

Hebrews 13:17-19

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[0:00] If you will please take your copy of God's Word and turn to Hebrews chapter 13. In our verse-by-verse exposition of the book of Hebrews, we have been in chapter 11.

! However, this morning we are going to formally install two elders, and as such, it seemed fitting to us to jump ahead to these verses in chapter 13. I apologize if that drives you crazy, taking it out of order. Next week, we will return our attention to chapter 11. In Hebrews chapter 13, verses 17 through 19, the author of Hebrews gives instruction as to how to relate to your leaders.

Now, we do not know the specific men that our author is referring to. He doesn't give them names here in the text. But I propose to you that he is referring to the elders or pastors of this church. We will see that he includes himself in that number, verse 18.

I want to tell you why I draw this conclusion. It's because of the preceding verse found in Hebrews 13 and verse 7. Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the Word of God, consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith. So he's previously referenced your leaders. And these are leaders that taught this church sound doctrine. And these are leaders that lived among them. Otherwise, how could the church consider and imitate their lives? So there's a relationship that's happening here. These men seem to be in place to do this very work. 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.

As a church of Christ, we are ordered by the Bible with elders giving leadership to it. Beloved, elders are a gift to the church. Our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, the Great Shepherd, has gifted the church with undershepherds. Remember that this letter written to the Hebrews is about them persevering in faith to their great Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, to not be tempted to go back to Judaism and neglect pressing on in this salvation that they had received. So because of what Christ has done, what he has accomplished, he has saved for himself a church that meets and is expressed in local congregations. And to help place that in order and to help give guidance to that, he gives to it undershepherds, gifts to the church. Do you believe this to be true?

[2:59] We live in a day when all positions of authority seem suspect. And it would seem even in our day that the position of pastor can bear with it much shame. There have been so many nefarious things done by men who claim that title. It's difficult for me with much pride at all to claim that I am a pastor because I kind of want to go, but not like those pastors. Let me tell you what that means. We are a people who are slow to believe that anyone is seeking our good at great expense to themselves. We just tend to think that somebody is seeking their own good if they're doing anything at all good for us. I can attest to you, though, that the elders of Christ's Family Church share the sentiment expressed by Paul in 2 Corinthians chapter 12 and verse 15 where he 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. None of these authorities govern perfectly, but they are gifts. I am grateful for the authority figures in my life. I am grateful that we have elders. I'm not the only one that serves in this role, but there is authority placed over me, especially when they direct my steps under the perfect rule of our Heavenly Father. I'm grateful that our church presently has a congregation. And that congregation has authority and that congregation

has ordered that we would have elders to help us all pursue the way of God. My prayer this morning has been that each of you would feel the same and would respond accordingly. So our text for today is Hebrews chapter 13, verse 17 through 19. Let me remind you, beloved, that this is God's word to us written for his glory and our good.

We would all do well to listen to it in order to believe its promises and obey its commands. 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.

My greatest difficulty in preparing to preach this text was to consider how to work out the negative implications of its commands without being condemning, right? To consider that maybe not all of you do this well, right? But to not make you think that we as elders are ungrateful for this fellowship. I want to be very careful at this point. All of your elders, and I can say this especially of myself, are glad to be of service to you. We love what we get to do because we love Jesus Christ, and we love his church, and we love you. Additionally, you all are a generally pleasant group of people to serve. You should be encouraged this morning that there is very little groaning in our care for you, and there is very much joy. So, keep doing what you're doing, right?

Find some encouragement in the text this morning, even as you may find some areas of conviction. This may not be the last fellowship that you're part of, and you may go on from here, right?

[7:07] Carry the lessons of this text with you wherever you might go. Now, that said, I have done a number of jobs in my life, right? Blue collar and white collar, paid and unpaid. Never have I done a job as difficult as that of shepherding God's people. It is a glorious work, but it's a laborious work.

It's a difficult work when you very rarely get to see the good result of the work that you're doing. It seems that God most regularly changes us degree by degree by degree. It's pretty rare that you have a breakthrough with an individual. So, the work of pastoring can often be described as a plotting work, right? We just do the next right thing, step by step by step. Generally speaking, the pastors of our churches, present company excluded, suffer much. A survey conducted by LifeWay Research in 2015 revealed 84% of pastors say they're on call 24 hours a day. 80% expect conflict in their church. Expect conflict in their church. 54% find the role of pastor frequently overwhelming. 53% are often concerned about their family's financial security. 48% often feel the demands of ministry are more than they can handle.

