

LESSON 8

How to Encourage Leaders

Hebrews 13:7, 17; 1 Thessalonians 5:12–13

Remember your leaders who have spoken God's word to you. As you carefully observe the outcome of their lives, imitate their faith, Hebrews 13:7.

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, Hebrews 13:17.

Class Overview: Church leaders carry a sacred and often heavy responsibility as they watch over the souls of God's people. Hebrews 13 and 1 Thessalonians 5 remind us that these men and women labor not for recognition, but out of love for the Lord and His church. The strength and joy of leadership depend significantly on the congregation's encouragement and cooperation. When Christians remember their leaders' example, support them with humility, and esteem them in love, the whole body thrives in unity and peace. This lesson reminds us that encouragement is not flattery; it is faithfulness. As we pray for, honor, and assist our leaders, we not only bless them but also honor Christ, the Chief Shepherd of the church.

Class Objectives:

By the end of this class, you should be able to:

1. Explain why Scripture calls believers to remember, respect, and follow those who lead in the Lord (Heb. 13:7, 17; 1 Thess. 5:12–13).
2. Describe what it means for leaders to "keep watch over your souls" and how this should shape our attitude toward them.
3. Identify practical ways to encourage leaders through prayer, gratitude, cooperation, and acts of kindness.
4. Commit to guarding unity by refusing gossip, criticism, or disrespect that undermines leadership and harms the church's witness.
5. Cultivate a spirit of appreciation that values leaders not for position, but for their faithful labor in the gospel.

6. Choose one specific way to encourage a leader this week: through a note, a prayer, or personal service, fulfilling the law of Christ through love.

Introduction:

IF YOU'VE EVER SERVED IN LEADERSHIP, as an elder, deacon, teacher, preacher, or ministry worker, you understand that the work is both joyful and heavy. Leaders carry the spiritual weight of shepherding people, often dealing with challenges and criticism that others never see. They are called to “keep watch over souls” (Hebrews 13:17), a responsibility that demands both strength and humility. Yet leaders are also human. They get tired, discouraged, and sometimes feel unseen.

That's why the Bible repeatedly calls God's people to honor, support, and encourage their leaders. Hebrews 13:7 reminds us to *remember your leaders who have spoken God's word to you* and to *imitate their faith*. Verse 17 adds that we should obey and submit to them *so that they can do this with joy and not with grief*. And in 1 Thessalonians 5:12–13, Paul urges Christians to *recognize those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord* and to *regard them very highly in love because of their work*.

Leadership in the church is a sacred trust, and it thrives in an atmosphere of gratitude and love. When leaders are encouraged, the whole church is strengthened. When leaders are constantly criticized or left unsupported, the entire body suffers.

In this lesson, we'll explore what it means to follow godly leaders, how to support them joyfully, and how to show love in ways that refresh their hearts. Encouraging leaders is a spiritual responsibility that reflects the heart of Christ Himself, who shepherded with compassion, patience, and grace.

Remember and Follow Godly Leaders

The writer of Hebrews begins his exhortation by saying, *...remember your leaders who have spoken God's word to you. As you carefully observe the outcome of their lives, imitate their faith*, Hebrews 13:7.

That one verse captures three simple but powerful responsibilities for every Christian: **remember, observe, and imitate**.

1. Remember Their Work

To “remember” here doesn’t just mean to think fondly of leaders who have influenced us; it means to keep their example close to mind. These are the men who taught us the Word of God, prayed for us, counseled us, and helped shape our walk with Christ. Their sacrifices often go unseen, long hours of study, countless visits, difficult conversations, and emotional investment in the lives of others. Encouragement begins with gratitude, remembering that leaders serve not for applause, but because they love the Lord and His people.

2. Observe Their Faithfulness

The verse continues, *...as you carefully observe the outcome of their lives.* The word *observe* means to look attentively to study closely. We’re to watch not just what our leaders say, but how they live. Authentic leadership is verified by consistency: by the evidence of faith under pressure, humility in success, and endurance in trial. A godly leader’s life is an open book that teaches long after the sermon ends.

I remember an elder in one congregation who spent hours visiting and spending time with those in the local church, often without anyone knowing. He mentored one of our teens by taking him fishing. When he passed away, story after story surfaced at his funeral about quiet acts of service he’d done. People didn’t just remember what he said; they remembered *how* he lived. His example continues to shape lives even after his passing.

3. Imitate Their Faith

The command ends with, *imitate their faith.* We are not called to imitate their personalities or preferences, but their faith, their trust in God, their perseverance in hardship, and their devotion to the truth. The greatest tribute we can give to a faithful leader is not applause, but imitation. When we carry forward their example of integrity, humility, and service, we honor both them and Christ, whom they follow.

Practically, this means taking time to reflect on the people who have

helped form your faith. Who taught you Scripture when you were young? Who encouraged you when you were struggling? Who modeled prayer, patience, or courage? Thank God for them and then strive to walk in the same faith.

