

Real-Life Authority — Delivery Transcript

Hebrews 13:17–19 (CSB) • Wes Terry • Sunday, May 11, 2025 • Faith IRL

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Hebrews chapter 13, the series we're in is called Faith IRL. IRL just means in real life, and the reason we've looked at this series, especially after Easter, if Jesus has been raised, if Christianity is true. Then the truth of Christianity ought to have real bearing on our real life because we live in a really broken world that has real problems that surface that are really difficult to solve. And what good is Christianity if it kind of can't help us solve some of those real life problems or help us get through things in ways that are really, really difficult.

And so last week we looked at the topic of worship, which you might not think of worship as being real life, but from a biblical perspective, there's nothing more real life than your approach to worship. This morning we're turning from the topic of worship to the topic of authority, which in some ways is a curse word in our culture. We don't really like it. Authority in the West, especially in America. We are founded on the whole idea of rebelling against authority that was improperly used. And for that reason we kind of bristle at it.

But the idea of authority is a very biblical concept and on Mother's Day of all days is a relevant thing for us to talk about because not every person in authority is a mom, but every mom is a person in authority. And so it's important that we know what real good authority is what it looks like and its counterfeits how they surface and how to respond when they do. And so that's our passage this morning in Hebrews chapter 13. We looked at it real briefly last week in verse seven and again in verse seventeen.

That's what we're going to do again this week, but in more extended treatment. If you're taking notes, here's my thesis for the sermon based on the text that we're reading. There is a God-given connection between good authority and human flourishing. There is a direct connection designed by God between authority in our life and human flourishing. And again in our culture they kind of revolt against that idea. If you want to flourish, you've got to reject authority. But in the scriptures, and I would say in my life, and hopefully you would be able to testify in your life, when I was under good authority, and allowing myself to submit to that authority, it actually cultivated goodness and blessing in my life.

And that's what we're going to see in Hebrews chapter 13. So let's pick it up. This is on the tail end of a discussion about worship. It's fronted at the beginning in verse 7 with the discussion about spiritual leadership. And then its conclusion in verse 17 is about spiritual leadership. And so I want to read the first and the last verse of this section on worship. He says in verse 7 that we are to remember. Our leaders who have spoken God's word to us, and as we carefully observe the outcome of their lives, imitate their faith.

And then at the end in verse 17, he says, to obey your leaders and submit to them, since they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account submit and obey so that they can do this with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you. I want you to notice this phrase here that would be unprofitable for you. You see, I think a connection between human authority and human flourishing. He's saying to these Christians, you need to submit and obey to your spiritual leaders, because through your submission and obedience it's going to become profitable for your life.

When you don't submit and obey, it will become unprofitable because there is a sense in which those in authority over you have a responsibility to God to cultivate your life so that it flourishes according to God's design. And so you see the connection between human authority and human flourishing. The definition for authority, there's all kinds of people that define it different ways. But from this passage, one of the things I'd like us to think about authority. And if you want to use this as a working definition, this is kind of how I think about it.

Authority, based on Hebrews 13, is a stewardship. And when I say it's a stewardship, I mean it's something that is not inherent to you as a person. You're not born out of the womb with authority. Although some people like to think of themselves as boss baby, you know, out of the womb with authority. No, you're not born out of the womb with authority. It's at some point in your life given to you as a gift from God And you're accountable, it's temporary, you're possessing of authority, it's temporary, you're accountable to the one who gave it to you who gives authority in this context?

The one who gives authority is the Lord. So for moms in the room, God has given you authority as a stewardship, which means it's a trust, it's temporary, and you're accountable. There is a purpose for the authority that God has given you. That purpose is to cultivate or to help flourish the life of the person under that authority. And so it is a stewardship to serve those who sit underneath it. Authority is a stewardship to serve those who sit beneath it. This idea of stewardship and authority goes all the way back to the very beginning of the scriptures.

If you want to take your Bibles and turn all the way to the front end in Genesis chapter 1. In Genesis chapter 1, you have the creation of everything, and on the sixth day, God creates man and his image. In the image of God he created them. After he creates man in his image,

he tells them to be fruitful, to multiply, to fill the earth, and subdue it. And those words that are used of God's assignment to man, I think, show you the relationship between authority and stewardship. He says He created him in his own image, in the image of God, male and female.

