

## Heb. 13:17-19 General Instructions for leaders and followers in the local church

This sermon falls under the context of “acceptable worship” from 12:28. And one of the most important parts of our worship has to do with responsibilities and duties of both leaders and laity (people not in leadership) of the local church. Now, there are various types of leadership structures in Christian churches. As Baptists, we are congregational. Presbyterians (and others) see authority and leadership differently. However, we all have leaders. As Protestants following the reformed tradition, we see only two offices in the local church: elders and deacons. Deacons serve the body so that the elders can preach and pray. And practically, our elders serve as pastors. And as pastors, we “lead” the congregation. As shepherds lead their flocks to good pasture, as shepherds guard their flocks from predators, so the elders in the local church function in this way. And though there is much more than what I am saying here, this is “leadership.” And no matter where one lands on leadership structure, our text gives us general instructions for leadership and those who follow in the local church. And these instructions are consistent in the Bible. With this in mind, I have two parts of sermon: 1) Instructions for followers (those in the congregation who are not in leadership), and 2) Instructions for leadership.

1. Instructions for followers. Whoever wrote this letter was one of their leaders, (as opposed to “leaders” in the faith who had passed away from v. 7). In these verses, we see three imperatives, three commands: In v. 17 he says, “**Obey your leaders and submit to them.**” In v. 18, he says, “**pray for us.**” This is a pretty simple formula: Obey, submit, and pray for . . . your leaders. This is one way of describing what it means to “follow,” what it means to come under, in some way, God-given authority in the local church. And let me say from the outset, that ALL OF US are under the authority of God! ALL of us are sheep; we are the flock of Jesus Christ, who is the head of the church. ALL authority is given by God in this way.

I think of our text from HG last week of the story of Jesus healing the servant of the Roman Centurion. He had a beloved servant of his household that was very sick. So, Jesus has compassion and starts to make his way to this man’s house. And on the way, do you remember what happened. The man, in great humility, came out to Jesus and said, “***I am not worthy to have you come under my roof . . . Just say the Word and let my servant be healed . . . For I am a man of authority, and under authority. I say, ‘to one go and to the other come’ . . .***” (Luke 7:1-10). This man recognized the authority of Jesus. And Jesus marveled at this man’s faith.

Now, ALL of us are creatures. ALL of us did not ask to be born in this place. ALL of us are under the authority of God. And, we are under the authority of God’s Word. And, in every local church, there is God-given authority. As we see it, the congregation has authority, but the elders also have God-given authority to lead. And who are we leading? We are not leading other Christians, other Churches; we are leaders of THIS congregation. This is our starting place. And the responsibility of the congregation is to: “obey,” “submit,” and “pray for” your leaders. And, remember our context, “This is acceptable worship” (12:28).

Let’s begin with the words “obedience” and “submission.” These words go together. They give us different perspectives on what it means and to come under the authority of our leaders. The word “obey” is not the normal word in the NT for merely to “obey,” though it does carry the

meaning as translated in both the KJV, the NAS, and the ESV. But the root word is to “put confidence in.” In other words, there is something about your leaders that you trust. And because you trust your leaders, you listen to them with confidence. And then you follow in obedience to what they ask you to do. And in this way, you come under the authority of your leaders through submission. In this scenario, there is a heartfelt desire to obey and submit to the authority of your leaders.

I think of the example of a good father. I think of my own. I know as a child, you have no choice. Whether your parents are “good” or “bad,” you just obey. But, as you get older, you begin to see if they practice what they preach. As I think back to my dad (particularly), he was not perfect by any means. He had great faults. But, I knew he loved me. I knew he cared for me. I knew he had my best interests at heart. I also knew that he tried his best to practice what he preached. In the end, I trusted Him, and because this I obeyed him with a willful heart. It wasn’t burdensome, even if I didn’t like what he asked me to do.

In the same kind of way, this is the healthy relationship of followers to leaders in the local church. As a church, we are the most healthy when you trust your elders, and you trust us in much of the same way I have described. And, because of your trust and your confidence in us, you obey and submit to the things we ask, to the ways in which we are leading. In every local church, there are leaders and followers. But, the key is trust, confidence in those who are leading. And as long as your elders are following the Word of God and holding on to the Gospel of Christ, and practicing what they preach, there is a good environment for what v. 17 says. (I’ll come back applications at end.)

