

An Invitation to Obey Your Leaders

Kevin Hay
Hebrews 13:17
October 1, 2023

As we continue walking our way through this passage, we're going to be unpacking this evening just a single verse, and that's verse number 17. Hebrews 13:17. And while you're finding your place in Hebrews, I want to take just a few minutes to remind us that the tone of this letter to the Hebrews is very pastoral in nature. Not only have we seen the author encourage these believers to press on in their faith, but we've also looked at some of the ways he's expressed urgency in that exhortation as well. And so, what we don't find in the letter of Hebrews is a tone of passiveness or an attitude of apathy. Now, the author is very serious in his concern for the perseverance of these believers. Again, it's being written in the context or in the midst of the backdrop of this potential apostasy that some of them are potentially either committing or preparing to commit. And so, he's urging them throughout this letter to realize the significance of what Jesus Christ has accomplished on their behalf.

And on the flip side, how devastating the consequences of rejecting the gospel would truly be. Passages throughout the Book of Hebrews like, "How shall we escape if we neglect such great salvation?" Now for you and I here this evening, as we've said before, our context is much different than that of these persecuted Jews. We're not being tempted to return back to the old covenant system of Judaism. That's not our battle. But what we can relate to is the constant temptation we face to be conformed to the pattern of how we used to live. Much like these first century Jewish believers, we know what it's like to experience pressures of resistance in our walk with God. And those pressures come at us both inwardly and outwardly. Inwardly, we have a flesh that is attracted to the things of the unbelieving world and culture around us as it seeks to selfishly be gratified. And outwardly, we face the criticism of a secular culture and the forces that urge us from the outside in to compromise and capitulate.

And so not only does that underscore the crucial importance of the local church in the life of every genuine believer, but as we approach this 17th verse this evening, it also reminds us why this pastoral tone we observe is so serious in nature. So far in this series, we've seen the author of Hebrews call these believers to remember the faithfulness of their former leaders, to bring to mind the legacy of those who taught them the word of God in the past. We've seen him exhort this church to follow the pattern that they have been given, to keep the faith, to pursue sound doctrine, and to practice biblical discernment. And then we've seen him lift their gaze as it were to the cross, to remind them that every aspect of our lives as believers should be a form of worship unto Christ, that we are to be a worship-centered, Christ-centered people.

And now as we continue thinking about the roles God has established in the church, we're going to see the author of Hebrews command these believers to obey your leaders, obey your leaders.

So with that in mind, for those who are able, I'll ask now that you stand with me for the reading of God's word from Hebrews 13:17. And there God's word comes to us saying the following, "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." And with that, you can be seated as we ask the Lord to bless our time and His word tonight.

Father, there are a great many truths in your word that are challenging and difficult, not because of the nature of your word, but because of the sinful nature that exists still in us. I pray tonight that you will give us an experiential knowledge, an understanding that is far deeper than surface level. Help us to hear from your heart tonight that we might more fully understand and more significantly grasp this truth from the 17th verse of Hebrews 13 tonight. I pray that by the power of your spirit, that you will work in our minds and in our hearts to give us a supernatural focus and an ability to shroud out and to focus in on this time together. And that as we hear this truth, Lord, that you will just come alongside us and apply it directly to our hearts. Maybe have a greater love and affection for you and your word and your church and your gospel. And may we take our lives more seriously every day that You've given us, every minute, every second that we have to bring you glory.

I pray, oh God, that you will enrich us and strengthen us and inspire us to bring You honor. I pray that you'll bless Redeemer Bible Church as you already have and then more so in the days ahead, that we would be a people who live out the calling that you've placed upon our lives, that the world would see the love of Christ through the way that we love one another. We pray this in Jesus' name, Amen.

Well, we find ourselves this evening entering a text that is filled to the brim with tension. Apart from anything connected to the context of the passage itself, the first source of tension comes from within ourselves if we're being honest here tonight, each and every one of us to some extent or another sort of cringes on the inside when we read or hear the call to submit and obey. Why is that? Well, because we have something called a sinful flesh that does not want to submit to any form of authority whatsoever. But then in addition, there is also a source of tension coming from what is implied in this text as well by speaking to these Hebrews the way he does, the author of this letter is both affirming the faithfulness of their current leaders and he's also stating that they are not giving them the honor and the respect that they deserve.