And 21% say their church has unrealistic expectations of them. The average tenure of a senior pastor at a SBC church is 3.6 years. Now, I cannot speak much about such a complex issue of pastoral unpreparedness or pressure or tenure. But what I can say with confidence is that God does not work in his church in 3.6 year cycles. It's not part of the design. Something is very wrong here. Kent Hughes, after co-authoring a book entitled *Liberating Ministry from the Success Syndrome*, 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.

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. It's an astounding statement, isn't it? This happens, I think, for a number of reasons.

I just want to share a few before we're setting up the problem so you'll see the solution found in our text today. Number one, our modern media, both Christian or otherwise, we have an astounding access to really, really good Christian teaching. It's just you couldn't spend enough time finding all of it. It is deep and wide, and it is good. What a wonderful blessing it is to our age that we have such access to this kind of media. However, it also creates the opportunity for the celebrity pastor. The one that always says things just right is so phenomenally gifted. You can probably think of one in your own mind. This puts a lot of pressure on the local pastor. I will never be John Piper. I'm just not going to be. By God's grace, maybe someday, but give me another 40 years and I might pull it off. It's important to realize that a lot of these pastors have massive staffs. A lot of these pastors have research teams. They seem so brilliant.

[11:02] Do you know that a lot of these pastors pay a team of people to build background information for sermons? Right? I don't have that. Right? Any help in that regard. Highly educated, extremely schooled, extremely gifted men, and they are a blessing to us. Right? We should listen to them. We should take them up and read them, and then we should not put undue pressure on our elders. I love John Piper.

I've benefited greatly from his teaching, but John Piper's not one of my elders. He will not show up when I am in turmoil. He will not lovingly rebuke me when I err. Right? I am not placed under his care.

Right? I am not a member of his church. Right? John Piper is not my pastor. Additionally, media, just information overloads us. Right? There are so many bits of information going around out there, and sometimes people then expect their elders to be experts on everything. Right? To have something to say about some concern for, they want their elders to be as concerned about their agenda as they are.

Right? What is the new thing happening in the political realm or otherwise? Right? No one is an expert in that way. No one can possibly take in all the information and sift all the information and come out with answers on the other end. Right? The solution is not that elders spend more time online. The solution is that you spend less time online. Right? We would just faithfully open up God's Word and see what it says day in and day out to all of the situations we may encounter in our life. Secondly, we live in a culture that has a big business mentality. Right? We, as a society, have abandoned the mom and pop for big business. We expect slick. Like, we want everything to be put together just so. And because of that, little things who can't do that kind of work tend to get neglected. And big things and bigger things tend to get paid extra careful attention to. Right? Our expectations generally as a consumer society are way too high. We have a very, very high concern for felt needs. I expect stuff to happen just like this. Just think about the last time you got on a website and you tried to navigate to a page and it said, error, page not found. And how quickly you went, blah, and got off the page and went on to something else altogether. Like, we don't have patience for server errors. How could it be? Right? And we apply that kind of thinking to the local fellowship as well. Everything has to be just so. Thirdly, individualism and, therefore, subjectivism. We, as a people, tend to not like authority. Right? The whole American experiment is based on this very thing. Right? Throw off the oppressor and be liberated. That we would be self-governing. Right? There's a lot of good in that. A lot to be valued in that kind of thinking. However, when we apply that to the church, right? We think that our opinion is more important than it frankly is. Right? Everyone has an opinion and a platform to share it from. Right?

There's so much voice given to people in this day. And so, we can tend to believe that our way is the best way and, in a lot of cases, the only way. That our perspective is the only perspective.

Right? Your perspective is valuable. Your opinion matters. But it's not the only one.

[14:55] It must be considered in weight of other things that may be going on. And then, fourthly, and a bit in contradiction to this idea of individualism, we, as a people, have a love of authoritarianism.

Not of authority, but of authoritarianism. Right? Our culture seems to love strong leadership. Our current president is a case in point. Right? There are whole sectors of our society that love that our current president says whatever on his mind. Right? Provided that they agree with what he says. Many seek in a pastor someone who will say the things they want said at the volume they want it said at. Right? That the pastor gives voice to their particular concerns and views. Right?

Elders are first and foremost servants. Right? They're not meant to be authoritarians. Right? Giving strong and bold proclamation of things that aren't found in the text. Right? That's where we're bold. That's where we speak with authority. But the things outside of it are not our concern.

