



Obey Your Leaders

Hebrews 13

Text: verse 17

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It is a momentous blessing when God provides us with two new elders to contribute to the leadership and oversight of our congregation. Leaders are gifts to the church given by the ascended and reigning Lord Jesus Christ who grants gifts on the basis of the victory that he has won. The gift passages in the New Testament teach us that everyone in the church has a gift that is to be used for the wellbeing of the church and one of those gifts is the gift of leadership. It is mentioned specifically in Romans 12:8. Those who are gifts to the church, given by the risen Christ in the form of leaders, are not of a higher status than anyone else in the church. We are all sinners saved by grace and we are all servants of Christ whose glory it is to focus our attention on our Lord and Saviour.

In his teaching on gifts in 1 Corinthians 12, Paul makes it clear that all the gifts are important and even tells us to bestow greater honor on our more unpresentable parts. In 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13 he does say that we are to respect those who are over us in the Lord and to “esteem them very highly in love because of their work”, but that is to happen in a context where we are to “outdo one another in showing honor” (Romans 12:10). Everyone in the church is pretty special according to the New Testament and so leaders are to be honored appropriately because of their work, but for the rest we are at the same level – sinners saved by grace whose purpose is not our own glory, but the glory of our Lord and Saviour.

But that being said, it is a wonderful blessing from our Lord to be gifted with two new elders. There is no question that faithful elders are very important for the health and wellbeing of the church. One of the

constants in the biblical story is that bad leaders are very bad for the people of God and good leaders are absolutely necessary for the health and flourishing of the flock of God. The office of elder comes from God himself and he has given it because he has designed his people to be led. Sheep without a shepherd are in a precarious state. Good shepherds, who seek to reflect the love and care of the Good Shepherd, lead the flock in paths of righteousness for his sake and for their sake.

This morning we will consider one of the key passages in the New Testament concerning the work of elders and concerning the way that the congregation is to submit to the leadership of their elders. Hebrews 13:17 says “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.”

This goes against the grain of our fallen sinful nature and of the spirit of the age in which we live. Our natural inclination is to assert our independence and to allow no one to tell us what to do. That attitude is nurtured by much of what we read and see and hear. Independence and self-sufficiency are highly prized in our society. And within certain parameters there is a place for taking care of ourselves, but there is also a huge place for acknowledging that we are in need of things like guidance, and oversight and accountability. That is very much the case in the biblical teaching about our relationships with one another in the church.

In the first place we are completely and totally dependent upon God for life and salvation. As Jesus teaches us in John 15:5, “[A]part from me you can do nothing.” But as Christians we are also dependent upon one another for spiritual growth and accountability. The Bible does not envision Christians as self-sufficient in the Christian life. There are all kinds of “one another” texts in the New Testament that make it clear that Christians are interdependent. We need to be encouraged by others. We need to be accountable to others. We need to be taught and guided by others. And as part of that picture, God has instituted the office of elder in the church to oversee and to direct the church as a

whole and its members particular under the authority of Jesus Christ which means under the authority of the word of God.

So this text says to all of us, “Obey your leaders and submit to them.” That includes leaders, of course. That is very important. There are churches which organize in such a way that the leaders have no one who has oversight over them. That is profoundly unbiblical and a recipe for disaster. This is one of the beauties of the Presbyterian form of church government. This verse applies to leaders as much as it applies to everyone else. Leaders are accountable to one another and are to submit to one another in the Lord. And in the Presbyterian system individual elders and ministers are not only accountable to their local session, we are also accountable to our presbytery and to the synod. No elder in the Presbyterian system is outside of the oversight and authority of their fellow elders.

That is one thing for church members to keep in mind. The men who are over you in the church are under others in the Lord. None of us is capable of living as a Christian without oversight. None of us are self-sufficient. None of us can live a healthy Christian life without being accountable to others.

That is why one of the questions that Dennis and Paul will answer in a moment is, “Do you promise to submit in the spirit of love to the authority of the Session and to the higher courts of the Church?” All of your other leaders have had to make the same commitment. What that means is that the elders who are over you in the Lord are themselves under elders in the Lord.

It belongs to godliness, as the New Testament describes, it that it includes submission to elders, whether that is a church member who is not in a leadership position or a church member who is called to be an elder or a minister. Godliness requires submission, not only to Christ directly, but also to those human beings whom he has placed over us to guide, nurture and protect us.

By the way, this is one of the reasons that we require membership in a local church for guests who might want to participate with us in celebrating the Lord’s Supper. A person who is not under the oversight

of elders through membership in a local church is living in disobedience to this text and others like it in the New Testament. Many people in our day, when personal autonomy is the highest value, think that they can be Christians as long as they have a relationship with Jesus. But the Bible insists that belonging to Jesus includes belonging to a local church and it requires of Christians that they place themselves under the oversight of elders. Holiness in biblical terms includes submission to those whom Christ has placed over us to watch over our souls.