Again, there's a tension here that's being perceived by the audience of this letter. And so notwithstanding, we are going to step into that tension tonight to see first and foremost, ***An Expectation of Obedience and Submission. An Expectation of Obedience and Submission.*** Our verse begins with a command, "Obey Your Leaders and Submit to them." Now, before we begin to consider the two imperatives that are found within this biblical instruction, I think it would be helpful to remind us how God has designed the local church to be governed because without that understanding, we're really missing the context here. And so what we learned from scripture is that God has ordained for local churches to be led by a team of men known as elders or pastors.

And just to give you a few examples of this, first of all, in the Book of Acts 14, we find Paul and Barnabas establishing churches in every city where people were coming to faith in Christ.

And the consistent pattern I want you to notice is the plurality of the elders. There's always an S at the end of elder. And so, in verse 23 of that 14th chapter of Acts, it says, "And when they had appointed elders," plural, "for them in every church with prayer and fasting, they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed." In similar fashion, we see Paul in Titus 1:5 instructing young Titus to appoint elders in every town where a local church was to be found. And then finally, 1 Timothy 5:17, it speaks of the elders who rule well. Of course, in Titus 1 and 1 Timothy 3, we also find the expectation or the qualifications for elders as well. So, what we find in the New Testament then is that God's design for church leadership consists of elders or overseers or pastors.

These are synonymous terms used in different ways who are gifted by God to lead the people of God. And this takes place in the context of the local church. And so after being called to remember their former pastors and elders who led them well with great adoration and esteem, these believers are now being called to obey and submit to their current ones. And you can kind of understand now the foundation he was laying as we stretch all the way back to our first sermon in this series. Remember your former leaders and now he's saying, "Obey and submit to your current ones." It's easy at times to remember those of the past, maybe not so much in the present. And of course, along with understanding who the leaders are, it's also important that we know what the words obey and submit actually mean. Let's not impose upon those perhaps a definition that the biblical author did not actually intend.

The sad reality is that throughout the history of the church, there have been no shortage of false teachers who have twisted these words and abused their authority for the sake of their own selfish purposes. No doubt this adds another bit of tension to the text that we find ourselves in tonight. So, in order for us to understand our text rightly, then let's start with the word obey. This word comes from a Greek word that literally means to have confidence in. Although we typically will use the word obey in a way that implies doing what you're told to do, that's not exactly what the author of Hebrews intends to say. One of the things that's assumed in this text is that elders are leading their people and instructing them not by their own thoughts and opinions, but rather according to the word of God, because that is the means by which God has ordained them to lead.

As we've talked about before, their very authority is anchored and embedded in the authority of the word of God. So in actuality, the believers are being exhorted here and by application all of us tonight. First of all, to have confidence in God and His word through the elders who have been called to be their leaders. 1 Thessalonians affirms this exhortation in chapter 5:12-13 when it says, "We ask you brothers to respect those who labor among you and who are over you in the Lord and admonish you," or teach you, and to esteem them very highly in love. Why? Because you like their personality, because you like any other assort? No, because of their work. What

work? The work of ministering to you and leading you through the word of God. So, obey your leaders in so far as they are instructing you to obey God through His word.

Secondly, we see the word submit. Now, what's interesting about this word in the Greek is that this is the only time it's used in the entire Bible, and that's two components to its meaning. So, on the one hand it means to stop resisting, but right along with that, it means to start receiving admonition. So stop doing one thing, start doing another. And because it's in the present imperative, we know that this is not a one-time thing. It's not a been there done that got the T-shirt kind of thing. This is something that the believers are called to do continuously again and again and again. This is a way of life for the believer. And some have even pointed out that this clearly involves developing a proper attitude first, which then follows with an appropriate action. It's not enough just to externally obey your leaders in the word no, the Lord cares about the heart as well.

