

Hebrews: The Supremacy of Christ over All Things
Christian Leadership, Pt. 2
Hebrews 13:17

Text:

Hebrews 13:17 (ESV)

¹⁷ Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.

Introduction:

I have argued several times throughout the book of Hebrews that the author believes that the Christian life is lived in the context of relationships.

- In relationship to God through the Son, Jesus Christ
- In relationship to a group of believers known as the church
- In relationship to the leaders of a church

Three times in chapter 13, the writer addresses the topic of spiritual leaders (v.7, 17, and 24). In v. 7 he references *leadership past* while in v. 17 he references *leadership present*. Recall v. 7 where he said, “Remember your leaders, those who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith.” Everything about this verse is past tense. Not only are the verbs past tense, “they spoke the word of God to you,” but their lives are squarely in the past as well. We noticed that the lives of these particular leaders are clearly viewable in that it has already reached its outcome. With these thoughts in mind, I said last time that this is a mandate for having spiritual heroes. We are to reflect on the lives of spiritual giants in such a way that we see Christ. After all, it is not the personality of a man or woman that we want to imitate; it is not the circumstances of a life that we want to imitate; it is the faith of the individual we want to imitate because their faith points to the supremacy of Christ over all things. It is Jesus who is the same for me as he was for Paul, the apostle, Augustine, Calvin, Luther, John Owen, Jonathan Edwards, Charles Spurgeon, etc. It is Jesus Christ who is the same yesterday and today and forever (v.8). That is leadership past.

Now we come to v. 17 and leadership present.

There are two NT commands given to you in this verse: Obey and submit to your spiritual leaders.

By virtue of the fact that you and I live in a post 1960’s world, these commands are difficult to obey because the very air we breathe is a “question-authority” kind of air. We live in a culture where leaders cannot be trusted and leaders are not to be trusted. We live in a culture where our highest officials are subject to scandal after scandal, whether those leaders are in politics or religion. Both pastors and presidents fall.

But church, hear me well: Authority is not bad. Authority is of God. In fact, I would submit to you that the ability to submit to authority is part of the image of God in man.

Are you aware that the ultimate place where authority and submission is modeled is in the godhead? Did you know that Jesus Christ submits to the Father? That’s right! Submission is modeled in Christ. We can see this depicted in such places as Jesus’ prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane before his crucifixion, “Not my will but yours be done” (cf.). We can read of it in places like Philippians 2: “He humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death” (Philippians 2).

I like what Mark Dever says in a book about elders, leaders and congregations called *A Display of God's Glory*: "A recognition of the fallen nature of authority and the possibility of its abuse is good and healthy. Power apart from God's purposes is always demonic. But a suspicion of all authority or an innate distrust of it is very bad. Really, it reveals more of the person questioning than of the authority" (p.27).

I think that once we see the perspective of Hebrews 13:17 we will come away with the realization that it is both a privilege to lead and be served by godly leaders. Let me say that again: It is both a privilege to lead and to be served by godly leaders. Did you hear that? There are two parts to that privilege: leading and following. Or, there are two aspects: leading and submitting. Leaders lead and churches follow.

In unfolding this verse before us, I think the author portrays three things very clearly:

1. The role of godly leaders in the plan of God for persevering saints.
2. The responsibility of church members to their leaders.
3. The critical relationship between the church and its leaders

Let's unpack them in that order.

First, understand the role that godly leaders play in the plan of God for persevering saints. In understanding this role, I think two words stand out: "watch" and "souls." "Obey and submit to your leaders for *they are keeping watch over your souls.*"

Watching is a primary function of pastors, elders, leaders of Christ's church.

1 Timothy 4:16 (ESV)

¹⁶ Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers.

Pastors and elders are commanded to watch themselves – their character, their manner of living, their doctrine. Pastors are to be model saints of self-disciplined living.

Acts 20:28 (ESV)

²⁸ Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.

Pastors and elders are to keep watch over each other. The verse said, "Pay careful attention to *yourselves...*" (plural – addressed to the elders as a plurality or a team).

And, obviously, the elders, the pastors, the leaders of Christ's church keep watch over the flock of God. That is the emphasis here in Hebrews 13. We might do well to ask ourselves why the elders are mentioned at the end of this letter? What part does the watching of an elder play in the life of a saint?

Throughout the book of Hebrews, which is a sermon, in my opinion, the author has been warning the church about falling away from the faith. That is to say, he has been pleading with them to neither *cave-in beneath the weight of the pressures that threatened* their souls, nor to *sell-out to the pleasures that beckoned*. We have seen these pleas manifested the clearest in the five warning passages. So why might a pastor be needed to watch over your souls?

- Because of the danger of drifting way (cf.)
- Because of the danger of being deceived by sin's promises (cf.)
- Because of danger of becoming dull of hearing (cf.)