These words here, be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth, and subdue it. And rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, and every creature that crawls on the earth. These words, if you do a little word study on them, they can carry negative connotations, and in some contexts it is applied negatively. But in the context of Genesis 1, the God who created everything is essentially saying to mankind who he created, male and female, I want you to imitate me. I want you to be like me and that you create life just like I create life.

And then I want you to rule it and subdue it, and those words mean not just that you would govern or have responsibility over a thing and ruling it, but that you would subdue it. That word means to cultivate it, to take the raw potential of something and maximize its utility. Just like God took the chaos that was in Genesis 1, it was kind of the spirit hovering over the waters, there was disorder and a lack of utility. God created order out of that chaos, and that's what He's saying I want you to do as people in my image I want you to cultivate.

I want you to subdue. I want you to take the raw potential of that which is under you and make it so that it is the height of its what it was designed to be. And that's what authority is. Authority is a stewardship to serve those underneath it such that you're cultivating them, blessing them, building them up, bringing them into the fullness of what God designed them to be. So you see it in Genesis 1, you see it in Hebrews 13. Authority is a stewardship to serve those who sit beneath it.

All kinds of realms for authority. In Hebrews 13 he applies it to I think pastors, spiritual leaders in the local church. But I think it's interesting that he doesn't use the word presbyteros like elder. He doesn't use the word poimen, which means pastor. He just uses a general term for leader, spiritual leader. And I think he does that because the truths that are in Hebrews 13 are more universal in scope. And apply to anyone in any domain of authority, not just pastors in a local church. And so anyone who is a leader of sorts in that they have the right to build up or they have the right to oversee the welfare or flourishing of another person.

There are truths from Hebrews 13 that apply directly to that calling. That apply outside of the local church and I would say fundamentally that calling begins in the home. Just like Genesis 1, you have the creation of man and woman. He says to be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it. At the root of healthy civilizations is a healthy, stable family. One man, one woman, and a lifelong covenant of marriage, bearing children and raising those children up in the context of that institution of marriage as God designed it.

When a culture has healthy, stable families, then it's a healthy, stable culture. And when a culture loses healthy, stable families, the culture begins to get sick. And our culture in large measure is sick like it is today because we've lost a lot of the healthy, stable families required for a culture to flourish. And so when we think about authority and that being a stewardship to bless those, serve those underneath it, this morning I want us to think about it in the realm of the home and the family. One because it's Mother's Day, two, because it is the central place.

If it doesn't happen here, it doesn't happen in the church, it doesn't happen anywhere else. So to the degree that these counterfeits to authority. Have increased in our culture, I would say it is to that degree that our culture has begun to get sick. A counter everything God designs and creates Satan counterfeits. I think that's a spiritual principle we would all acknowledge. God creates a certain thing good. Satan comes up and tweaks it here, tweaks it there, presents the counterfeit, and instead of that thing being a good thing that blesses the counterfeit becomes a negative thing that destroys.

Satan has created counterfeit versions of authority. There's all kinds of different versions of counterfeit authority. Different versions have cropped up at different times in human history. There is a cultural counterfeit to authority in our culture today, and really depending on your generational makeup kind of determines how you think about it. If you've ever sat down for coffee with a group of baby boomers, they'll tell you what's wrong with the world today. And one of the things I've heard when I've sat down with those gentlemen is it's the it's the kids these days, the way the kids are getting raised, you know.

They're ruining everything. And it's not like they don't have some evidence to bolster their claim. Kids are absolutely different than they used to be. Can we all agree on that? I got a lot of educators, public educators in my family, people in the public school system. Or who were formerly in the public school system. And those who are still teaching will say, I can't wait to get out because kids are just different today. Kids have always been anti-authority, rebellious, but it seems like these days kids are almost violent and forceful in how they express their anti-authority and impulses.

There are many parents today who are just exasperated. They are worn out, they are exhausted. And a lot of older people will look at the way that people, younger people, parent today and they'll shake their heads and go, what in the world are you doing? Because parents are treating their children like a peer instead of a parent. They'll argue with them, you know, bargain, try to persuade, convince. They don't exercise authority as like a top coming down, but rather horizontal I'm going to be a friend, I'm going to be a colleague.

