

“Responsibility to Leaders”

Hebrews 13:17-19

The title of my message this morning is “Responsibility to Leaders”, which is the subject of the passage we’ll be studying in Hebrews 13:17-19. It’s not about our responsibility to civic or community leaders—there are other passages in the New Testament about that. This is a reference to *spiritual* leaders, specifically, leaders in the local church. Now if a picture paints a thousand words then I could make this sermon really short and sweet if you would just study this power point slide for a few seconds and then apply it to your life.

Then again, maybe we’d better look at the passage. **Hebrews 13:17.** *17 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.*

Hmmm...Where do I begin? In case you’re wondering, yes, it is a bit awkward preaching on this passage since I am one of the leaders to whom you are supposed to apply this instruction. And, yes, I understand there is a risk of some interpreting this sermon as me telling you what I want you to do for me and my fellow leaders.

But those of you who have been here for any length of time know that I am committed to preaching the whole counsel of God, which means that when we come to something in the text I don’t skip over it because it’s uncomfortable or difficult or because I might be accused of having my own agenda. So please know that I will do my best to explain this passage and seek to apply it as objectively as I possibly can.

Before we actually look at the text be aware that the author is addressing a church that did not have professional pastors or paid staff members like me. All the leaders were *lay* leaders—*volunteers* who had to make a living in the real world. Furthermore, we’re not told anything in the text or in Hebrews about who these leaders were, how they came into their positions of responsibility, or how they organized themselves, made their decisions, or exercised their oversight.

But there are a few things that we can ascertain about their role from the text itself, as well as some other passages in the New Testament. First, we are told that it was the responsibility of these leaders to keep watch over the souls of these people to whom the author is writing. Not to administrate programs, or lead the organization, or plan services, or manage the property and finances. Not even to preach sermons. The main job of spiritual overseers has to do with people, the souls of people, making sure their souls are in a good place, spiritually.

That word “keeping watch” is a word that describes the responsibility of a shepherd. It is the responsibility of a shepherd to keep watch over sheep—to be continually alert to their needs; to look after them and makes sure they are safe, fed, peaceful, and healthy. The word in verse 17 is similar to one Paul used in Acts 20:28 when he was addressing the elders of Ephesus on his way to Jerusalem. He said, “**Keep watch** over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers”.

That word means “to pay attention to,” “to be intent upon,” or “to give heed to”. It has the idea of being *vigilant*, of *guarding* something that is valuable, and it implies that whatever is valuable is vulnerable—it can be attacked or hurt or damaged.

In fact, Paul goes on in the very next verse to say that the sheep will most certainly be attacked. *I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them (20:29-30).*

I don't know how Paul knew this would happen. I don't know if the Lord revealed this to him, or if he knew, from his own experience in Ephesus, that there were wolves in sheep's clothing in that particular flock. But this happens in churches all the time—people who rise up from within a congregation and promote some distorted or watered-down version of the truth, passing it off as God's revelation. Nowadays, this kind of false teaching is accessible in the comfort of our own homes from preachers on television, or through radio or the Internet. These shysters either add something to the pure gospel or take something away from it, and usually it sounds pretty good, it seems reasonable, and it's appealing.

It is the elders' responsibility to watch out for this and make sure the sheep are protected and preserved from this kind of danger, for it can be devastating in a congregation. It has destroyed many, many churches over the years. And so the responsibility of elders is very great—so great, in fact, that they are assigned this responsibility by God Himself. That's what Paul said in Acts 20:28. The Holy Spirit made them overseers.

How does a person become an overseer in a local church? (By the way, "overseer" and "elder" and "pastor" are used interchangeably in the New Testament of the same office, the same position of leadership.) Does a person become an overseer because he decides to do it? Or because he goes to seminary and gets the necessary education? Or because he got enough votes from the congregation? No. The Holy Spirit appoints him! That is eminently clear in the text.

You say, "Well how do you know *who* the Holy Spirit has selected and appointed?" That is a *really* good question. In Paul's day elders were either appointed by Paul or by someone like Titus, to whom Paul gave the authority to appoint elders. But there were specific qualifications that had to be met by a prospective elder—qualifications that are listed in detail in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1. And all but one of those qualifications have to do with the character of the man, rather than his capabilities.