So we don't want to be a part of this trend. Right? We, as a church, you, as individuals, don't want to be a part of this trend of beating down and wearing out pastors. Right? I know this is true of you. You don't want to wear out our elders. Right? So let's look at our text together. Right? I have the very simplest of outlines for you this morning, which just goes like this. Number one, obey your elders. And number two, pray for your elders. You should be able to remember that at least until dinner time.

Number one, obey your elders. Number two, pray for your elders. So number one, obey your elders. Found in verse 17. And before we go on to talk about obeying and submitting to your

leaders, I want to just talk a little bit about this phrase, your leaders. The author of Hebrews have a specific group of men in mind here. And his readers are aware of who he is talking about. For you, who is he talking about?

[17:09] When you read this text, when you read Hebrews 13, 17, the author of Hebrews says, right, this holy writ says, obey your leaders. Who pops into your mind? Who? Who? Who are you supposed to obey and submit to?

Anyone who says they're a leader? Who are your leaders? I often employ this verse to make the case for church membership. Right? Somehow we need to formalize who your leaders are and your leaders need to know for whom they will give an account. There should be at least a conversation about such a thing. Now, this morning, I will be giving an account for everything that I say. If you're not a member of our fellowship, I will be held accountable for my faithfulness in preaching God's word. But I don't think I'm going to be held accountable for you, for your soul. These people that I have here folded up on a list in the front of my Bible, these are 140 names, at least in this time period of the life of our church. I think these are the ones that I'll stand before God and he'll say, hey, but how about so-and-so?

Did you follow up with them? Did you notice they weren't at church for a month? How is it that you cared for their soul? Who are your leaders? You should have them. This is important. This is God ordered. And when you know who they are, the author of Hebrews says that you should obey and submit to them. Now, the Greek word here translated obey refers to, quite simply, hearing what they say and following their guidance. And the word here translated submit has to do more with the office that they hold. So think giving respect to the office that is held. So obey and submit to them. But this is not blind, unqualified obedience and submission. This is not what the author of Hebrews is doing here. The authority of church leaders is always subject to the authority of God's word. Right? We are merely under shepherds. Note again the immediate context of Hebrews 13, verse 7. I read to you already, but then following. So verse 7 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. Verse 8, Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. And what he's talking about here, I believe, are fundamental doctrines of who Christ is. And they're not changing. Right? Don't get off track. Right? Listen to the word that was taught. Because then he says at the beginning of verse 9, do not be led away by diverse and strange teachings. So these leaders that we're supposed to be obeying and submitting to, right, are teachers of God's word. Elders are those who have to give an account. To whom and for what? What are we accounting for? To God. For how faithfully they kept watch over your souls by the authoritative, inerrant, sufficient word of God. Elders as under shepherds are to be ministers of God's truth.

[20:46] He cares for your souls in part through the careful work of your leaders. Right? So it's a qualified leadership. Right? Your obedience to and submission to is qualified on obedience to God's word. And this is why you should obey and submit to them. Right? They are working to keep watch over your souls. Right?

Caring for you. Caring for you. Meeting your real needs and not your felt needs as directed by God's word. Right?

If they lead by God's word, then they do so for your good. And secondly, because they do so as those who 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 all of us will stand before the throne of Christ. Right? And if we're in Christ, we will not be cast away. Right? Our final judgment is secure in him. We are his. We belong to him. But all of the works will be laid bare. Right?

I'm going to stand quivering one day before God as he talks about the work that I've done at Christ's family church. Right? That's that shows itself to be faithful and that that shows itself to be unfaithful. Right? Biblical elders are leading you in this way. Right? For your good and submission to God. Right? We have a weighty task in front of us. And the author, aware of the weightiness of this task, instructs us to let them do this with joy and not with groaning.

Don't be one who always critiques and always criticizes, whether face-to-face or behind the back of the leadership of your church, but one who encourages and supports. And you should definitely do that face-to-face. You can encourage and support behind the back, but face-to-face is so much better.

