

Hebrews 13:17-19

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[0:00] Next Sunday, Lord willing, we will begin our study of the book of Daniel as our normal habit is verse by verse exposition. And I just wanted to let you be aware of that if you'd like to start reading through the book of Daniel, at very least the first six chapters and get yourself familiar with the content there.

Also, we've been doing this for a bit of time, but making available to you the ESV scripture journals for each of the books that we're preaching through. I think this has been a good help to many of you. These are available out there. There's 30 ish copies in the book nook.

They're five dollars a piece, which is not terribly cheaper, but it is a bit cheaper than you can get them on Amazon. I think there's six bucks on Amazon. So if they run out out there and you want to grab one online, I encourage you to do that as well.

They're handy. It's got the ESV text down the left hand side and the notes on the right hand side. It's a good way to keep up with our preaching. And I also want you to know that and even encourage you, if you'd like to take one, you can owe the book nook.

It's OK. You don't have to put an IOU in that little box. You can just at some point come back and drop five dollars in that box. And at some point we'll take care of accounting for all of that.

[1:09] So let me encourage you to do that. Hopefully, Lord willing, next Sunday we'll begin that Sunday. So this Sunday, we're going to do a bit of catching up and an effort last year to not neglect the most important things as the pandemic came on.

And we were concerned about what that would mean for us as individuals and for us as a church. We did manage to neglect some important things. At the very beginning of the pandemic, we nominated and affirmed by a vote of the church to new elders, Caleb Waters and Reese Winkler. And they have been serving us faithfully for all that time. If you've been here, you saw it this morning. Even they were introduced to you as elders, which they are. But we have yet to install them so many months later.

And it just struck me a couple of weeks ago that we hadn't done that yet. And so we planned for it just as soon as we could. So that's what we'll be doing this morning, but not without a sermon first. First, we're going to look at a text together and our text today will help us to think both about the solemn duties of an elder of Jesus Church and our responsibilities to these men.

[2:24] Now, in Hebrews chapter 13, verses 17 through 19, the author gives instruction as how to relate to your leaders.

And we do not know the specific men that our author is referring to, right? We don't know their names. I propose to you that he is referring to the elders or pastors of this little church.

We will see that he also includes himself in that number and later on in that text. But I want you to know that I draw this conclusion because of a preceding verse, Hebrews chapter 13 and verse 7, which says, Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God, consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith.

These leaders taught this church. They were there. They spoke the word to them. They taught them. They taught them sound doctrine and they lived among them. Otherwise, how could the church consider and imitate their lives?

I also draw this conclusion because this letter, by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, was not only pinned for its original audience, but also for us.

[3:37] And we are a church ordered by the Bible with elders giving leadership to it. Beloved, elders are a gift to the church.

They're a great grace for us. And hear me as an elder, include myself in that number. Our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, the great shepherd, has gifted the church with under shepherds.

Do you believe this to be true? Do you think of church leadership as a gift to you? We live in a day when all positions of authority are under suspicion.

Rightly so in many cases. We are a people who are slow to believe that anyone is seeking our good at great expense to themselves.

But I can attest to you that the elders of Christ Family Church share the sentiment expressed by Paul in 2 Corinthians chapter 12 and verse 15.

[4:39] Where Paul wrote, I will most gladly spend and be spent for your souls. Do you believe that God ordered authority is good for you?

God has given to us governments, husbands, parents, and the church with its leaders to help order our lives. And none of these authorities govern perfectly, but they are gifts.

I am very grateful for the authority figures in my life, especially when they direct my steps under the perfect rule of our Heavenly Father. I am grateful that our church presently has a congregation.

You are part of this process. And that this congregation has five elders besides myself that help order my life in the way of God.

They help me to pursue God. My prayer for this morning has been that each of you would feel the same and respond accordingly. Accordingly, right?

[5:45] There are good authorities given to us by God that we might follow him more faithfully. So our text for today, Hebrews chapter 13, verse 17 and 19.