Those qualifications are given so that we, as human beings, might be able to discern who the Holy Spirit has chosen to be in this position of spiritual oversight, because the position is such that it requires integrity and trustworthiness. It is a position of stewardship, for God has actually delegated His spiritual authority to these men, authority that even demons have to recognize and respect. It's a position of tremendous responsibility, for God has trusted these men to care for that which is most precious to Him—so precious that the Lord Jesus purchased them with His own blood.

And if Jesus purchased them with His own blood, you can be sure that He wants to protect and preserve every one of them. He wants every one of them to grow, develop, mature, thrive, succeed, and fulfill their highest potential. And it's the job of the elders in a church to facilitate that.

So our job as elders at Emmanuel Bible Church is to make sure you are fed well from the Word of God—that you have a balanced, nutritious diet from the *whole* Bible, not just our favorite passages; that we are accurately interpreting the Word so that you are hearing what God says and not our biases and opinions; and that we faithfully teach the Word in season and out of season.

It is our job to shepherd you through traumas and crises and times of uncertainty and indecision, so that you can know, on the basis of God's Word, what to do, where to go, and who to trust.

It is our job to pray for you. To use our delegated authority on your behalf to break strongholds, to heal sicknesses, to stand in the gap, and whatever else God may want to do for you through us.

It is our job to make sure you do not wander away from the truth or slide into sin. And when we see this happening we can't just sit back and keep quiet; we cannot ignore it and hope or even pray it will resolve on its own. We have to confront it. Lovingly...sensitively...compassionately...but firmly. That is our responsibility. God entrusted us with this role.

And one day, when we see the Lord, we must give an account to Him of the way we shepherded His flock. Were we attentive? Were we vigilant? Were we faithful?

I don't know about my fellow elders, but this matter of being accountable to God for how I keep watch over his flock weighs heavily on me. Sometimes it keeps me up at night. Sometimes I cannot stop thinking about and praying for certain ones of you for hours at a time, because I'm so concerned. Sometimes it compels me to shed tears.

But that's what a real shepherd does for the sheep he loves. That's what an under-shepherd does when he's been entrusted by the Chief Shepherd with the sheep He purchased with His own blood.

In 2 Corinthians the Apostle Paul is giving a defense of his ministry. He is explaining to the Corinthian church why they should trust him, why they should consider him a legitimate, genuine Apostle of Christ. He describes all the hardships he endured for the sake of the gospel—his imprisonments, the floggings and beatings he received, the time he was stoned and left for dead, the three shipwrecks he survived, the sleepless nights, and many other things that seem quite unbearable to us. But at the end of that list of hardships he makes an interesting statement. He said, *"Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches"* (11:28).

And it was as though this last item on the list was the toughest thing of all to endure. "I wonder how the gang down in Galatia are doing? When Timothy came back from there he told me they were struggling with their grasp of grace, and they were reverting back to rule-keeping. I wonder how the folks up in Philippi are faring? Last time I was there Euodia and Synteche were bickering, and I know how tensions can escalate and people can take sides and things can go south in a hurry."

When you care for the sheep, when you are accountable for the sheep, you can't help but feel burdened for the sheep.

That's the role of the elder/shepherd/overseer. Appointed by the Holy Spirit to keep watch over the souls of the people in a congregation, and accountable to God for the way they do it.

But verse 17 in Hebrews 13 is written to sheep, not shepherds. It is instruction for members of a congregation as to their responsibility to those God has placed over them in the church. And the admonition is simple: *"Obey your leaders and submit to them."*

I realize those are the two words that raise more hackles than perhaps any others. It is not natural to obey, and it is even more unnatural to submit. The tendency of the natural man, what the Bible calls our "flesh" or "sinful nature" (the nature that dominated us before

we put our faith in Christ) is to resist, challenge, defy, and rebel. What is more, we are Americans, the most fiercely independent people on the earth and a people who are firmly committed to a democratic process of decision making. We don't obey and submit in America; we do things by consensus, or we go our own way.

So what do you do with an admonition like this?

It is important to remember the context here. When the author first talked about leaders in verse 7, he introduced them as those who spoke the Word of God to them. I believe the obedience and submission in verse 17, in light of the context which talks about not being led away by diverse and strange teachings in verse 9, primarily has to do with the church leaders' instruction in the word of God.

They are God's anointed and appointed spokespersons to teach you in His ways. When they speak, listen. When they preach the Word, pay attention. When they show you how the word of God comes to bear upon a circumstance in your church or in your life, apply it. That's God's method of ensuring your health, your growth, your safety, and your spiritual prosperity.