[23:00] Right? And so I want to share with you a few of my thoughts on how to mitigate groaning and how to maximize joy. What could that look like in the life of our church and in a church you may be a member of or going on from here to be a member of. So a few things on this point. Number one, don't assume the worst of their actions and intentions. Don't assume the worst. And we, as a people, just tend to do this. Right? We tend to assume the worst. Consider the men that lead your church are doing so for the sake of your soul. At least they ought to be. As those who will have to give an account that this kind of weightiness is brought to the tasks at hand. And don't assume the worst of their actions and intentions. Where clarity is lacking, I'm fully aware of this, where clarity is lacking, negative assumptions reign. But don't let that be true amongst us. Instead, assume the best. It's a novel idea. Just think, it seemed like he said, but surely that's not what he meant. He wouldn't have meant such a thing. I have on many occasions made a statement and then followed it by, I don't mean this. And then sometime later that week, I'll have an hour-long meeting with somebody where they accuse me of saying the thing that I said I didn't say. And I'll spend all that time going, oh, but remember, I said right after, because they just stopped listening. Right? As if, as if they feel like their job is to be critical. Right? Is to find the little nuance that could be taken wrong and to pounce on such a thing. Right? Don't assume the worst. Now, we're going to err.

As people, we're going to err. And we need correction. But times where I thought, yep, that was unclear. You're right. I need to correct it. Absolutely. And I'm very thankful for that.

I would rather be true than consistent. You've heard me say. Right? When people come to me assuming the best, I really, really appreciate that kind of correction. Get to know the hearts of your leaders.

To know what makes our hearts beat. What we really care about. Then when we seem to say something in contradiction to that, you can just ask questions. Hey, when you said, I wasn't sure what you meant.

These are wonderful types of things to ask of leaders of the church. Right? Recognize that there is a larger picture at play. That you have no idea all of the things that may have come one of your elders' way in that particular week. That the big picture of how the life of the fellowship is going might be lost on you. Your perspective may not take in to totality all that is going on. So don't assume the worst of your elders' actions and intentions. Secondly, don't assume the best of their humanity.

[26:09] Your leaders are men. We are human men. We also are affected by the fall. Did you know that we didn't get all new bodies when we were found in Christ? We get sick. We get tired. We feel stress.

There are times that your elders' hearts are drifting spiritually and we don't know why. What's happening here? Right? I feel my affections waning. I don't have time to figure it out because it's Sunday again. You need to recognize that we, like you, do that. Right? Have to take time to figure out what's happening in my soul and how do I give it care. We may err. Right? God forbid, but we may err. Right? We have bad weeks just like you. We are not Jesus. Praise God. Good elders do the work of taking you to Jesus, even in our failings. Right? We say, look, I'm not a perfect man. Let me show you how I repent.

Let me show you how I flee to the cross of Christ. Let me show you how I ground my identity in him and his perfect life because I am not perfect. Right? Certainly, we should be out ahead, right? Pursuing holiness. Certainly, we should be modeling that for you. You should be able to imitate our way of life, but never think for a moment that we are perfect. Our culture tends to take leaders in general, and they do this in church, and they take pastors and they put them on pedestals. I think good pastors hop off the pedestal and kick it over. Right? But then we'll find ourselves getting put back up on that pedestal. So we hop off and we kick it over once again. So don't assume the best of their humanity. Right? Our calendars also have seven days, 24 hours. We are not superhuman. We are not Jesus. Third, don't expect too much of their knowledge and skill sets. Don't expect too much of their knowledge and skill sets. We will not always have all the answers to your questions or

answer your questions in a satisfactory way. Right? It's frankly just not possible. Are we laboring to do so?

Absolutely. Right? I want to know this book backwards and forwards and inside out. Right? I want to be able to give you hallway answers to every question you would possibly have. I want to text respond to your long questions. Right? With the perfect sentence that answers your question. But it just may not happen.

There are just so much. The depths of God's word. Right? To be plumbed and for us to be working it out and figuring it out together. Should elders know sound doctrine? Absolutely. Right? We should be able to teach and contend for those things that are primary. Those things that make us Christian. But the nuances out on the edges. Right? Don't expect too much for knowledge and skill sets. Don't expect that your elders know everything there is to know about the administration of a church.

There's so much. We have to keep in good standing with the IRS. I spent a bunch of my first years as a full-time pastor here making sure that we had all of the T's crossed and all of the I's dotted.

And I didn't have this as a skill set. I'm not a CPA. Surprise. Right? I had to go and do a lot of work to learn how to do these kinds of things. And it was arduous. And it was difficult. And it took up frankly too much of my time. Don't expect that I know anything about how to build a retaining wall. I have no idea. I don't know how to build a retaining wall. Clue whatsoever how to do such a thing.

