

Church Leaders

Hebrews 13:17

The first time I volunteered to teach Sunday school I think I was sixteen or seventeen years old and had been attending church two or three years, having been a Christian for about the same length of time.

My most vivid memory about that experience was speaking with the person in charge of Sunday school about the possibility of teaching.

The reason it sticks out in my mind is because to that point I had been approaching the idea of teaching Sunday school as me doing the church a favour.

I was thinking of it like cutting someone's grass or shoveling snow for an elderly person.

When I've done those sorts of things for people no one has ever asked me to stop and consider whether or not the task is for me.

They are just happy to have the job done and don't want to discourage anyone who is willing from doing the job.

The conversation we had over Sunday school was not like that at all.

I went into the conversation expecting to here, "I'm so happy that you are willing to teach Sunday school, we are just so lucky to have a nice young man like you help us out."

That's not what happened.

I don't remember the whole conversation, but I clearly remember what happened close to the end of it.

The person gave me a Bible verse to think on before I made a final decision about teaching.

She gave me **James 3:1**.

It says, "Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we shall incur a stricter judgment."

When I looked it up and read it I thought, "Is she trying to scare me away from teaching?"

That's an odd strategy for recruiting people to teach Sunday school."

I waited a day to give the appearance of Spirituality, but I agreed to teach without really seriously reflecting on what God's word has to say about teaching His word.

Thankfully, I did not lead my class astray but neither do I believe that I was any great benefit to their lives.

Looking back on it I think about how foolish I was to not consider more carefully the seriousness of leading God's people.

[As we are coming close to the end of the book of Hebrews, the writer speaks to the church briefly here in Chapter thirteen verse seventeen about Church leaders. When I read it my mind went back to that moment so many years ago when I was confronted with the seriousness of leadership, but did not treat it as such. As I stand here this morning more than twenty five years later as a pastor charged to teach God's word to you I am freshly challenged about the significance of being a leader

in the church. I want to confess up front that this was a difficult sermon to prepare. It is difficult because some of the content here feels very self-serving. I can see how easy it would be to twist the text for selfish reasons. It's also difficult because of how easy it would be to skirt around the truth of how this is supposed to apply to us as a congregation. Despite the difficulties this is God's word before us this morning and so let us try our very best to think rightly about it and ourselves so that Christ might be glorified in us. In this text there is a clear command to God's people concerning how they are to relate to church leaders, there is a clear statement about the task and responsibility of church leaders, and finally we are told what the outcome of the relationship between God's people and church leadership might look like. First, let's look at the command to God's people which is that...]

Point #1 – God's people must willfully put themselves under church leaders.

Belonging to a church is a significant exercise of trust in those God, in His providence, has appointed over the church. That is a big deal and sometimes it can be hard, but that is what is commanded here.

Let's listen to the command carefully here at the beginning of the verse (Verse 17).

Two commands are given here, the command to obey and the command to submit.

While there are two commands they are also inseparable from one another, so it is likely better to think of these two commands as halves that belong to a whole.

Right out of the gate we need to acknowledge that these are words we generally don't enjoy.

We tend to bristle at the thought of obedience and submission.

You can also see how tempting it would be for wicked men who happen to be pastors and leaders in churches to use this against their people to try and force their evil desires upon the congregation.

So let's step back from those things as best we can and try, depending on the Holy Spirit, to listen rightly to what the text is saying.

Submit is the harder word to understand here as this is the only place in the New Testament where this particular Greek word is used.

However, the word "obey" is fairly straight forward and since these commands are so closely connected, I am convinced that if we get the meaning of "obey" right, then the meaning of "submit" will be plain to us.

Typically when we think of the word "obey" we think of a command being given and then it being carried out regardless of how the one who has been given the command feels about it.

[If a king commands a servant to bring him a meal, the obedient servant brings the meal. If a general commands a soldier to go on a mission, he goes. If a father tells his son to take out the garbage, he obeys by taking out the garbage. The instruction is given and it is followed, that is what we normally think of.]

That is the approach of some church leaders and it has been that way to greater and lesser degrees for a long time.

Their attitude is , “I say it, you do it and that is all you need to concern yourself with.”

This command translated “obey” is different.

The most literal meaning of the word is to “persuade.”

The sense is that the people of God are to be persuaded in their thinking toward their church leaders.

