has to be a judge. For example, when a ship is out at sea, the captain is in charge. In fact, aboard nuclear submarines a captain acts as a judge in any crime on board his ship and his legal decisions are final.

Every day Moses had to deal with judicial problems people had. He never had this kind of responsibility when he was out caring for sheep, but now that he was leading the nation Israel, he was dealing with all kinds of problems. Many of the problems were legal in nature and his case load was unending. He sat down as a judge typically does. All people typically stand when a judge enters and then when he is seated they sit down. Moses had to sit and judge all day and every day.

He had to listen to all kinds of issues and then he was expected to make a judgment call concerning those issues. He was the man of God who knew the Word of God and people would come to him to ask him what to do in various situations. But this is draining. When you have to listen to problems day in and day out, it takes its toll on you and Moses' father-in-law knew that.

HISTORICAL REALITY #2 – Moses' father-in-law asks Moses what he is doing. **18:14-16**

According to **verse 14**, as Jethro (Moses' father-in-law) saw all of this, he was troubled by what he called "this thing." The word "thing" (dabar) occurs some 10 times in this paragraph. Sometimes it is translated "thing" or "matter" or "task" or "dispute" (**v. 14, 16, 17, 18, 22, 22, 23, 26, 26**). So the thing that Jethro is referring to is all of the disputes and matters that were being brought to Moses for him to resolve.

Probably his own experience as a Midianite priest caused him to know this type of thing can cause you major problems. Now it is my belief that God is directing Jethro and letting him see this.

Jethro saw that Moses was listening to all of the cases and problems of the people day after day, from sun up to sun down. Moses explained in **verse 15** that when people had issues, they wanted to know what God would have them do so they would come to Moses.

In fact, the Hebrew word "inquire" (**v. 15**) is one that speaks of seeking "a revelatory answer from God." So the people knew that Moses was in tune with God and they would go to him seeking answers to their questions.

Here is exactly what counseling should be. People with problems and issues should go to people who know the Word of God and then those people should tell them what the Word of God actually says and they should obey it. This is what real counseling should be. If people were actually interested in what God wanted them to do, then life would be a whole lot better.

If this is what would happen in the counseling world, many problems would be cleared up and cleaned up. Moses was a true Biblical counselor. He would listen to the issues, he knew God's Word or he would consult with God and he would inform the people of the will of God. Now there is no question that Moses was God's man, who knew the Word of God better than anyone else in Israel, including Aaron. He did have a very special relationship with God. So he was in a position to know God's Word and reveal God's will in a variety of contexts. But Moses' father-in-law was concerned that this counseling business was becoming the whole focal point of his life. This was happening day after day. Moses still needed to be the leader who would lead Israel to the Promised Land.

It is intriguing to me that Moses does appear to be open to the counsel of his father-in-law, even though he had been involved in a false religion. God can use people of various backgrounds to assist us.

HISTORICAL REALITY #3 – Moses' father-in-law gives godly counsel to Moses. **18:17-23**

There are six pieces of godly advice that Jethro gave to Moses:

Godly Advice #1 - The thing you are doing is not good. **18:17**

It is not good for a man of God to spend all of his time counseling people about their problems. This business of judging was all-consuming for Moses.

Godly Advice #2 - You will wear yourself out. **18:18a**

The Hebrew word "wear out" is one that means to sink down, to get run down and to wither. If the end result of something is that you are totally and completely exhausted and worn down and drained every single day, it cannot be right.

Godly Advice #3 - You will wear the people out. **18:18b**

When you are the judge over the people in any situation, someone is not happy. If the end result is that the people are all frustrated, then the process cannot be right.

Godly Advice #4 - You cannot take care of people alone. **18:18c**

The word "heavy" is the same word used pertaining to Moses' arms (Ex. 17:12). This task would physically and emotionally drain Moses to the point in which he would not be able to go on.

Godly Advice #5 - You must be the people's representative to God. **18:19-20**

Jethro never once suggested that he should be appointed to anything. But he was being used of God to point out truth to Moses.

Now it is clear that the primary responsibility that Jethro believed Moses' job was to teach the Word of God. His job was to teach the truth of God to the people and instruct them in the ways they are to walk and live.