There are two items on the job description of your elders. Two. Prayer. Ministry of the Word. Those are the two things. That is a lot to be done. Right? There is so very much to be done in those two categories of work in the church. So don't expect too much of your elders' knowledge and skill sets. Lastly, don't expect too little of their knowledge and skill sets. Right? As elders, we care about your whole person. We care about every single bit of you. We are shepherding your souls. But we want to be aware of and we want to be involved in the periphery circumstances of your life because they have a bearing on your soul. We want to help you not make dumb decisions for your life that add unnecessary stress to your life. Young people, I'm talking to you. I know I look 25, but at the end of this month I'll turn 40. And I've learned a lot in my living. And we have elders who are older than me, praise God, who have learned even more about this type of thing. Did you know that Doug Hitchcock used to be a financial advisor?

[31:15] Father, don't make dumb financial decisions. Let us be of some help to you and service to you as a whole person. Right? Recognize that you can do that. You can ask questions. You can seek counsel and you can seek wisdom. And every one of us will be so careful to say to you, this advice I'm giving you is thus saith the Lord. Right? This is what you ought to do to be obedient to God versus I think this is what I would do in that situation. Right? But both can be ones of superior value. The other can be of value as well. Right? Here's what I've seen work well in my life and what hasn't gone so well in my life.

So don't expect too little of their knowledge and skill sets. It causes groaning in me when I see people put themselves in unnecessarily troubling situations. Right? Because I know I'm going to have to do a lot of soul care to help them in the midst of that troubling situation. Just ask the question and heed the advice. Don't do the opposite thing that you're told to do. Or don't go ask everybody you know for advice and then pick your favorite of the options that are given to you. Heed the counsel.

See that there is some contained wisdom in the life of your elders. Right? Why? Why all of this? Why is it important that there is joy in your elders as they're leading you and not groaning? Right? The author of Hebrews says, for that would be of no advantage to you. Unhappy leaders will struggle to lead. How do you, I mean, sheep are just naturally dumb. Right? I put myself in this category. I'm not without this. I've got elders that pay attention to me as well. Naturally. But when a sheep has just flatly told you, I really don't like being part of this flock. I really don't trust you as a shepherd. It is hard to lead that kind of person. Right? How do I employ the staff and the rod for a person who said, hey, quit it. I don't want to be part of the flock. Right? I'm around, but don't expect that I'm underneath your leadership. It's difficult to do. 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. 1 Corinthians 13:7 says, love bears all things. Is patient. Believes all things. Isn't hasty to see promises fulfilled. Hopes all things. Assumes the very best. And endures all things. Is gracious toward failings. Recognize that your elders do not

ultimately lead for their gain, but for yours. Recognize that we carry a weight and we resonate with Paul in 2 Corinthians 11:28 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. When you read this, do you just think that sounds crazy? Well, I'm gonna tell you, your elders go, yeah. I read that list of sufferings of Paul in 2 Corinthians 11 and when he gets to verse 28, I go, oh, I feel this one the most, right? I feel it. He says, and apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches. Now, in our case, it's for a church and the individuals of that church, right? We love you that way, right? We want your good to the glory of God in that way. Don't make us do it with groaning. Help us to do it with joy as you already do in large order. Secondly, pray for your elders and we'll cover this quick. I know I'm running long. The author is confident of his work and the work of the leaders because he is sure that we have a clear conscience. We see that and he knows that his desire, their desire as leaders is to act honorably in all things. Now, 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, right, that any good he's ever accomplished, any proper desire is because God has worked graciously on his behalf and so he asks that they would pray for him. He knows that having begun by grace, he is being sustained by grace.

He expresses the simple profundity of this faith in prayer. In verse 19, he says, I urge you, this is an example, I urge you the more earnestly to do this in order that I may be restored to you the sooner. [36:13] Him desiring to be back with them, he knows that this won't happen unless the church prays, 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, praying for you, but in reality, do you really pray for the elders of your church? 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. Just imagine Charles Spurgeon saying this to you. 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. For my own part, I have not felt the wondrous power I sometimes experience.

He gets done preaching a sermon and he goes, I didn't feel the power I normally feel. What's wrong with y'all? Why are you not praying for me as I'm preaching for you?

In closing, do you desire to seek your growth in the Lord? Do you desire the holiness of his church for the praise of his name? Then, in part, obey your elders and pray for 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. Pray for us, for we are sure that we have a clear conscience, desiring to act honorably in all things. Let's pray together.