Encouraging leaders begins here: with gratitude for their work, respect for their example, and a heart determined to follow their faith. Remembering their sacrifices keeps us humble; imitating their faith keeps the church strong.

Support and Submit to Leadership

The writer of Hebrews continues, *...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*, Hebrews 13:17.

This verse can feel counter-cultural in a world that resists authority and prizes independence. Yet the principle here is not about blind obedience; it's about mutual trust, respect, and cooperation within the family of God. Church leadership is not domination; it's stewardship. Elders and spiritual leaders are shepherds who serve under the Chief Shepherd, Jesus Christ (1 Peter 5:2–4). And those who follow are called to do so with humility and a cooperative spirit that strengthens the whole body.

1. The Role of Leadership: Watching Over Souls

The writer reminds us that leaders “keep watch over your souls.” This phrase describes the constant vigilance of a shepherd who stays alert at night, guarding his flock from danger. True spiritual leaders are not managing an organization; they are protecting eternal souls. They pray for the flock, guide it through hardship, and sometimes confront when sin threatens to destroy. That is a sacred and heavy responsibility.

Good leaders don't seek control; they seek care. They will one day “give an account” to God for how they watched over the souls entrusted to them. Imagine the weight of that calling. It's one thing to lead a company or manage a team; it's another to shepherd the souls of men and women created in the image of God.

2. The Responsibility of the Flock: Obedience and Submission

Paul's words, *obey your leaders and submit to them*, are rooted in the idea of willing cooperation, not forced compliance. Submission here means to *yield*, to recognize, and support the God-given role of those who lead. It's the same kind of submission we practice in other biblical relationships, between spouses, between citizens and governing authorities, between Christians and Christ. It's an act of faith, trusting that God works through His appointed servants.

When members refuse to follow godly leadership, tension and division arise. But when the church works together in harmony, leaders serving selflessly and members following faithfully, the result is joy. That's why the verse says, *so that they can do this with joy and not with grief*. Leaders who serve among cooperative, supportive believers are encouraged to lead with renewed energy. But when they face constant resistance, criticism, or apathy, their work becomes heavy and the whole church suffers.

3. The Benefit for Everyone: Growth and Unity

The writer concludes, *for that would be unprofitable for you*. In other words, when leaders lead joyfully and members follow faithfully, everyone benefits. The church grows stronger, unity deepens, and spiritual progress accelerates. But when leadership becomes a constant struggle, the energy that should go toward evangelism, teaching, and care is drained by internal conflict.

Practically, supporting leadership means:

- Praying for your elders, deacons, and teachers regularly.
- Speaking encouragement more than criticism.
- Giving them the benefit of the doubt when decisions are hard.
- Protecting their reputation from gossip.
- Following their example in faith and love.

When leaders are supported, they lead better. When they lead better, the church flourishes. The way we treat our leaders says much about how we view the Lord who appointed them.

Esteem and Encourage Leaders in Love

In 1 Thessalonians 5:12–13, Paul writes, *now we ask you, brothers and sisters, to give recognition to those who labor among you and lead you in the Lord and admonish you, and to regard them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves.* These verses form one of the most beautiful pictures of the relationship between church leaders and members in all of Scripture. Paul gives three key instructions: **recognize, esteem, and love.**

1. Recognize Their Work

Paul begins with the phrase, *...give recognition to those who labor among you.* The word “labor” here means to toil to the point of exhaustion. Authentic leadership in the church is not about status; it’s about sacrifice. Elders, preachers, and servants often labor quietly behind the scenes: counseling the broken, visiting the sick, making difficult decisions, and bearing spiritual burdens that few ever see. Paul urges the church: *Don’t overlook their labor. Acknowledge it. Appreciate it. Thank God for it.*

Encouragement begins with awareness. We can’t appreciate what we never notice. That’s why Paul calls us to recognize their effort and devotion.

2. Esteem Them in Love

Next, Paul says, *regard them very highly in love because of their work.* This is heartfelt affection. The phrase “very highly” means to go beyond the usual measure. In other words, let love overflow toward those who serve. We don’t honor leaders because they’re perfect (no one is); we honor them because of the love and labor they pour out for the sake of Christ and His people.

Genuine esteem for leaders is rooted in *love*, not flattery. It shows up in prayer, gratitude, and acts of kindness. It’s the note of appreciation, the handshake after worship, the offer to help lighten their load. Small gestures of love carry immense weight for those who often carry heavy responsibilities. Leaders frequently serve quietly, rarely hearing affirmation unless something goes wrong. Paul’s instruction challenges

us to change that pattern, to be intentional about expressing love and gratitude often.

3. Protect Unity and Peace

Paul ends this section with a simple command: *be at peace among yourselves*. Encouragement of leaders and unity in the church go hand in hand. A congregation that loves and esteems its leaders will naturally be a place of peace. When people speak kindly, serve willingly, and follow faithfully, tension fades and love abounds.