And they've they've lost that former approach to parenting that said there's a clearly established authority and you are underneath it. And kids also begin to treat their parents like peers. Which means they're combative and debative and mean spirited because they've

been treated like a peer, now they're responding like a peer, and it's created all kinds of really exhausted parents and really children who've become social pariahs, unable to live under authority and people talk about the school to prison pipeline, they just make decisions at an early age that create a certain kind of personality that disadvantages them really for the rest of their lives all because of a counterfeit vision of authority.

Now, where did that come from? What is it? There's a lot of debates about what to call it and how it happened. Some point to the 60s and the free love and the sexual revolution, some point to like things like feminism and all the other isms of the nineteen sixties and seventies. Some point to the class divide, things like the wealthy getting wealthier and the poor getting poorer and the brokenness in economic systems. Some point to the development of screens and technology like the iPhone and certainly I would say a lot of those things play a lot of roles and I wouldn't boil it down to any single one and maybe include even more.

But if I had to boil it down to one thing that poisoned the well when it comes to the vision of biblical authority, the thing that I would identify is what philosophers call expressive individualism. Nietzsche, who was a postmodern philosopher back in the early 19th century, he hailed the death of God in a culture. He says, God is dead and we have killed him. Statement from Nietzsche was not a celebratory statement. He's like saying, I'm an atheist, I'm glad God is dead. He's saying, no, our culture has killed the idea of God.

And because we've killed the idea of a biblical God something's going to rise up and take its place because that's the way human beings are. And the thing that has risen up to take its place has not been fruitful for human societies. The idea of expressive individualism is essentially summed up in the phrase, to thine own self be true, which is from a Shakespeare play, I believe. Not sure which one or who said it. But it's this idea that truth and goodness and beauty are all inwardly defined. That you, as the psychological self, who you think and feel yourself to be, you are the sole determiner of what is and is not in life.

What is and is not true, what is and is not good, what is and is not beautiful, it all starts and ends right here. This comes out of a lot of enlightenment thinking and modern thinking and the reaction against it in postmodernism. It's been described, I think, helpfully by guys like Carl Trueman or Catholic philosopher Charles Taylor. But at the end of the day You decide who you are. And when it comes to authority, expressive individualism basically says any and all forms of external authority are to be rejected. They are irrelevant.

They are relevant only in so far as they agree with my inward determination of what things are. And so any anything external, this comes from institutions all the way down to physical reality itself. If I feel like I'm a girl, then I'm a girl. It doesn't matter what my biology says, it matters what I think and what I feel inside. If I feel like I'm attracted to this sex, then that means I am that type of a person. All of it doesn't matter what culture or even society suggests, all of those things are cruel and harmful impositions on the psychological self.

And it's not just that people believe this in that they express themselves, it's that all the other people around them believe this, and so therefore they take the position, if I impose my view. In opposition in any way whatsoever, it is not just unkind or unpolite, it is cruel and harmful. And so the greatest sin, the most unpardonable sin in our culture today is to hinder self-expression in any way, shape, or form. This is why I think a lot of parents treat their children like peers, because the big sin in our culture is to hinder their self-development or self-expression in any way whatsoever.

I don't want to shape it, I don't want to mold it, I don't want to harm it, I don't want to cause them to become not who they really are and you see in you see it everywhere in our culture. It's in every Disney movie. It's in every soundtrack to every popular film. It's in our educational system, it's in our institutions, it's in our art, it's in the entertainment, it's seeping into the minds, not just of young people, but of their parents. And it is a counterfeit vision of authority. And because of that counterfeit vision, everyone is broken down into either an oppressed or an oppressor class.

And if you are an oppressed person, you can do no wrong. And if you are an oppressor, you can do no right. And your oppressed or oppressor status is not determined by you as an individual. It's determined by really genetic things over which you can have no control or societal things which you can have no control. And once you're in that class, there's nothing you can do about it, you're locked in all of it's filtered to the lens of power, not success or wealth, societal power. And those who have any kind of power, if they exercise that power on the self-individual, the psychological self, it is not just wrong, it is harmful and hateful and is to be rejected at all cost.