This does not mean easily persuaded. That is clear from a few verses earlier which exhorts believers to not be “carried away by all kinds of strange teachings.”

What this means is that God’s people are to engage their minds according to God’s grace that is given to them, to discern whether or not they are being lead according to God’s word.

That is the meaning of the word “obey”.

Now, if you are persuaded that someone is clearly and consistently teaching the word of God, what should you do?

Answer, “submit to” their leading.

Just like the word “obey” the word “submit” may cause us some difficulty.

When we think of the word we normally think of people being put into submission, but that would not fit with what we just learned about the word obey.

While this is the only time this word is used in the NT, if we apply the proper understanding of “obey” here to the word submit then we must conclude that to submit here means a willful choice to put one’s self under the authority of someone else.

In other words being persuaded that Church leaders are in fact telling us God’s will, we will follow it even if it means going against our own will.

We should expect that! How many sinners are in the room this morning? Let me ask it another way. How many people here this morning do the will of God perfectly all the time?

We are all sinners and none of us does the will of God perfectly. That being the case it should not surprise us that there will be times were we will want something opposite to what godly people are telling us.

The command here is to be willing to put what we want aside and live under the authority of godly leaders trusting that this is the will of God for our lives.

[Are we? That is the command here. Now, I know someone might think, “Well, that is convenient for you pastor, telling people they have to listen to you. Always getting what you want.” Let me assure you I don’t always get what I want and I also believe this verse applies to me as much as it applies to you. That is why we have a plurality of elders. I also must subject myself to the other men who in God’s providence have been entrusted with church leadership. In addition to that,

there is a clear and sobering statement here in this verse about church leaders which teaches us this about their task. It teaches us that...]

Point #2 – Church leaders must fearfully seek the good of God’s people.

Almighty God has set His infinite and eternal affection upon those who Jesus died to redeem; therefore, it is a most serious calling to watch over His people.

Two things are said in the next part of the verse concerning church leaders, the first is a description of the task. (Verse 17b)

When I read these words the image of a shepherd comes to mind.

It is easy to get all warm and fuzzy inside thinking about the image of a shepherd and his sheep.

My mind tends to go towards a children’s book image with the friendly looking shepherd surrounded by his happy sheep.

Or we might think of Jesus teaching about the shepherd leaving the 99 to go after the one, putting on his shoulders, and rejoicing over being able to bring it home.

Those are good pictures to be sure, but it is always important to remember that being a shepherd in the ancient world was a difficult job.

The word translated “keep watch” here has the sense of staying awake or losing sleep.

Jacob, the patriarch, describes his work as a shepherd in Genesis 31:40 as sleep fleeing from his eyes.

Why does a shepherd have to stay awake at night?

To protect the sheep from danger.

The Greek in this verse says a bit more than “they keep watch over you” it says, “they (church leaders) keep watch over your souls.”

The New International Commentary describes this as watching over believers with the goal of sustaining their perseverance in faith until they reach the state of final blessedness.

In other words the task of the church leader is to constantly act for the eternal spiritual good of those in his care.

To that he adds this...(Verse 17b).

Give an account to whom? The congregation at the annual church meeting? Well, that is important but this is a much bigger deal than that.

He is talking about giving an account to God.

The church, by that I mean the people who gather together to form a local body of believers, belongs to God, not to me or any of the elders.

The Father gave the Son (Jesus) to die in our place, to pay our penalty for breaking His laws, and by faith alone in Him we are forgiven. Through that

forgiveness we have the certain hope of eternal life through faith in the resurrection of Christ. Every Christian has been purchased through the blood of God's Son whom He loves.

The church is His. He entrusts men to lead, serve, and protect those that belong to Him and at the end of all things everyone who has dared to take on this immense responsibility will answer to the LORD for how well he has done his job.

I did not appreciate that when I taught my first Sunday school class, but to a much better degree I do today.

It's terrifying.

It's terrifying because there are so many ways to fail here.

You can fail by being self-serving, by seeing church people as those who are supposed to do your bidding and if they don't, you treat them like dirt.

You can fail by comforting sin instead of rebuking it.

You can fail by twisting the word of God or being careless with its interpretation.

You can fail through pride thinking far too much of yourself and your ability.

Yes, there are many ways to fail in this task of eternal importance and God will call church leaders to account for every one of them.