Godly Advice #6 - You should select leaders to take care of the people. **18:21-22**

Jethro believed it was important for Moses to assess people and determine who should be leaders. There are two leadership points to see here:

(Leadership Point #1) - They should be men who have qualifications for the leadership. **18:21**

Now there are five qualifications given for leadership and any nation or any organization would be wise to apply these very principles in their selection of leaders today:

Qualification #1 - They are to be able men. **18:21a**

The word means these were to be capable and competent men. This refers to men who do have the ability to lead others in the true and pure ways of God. In fact, Victor Hamilton said that if you track this word through the O.T. it refers to brave men who are strong defenders and warriors (*Exodus*, p. 284).

Some men do not have the ability, personality or capability to handle the pressures of leadership. Some men are in leadership positions because they are popular with people or they are related to someone; not necessarily because they are skilled, able men. Moses was to spot "able" men.

Qualification #2 - They are to be men who fear God. **18:21b**

This to me is interesting, because you would think that all men in Israel would fear and reverence God and His Word. But obviously this is not an automatic given.

The truth is there are many who go to worship services regularly who do not fear and reverence God and His Word.

Qualification #3 - They are to be men of truth. **18:21c**

It is imperative that leaders be men of truth. It is imperative that leaders not be liars. A lying leader is useless in the sight of God.

Qualification #4 - They are to be men who hate dishonest gain. **18:21d**

Godly leaders not only are against dishonest gain, they hate it. To be a leader, you must love things and you must hate things. Now dishonest gain is gain that is through a bribe or distortion.

Qualification #5 - They are to be in charge of various numbers of people. **18:21e**

The mathematical breakdown of a society into categories of divisions of thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens indicate that the whole group has accountability. The point is that there were to be enough qualified leaders to take care of the entire population.

Unfortunately, what has happened in our society is that those who are elected to leadership offices don't have a clue as to what God's Word actually is or says. For the most part what we have is the blind leading the blind.

(Leadership Point #2) - They should be men who have responsibilities of the leadership.
18:22

The responsibilities were twofold:

Responsibility #1 - They were to judge the people at all times. **18:22a**

This organization would take the bulk of the burden off Moses and free him up to pray and minister God's Word.

Responsibility #2 - They are to bring major disputes to you. **18:22b**

This does show that some things are more weighty and significant than other things.

Responsibility #3 - They are to judge minor disputes themselves. **18:22c**

It isn't that minor disputes aren't important to the person, but they all didn't need to go to Moses. Everyone with a problem was provided for, but not everyone got in to see Moses.

In **verse 23**, Jethro said that if Moses would do this he would endure this and be able to stand and endure and he will be at peace with most people. This is interesting because the section begins with Moses sitting down because he has to be there so long and it ends with him standing because he doesn't have to be there so long.

HISTORICAL REALITY #4 – Moses listened to his father-in-law and obeyed him.
18:24-26

Moses is the great leader of God, but he is listening to the counsel of a man who, at one time, had been caught up in a false religious system. Moses did what his father-in-law requested he do and God blessed him.

We may assume because Moses is very much in tune with God that he came to realize that this

counsel was, in fact, from God.

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HISTORICAL REALITY #5 – Moses said goodbye to his father-in-law. **18:27**

This was one in-law you hated to see leave. This was, as one writer said, “a warm and happy parting.” Now by virtue of the fact that there is no mention of Moses’ wife or children going back with Jethro, we may assume that they stayed with Moses. What this would mean is that they would have joined in with Moses and Israel and stayed in a proper relationship with God for the rest of their lives.

Jethro was now a true believer and he could go back to his Midianite area and be a great witness as a former Midianite priest.

What a great father-in-law Jethro turned out to be. Can you imagine sitting down with David or Jacob and asking them about their father-in-law? Well, David could say my father-in-law was Saul and he tried to kill me. Jacob could say my father-in-law was Laban and he stole from me.

But Moses could tell a different story. His story was of a father-in-law who came to love the Lord and love him.

He stands out as a man of God who was used by God to help Moses.