Now the authority of elders over church members is a carefully prescribed authority. The authority of elders over church members exists under the absolute authority of Jesus Christ over all of his people. What that means in practice is that the authority of elders goes no further than applying the word of God. There is, of course, the authority to organize the activities of the church, but the Lordship of Christ over his church means that Jesus rules his church by his word and the elders of the church have no authority other than applying the word of God to the lives of the members. Paul makes this clear when he writes in Romans 14:4, “Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls.” Our Westminster Confession of Faith expresses this principle in the following words: “God alone is Lord of the conscience and has left it free from, the doctrines and commandments of men which are – in anything contrary to his Word, or which – in matters of faith or worship – are in addition to it.”

This is a very important principle when understanding what our text means when it tells us to obey our “leaders and submit to them.” This does not mean that our leaders have the authority to control every aspect of our lives. Elders only have the authority to hold us accountable to the word of God. We have no authority that goes beyond bringing the word of God to bear on your lives. But having made that clear, we must give full weight to the words of our text that requires all church members to “Obey your leaders and submit to them.”

The next part of this sentence tells us the reason that we are to obey our leaders and submit to them. “[F]or they are keeping watch over

your souls....” This gives us an important insight into the task of elders in their role as leaders over the people of God. They are to keep watch over the souls of the believers entrusted to their care.

“Keeping watch” conveys the idea of attentiveness. It particularly conveys the idea of being alert for danger. As Christians we are surrounded by danger and the danger that is most concerning is spiritual danger – danger to our souls – danger to our spiritual wellbeing.

There are a lot of warnings in the Bible that are addressed to the people of God. The Bible tells us often that we are to watch over our own souls. For instance, Peter tells us in 1 Peter 5:8, “Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.” We are engaged in spiritual warfare. The devil and his followers are active and dangerous and so we are told to be sober-minded and watchful. But God has given us another level of protection in that he has instructed elders to be watchful for our souls.

One area where elders are to be watchful is for false teaching. In Ephesians 20, right after he had reminded the elders of the church at Ephesus to “pay careful attention to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit had made [them] overseers,” Paul said, verse 29, “I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock...” And so he tells them to “be alert” for false teaching. The Bible also warns us of the dangerous possibility of drifting away from the Lord. Hebrews 2:1 says, “Therefore we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it.” Here again we are all to pay close attention so that we do not drift, but one of the ways that elders watch over our souls is to be watchful for drift in our lives.

But it is not only dangers that elders are to be watchful for. They are to be watchful for things like discouragement and any kind of struggle that the believers under their care are going through. They are to be watchful for the spiritual wellbeing of our souls.

We can fill out the idea of what it means to watch over souls by listing the biblical instructions to elders from the various passages addressed

to elders. 1 Peter 5 speaks of shepherding, exercising oversight and being examples. 1 Thessalonians 5:12, speaks of elders as laboring among you, being over you in the Lord and admonishing you. 1 Timothy 3:5 speaks of managing and caring for God's church. 1 Timothy 5 speaks of elders as ruling and some as laboring in preaching and teaching. 1 Timothy 3:2 says that all elders are to be able to teach. Titus 1:9 says that all elders are to "be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it."

Some of the things that Paul says about his own ministry would apply equally to elders in the church. To the Corinthians he wrote, "For I feel a divine jealousy for you, since I betrothed you to one husband, to present you as a pure virgin in Christ. But I am afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, your thoughts will be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ" (2 Corinthians 11:2-3). To the Colossians he wrote, "Him [Jesus] we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ" (Colossians 1:28).

This fills out what the Bible means when it says that elders are to watch over the souls of those who are entrusted to their care. And this is the context for the exhortation to "Obey your leaders and submit to them." "[T]hey are keeping watch over your souls."

So we are all ruled by the word of God. Jesus Christ is Lord in his church. He is the one who has the ultimate authority. He is the one who tells us how to live and what to do and what not to do. And the elders have been given authority to shepherd the people of God by applying the word of God to their lives for encouragement, for direction, for warning. We can therefore see the role of elders in the light of what Paul says about the word of God in 2 Timothy 3:16-17 that Scripture is "profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work."

Christianity is about believing in Jesus and being transformed by the word and Spirit as the fruit of the gospel in our lives. The key relationship is between the believer and his or her Lord. But God has ordained that the Christian life consists of more than just the

relationship between the believer and his or her Lord. Salvation means being a member of Christ's church and God has ordained that believers are interdependent on one another and he has ordained that we live our Christian lives under the oversight and direction of men whom he has appointed to watch over our souls. And all of that means that faithfulness to Jesus and the holy life that is pleasing to Jesus involves submitting to the shepherding of our elders.

What does this look like in practice? As far as obeying and submitting is concerned, it means opening our lives to their inspection when they come on a home visit or when they ask us how we are doing. It means accepting the fact that we are accountable to them, that is this God's idea, that God has told them to watch over our souls. It also means obeying them when they call us to repentance if we are straying from God's word in some area. But it also means accepting the fact that they are our shepherds and going to them for advice and encouragement. Shepherding is not just about correction and accountability; it is also about nurture and instruction and encouragement as well.