And because that is our vision of authority in our culture, it has prevented the flourishing that good authority can create. So when Hebrews 13 says we should submit to our spiritual leaders and obey them, because to do otherwise would be unprofitable for us, you even have Christian people in our culture who go, I don't really like that. Even myself who live and move and breathe in our cultural air, I read that passage and I go, well, that's really uncomfortable. I'll probably preach on that when I'm 89 years old. Because there's this implicit disgust with authority.

Whereas if you think about it biblically, from Genesis 1 all the way to Revelation, authority is a good gift. It is given by God for our flourishing. It is a stewardship not necessarily inherent to a person, but to an office. And when you let that authority do what it's supposed to do, it will produce good things and beautiful things in your life. So the anti- the expressive individualism today I would say has weaponized a good virtue of Christian compassion. It has weaponized it against people, so that in the name of compassion, we will not give young people a opposing point of view.

We will not refuse to entertain their mistaken notions of what is and is not true. And in the name of compassion, many children are making permanent, life-altering decisions that are ultimately harmful. Because they deem as harmful anyone who would suggest otherwise. It is the assumption behind. So much in our culture today, from gender-affirming care to a lack of discipline in the home. But the solution to bad authority is not no authority. The solution to bad authority is good authority. Rightly used. I could point to the boomer generation and point to specific counterfeits authority that were different from the expressive individual expressive individualism of our day.

But again, in reacting against that bad authority, the solution wasn't no authority, it's good authority. So the real question we need to answer from Hebrews 13 is what is good authority? What does it look like? How do I practice it in my life? So that's what I want to do with the rest of our time. The word authority, if you break it down to its actual roots, it's you can even see the English word author there at the beginning, A-U-T-H-O-R-I-T-Y. The word author, the human, the English word author comes from the Latin word auctor.

And that means to basically be the person responsible for creating a thing, to be the originator, to speak definitively on a matter. So the word author is the perfect word. Just like an author has the power to create a certain kind of life for the characters and his or her story, so also does a person in authority have the power to produce a certain kind of life in those who sit underneath it. And good authority creates life, it doesn't destroy it. Good authority builds up, it does not tear down. Good authority has authority has the power for good or evil because the idea, the very institution of authority is life-giving, story creating.

Power. You can use that power for good or for ill, but good authority takes the power to create and uses it to create life and beauty and goodness in the person who sits underneath that authority. That is a vision for biblical authority. I think that would be a biblical theology of authority. And Hebrews 13, I think, gives us some specific ways. To flesh it out. I'm going to give you six different examples very quickly. First, those who are in authority. Well, let's just read the passage again, actually. Verse 7, remember your leaders who have spoken God's word to you as you carefully observe the outcome of their lives, imitate their faith.

Obey your leaders and submit to them, since they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account, so that they can do this with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you. He says in verse 18, I don't think this is on the screen, pray for us, for we are convinced that we have a clear conscience, wanting to conduct ourselves honorably in everything. And then I urge you all the more to pray that I may be restored to you very soon. And then he gives that famous benediction, may the great shepherd of the sheep, the Lord Jesus Christ, give you everything you need to do his will.

So if you just take those passages and you ask the question, what does good authority look like? The first example is that every person in authority is also under authority. If you want

to be a person that exercises good authority, you need to recognize no matter who you are, no matter what office you hold, you as a person in authority are also under authority. At root, ultimately, everyone is under the authority of God Himself. That's what Hebrews 13 says. They'll give an account to God on the day of judgment for how they exercise the authority, the authority that was given to them.

And for some of us, that will be an unsettling day, you know, when you give an account to God. But the idea is that you're under authority. You think about Jesus Christ Himself, King of Kings, Lord of Lords, under authority. Jesus said, I only go where the Father tells me to go. I only say what the Father tells me to say. The fact that Jesus was under authority in no way lessened his authority. He was still King of Kings and Lord of Lords, but as someone under authority, his use of authority, I think, was properly applied.

So every person in authority is also a person under authority. When we forget this, when people who are in authority act as though they are not under authority, that's when authority becomes abusive. And that's the definition of abuse is authority wrongly applied. When you forget that you are accountable to someone for the use of your authority because your authority was given to you as a stewardship, then you will misapply it. This is why in our church we have not just a single senior pastor, we have a Plurality of pastors that serve on a pastoral team, all of their votes equal to mine, all of their voices equal to mine.