Before I read it, let me remind you, beloved, that this is God's word to us. It was written for his glory and our good. And so we would all do well to listen to it in order to believe its promises and obey its commands.

Beginning of verse 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.

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

Now, my great difficulty in preparing to preach this text was to consider how to work out the negative implications of its commands without being condemning.

[6:49] I want to be very careful at this point. All of your elders are glad to be of service to you. We enjoy what we get to do.

We love what we get to do because we love Jesus Christ and we love his church. Additionally, you all are a generally pleasant group of people to serve.

Most often, you're very pleasant to serve. You should be encouraged this morning that there is very little groaning in our care for you and there is much joy.

So as we teach the negative implication, don't do these things. I just don't want you to feel condemned this morning, but I want you to know you should continue in the way you follow. Now, that said, I have done a number of jobs in my life, both blue collar and white, paid and unpaid.

I've volunteered for a lot of things. Never have I done a job as difficult as that of shepherding God's people. If you know me, you've heard my story about kind of backing into being a pastor. It wasn't really a thing I set out to do.

[7:52] And quite frankly, the thing that drew me into it was my love of teaching God's word. I'm really glad I didn't know everything else that came with it then because I might have run, run far, far away from the task.

It's a difficult task. But it is a glorious work just as it's a laborious work. Generally speaking, broadly speaking, the pastors of our churches suffer much.

We don't want this to be true of the pastors of this church, and it's not currently, but let's keep it that way. A survey conducted by Lifeway Research in 2015 revealed that 84% of pastors say they're on call 24 hours a day.

I put my phone in do not disturb, so there's some times you can't get me. But 84% don't think they can do that. 80% expect conflict in their church.

They're expecting it to happen. 54% find the role of pastor frequently overwhelming. 53% are often concerned about their family's financial security.

[8:57] 48% often feel the demands of ministry are more than they can handle. 21% say their church has unrealistic expectations of them.

The average tenure of a senior pastor at a Southern Baptist church is 3.6. Years. I can't speak very long about this this morning.

In fact, I won't speak to it hardly at all because it's a complex issue. It includes pastoral unpreparedness, pressures of the church, the desire to be promoted and go to bigger churches. There's a lot of reasons that this is happening. But what I can say with confidence and will say this morning is that God does not work in his church in 3.6 year cycles. Right? We should not think that God is consistently calling men to move positions every 3.6 years.

This is a tragedy. And something is very wrong here. Kent Hughes, after co-authoring a book entitled *Liberating Ministry from the Success Syndrome*, which has a terrible title but it's a very good book, was given opportunity to travel and speak and was astounded by the number of hurting pastors who would open up to him about the difficulty of their work.

[10:10] He states in his commentary on today's verses, Pastors as a group are one of the most hurting and abused segments of our society. And this happens, I think, for a number of reasons.

I do promise we're going to look at the text this morning. I just want to share a few of these reasons for you. And these are just some of the things for me that are kind of off the top. But why do I think that this tends to be the case?

Here's just a couple for you. Number one, media. We have access to so much good teaching. We get to experience, and I would encourage you to do so, lots of wonderful, good teaching.

We have celebrity pastors that just absolutely abound. Let me give you one example. I love John Piper. In fact, if you ever hear me talk about him, I call him Pastor John because he's done some good shaping in my life as I've been able to listen to his teaching and take up his books.

I've benefited greatly from him. But he's not actually my pastor, is he? He's not one of my elders. He will not show up when I am in turmoil.

[11:17] I can't text him. I don't know his phone number. And if I did have it, he'd say, who is this? And why should I spend any time responding to you? He will not lovingly rebuke me when I err.

John Piper is not my pastor. And I think sometimes people expect the level of preaching, the level of education of the highest guys and forget that those pastors have been pastoring for decades most often.

Many of the people that you may like to listen to have been at it for a very, very long time. Also with media, we have an age of information overload.

There are so many things to be talked about and considered. And people can often expect their leaders to be experts on everything. And no one is.