The next command for “followers” in relationship with “leaders” is to pray for them. Look at v. 18. “**Pray for us.**” This probably refers to more than the author, other leaders with him in the congregation. I think the context, as he speaks of a good conscience, is that of godliness and faithful preaching of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. But also in the same verse, there is a link to prayer and the author’s desire to be with these believers. He says, pray “more earnestly” that I might be restored to you. In this command, we see both the content of prayer and love in the heart of the one who prays. So what does this look like here at Grace. Your command is to pray for your leaders, that we would be faithful to the Word of God and to the preaching and teaching and application of the Gospel of Christ. And you do this because of your affection for your leaders; you love them. Brothers and sisters, I/we cannot lead without your regular, affectionate prayers! I am not sure how much you guys pray for me and your elders. But, I thank you! And for your sake, I hope you will be more obedient after hearing these words today as you pray for us. It is the most important thing you do for your elders. (Let’s move on)

2. Instructions for leaders. In this text I have found 6 truths for leaders in the church. So, here I am really preaching to myself (and to our elders). So, let’s work through these 6 truths briefly and then end with applications.

1) As elders, we keep watch over souls. Look at v. 17: The reason we obey and submit to our elders is because they are watching over our souls. Often when I study at Panera and have to go to the bathroom, I ask someone next to me, “*Watch my computer.*” This is a pretty simple thing. Or, have you ever been in line somewhere and you have to step out for a minute? You ask, the

lady in front of you, “*watch my spot in line.*” Or, maybe you’ve been asked to babysit your neighbor’s children. In all of these examples, there is a responsibility given “to watch over.” As pastors, we are tasked with “watching over souls.” There is nothing so important as watching over souls, the very part of our existence that we especially associate with being made created in the image of God. According to the Bible, it is the soul that can be “lost” or “gained” in this world. In Matt. 10:28 Jesus says, “**Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.**”

I think of Acts 20:28 where Paul meets with the elders (leaders) of the Church at Ephesus. These are the last words he would speak to them. He says, “**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.**” I think of Peter’s words to the pastors when he says: “**Shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight . . .**” (1 Pet. 5:2). The church is not a business where employers manage and give oversight to their employees, for a profit. The church is not a country club where its members pay money for the employees of the club to make their experience good. The Church is not a group like AA or your local counseling center that works merely to help someone overcome addictions. The Church is a place where pastors watch over SOULS. And how this works itself out determines not only the health of a soul, but also the eternal state of the soul! (I’ll come back to this in application.)

2) As elders, we are accountable before God. Look at the end of v. 17: “**as those who will have to give an account to God.**” Here, the responsibility of leadership is taken to another level of accountability. As elders, we are accountable to the body of Christ (all of you). But, we are ultimately accountable to God. The office of pastor is not like a job in the corporate world where the employee is accountable to his boss. We are accountable to God! In our passage earlier from Acts. 20, Paul says, “**But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God**” (v. 24). And then in again in v. 28: “**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 . . .**” I also think of the watchman from Ezekiel 3. God says to him, “**If you give the people my word and warn them, you will be faithful and your soul will be saved**” (my paraphrase).

There are two callings for the elder/pastor/leader. The first is from God. The second follows this but comes from the congregation as they see a pastor is qualified according to God’s standards (1 Tim. 3; Tit. 1). But, the most important calling is from God. This means that as your pastor/s we are stewards of God’s grace with great responsibility . . . because we are accountable to God!

3) As elders, we serve with an attitude of joy. Look at the 2<sup>nd</sup> part of v. 17: “**Let them do this with joy and not with groaning.**” I like Mark Dever’s words when it comes to being a pastor in this regard. He says something like this: “**No matter whether you serve a congregation of five thousand or fifty, you will say to God ‘that is enough’**”. Brothers and sisters, dealing with my sin and my own faults and my own failures is hard enough (right elders?). But as elders, we MUST also enter your world as a shepherd over your souls. And as hard as it is, we must never complain or “groan” over how difficult the task is . . . must serve with joy! I have spoken with many pastors who do not serve with joy. But, we must! Or, we are not being obedient to these

words. (I think the meaning here is more about serving under compulsion or serving because God has called us to serve.) I am not sure I've ever asked our elders if this is the case. But, I believe that all of us serve with joy. And YES it is messy being your pastor. But, speaking for myself, I don't wish to be anywhere else! And as bad and inefficient as I may be in certain areas, You are my joy! And if this turns out in the future not to be the case, I should rethink my position.