This is one of the reasons that I try to put myself in accountability with other pastors in the state of Texas and around who know me well, have the authority to speak into my life, because it's really difficult to see your sin in the mirror. Can anyone say amen to that? How many of you look in the mirror, you see all your sins, may see you know overweight sins, but other than that, you don't see your greed, you don't see your envy, you don't see those things. You need someone else who can see you truly to call that out in you when they see it.

That's why you need to be under authority if you're in authority. Because if you're in authority, you want to be righteous in your expression of it, which means you need to be held accountable for your own sins. And for that to happen, you've got to be under authority. Number two, those in authority need to aim to build up those underneath it. He says it would be unprofitable for you. To not submit, to not obey, which means the purpose of the one who has the authority is to profit you, to build up, not to tear down.

This is the idea behind when you when you hire a trainer to I don't know if anybody does this anymore. Has anyone ever hired a trainer when they're working out. So why would I pay someone to hurt me? But that's exactly what you do. You pay someone to hurt you because you will not do it yourself, right? You know your limits, and most people knowing their limits stop at about 60% of where they can cap out. Whereas if you hire a trainer, he'll get in your face, call you names, and say, you're only giving me 60%, you can give me 10% more.

You can give me 15% more. Come on, you weenie baby. Come on, you little you little pansy. You know, he just you know he solicits out of you more potential. Because you would not do it yourself. That's why we need authority. We need authority because someone has to do that for us because we cannot do it for ourselves. Just like we can't see our own sin. Sometimes it's hard to give ourselves the necessary energy to do the hard things in life. And so we need people in authority to build us up.

Just like a trainer builds up physically, so also a person in authority builds up emotionally, socially. This is what moms do. This is why moms are so important. They are cultivating the life of the children under their care. They're making boys into men, they're making girls into women, they're cultivating goodness and virtue out of their life, building them up. So the question I think we should ask if you're a person in authority is how am I using my authority to build others up am I using my authority to serve myself or am I using my authority to serve other people?

Is my authority for the benefit of me or is it for the benefit of others? Do I see others as an assignment that God has given me to strengthen and beautify and help flourish? Or do I see them as like a bank from which to draw and serve myself? So they build up, and then number three, they accept wisdom. If you see your assignment as a stewardship before God for whom you're accountable, for which you're accountable. And you see the primary goal of your authority to cultivate the ones underneath you, then you will be ready to acknowledge when other people have wisdom that you don't have.

You will almost be willing to intentionally seek it out. And I think that's what you see Paul doing with the prayer when he says in verse 18, pray for us. I think we have a clear conscience. Like I've done everything I know to do to clear my conscience, but just in case I'm missing something, pray for us and pray that I can be restored to you. That is an expression of humility. And you need humility if you're going to exercise authority rightly. Because pride turns you inward. When you turn inward, you're not serving those underneath you.

You're using them to serve yourself. And so ask yourself the question, as someone in authority, what do you do when someone offers you constructive criticism? When you're in authority, what do you do? When you don't have the answers to the problems you seek. Are you destroyed by it? Are you undermined by it? Or do you find yourself with a teachable, humble spirit. That says I'll receive some wisdom from outside of me, whether that's from my peers, my spouse, my pastor, God's word, or even. Those I'm called to lead. If my job is to help them flourish, who better to give me wisdom on what good authority should look like than those who are under my authority?

This is why good bosses have a 360 communication mechanism so they can get to the top what's at the bottom. How are people thinking? How are people feeling? How does my

authority make you feel? How does the way I live help or hinder you becoming who God wants you to be? People in authority will accept wisdom from those around them. Number three, they'll apply discipline when it's needed the idea of submission and obedience. The actually the word for submission in Hebrews 13 it's called a hapax legomenon. It just means it's the word is only used one time in the New Testament.

That's the only time that word for submission is used. It's not like the usual biblical word for submission, and it carries the idea of enforcing your will against the will of another person. And so whether they want it or not. And so this idea entails that sometimes people are not going to do what you want them to do. So when someone doesn't do what they need to do, a person in authority has a responsibility to respond. Now different types of authority determine the approach to discipline. You know, so like a pastor who has authority can't discipline in the same way that a police officer can.