- Because of the danger of deliberately sinning (cf.)
- Because of the danger of denying Christ (cf.)

While we all know of the power of the remaining sin in our hearts, the pastor's job is not simply to warn of sin but to also alert you to the presence of grace. There are many times in the course of my weeks when it is extremely necessary for me to point out to you not your sin but the grace that is sufficient. Do you recall the way this author dealt with his sheep when it came to the issue of guilt and regret? Go back to ch.10.

In writing to a group of Jewish Christians, who were contemplating returning to the Mosaic system, the writer points out the supremacy of Christ over that system by showing them the grace.

- 10:1-4, 11 – the dilemma – the law cannot take away sin
- 10:12-14, 18 – the solution – the death of Christ

So, I submit to you that in keeping watch over your souls, a pastor is keenly aware of when to insert grace just as he is keenly aware of when to insert rebuke. He watches over your soul.

The second word to emphasize here is the word "soul." We watch over your souls. Why your soul? We keep watch over your soul because we are not simply interested in this life but the next life. We are those who live with an eternal perspective. We should be expected to ask difficult questions of your souls that take the spotlight off of today and puts it on eternity. It is your soul that is the battleground for truth. It is your soul that is at stake.

Go back to chapter 10 again and recall vv.24-25. Living your Christian life in the context of relationships means living and interacting with those who have a future Day of judgment in mind.

10:24-25

Your most valued relationships should be those who help you see today in light of *that* Day! Your most cherished conversations should be those that help you live today in light of *that* Day!

I want you to know that I pray daily for the strength and grace to be diligent in watching over the souls allotted to my charge. I will say this in addition, I pray everyday for the wisdom to discern in how much effort to allot to those who are not in my charge. How is a pastor to know which sheep, in particular, have been allotted to his charge? Don't get me wrong, I know that shepherds love sheep in general. But if I am to give an account for the sheep allotted to me, I want to know who they are. I think there is an implication here and I will return to it later.

Pastors, elders, church leaders watch over the souls of the sheep allotted to their charge as those who will have to give an account. There is stewardship language here. This is not my church and you are not my sheep. You are part of Christ's church and you are Christ's sheep. Jesus Christ is the great and good shepherd. I am nothing but a lowly under-shepherd. I am firmly aware that I must care for you as Christ would. Trust me, this is a daunting task! Notice how he calls Jesus the "great shepherd of the sheep" in v.20.

We watch over your souls through Sunday teaching and Sunday worship, through Growth Groups, through prayer, through hospitality, through counsel, through discipleship, through correction and even through church discipline. All of these are only a means to watching. I like what C.J. Mahaney said in a sermon on this text, "We as pastors, in whatever context, are never simply present and passive, we are always watching! We are always caring for your soul!" And He is right. **But please here me. The more you participate, the better care you will receive.**

This leads us to the second aspect of this passage: the responsibility of church members to their spiritual leaders.

The verse begins with two imperatives, two commands: “obey your leaders and submit to them.” I admit this is troubling language. It is troubling language on two counts. First, it is troubling to you because none of us by nature likes being told to obey and submit. We come into the world hard-wired toward independence and rebellion. But it is also troubling on a second count because to preach such a text, as a pastor, can seem a bit self-serving. But...we must not weaken the force of this text. The Bible is not troubled with this kind of language. Obedience and submission are a natural part of the Christian life and the Holy Spirit inspired a pastor to instruct a church about the topic. So, we trudge on.

I want to make a few qualifying sentences about the role of pastoral authority. These are borrowed from the sermon by C.J. Mahaney that I referenced earlier.

1. Pastoral authority is aimed at pointing all sheep to the chief-shepherd, Jesus Christ.
2. Pastoral authority is derived from Scripture. It should never be confused with the authority of Scripture. The pastors and teachers, those who feed the flock of God must be ever so careful as to feed them with Christ’s words and not their own opinions. Your commitment to the Scripture is absolute; your commitment to a pastor is not absolute. However, because of the clear command of Scripture, your obedience and submission to a pastor is a clear expression of your obedience and submission to Christ.
3. Pastoral authority is defined by Scripture. Pastors have no authority outside the bounds of either Scripture or the church.

Now listen, your responsibility to obey and submit to pastoral leadership is a divine calling that bears huge consequences on your soul. God cares about the way we treat those in authority – especially those in charge of your spiritual affairs.

So what is the appropriate response to a pastor who is deeply concerned with his duty of keeping watch over your soul?

1. There should be a joyful responsiveness to their doctrine and teaching. Has not the entire book of Hebrews been a book about setting straight the church’s weak view of doctrine? Now that they have been clearly taught the supremacy of Christ over all things, he asks them to receive it joyfully. I think this is tied back to the leadership past – those who taught them the word of God.
2. There should be a joyful inclination to comply and participate with the elder’s methodology. Everything we do here has been deeply thought through as to its effectiveness in aiding us keep watch over your souls. There is a reason why we have gone away from a Sunday evening service to small groups. There is a reason why we have a mid-week prayer time. There is a reason why we have a Bible study hour on Sundays at 9:30 a.m. These are not mere traditions. As I said earlier, they are all means to helping us watch your souls.