So if we put all of this together, then this is what God's word is instructing us as the people of God to do in relationship to our leaders from verse 17. First, we're to recognize that God has put spiritual leaders in place to instruct us and to care for us. It's a gift of God. Number two, we are to place our full confidence in the elders God has provided for us, not because of any ability they possess, but because they are instructing and equipping us with the word of God. And finally, number three, we are to dedicate ourselves in both thought and action to the spiritual oversight being provided by our leaders.

And so in light of that, then each of us should be asking ourselves the question tonight, "Am I doing that? Am I being obedient to the command found here in this verse? Have I dedicated myself to the spiritual oversight God is providing me here at Redeemer Bible Church or am I resisting it in some way? Am I engaged in the life of the church and being transparent with my pastors and elders or am I allowing something to hold me back from being fully submissive?" Upon the authority of the word of God, the exhortation is simply to obey and submit. And my friends, let me just tell you one of the greatest joys a pastor can experience as we'll see more and more as we work our way through this verse is that congregation who seeks to love, honor, and obey the truth of God's word. It's one of the greatest joys a pastor can experience. And so as you're sitting there contemplating how this practically applies to your life today, I will tell you that this verse for me is one of the most sobering verses in all of scripture.

That's because when you read it from the perspective of an elder or pastor, you have no choice but to recognize the magnitude of your duty before God. In fact, the sheer weightiness of that responsibility as we'll see, is almost too much to bear. And yet this is the reason that believers are called to submit to their spiritual leaders. And so, what we're going to discover as we continue in our text kind of drill deeper into this is *An Explanation of Soul Care and Commission*. The author of Hebrews is going to give us some clarity to this command by saying this, "For they are keeping watch over your souls." Now, the word for keeping watch here literally means to keep oneself awake, to fight off

sleep. It means to stay alert and be on guard, and it suggests the type of care that is provided by a shepherd to his flock of sheep.

One commentator said that shepherds had to stay alert in order to guard their flocks from predators. They had to know the sheep and observe them carefully enough to know when a sheep was sick or when a sheep from the flock was missing, they had to go after the strays and try to restore them to the flock. They had to lead them to pasture and clean water. All of this was bound up in the responsibility and purview of the shepherd. And yet brothers and sisters, it is one thing to keep sheep, but it is an altogether more serious and sobering duty to be a keeper of souls, to minister to the souls of those who have been entrusted to your care. And that's part of the reason that this is not a one-man job, but instead it's a team job. Just to give us a glimpse into the heart of God in this calling, there's an amazing scene that unfolds in Acts 20, probably my favorite chapter in all of scripture.

It's there that the Apostle Paul gathers together the Ephesian elders before leaving for Jerusalem and just listen to part of what he says to them. He says, "Pay careful attention to yourselves first 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. I know that after my departure, fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock, and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore, be alert, be watchful. Keep watch." So it's the same pastoral tone that we find in our text in Hebrews. Pay careful attention to the flock. These men are called to keep watch over the souls that God has entrusted to them.

And this is precisely why the author of Hebrews exhorts these believers to submit to their leaders because he knows that it's to help them persevere in the faith. That's the reason God designed it that way. It's what they've been called to do. And yet the high calling of spiritual leadership doesn't stop there. That's not the peak, but we see the peak as we continue in our text and we're going to see that there is an even greater recognition to be considered. Not only is there a weightiness found in the role itself, but to an even greater extent, we're also going to discover ***An Exaltation of Accountability and Devotion. An Exaltation of Accountability and Devotion.*** The author of Hebrews explains that these men who are keeping watch over their souls do so notice with me as those who will have to give an account.

And so, this is where the real gravity of pastoral ministry is found. This is why it's sobering. This is also why the brother of Jesus, James, in his epistle said, "Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers." "Well, why not?" "For you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. That's why." And so with great privilege comes great responsibility. The high calling for pastors and elders includes a high standard of expectation and judgment. And I am convinced that it is not the President of the United States who has the greatest calling in all the world. It is the pastors of local churches of which I'm privileged to be called one and humbled.