4) As elders we do not serve ourselves; we serve the body. I get this from v. 17 in the context of watching over souls with joy. He says, "**Let them do this with joy and not with groaning . . .**" Why? Because when the pastor groans about being a pastor and does not serve with joy, he is only thinking of himself and not his followers. He says, "**for that would be of no advantage to you.**" In other words, the pastor is thinking of his followers in such a way that his faithfulness in being a pastor is for the advantage of his flock. To put it simply, the pastor does not serve himself, but serves his sheep. Think about a lazy shepherd. He sleeps often. He doesn't lead his flock to the difficult, but green pastures. He doesn't protect the flock from predators. He doesn't do these things because he is thinking of himself.

In the same kind of way, your pastors/elders/leaders must serve those under their care. Jesus is our example: Phil. 2:3-8: "**Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.**"

5) As elders we serve with integrity. Look at v. 18: "**Pray for us, for we are sure that we have a clear conscience, desiring to act honorably in all things.**" As elders, we must always practice what we preach. And when we fail, we must repent and ask for forgiveness as we grow in godliness. I have many faults. I have many sins. When I read our covenant, I see where I fail. Your pastors are sinners, just as you are. But, as 1 Tim. 3 tells us, in a general way, they "must be above reproach." We should see consistency over time in godliness with our elders. If not, we are not qualified. As my dad always said to me, "*Jon, only one person can take away your integrity.*" This statement stands up to the truth of Scripture! For some application to this truth, let me read what I often read in our elders meetings from 1 Tim. 4:11-16: "**Command and teach these things. Let no one despise you for your youth, but set the believers an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity. Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching. Do not neglect the gift you have, which was given you by prophecy when the council of elders laid their hands on you. Practice these things, immerse yourself in them, so that all may see your progress. Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers.**"

6) As elders we serve with a particular affection. Look at v. 19. "**I urge you the more earnestly to do this in order that I may be restored to you the sooner.**" This man was apparently away from this congregation of people. And he wanted "earnestly" to be with them. So he asks them to

pray for this to happen soon. The implication here is affectionate love. Pastors/Elders/leaders love their people God has given to them. A leader in a church must always be motivated by love for those in his care. With these things in mind, let me end with some comments for application.

Application: From my perspective, what a responsibility! I think of all the churches where pastors have moved away from the Word, and those under their care are still in obedience and submission. Therefore, I/We MUST hold fast the Word of God and Gospel of Christ with its applications! We must! Otherwise, we become like the blind leading the blind.

Application: Please Pray for us! God has designed that your prayers work together with development of your leaders. They go “hand in hand.” And what do you pray? First, pray we would be faithful to God and his Word, and as Paul says to Timothy: “*Command and teach these things!*” Also, Pray for our godliness. Pray that we will ALWAYS strive for godliness, so that when we preach, you know we are really doing our best to practice what we are asking you to do. At the same time, and most importantly, Pray for our affections! Pray for our hearts!

Application: If these things break down, (obey, submit, pray for), how healthy can the local church be? If we as your leaders/elders do not constantly keep these principles before us, we will become more and more like the world in the ways we govern ourselves.

Application: This is one of the reasons we set clear membership standards. Pastors need to know exactly who their sheep are. And right or wrong on every jot and tittle, to come under authority at Grace is to accept our membership structure.

Application: We don’t have to agree on everything. But, these principles must be present if we are to have a healthy church. As followers: obey, submit, and pray for. As leaders: Watch over souls, Accountable to God, Serving the body with an Attitude of Joy and heart of Love, and Living lives of Integrity.

Application: We cannot do these things on our own. We must be filled with the Spirit of God . . . which comes down to us through the person and work of Christ. We are not the “Church of Jesus Christ” if we do not have his power. We must live and govern our lives by the power of the Gospel of Christ.