

Hebrews

Respecting Church Leaders

Hebrews 13:17-19, 22-25

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INTRODUCTION:

All Stand and Read Scripture

Hebrews 13:17-19, 22-25 (NASB95)

¹⁷ Obey your leaders and submit *to them*, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you.

¹⁸ Pray for us, for we are sure that we have a good conscience, desiring to conduct ourselves honorably in all things. ¹⁹ And I urge *you* all the more to do this, so that I may be restored to you the sooner.

...²² But I urge you, brethren, bear with this word of exhortation, for I have written to you briefly. ²³ Take notice that our brother Timothy has been released, with whom, if he comes soon, I will see you. ²⁴ Greet all of your leaders and all the saints. Those from Italy greet you.

²⁵ Grace be with you all.

Prayer

“Obey your leaders and submit to them” is a difficult text to speak on because of our Western society. Our culture is anti-authoritarian and postmodern. Both philosophies resist against obedience or submission.

When you hear the words, **authority** or **submission**, what comes to mind? Do you welcome them as pleasant words, or does it rub you the wrong way and cause you to put up your guard?

Our nation was founded on a rebellion against authority, and one of our early mottoes was, “Don’t tread on me!” We have a defiant national spirit that highly regards our individual rights. The concept of submission to authority seems somewhat wimpy to us!

Our culture is also influenced by postmodernism, which holds that there is no absolute truth and that each person is free to make up or interpret “truth” as he sees fit. Thus, your “truth” is fine for you, but I have my own “truth,” and I would never feel obligated to submit to your “truth.” You can believe as you like, but you must also let me believe as I like. Truth is not authoritative. **I** am the authority over **my** life, and I use “truth” for my **own** ends.

These movements become problematic when it comes to the absolute truth of God's word and the authority **of** and the submission **to** our church leaders. But against all of these powerful influences, we come to Hebrews 13:17: "**Obey your leaders and submit to them**".

Throughout the centuries, people have left the church over very minor issues because they are not willing to respect their Godly leaders.

ILLUSTRATION:

There is a joke about the Christian who was stranded on a desert island. When rescuers finally found him, they saw three buildings on the island. They asked, "What's that building?" "That's my house," the man answered.

"Then, what's that second building?" "That's my church," he said.

"Well then what's that third building?" "Oh, that's where I **used** to go to church."

It is heart-wrenching to watch divisions in our churches occur when Christians in our Western culture become dissatisfied with their current church. Instead of respecting the authority of their Godly leaders and submitting to them, they just start or join a new church!

The command of authority and submission is a part of God's inspired Word. These commands are profitable for us and we must be willing to submit to them.

2 Timothy 3:16-17 (NASB95)

¹⁶ All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; ¹⁷ so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.

Your duty is to obey and pray for godly church leaders. The Greek words for "obey" and "submit", believe it or not, actually means to obey and submit! The difference, if any, between the two words is that obedience implies doing what you are told to do, whereas submission involves an attitude. You can obey outwardly while seething with anger on the inside, but you are not submitting. Submission implies a sweet spirit of cooperation that stems from trust. You trust that the leaders have your best interests at heart, and so you go along with them. Let's start with the command of obedience.

BODY:

I. Your Duty is to Obey Godly Church Leaders.

The author gives two reasons why you should obey and submit to godly church leaders:

A. They Keep Watch Over Your Souls.

God has established various levels of authority under His **ultimate** authority. The purpose for **all** authority is to protect and bless those **under** authority.

God established the authority of **civil governments** to protect and bless law-abiding citizens from those that would harm or take advantage of them. When the government does its job, criminals are punished, foreign invaders are kept at bay, and the people can dwell in peace. When the government leaders become corrupt or negligent, the citizens

suffer and the leaders will ultimately fall under judgment. If not while on this earth, then certainly when they face God in the final judgment.

In the human **family**, God appoints husbands to have authority under Christ in order to protect and bless their wives and children.

1 Timothy 5:8 (NASB95)

⁸ But if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.

So the husband, as a Christian, is to provide for his family, protect them from physical and spiritual danger, and bless his family by leading them in the ways of God. An ungodly husband who uses authority for his own selfish ends is abusing the authority that God has entrusted to him, and will answer to God for his sins.

In the **church**, God has appointed elders or pastors to oversee the flock by example. They are to use their authority without lording over them.

1 Peter 5:1-4 (NASB95)

⁵ Therefore, I exhort the elders among you, as *your* fellow elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ, and a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed, ² shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to *the will of God*; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness; ³ nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock. ⁴ And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory.

On every level, those in authority are never in absolute authority. Every leader will give an account to God!