Just to give you an idea of how serious God takes the responsibility of this calling. We find God's heart on this matter in a scene of indictment from all the way back in the Book of Ezekiel 34. This is really raw the way he just comes at these who call themselves shepherds. And so, reflecting on the fact that elders will have to give an account of their service at the judgment seat of Christ, this is an Old Testament parallel, if you will, as God gives Ezekiel a prophecy against the shepherds of Israel, those very people who were called by God in the Old Testament to care for His sheep. Just listen with me to the seriousness of His words.

Here's what it says. The word of the Lord came to me, "Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel; prophesy and say to them, even to the shepherds, thus says the Lord God. Ah, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves, should not shepherds feed the sheep. You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat ones, but you do not feed the sheep. The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the injured you have not bound up, the strayed you have not brought back, the lost you have not sought. And with force and harshness, you have ruled them." So, they were scattered because there was no shepherd, and they became food for all the wild beasts.

You hear the Lord's heart breaking as he shares this indictment. "My sheep were scattered," the Lord says. "They wandered all over the mountains and on every high hill, my sheep were scattered over all the face of the earth with none to search or seek for them. Therefore, you shepherds hear the word of the Lord. As I live, declares the Lord God, surely because my sheep have become a prey and my sheep have become food for all the wild beasts since there was no shepherd, and because my shepherds have not searched for my sheep, but the shepherds have fed themselves and have not fed my sheep. Therefore, you shepherds hear the word of the Lord, thus says the Lord God. Behold, I am against the shepherds, and I will require my sheep at their hand and put a stop to their feeding the sheep. No longer shall the shepherds feed themselves, I will rescue my sheep from their mouths that they may not be food for them. For thus says the Lord God, behold, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out."

Think of Jesus coming to seek out His own. "As a shepherd seeks out his flock when he is among his sheep that had been scattered, so will I seek out my sheep. And I will rescue them from all the places where they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. And I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries and will bring them into their own land. And I will feed them on the mountains of Israel by the ravines and in all the inhabited places of the country, I will feed them with good pasture. And on the mountain heights of Israel shall be their grazing land. They shall lie down in good grazing land." Psalm 23. "And on rich pasture, they shall feed on the mountains of Israel. I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep and I myself will make them lie down, declares the Lord God. I will seek the lost and I will bring back the strayed and I will bind up the injured and I will strengthen the weak."

What did our Lord say in John 10? "I am the good shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep." Brothers and sisters, God does not take this assignment lightly. It is not a game. He has not called elders to lead just so that they can be lazy and selfish or indifferent to their task. And if

you look down with me at verse 20 of our text, you'll see in the benediction as it's traditionally referred to, one of the main reasons that this calling has such a high standard. How does the author of Hebrews refer to our Lord Jesus? He calls Him the Great Shepherd of the sheep. So, you see those who have been called to be spiritual leaders are simply under shepherds to the Great Shepherd and therefore we are serving as His representatives until the day when He Himself will return for His own.

Peter writes this in 1 Peter 5:1-4. He says, "So I exhort the elders among you as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly as God would have you not for shameful gain but eagerly, not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock. And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory." The reality is that it really isn't sheep that we are keeping watch over. It is the souls of God's people who have been purchased with the blood of the Great Shepherd. How much higher of a calling could one be given? And again, I am privileged to serve in that capacity with the team of elders and pastors we have here at Redeemer Bible Church.

So, we need to understand that the author of Hebrews here is not expressing some sort of mundane thought. He's not just going through the motions and finishing up this letter. No, it's as if he's saying, "Don't you understand what's at stake? Obey your leaders and submit to them because one day these men will give an account to the one true and living God for how they've cared for your soul." So, as we recognize this high calling of spiritual leadership on the part of pastors and elders, allow me just to ask the question, how is it possible for elders to keep watch over their flock if they don't know who their flock is? The implication of our text is that elders and pastors can only be responsible for the individuals who have effectively united themselves to their particular local body of believers. And that's what biblical church membership is all about.