No one can possibly keep up with what's happening in our culture. Even people whose job it is to speak the culture typically pick a lane and they stay in it like economics, for example.

[12:24] And they don't try to know everything about everything. This is an unreasonable expectation put on pastors. Secondly, we kind of have as a culture a big business mentality.

We've abandoned kind of the mom and pop for big businesses. Our expectations are so high. Everything needs to run just perfectly, right?

How frustrating is it when you go into a big box store and they don't have the thing you want in stock? This happens so rarely because they have these huge machines that are outputting data and they can predict the things that you're going to buy.

And you step into a small hardware store and you can't find anything that you need because it's people. Marking down on paper. The types of things that they need to be ordering.

We have as a society a very high concern for felt needs. We're less concerned about the real needs that actually exist for us. Thirdly, individualism and therefore subjectivism.

[13:25] Everyone has an opinion and there's a platform to share it from, right? Social media has taught us that your voice matters as much as any other voice in the world. And quite frankly, it just doesn't, right?

And I'd put myself in that category as well. We can tend to believe that our way is the best way and that our perspective is the only perspective. And fourth, a love of authoritarianism.

Our last election cycle showed this to be the case. While we tend to be suspicious of leadership, our culture seems to love strong leadership, right?

Someone who will say the things that you want said at the volume that you want it said at. A lot of people move from church to church to church looking for the pastor who just scratches their itch. Just right. Elders are first and foremost meant to be servants. The analogy of shepherd is one who leads along gently.

[14:29] We're moving people to the good grass and the still water. So these things are happening broadly, right? We do not want to be a part of this trend.

And so our text will help us think about how not to do these kinds of things. And I just have the simplest of outlines for you this morning. Two points. Number one, obey your elders.

And number two, pray for your elders. So number one, obey your elders. Obey your leaders and submit to them for they are keeping watch over your souls.

As those who have to give an account, let them do this with joy and not with groaning. For that would be of no advantage to you. So again, the author of Hebrews has a specific group of men in mind here.

And his readers are aware of who he is talking about. When they picked up this letter and read it, they knew exactly who he was referring to you. For you, who is he talking about?

[15:31] This text says to you, obey your leaders. Do you have a clear mind for who your leaders are? I often employ this verse to make the case for church membership.

How can you obey this if you don't have leaders? Right. Somehow you need to formalize who your leaders are and your leaders need to know for whom we will give an account.

I praise God for Hebrews 13, 17, because I think it means that I don't have to give an account for everyone that lives in this tri-county area. I'll give an account for the things I say and the way I teach.

But for souls, I'm going to give an account for those who are members of our church. Many of you know that I do this often. These names on this list, right? The formalized people that are on this list that have made a commitment here.

And I've made a commitment to them as have our other elders. So you need to know who your leaders are and they need to know who you are to give careful care to your soul.

[16:34] And you're to obey them and submit to them. The Greek word here translated obey refers to hearing what they say and following their guidance.

And the word here translated submit has to do with the office that they hold. This is not blind, unqualified obedience and submission.

So you should not hear it that way. We are not asking for an authoritarian type of following. The authority of church leaders is always subject to the authority of God's word.

We are under shepherds. Note again the immediate context. Hebrews chapter 13 and verse 7. So I'm backing up in the chapter.

Remember your leaders, those who did what? Spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith. Verse 8.

[17:36] Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. The beginning of verse 9. Do not be led away by diverse and strange teachings.

So notice his flow of thought. They've taught this word of God to you and they're following this word of God. And Jesus is not changing. The way of Jesus is the same.

Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. So don't be led away by diverse and strange teachings. Elders back in our text are those who have to give an account.

To whom and for what? To God for how faithfully they kept watch over your soul, your souls, by the authoritative, inerrant, sufficient word of God.

How they have carefully applied this text to your life for your good and for the glory of God. Elders as undershepherds are to be ministers of God's truth.

[18:39] He cares for your soul in part through the careful work of your leaders. And that's why you should obey and submit to them. That shouldn't feel like a burden. That should be a joy.