So the type of authority you have will determine this, but at the end of the day, good authority will discipline when necessary. When people violate the good design of God, there will be a response. It's never pleasant. The book of Hebrews actually talks about this when it talks about the Lord's discipline in Hebrews chapter 12. If you'll turn one page over. Hebrews chapter twelve verse six says the Lord disciplines the one he loves and punishes every son he receives. And then he says in verse eleven, no discipline seems enjoyable at the time, but painful.

Later on, however, it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it. There is nothing so untouchable as how parents discipline their children. So let me wade into these waters. No, I'm just kidding. I'm not going to solve that problem for you. Spanking, no spanking, you know, you take that you take that up with someone else not on Sunday morning on the stage. But I will say this, biblically speaking, there are some there are some filters through which you should determine discipline. Namely, number one, it should come from a place of love.

If you will discipline your children from a place of love and not anger, you will discipline different and they will receive your discipline differently. It will not bring shame or fear, it will bring correction, it will not be pleasant, but it will come differently. Number two, it needs to be unenjoyable Your discipline can't be, oh, that ain't so bad. You know, so spanking, no spanking, I don't know, but it better hurt. It should be unpleasant should be like, oh man, that's oh because if it's not unpleasant, it doesn't teach anything.

If like the trainer training you in the gym, if he's not pushing you beyond what's comfortable, it's not going to benefit. So it needs to be from love, it needs to be unpleasant, and then lastly, it needs to be for growth. You discipline not for revenge. You discipline not to for punitive damages. You discipline not because you were ashamed or you got you know, your honor was wounded. You discipline in love to grow them, to train them, to build them up.

And I'm telling you, when your children know that the discipline mom and dad have put on me is because they love me and they want to make me better and grow me, they will be received differently.

That's what good authority does. And I can promise you all those people who have had bad authorities in their life, when those authorities have disciplined them, it has felt like it wasn't loving. It was unusually cruel and it was to tear me down, not to build me up. If you'll filter your discipline through these things, I think it'll change the way you do it. And then the fifth thing is that they will what is the fifth thing? To exercise good authority, assume responsibility when things go wrong. He says they keep watch over your soul in verse 17 that word translated keep watch means like constant vigilance stay awake don't fall asleep that's what you do as a person in authority you are taking responsibility for the other person.

It doesn't mean you're accountable for their sin, just like a pastor's not accountable for the sin of their congregants, but I am accountable for my leadership of the congregation. Am I paying attention to what's going on? Do I see the threats when they're coming? Am I proactive against those threats? That's what any person in authority should do. That's what moms should do. That's why moms stay awake at night worried about their children because they're keeping watch. And this is why moms and dads feel responsible when their kids get in trouble or go to jail.

You know, there's that mugshot in the newspaper. Man, is there something I could have done? What did I not see? This gets back to the Garden of Eden when Adam and Eve were in the garden. God holds Adam accountable for the sin of Eve. He holds Eve accountable as well, but he says, to Adam first. I gave you the command, Adam. You were the one that was supposed to keep watch over your spouse. Not only did you not keep watch over her, you stood right next to her and you ate of the apple.

That was bad authority. You're supposed to keep watch, take responsibility if things go wrong, certainly own it. But should things begin to go wrong, insert yourself and stop it before it happens because your assignment is to cultivate those underneath you. Which will be crushing if you think about it. It's too much to bear. How can any person exercise this kind of authority? Which is why Paul says, I need you to pray for me. Not Paul, whoever wrote Hebrews, I need you to pray for me. It's why the benediction says, may the God of peace who raised up from the dead, our great shepherd, the Lord Jesus Christ, give you everything that you need.

You got to recognize if you want to exercise good authority that you're a person under authority, but a person in desperate need of God's grace to exercise authority in this way. And in that way, Jesus is both the example and the enabling grace to exercise authority in this way. And it's through repentance of sin and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ that we not

just have a model of what good authority should look like but the power from the Holy Spirit to apply that authority in a way that gives life and builds up.

And if you don't have a relationship with Jesus this morning, this is an opportunity for you to do just that. And so we're going to enter into a time of invitation response, and I'm going to encourage you...