And He says if you do obey and submit to your leaders and you do grow and become strong and healthy and mature in the Lord, it's going to make your leaders' job a lot easier and a lot more enjoyable. Look at the end of **verse 17**. *Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.*

I don't know if you are aware that a study was conducted not long ago which revealed that the profession of *pastor* has the highest level of job dissatisfaction of any other profession (which is odd since we work only one day a week). It has the highest attrition rate, too—meaning that more pastors quit their jobs and go into some other kind of work than any other profession. According to George Barna, the social scientist and pollster, who has done a lot of research about the church, fifteen hundred pastors leave the ministry every month. That's 18,000 every year! Barna also discovered that 38% of pastors in America today suffer from burnout, and another significant percentage from depression.

I'm sure there are a ton of reasons that contribute to burnout, depression, and dissatisfaction in the ministry, and so I don't want to be overly simplistic or naïve about this. But in my conversations with colleagues and in my experience with people in ministry one of the greatest reasons for this is ministering in churches where the people are critical of them or resist their leadership or complain about their preaching and teaching or are unresponsive to their shepherding.

That makes leaders groan. That makes their work a burden, not a joy.

You might say, "Well, what if I don't like his preaching style? What if I don't think he's doing a very good job? What if I don't particularly like his personality?"

I just want to point you back to the text. I'm not saying it's always easy to obey and submit. But let me suggest a couple of things you can do to take the sting out of submission.

First, *acknowledge that it is God who has appointed your leaders*. If you really believed that, then it would make it easier to obey and submit to your church leaders—you might even *want* to obey and submit to your leaders because it is a way of obeying and submitting to God. And if God put your leaders in their position then you can trust God to use them, in spite of their weaknesses, deficiencies, idiosyncrasies, and failures to do what He wants to do in the church and in your life.

Secondly, you can take the sting out of submission by praying for your leaders. In fact,

the author of Hebrews says as much in the next couple of verses. ¹⁸ *Pray for us, for we are sure that we have a clear conscience, desiring to act honorably in all things.* ¹⁹ *I urge you the more earnestly to do this in order that I may be restored to you the sooner*” (ESV).

In Ephesians 6 when Paul is talking about spiritual warfare and he is telling the church to put on the armor of God, he closes that section by saying, “And pray for this, and pray about that, and pray, pray, pray.” And then he inserts these words, “And pray for me.” Please, while you’re praying, don’t forget to pray for me!

Paul knew, as does the writer of Hebrews, as does any spiritual leader who has been around, that prayer is the most valuable, the most powerful, the most essential resource that we have. If we don’t have people praying for us, we might as well not even get out of bed in the morning.

I remember when I first came to EBC nearly twenty years ago, a rather young Tom Aman organized a prayer calendar for me. He had people in the church volunteer to pray for me so that I was covered every day of the week, and then he gave these pray-ers laminated cards to remind them when to pray for me.

I know I was sustained by those prayers. I know I am still sustained by your prayers. And I long for more of you to pray...not just for me, but for my fellow elders. If someone could do what Tom, who is now an elder, did then, for all of us, we would so appreciate it.

Pray for us.

Commissioning service with Brad and Cole

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Main Idea: Because Christ has delegated His authority to under-shepherds, he wants us to be obedient and submissive to them

Leaders in the Church (17)

The *identity* of these leaders

The *role* of these leaders

Shepherding

Spiritual oversight

The *accountability* of these leaders

Responsibility to Church Leaders (17a)

Obey them

Submit to them

Taking the Sting out of Submission (18)

For the church—praying for leaders (18a)

For Leaders (18b)

Having a clear conscience

Living an honorable life

Family Life Group Discussion Questions
Hebrews 13:17-19

¹⁷ “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.

¹⁸ Pray for us, for we are sure that we have a clear conscience, desiring to act honorably in all things. ¹⁹ I urge you the more earnestly to do this in order that I may be restored to you the sooner” (ESV).

It is not natural to submit...to anyone. The tendency of our sinful nature (the nature that dominated us before we put our faith in Christ) is to resist, challenge, defy, and rebel. How, then, is it possible to “joyfully” obey and submit to our spiritual leaders?

How do you apply this passage when you disagree with a decision your spiritual leaders make, or the direction they are leading you or the church to go?

Is there a place where it’s okay to “draw the line” and refuse to obey and submit?

Consistently and earnestly praying for your pastors/elders is the most loving, the most powerful, and the most beneficial thing you can do for them. List some of the things your leaders need prayer for. Is there a time in your busy schedule when you can specifically pray for them?