From the perspective of the elder we are to look like Jesus as much as we can by his grace. He is the Great Shepherd; we are the under-shepherds. So we are to model him. That means servant-leadership. It means love and care and compassion. It means a passionate concern for the spiritual wellbeing of those under our care. It means sacrifice. It means giving our lives for the sheep. And it means watchfulness. It means being aware of what is going on in the lives of the people entrusted to us. It means noticing things and asking questions and being interested. It means prayer and it means formal meetings and informal conversations.

And this is serious business. Our text tells us that we watch over the souls entrusted to us "as those who will have to give an account." That is a sobering statement. We will have to give an account of the way in which we have cared for Jesus' sheep. The Lord does not give us this assignment and then leave us to do our thing without any interest in how we are caring for his sheep. The Lord is interested in what we are doing. And we are going to have to give an account for what we have done or failed to do in caring for his people. In caring for the Lord's

sheep we must reckon with the fact that he loves his sheep – he gave his life for his sheep – they are precious to him. This idea is conveyed in connection with the idea of eldership in Acts 20:28 where Paul says to the Ephesian elders, “Pay careful attention to yourselves 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.”

These people are people for whom Jesus shed his blood. That is the measure of his love for them. It is therefore also the measure of the interest he has in how we shepherd them. These are sobering thoughts. To be an elder is a huge responsibility. The Lord’s love for his sheep and his concern for their welfare is a huge incentive for us to be very diligent in watching over their souls. We will have to give an account.

But it is not all sober warning. There is also great encouragement. There is encouragement in being called to a task which is so close to the heart of the Lord. There is encouragement in having the privilege to care for people who are so precious to Jesus. There is the joy of imitating our Lord in loving his sheep and in giving our lives for them. And there is the encouragement that Peter gives in 1 Peter 5:4, “And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory.”

And the gospel to which we point others is the gospel for us as well. The Lord who gave his life for his sheep gave his life for us as well for we belong to that number. There will be sin and there will be short comings. We can only do this work looking to Christ for forgiveness and for the strength that we need. Otherwise this work would be absolutely impossible.

One of the most important qualifications for us in our work as elders is a profound knowledge of our own sin and weakness and our utter dependence upon the Lord and his righteousness. As with the Christian life in general there is a profound tension between the urgency of faithfulness and obedience and trusting in Jesus for forgiveness and his righteousness in our inevitable sins and failures. Certainly the Lord would have us feel the weight of our responsibility, but also the buoyancy of knowing that our sins are forgiven in Christ and we are accepted as if we had never sinned and had fulfilled all righteousness. What Jesus says to all his people he also says to us who are called to

shepherd his people, Matthew 11:28–30, "²⁸Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. ²⁹Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."" There is no other way to do this work without being crushed by the weight of it.

Now we end with the last instruction of this verse to the people of God. You are not only to obey your leaders. You are not only to submit to them. You are to respond to their leadership in such a way that their hearts sing because of your progress in your Christian walk. "Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you." This is a very interesting exhortation from the word of God.

You can make your elders rejoice. Or you can make them groan. How you respond to their care can make their hearts sing or it can make their hearts heavy. God is giving you the responsibility to make your elders happy. Not by gifts or flattery or over-the-top respect. But by being diligent and serious about living the Christian life, by cooperating with their leadership and by complying with the word of God as they bring it to you.

This is one of the wonderful things about the Lord and the gospel and the Christian life. We are all to work for one another's joy. In 2 Corinthians 1:24 Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "Not that we lord it over your faith, but we work with you for your joy, for you stand firm in your faith." By watching over your souls and encouraging you in your faith, your elders are seeking your joy in the Lord. And by being serious about the Christian life and seeking to grow and repenting of sin and pursuing righteousness, you enable your elders to do their work with joy.

But it is also possible to make life miserable for them. It is possible to behave in such a way that your elders do their work with groaning. But that is not good for anyone. It is "no advantage to you" if your elders are groaning. And the word of God here tells you to respond to your elders in such a way that the task of watching over your souls is a source of joy rather than of groaning.

The Lord wants us to be happy. Not the frivolous happiness of the world, but the profound happiness of gospel joy – the joy of forgiveness and the joy of living to please God through the transforming power of the gospel. He has given elders to assist us in experiencing the joy of faithful Christian living and the word of God here teaches us that everyone wins if those elders can do their work with joy rather than groaning.

The Christian life as the Bible describes it is the way of life and blessing and it is most definitely not a solitary enterprise. We grow together as the people of God and one aspect of that is the provision of elders to “watch over [our] souls as those who will have to give an account.”

Today we witness the ordination of two new elders in our congregation. And this evening we will give thanks for a lifetime of service of another. These are indications of the Lord’s love for us and his provision for our true and eternal wellbeing. Let us rejoice in his love.