In our text, **leaders** is plural. The New Testament is clear that there is to be a plurality of elders over the local church. Plural leadership (referred to as shepherds) is a safeguard against the abuse of authority. When all of the elders in a local church have wrestled through an issue biblically and in prayer, and they all agree, they are not infallible, but there is a fair chance that they are right. There should always be room for biblically-based discussion of issues, but when the elders come to a consensus, the church should follow their leadership, unless it is clearly against Scripture on a major point of doctrine.

The text is clear that the church should submit to **godly** church leaders. Abusive leaders should be confronted and removed from office.

1 Timothy 5:19-21 (NASB95)

¹⁹ Do not receive an accusation against an elder except on the basis of two or three witnesses. ²⁰ Those who continue in sin, rebuke in the presence of all, so that the rest also will be fearful of *sinning*. ²¹ I solemnly charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus and of *His* chosen angels, to maintain these *principles* without bias, doing nothing in a *spirit of partiality*.

Before we leave the subject of obedience and submission to leaders, let me be more specific on what it does mean and what it does not mean.

First, it does **not** mean blindly following leaders without question. I doubt if this is a problem for most people, but the Jim Jones' mass suicide incident of the 1970's shows

that it can be a problem when an evil leader deceives people. Even in a church that is seeking to follow the Bible, it is **not wrong** and it **is right** to examine the Scriptures to see if the teaching is sound just as the Bereans did with Paul's teaching.

Acts 17:11 (NASB95)

¹¹ Now these were more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily *to see whether these things were so.*

When is the church responsible to obey and submit?

Obviously, when the leaders teach God's truth, especially on the essential doctrines and commands of the faith, we all must submit. It is not the leaders' authority, but God's, that we must submit to. If it is an area where godly Christians may differ, we must give grace to one another to disagree. But submission to godly leadership would require that if you disagree with me on a secondary matter, you would be disobeying God if you were to lead a part of the church family against me. There needs to be a respect shown toward those who teach God's Word.

Titus 2:11-15 (NASB95)

¹¹ For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men, ¹² instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age, ¹³ looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our **great God and Savior, Christ Jesus**, ¹⁴ who gave Himself for us to redeem us from every lawless deed, and to purify for Himself a people for His own possession, zealous for good deeds.

¹⁵ These things speak and exhort and reprove with all authority. Let no one disregard you.

Notice here that the leader is teaching the Gospel. That Jesus Christ is our **and Savior and God**. He brought salvation to all men by dying on the cross to pay for all the sins of God's family, wiping away our sins and filling us with His righteousness. To disregard Titus would have been to disregard God, whose word Titus preached.

Church discipline is a difficult matter, because there are always those in the church who have emotional ties to the one being disciplined. Some always feel sorry for the person and urge others in the church to show grace and mercy, not judgment. But to be effective, discipline has to be uniformly enforced. If some members continue to fellowship with the person under discipline, then the penalty of being put out of the fellowship is undermined. The same problem exists when parents do not stand together in disciplining their children. The children quickly recognize that they can do as they please, without any penalty, because dad and mom do not agree. So obedience to church leadership is especially important if the church has to discipline a sinning member.

B. When You Cause Them Grief, You Cause Yourself Grief.

Hebrews 13:17 (NASB95)

¹⁷ Obey your leaders and submit *to them*, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you.

God designed authority to protect and bless. If you disobey godly church leaders who proclaim God's Word to you, you are really disobeying God, which always has serious consequences. Again, we are not to follow our leaders blindly. These leaders are supposed to be conscientious men who are walking with God. When those leaders lead someone astray, they will be held accountable! So the leaders **MUST** take their role seriously!

Spiritual children, like our natural children, can be the source of immense joy or of immense grief (which, literally, is "groaning"). Every pastor has had frequent occasion both for joy and for groaning over people in the flock.

The apostle John wrote...

3 John 1:4 (NASB95)

⁴I have no greater joy than this, to hear of my children walking in the truth.

But Paul agonized over the Galatians' defection from the truth.

2 Corinthians 2:4 (NASB95)

⁴For out of much affliction and anguish of heart I wrote to you with many tears; **not** so that you would be made sorrowful, but that you might know the love which I have especially for you.

Paul was not concerned about his own welfare or reputation, but about their welfare and God's glory. If you cause me or one of our leaders to groan, it is because we know that your disobedience will damage both you and the name of Christ.

Thus, you should obey godly leaders because they keep watch over your souls and because if you cause them grief, you are causing yourself grief.

C. Obey Their Exhortations from God's Word.

Hebrews 13:22 (NASB95)

²²But I urge you, brethren, bear with this word of exhortation, for I have written to you **briefly**.

The author has indicated four different times that he could say much more, but he restrained himself. These are found in 5:11; 9:5; 11:32, and here in verse 22. (I can definitely identify with that problem!)

The word "**bear with**" suggests that the listener should "endure" the full length of the sermon. (I know that with some of us this is much more difficult than with others.) Paul exhorted Timothy to "**preach the Word**".

2 Timothy 4:2 (NASB95)

²preach the word; be ready in season *and* out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction.