Praise the Lord. He's given to us good leadership that we can follow. So you should obey and submit to them. One, because they're keeping watch over your souls.

If they lead by God's word, then they do so for your good. Whether you like it or not, if it's by God's word, it's good for you.

And secondly, because they will have to give an account. If they lead by God's word for your good, they do so with the weight that they will one day be judged for that leadership.

Right? One day I will stand before the Lord and I will give an account for your souls. That is a weighty, weighty thing to consider.

[19:39] Every elder, as an elder of our church, understands this. They get that they've taken up that task together. Right? It's the plurality that we have. What a thing to have to do.

What a task that's laid upon us. I am so grateful that I am merely an under-shepherd and that Christ is the great shepherd. And so the author, aware of the weightiness of this task, instructs us to let them do this with joy and not with groaning.

This is a big thing that we are being asked to do. And so don't be one who always critiques and always criticizes. Whether face-to-face or behind the back.

But one who encourages and supports. And you should definitely do the latter, face-to-face. It's very helpful. You will not over-encourage the elders of your church.

One of our members told me one time that he always appreciates my preaching. But he doesn't always tell me that because he doesn't want me to get a big head about my preaching. And my response was, that will never happen.

[20:48] I mean, I am in shambles after preaching. I'm usually like, that was horrible. I can't believe that I didn't spend another day preparing that. I don't know that it is any good for anybody. So just telling me that it was good is a huge, huge help.

If you were helped ever by anything I do, please tell me. I would be glad to hear it. And here's a few more of my thoughts on how to mitigate groaning and maximize joy.

Again, just a few here. Number one, don't assume the worst of your leader's actions and intentions. That's said often where clarity is lacking, negative assumptions reign.

We just tend to be that way as people. We assume the worst. If we don't know, we assume the worst instead of assuming the best. And I think that societally, we've been conditioned that way.

We have so many leadership failures in our culture. Don't assume that's what's happening in the life of your church. Some of you bring church hurt to this church and you've had leadership failures.

[21:49] Don't put that on us. Right. Let us disappoint you. Not somebody else disappoints you on our behalf. Right. Get to know the hearts of your leaders.

Right. Ask questions. Try to understand. Hey, why did you say it that way? Why are we doing this? I don't understand. Right. We'd be glad to share with you.

Recognize that there is a larger picture at play. We want to love you. We want to serve you. We want to do what's best for you. But we're doing that for a congregation.

Right. Who's made of individuals, but is a people together. Secondly, don't assume the best of their humanity.

Your leaders are not superhuman. They are men who deal with sickness, who deal with exhaustion, who deal with stress, who experience spiritual drifting.

[22:50] Just like you do. Sometimes you don't know exactly what's going on in your heart. We deal with that, too. But we've got to get up the next week and keep pushing and keep pushing and keep pushing.

Right. These things are realities of all people. We ought to be excelling in following Christ. I don't want to mitigate that, but recognize that we are still just men.

Right. I still mow the grass at my house, just like you do. I have to fix cars and do things like that. This kind of stuff doesn't come off my plate.

We may err. We're going to make mistakes. It's just going to be times that we misspeak. We don't get it right. We need you to love us back to the truth.

We're going to have bad weeks. And praise the Lord. We are not Jesus. What a wonderful thing that is. Get that in your head. Your leaders are not Jesus.

[23:49] Jesus will never fail. Don't look to us as if we are. Don't assume the best of our humanity. Don't expect, number three, too much of their knowledge and skill sets.

We will not always have all of the answers or answer your questions in a satisfactory way. Right. There are just two items on the job description of your elders.

Number one, prayer. Number two, ministry of the word. Those are the two things. An example for you. And if you ask this question, this is not, I'm not picking on you at all.

I don't even remember who this was. But we had a members meeting when our retaining wall was falling over. And I had a lot of questions asked of me about concrete. And I just was like, I don't have a clue. I don't know anything about concrete.