Any pastor/elder who has any appreciation for this reality will have an earnest desire for the good of his people.

There should be no lords in the church, but instead there ought to be lowly and humble servants to God's people.

[That brings us to the result of this relationship. What is the outcome if in fact Christians obey and submit to those whom God has called to keep watch over their souls? We are told at the end of the verse. Two possibilities are given. One if the command is followed and the other if it is not. Both possibilities show us this third lesson, which is that...]

Point #3 – God's people benefit from joyful Church leaders.

When elders/pastors are joyless in their work it results in an unhelpful situation for God's people.

There are two purpose statements in the last part of this verse, let's look at them one at a time. (Verse 17c [stop at burden].

One of the goals of the obedience and submission of God's people to church leaders is to make the work of the church leader/elder/pastor a cause of joy in his life.

Of course there is a great danger here if the leader/elder/pastor is a wicked man concerned only with his own advancement.

That happens in the church and it always ends badly. It often takes a while but it eventually ends poorly and is often very destructive to the lives of many people.

The context of this verse completely removes the possibility of encouraging such a situation.

The leaders in view here are godly men whose chief concern is the eternal well-being of people.

If that is their chief concern and through people faithfully obeying and submitting to the word of God faithfully taught they are growing up in Christ, then the leader/elder/pastor can't help but be happy.

That is the best kind of happiness because it is completely free from sin and it will be enjoyed forever.

That is why the Apostle Paul can say this to the Thessalonian church, **“For what is our hope, our joy, or the crown in which we will glory in the presence of our Lord Jesus when he comes? Is it not you?” (1Thess 2:19).**

If you listen to God's Word and you grow up in Jesus, it makes me happy.

It is not about me or the other elders in the church it is about the glory of Jesus Christ.

The opposite is also true. If obedience and submission gives the church leader joy in his work, then it makes sense that not listening makes the work a burden as it says here.

The burden referred to here is one of mental and emotional anguish.

It is a situation that produces complaining, groaning, grumbling, or sighing.

You can see this clearly in the lives of some well-known biblical characters.

Take Moses for example. Time and again the people didn't listen and it brought trouble and time and again Moses is burdened by it.

Or think of Elijah. He came off one of the greatest miracles and victories in the name of the LORD at Mt. Carmel and right away Jezebel tries to kill him.

He runs away in lament saying, "I have had enough, LORD. Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors."

Of course those are extreme examples, but nevertheless they clearly show the connection between people ignoring the word of God and burden that results upon their leaders.

Look at what it says here! It says to have that kind of leader “would be of no advantage to you.”

The advantage in mind here is an objective one. In other words even if you are happy when the leaders of the church are miserable your ungodly satisfaction will be short lived.

It is not good for the church for a pastor to be miserable in his work.

This is the part I most desperately wanted to skirt around, because this is a great struggle for me.

I could tell you many stories of people refusing to listen, of people wanting me gone, of lost friendships, and hurtful things said mostly behind my back.

I could tell you many stories of people violating the most basic of Christian principles as though they have not listened to a thing I have said for more than a decade.

Because of those things I find it very difficult to see much good and lasting fruit that has resulted from me serving this church as pastor.

I hesitated to put that in the sermon because it sounds like I'm fishing for a compliment or for someone to try and convince me otherwise.

Trust me when I say that my prideful nature would like nothing more than for you to tell me how great I am, but please don't.

Please understand my goal here is not to put the blame on you or to make you feel guilty.

Yes it is true that there have been many tough situations, but I have also enjoyed a great deal of kindness from many people.

I am convinced a great deal of my struggle is the result of my own pride and self-centeredness.

I'm not saying this to make you feel bad, I'm telling you these things as a matter of confession. I struggle to find joy in being a pastor and according to this text this is of "no advantage to you."

I don't want that! I want to be a benefit to you. I want you to grow in Christ week by week.

I want your hope in the gospel to be like an immovable anchor throughout all of life.

I want to be able to see that and rejoice over your eternal good.

That is the goal of this entire verse.

The words obey and submit seem like words that would tend to make us unhappy, but when we do that under men whom God has called to fearfully seek the eternal good of God's people it fills both us and them with lasting joy.

Oh how we desperately need the grace of God to make this true in our lives.

Would you pray with me towards that end?