Elders and pastors will give an account to God for how well they shepherded those who have been entrusted to their care. They have to know who they're responsible for caring for. So I want to encourage you this evening, if you've never attended one of our next steps or membership classes, please make that a priority. If you're not a member of Redeemer Bible Church, speak to me after the service or one of our pastors who are here because proper understanding of membership is crucial to the life of the local church and it's that life and vitality of Christ Church that leads us to the final section of our passage for this evening, and we're going to discover there *An Exhortation for Joy and Edification. An Exhortation for Joy and Edification*. The author of Hebrews concludes this 17th verse in kind of summarizing fashion, saying, "Let them do this with joy and not with groaning for that would be of no advantage to you."

So, this is meant to be both a summarizing statement and a motivating factor for these Hebrew believers. And the motivation is found in the relationship, as the title of our series says, between the shepherds and their sheep. So, what is it that brings joy to the heart of pastors and elders as they lead the people of God? Well, we talked about this earlier, but just to give us a few

examples. In the Apostle John's Third Epistle, he writes these words, "I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth." No greater joy. The apostle Paul in Philippians 1, 3, and 4, David spoke of this earlier this morning and last night. I thank my God and all my remembrance of you always in every prayer of mine for you making my prayer with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. There's joy in that partnership as we reminisce, and we reflect upon the people of God partnering together for the work of God.

But then also in 2 Corinthians, we find joy as well, but we find it from an entirely different response as Paul speaks of having to rebuke the church chapter 2:1-4. Here's what he says, "For I made up my mind not to make another painful visit to you. For if I cause you pain, who is there to make me glad, but the one whom I have pained? And I wrote as I did so that when I came, I might not suffer pain from those who should have made me rejoice for I felt sure of all of you that my joy would be the joy of you all. For I wrote to you out of much affliction and anguish of heart and with many tears not to cause you pain, but to let you know the abundant love that I have for you."

So, you see the relationship between a congregation and their leaders is reciprocal. It's one of cause and effect. As one commentator said, "Christian leadership is intended for the advantage of us all," not just for the advantage of those who hold positions of authority. And good successful leadership is to a considerable degree dependent on the willing response of obedience and submission on the part of those who are under authority. When the believers in a local church are living lives that bring reproach upon the gospel and the church and the truth, and they refuse to submit to the spiritual leadership which God has provided for them, it causes grief and discouragement for those who are striving to keep watch. And yet, on the opposite side of that spectrum, when believers in a local church are living lives that bring glory to God and are beautifully reflecting the gospel, there is an abundance of joy in the hearts of the elders and the pastors of that church.

And this becomes a great motivation for those in pastoral leadership because it signifies that there is spiritual growth and vitality taking place in the lives of those who are entrusted to their care. And it becomes a tremendous encouragement to their souls, which then feeds right back into the congregation as they seek to serve and minister well. This is what caused Paul to practically overflow with joy in 1 Thessalonians 2:13, and then again one chapter later in verse 9 when he said this, as we've prepared to close. "And we also thank God constantly for this," Paul says, "that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers. For what Thanksgiving can we return to God for you, for all the joy that we feel for your sake before our God."

So brothers and sisters, as we this evening, consider the high calling of spiritual leadership and the rich, robust relationship that exists between the shepherds and the sheep, may we endeavor together as one body to be the people of Christ's flock who both serve and lead with that same abundant supernatural joy. Pray with me.

Father, Lord, you are so kind to us. As we think about the design of the local church, the gifts that you give to the body, both those who are in spiritual leadership and those who serve in other capacities within the body. All of those gifts are gifts of your grace. Gifts of your kindness to us, meant to be used for the upbuilding of each local body and the kingdom at large. So I pray, Father, that you'll give us a clearer picture in our minds of what that looks like as we seek to honor you in our relationship with one another. And I pray, Father, that it would create an abundance of joy and life-giving vitality that just continues to thrive throughout this congregation. And I pray it in Jesus' name, Amen.