I have no idea how to answer that question. But, right, there's this bit of expectation because we're so organizationally minded as Americans that the CEO has to have answered every question.

[24:50] And we just don't always. So we're working it out. We're taking each little step. But what we're responsible for is prayer and for ministry of the word.

So don't expect too much of your leader's knowledge and skill sets. Also, don't expect too little of your leader's knowledge and skill sets.

We care about you as a whole person. We want to help you walk through life wisely. We might not always know the answer, but often we do. So, again, ask questions.

Seek counsel and wisdom. We want to help you follow the Lord well. So help us. Continue to help us, I should say, to be joyful.

We're joyful leaders. Because if we're groaning leaders, that would be of no advantage to you. I love that the motivation in this text is for your good. Do this thing because it's going to be good for you to do this thing.

[25:49] Unhappy leaders will struggle to lead. Seek your good by seeking the good of your elders. If you want your elders to shepherd you well, love them well.

You should love us as we're loving you. 1 Corinthians chapter 13 and verse 7. Not just the tail end of a text for weddings.

Says, love bears all things. So love is patient. It believes all things. It isn't hasty to see promises fulfilled.

So if your leadership says we're going to do a thing, it just doesn't happen on your timeline. Be patient. We're not lying to you. We do want to do the thing we've talked about doing.

It hopes all things, but assumes the very best of intentions. And it endures all things.

[26:48] It's gracious toward failings. Recognize that your elders do not ultimately lead for our gain, but for yours.

Recognize that we carry a weight. We resonate with Paul in 2 Corinthians 11 and verse 28. Where after mentioning the many ways he had suffered for the gospel, including but not limited to imprisonments, beatings, shipwrecks, and other dangers.

He states the following. And this seems to be the weightiest thing that he suffers. He says, and apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches.

We experience that for our church. We want to pastor you well. So obey your elders. Secondly, pray for your elders.

Verse 18 and 19. It says, pray for us, for we are sure that we have a clear conscience, desiring to act honorably in all things. I urge you the more earnestly to do this in order that I may be restored to you the sooner.

[27:51] Remember, the author is confident of their work toward this church because he is sure that we, they have a clear conscience. And he knows that their desire is to act honorably in all things.

Right. So he's confident of the work that he has been doing. And it is because of his clean conscience that he asks for their prayers. He recognizes his need of the intervening, gracious work

of God.

He knows that having begun by grace, he is being sustained by grace. He expresses the simple profundity of his faith in verse 19.

I urge you the more earnestly to do this in order that I may be restored to you the sooner. Right. He believes that it is by the prayers of this church that God will see fit to return him to them.

So do you pray for your leaders? Not just in sentiment, right? Just, hey, I'm praying for you. But in reality, do you actually pray for the leadership of this church?

[28:53] Right. Be for your good. Be for the good of others. That you pray for your leaders. To dial it even in a little bit closer. Have you prayed for us today?

Did you pray for our preparations this week and for the work of delivery this morning? Charles Spurgeon, after delivering his sermon on May 27th, 1855, concluded with these words.

Now, I don't know if you're a big fan of Charles Spurgeon, but I just can't imagine sitting in a congregation and hearing him say this after preaching a sermon. He said, my people, shall I ever lose your prayers?

Will you ever cease your supplications? Will you then ever cease to pray? I fear you have not uttered so many prayers this morning as you should have done.

I fear there has not been so much earnest devotion as might have been poured forth. Here's why. He says, for my own part, I have not felt the wondrous power I sometimes experience.

[29:56] Spurgeon knew the power of the prayers of his church. And he didn't feel that in that morning, and he may or may not have been right, but he supposed that the church just hadn't prayed enough for him that day.

And he longed, along with the author of Hebrews, to have them pray for him all the more. So, in closing, do you desire to seek the growth, your growth in the Lord?

Do you desire the holiness of his church for the praise of his name? If you do, and I hope you do, I hope you would say, yes, yes, I do. Then, part of that is to obey your elders and to pray for your elders.

Let's pray together.