When leaders feel supported, they can lead with joy, and when they lead with joy, the whole church benefits. The reverse is also true: when leaders are constantly under criticism, the spirit of the church is weakened. Encouragement is not only a gift to leaders; it's a blessing to the entire body.

Practically, this means:

- Express gratitude often: verbally, in writing, or through service.
- Guard your leaders' hearts by refusing to participate in gossip or negativity.
- Look for ways to help share their load.
- Encourage their families, who also bear the weight of ministry.

Paul's closing phrase, *because of their work*, reminds us that appreciation isn't based on personality or preference, but on faithfulness. When we honor those who lead us in the Lord, we honor the Lord who appointed them.

Practical Application: How to Encourage Leaders

Encouraging spiritual leaders isn't complicated, but it is intentional. Small acts of support and love can make a lasting difference in the life of an elder, deacon, preacher, teacher, or servant who labors for the Lord. Here are some practical ways to put this lesson into action:

1. Pray for Your Leaders Daily

Leaders need wisdom, courage, and endurance. Paul often asked believers to pray for him "that the word of the Lord may spread rapidly" (2 Thessalonians 3:1) and for boldness and strength

(Ephesians 6:19). Prayer is the most powerful encouragement we can offer. Keep your leaders' names on your daily prayer list—not just in times of crisis, but consistently.

2. Express Gratitude Regularly

Write a note, send a message, or say a simple “thank you.” Let your elders, deacons, preachers, and teachers know that their labor is making a difference. Be specific: mention a moment when their teaching, decision, or compassion blessed you. Words of gratitude have lasting power.

3. Offer Practical Support

Encouragement isn't just spoken, it's shown. Offer to help with tasks, take something off their plate, or volunteer for a need they're managing. When you step up to serve, you not only lighten their load but also affirm their leadership.

4. Refuse Gossip or Criticism

Few things discourage leaders more than constant criticism or gossip. If you hear unkind talk, stop it or redirect it toward prayer. Protect your leaders' reputation the way you'd want others to protect yours. Unity and encouragement grow where love governs speech.

5. Encourage Their Families

Leadership often places unique demands on spouses and children. Take time to encourage them, too, through kindness, understanding, and prayer. A strong family strengthens the servant who leads.

6. Follow Faithfully and Joyfully

Hebrews 13:17 reminds us that leaders should be able to serve “with joy and not with grief.” When members cooperate, communicate, and participate with love, leaders are refreshed. The most encouraging gift a church can give its leaders is joyful unity and willing service.

Challenge

This week, choose one leader (an elder, deacon, teacher, or ministry servant) and do something tangible to encourage them. Write a note, offer to help, pray with them, or thank them for their faithfulness. Then, commit to praying daily for all your leaders this month.

Conclusion

Strong leadership is one of God's greatest blessings to a congregation, but it's also one of the heaviest burdens. Elders, deacons, preachers, and teachers give of themselves day after day, often quietly and sacrificially, watching over souls and guiding hearts. Their work is vital, but their strength is not unlimited. That's why Scripture calls us, the church, to stand beside them, pray for them, and make their work a joy, not a grief.

We've learned that encouragement begins by **remembering** those who have spoken the Word to us and **imitating their faith** (Hebrews 13:7). It continues as we **support and submit** to them, recognizing that they watch over our souls as those who will give an account (Hebrews 13:17). And it grows as we **esteem them highly in love** for their labor (1 Thessalonians 5:12–13).

Encouraging leaders is not about flattery or favoritism; it's about faithfulness. It's about honoring God by honoring those who serve Him well. When we pray for our leaders, speak kindly of them, and help share their load, we strengthen the entire church. A joyful leader inspires a joyful congregation; a supported shepherd leads a healthy flock.

Look for ways this week to bless those who lead you in the Lord. Send that note. Offer that prayer. Speak that word of gratitude. Stand beside them in love and unity. When you do, you're not just encouraging a leader; you're fulfilling the law of Christ and helping the whole body grow in grace and peace.

For Discussion

1. Who has been a spiritual leader or mentor in your life who deeply influenced your faith? What specific things did they do that made their leadership meaningful?

2. Why does the writer of Hebrews connect remembering leaders with imitating their faith? What does this teach us about the kind of example spiritual leadership should set in the church?

3. What are some practical ways we can make our leaders' work "a joy and not a grief"? How does our attitude toward leadership affect the unity and health of the congregation?

4. Paul urges us to "regard them very highly in love because of their work." Why is love a key part of honoring and encouraging leaders, and what might that look like in daily congregational life?

5. What sometimes prevents members from encouraging or supporting their leaders? How can we overcome criticism, misunderstanding, or apathy in order to build up those who serve?

6. What's one concrete step you can take this week to encourage a leader—whether through prayer, service, or words of appreciation? How could your example inspire others to do the same?