And understand this: given the command of this verse, there is no room for fog or mud or smoke as to your responsibility: you must feel a joyful inclination toward our methodology. You must want to participate! And when you can’t, you are torn because you want to!

3. There should be a joyful disposition to trust your leaders. You cannot submit to those whom you do not trust. If a church cannot trust its leaders, it must remove them. But once you entrust to them their authority, you are commanded to trust him and to submit to him.

Now, I want to return to something I started earlier. Pastors cannot watch over the souls of those who do not participate, of those who are not here. This takes us to the third and final aspect of this verse: the relationship between pastoral leaders and church members.

Look at the last phrase of v. 17. The ESV has translated it this way: “Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.” This is a good translation in English because it has to work hard to convey what the Greek is really saying. Here is a literal rendering of v. 17: “Obey you leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over you souls as those who will have to give an account, in order that they may do this with joy and not with groaning...” The difficult phrase to bring over into the English is the phrase, “in order that.” Literally and simply, the verse says, “Obey your leaders and submit to them in order that they may do this with joy.” Do what with joy? The answer is that they may do their watching ministry with joy. So the ESV has carried it over as a command, “Let them do this watching ministry with joy and not with groaning, because that would be of no advantage to you.” Do you hear the relationship between leaders and church members?

Here it is: ***Pastoral leadership is as good as parishioner participation.*** If you do not let the pastors do their watchful ministry with joy, they will do it with groaning. And groaning pastors are of no benefit to you.

I am going to make this statement: God wants happy pastors. Did you ever think about that before? It could sound self-serving, I know. But trust me, it is not. Think about it? Why would God want happy pastors? Is it not due to the fact that they represent Christ? Shouldn't Christ, the chief-shepherd be presented as a happy shepherd?

Here is another way of stating the principle of this verse: ***Effective pastoral leadership is dependent upon a proper response to pastoral leadership.*** If you do not obey and submit, you will become a source of groaning to a pastor. And having a groaning pastor is of no advantage to you. Actually, this last phrase could very possibly be translated negatively: “it will harm you.”

Conclusion:

As we close, let me give you two applications and a single implication.

Application:

1. Each one of you, upon hearing this text portrayed should ask of yourselves and ask of others, “Am I a joy to pastor?” Or, “Am I a burden to pastor?” Trust me, I want you to ask this question of yourself, your spouse, your growth group leader, another church member, etc. not for my sake. I have to bear up the sheep either way. The text says you are to ask this question for your sake. Is your response to spiritual leadership done in such a way that you are allow your pastor to serve you joyfully? Or are you a burden to him because you struggle with obedience and submission to God's authority.
2. Each of you, upon hearing this text portrayed as you have should ask of yourself, “Am I available enough to the church's structured services and meetings such that I am more and more under the watchful eye of a pastor who is concerned with my soul?” I will tell you the absolute truth. Those who are here for Sunday School, Sunday morning worship, Koinonia Kook-outs, Wednesday evening prayer meetings, Growth groups, Once-a-month men's and women's prayer meetings are the one's who are more clearly on my radar screen and I make no apology for that!

Implication: How will you obey this command to obey and submit to your spiritual leaders if you refuse to submit to a church through a form of church membership? How is a pastor to know which of the sheep, in particular, has been allotted to his charge except through some means of a visible

membership? Unless you are a member of the church, which leaders will you be submitting to and obeying?

Don't get me wrong, I love sheep, in general, and I know that we, as a local church are only a microcosm of the whole. And I will minister to everyone who comes through the doors of this building. But, I also believe that my first loyalties and the clearest manifestations of my time and effort belong to the sheep that are clearly laid to my charge through a covenant of membership? I hope that I am not overstating the case here; but I feel that each of you here who are not members of a church should feel the force of this command. You should feel like a shepherd-less sheep.

Bill Hull, a noted author on the topic of the NT church has written very pointedly:

To be frank, there is little hope for the person who will not accept the authority of the local church. There is no basis by which to guide him. He will respond when he wants; he will resist when he wants...The person who will not accept the authority of a local church has a second flaw: He believes there is a difference between God's authority and the authority of the local church. There are some important distinctions between God and his leaders: God's authority is perfect and God's leaders are imperfect. God doesn't make mistakes but God's leaders do. God's judgment is perfect but the judgment of His leaders is flawed. Yet, in spite of the fallibility of church leaders, their authority is God's authority. Their authority comes from God and to disobey, deny or resist their authority is to rebel against God.