In order to "preach the word" one must also "reprove, rebuke, and exhort". Then Paul adds to it in verse 3...

2 Timothy 4:3 (NASB95)

³ For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but *wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires,*

The reason you must **bear with** or **endure** sound doctrine is that it often confronts how you think or live by showing you God's way.

Of course leaders must exhort with patience and gentleness. We must allow people time to wrestle with difficult truth as they grow in Christ. Spiritual maturity, like physical and emotional maturity, takes time. But, on the listening end, if you want to grow in Christ, you must bear with the exhortations of your spiritual leaders. Do not shrug off things you do not agree with. Go back to Scripture and see if these things are true. If they are, **submit** to them as the Word of God, not as the word of men.

If you want to "**bear with**" the word of exhortation that I bring each week, I would encourage you to pray for your own heart to be receptive to God's truth. Pray for me as I prepare the message and preach it, that I would be faithful to the text of Scripture. And, spend some time during the week going over the passage itself, meditating on how it applies to your heart. The effectiveness of my preaching does not **just** depend on how well I preach, but **also** on how well you listen. Even Jesus, the greatest preacher ever, exhorted His audience. Your first duty is to obey godly church leaders, and that primarily means obeying the Word of God that they preach.

II. Your Duty is to Pray for Godly Church Leaders.

A. Pray that the Leaders May Maintain a Good Conscience in all Things.

Hebrews 13:18 (NASB95)

¹⁸ Pray for us, for we are sure that we have a good conscience, desiring to conduct ourselves honorably in all things.

The writer of Hebrews apostle as well as Paul (who might be the author) frequently asked for prayer. If the apostle Paul was that aware of his need for prayer, how much more should the rest of us, who attempt to serve the Lord, seek prayer from our body of Christ? In our text, the author mentions two areas for prayer for leaders:

We have to take an educated guess at what is behind the author's comment in verse 18, but it would seem to be something like this: the author has said some difficult things. He has confronted the traditionalists, who wanted to hold onto their Jewish ways, while still trying to follow Christ. He has said, "You can't do that! If you go back to Judaism, or try to blend it with faith in Christ, you will face God's judgment because you have diluted the gospel." The traditionalists were arguing with others in the church, "He's gone too far! He is saying that the ways of our fathers since the time of Moses are no longer valid." The author is saying in effect, "I understand how difficult my teaching has been, and I ask you to pray for me, because I am sure that my conscience is right before God, and that everything I have said has been to promote God's truth and your spiritual welfare."

Every pastor who is faithful to God has to say or do some things from time to time that undoubtedly will offend someone in the church. Often, it is the traditionalists: "We have never done it that way before!" They will say that he has no respect for the past. Sometimes they will accuse him of causing disunity. Sometimes, they try to work out a compromise so that they can hold onto their cherished beliefs or practices, even if they compromise biblical truth. Under such pressure, some pastors cave under and play

politics in the church. I ask that you will pray for your leaders, that they will stand firm and maintain a good conscience before God, who knows the heart.

B. Pray for deliverance from Circumstances Beyond the Control of the Leaders.

Hebrews 13:19 (NASB95)

¹⁹ And I urge you all the more to do this, so that I may be restored to you the sooner.

The author asks them to pray all the more, so that he may be restored to them the sooner. We do not know what the situation was that kept him from visiting them, but it was beyond his control. It could have been a health problem, or something else. Perhaps his critics in the Hebrew church were saying, “If he really cared about you, he would have visited here personally by now!” I find that critics often judge the pastor because he does not have the gift of omnipresence! But the author’s heart was to visit them, and so he asks them to pray.

His request shows that God is bigger than any circumstance we face, and that prayer is our means of laying hold of God’s power. Prayer is not just a polite gesture that shows brotherly concern. God has ordained prayer as one of the ways that He pours out His power and blessing on His people. Prayer shows us that we are **not** competent people who just need a little boost from God now and then. We are totally inadequate, unless He works, and He has chosen to work through our prayers. If people were to pray more frequently for their pastors, maybe there would be fewer church splits and fewer people leaving churches over petty matters.

CONCLUSION:

I hope many of you will take to heart two simple applications. First, prepare your heart for church by taking some time during the week, perhaps on Saturday evenings, to pray for me (or whoever is preaching). Pray that your heart would be open and submissive to God’s Word. Spend a few minutes reading the text in its context and meditating on it. Pray for my health and the problems that I and the other leaders face daily within the church.

Second, pray for me to maintain a good conscience before God and to preach His truth without compromise. Pray for me while I am preaching, that the seed of the Word would find fertile soil in the hearts of those who hear. Pray against distractions that arise. Pray for individuals you know of who are struggling with sin.

I would like to close with the first verse in our text.

Hebrews 13:17 (NASB95)

¹⁷ Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you.

What a Day That Will Be.