
Honoring Your Leaders

1 Thessalonians 5:12-13; Hebrews 13:7-21

Examples of church fights...

Embarking on difficult journeys...

As an elder, this message may sound very self-serving. One of our convictions is that the eldership is not only a plurality but also a parity. I am simply an elder – the senior pastor has died on the cross, raised from the dead, gone to heaven and now sits on God's right hand. Jesus is our senior pastor, our chief shepherd. So, when messages like this come, I am under it as well as preaching it. It is absolutely imperative that I honor my leaders, that is, the elders of the Chapel.

Why this message today?

I do not sense any dishonor or lack of submission in this congregation. Your love, honor, prayers and encouragements are given with joy. Sometimes, it is simply good to affirm and strengthen what God has graced you in.

In many churches, the leaders (elders, pastors, senior-pastor) are elevated to such a degree that most recognize that something is amiss. The result is many Christians who publicly say they agree with submission have personally, privately and practically rejected the church's leadership.

There is a powerful and pervasive and perverse teaching out there now that denies the authority of elders and the Biblical honor due them. Elders are seen as simply older, wiser counselors to the church who have no authority over the church. Many evangelical churches have bought into a wrong view of the organic nature of the church that sets aside the very texts we will hear this morning. So, I is important for our new families, new or untaught believers to hear what God says about this.

Let us take up God's Word this morning and think together about pleasing the Lord in honoring our leaders at church.

In the Attitudes that Please God 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13

¹² We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, ¹³ and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves.

Writing as an elder (and speaking as an elder) we address the church in such a way as to call forth from you the very response required. Respect, submission and esteem cannot be demanded. Even though they are required, they spoken of as being requested. And the elders who are to be appreciated and esteemed are marked by certain characteristics.

Characteristics of Leadership

This is addressed *primarily* to elders and then generally to those whose ministry is characterized by these categories.

In Their Labor

The word here is used of someone who works hard. It was generally used of laborers in the quarries and fields. The picture is of someone who is working hard at ministry. It sets a standard, not only for the elders who must be diligent in their work, but for everyone in the church who ministers.

The prevailing view that church ministry ought to be easy is simply wrong. There are high standards, difficult demands and hard work. It requires endurance. There is hard labor to be done by each and every member of the church. Sometimes that hard labor is physical – moving chairs, mowing yards, plowing snow, maintaining facilities, moving people, fixing cars and so on. Sometimes the labor is mental and spiritual. This is where the leaders are most often affected - long hours of study, preparation, writing, thinking, discussing, praying, counseling, administrating not to mention just the weight of responsibility.

In Their Governance

The word here is used of those who have the oversight or are in charge over. The old word used to be translated *rule*. Today, with the abuses of ruling elders, we prefer the word *governance*. The Bible consistently uses this word to refer to the elders of the church in their governing role, whether it is in the home to be qualified for eldership, or in the church where they are exercising the oversight of the church.

The key texts are Romans 12:8, “he who leads, with zeal”; 1 Timothy 3:4-5, “He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, 5 for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God’s church? ” and 1 Timothy 5:17, “Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching.” The governance of the church in the Bible is committed to a group of men called elders. The elders are to oversee the church by shepherding, teaching and governing as men mature in the Word.

In Their Admonition

This is borne out by the word which is used here. It is usually rendered *to admonish*. It means “to confront with truth so as to bring about change” thus we think of counseling and confronting the believer struggling with sin.

Elders are to confront with truth so as to bring about change, constantly, with tears, in the worship of the church through its singing and preaching involving everyone in it so as to present believers before God without blame even when we are dealing with someone who is refusing to bow to the apostolic authority of the Scripture themselves.⁴

What a picture Paul gives of elders and of the church as a whole. Both are working hard in ministry under the governance of the elders who, along with the many, are confronting people with truth needed to produce change.

So how are we to respond to people like this? Why does Paul follow with the next paragraph?

Because this is not the common picture of the church. Three misconceptions regarding the church are dealt with here. Ministry requires hard work. Elders are to govern the church. And we must be confronting one another with the Scripture or we will not be blameless.

Because too often we respond wrongly to this kind of ministry. We do not want the commitment this ministry requires. We do not want to submit our elders. And we do not like to be confronted in such a way that we are pressed to change.

Responsibilities to Leadership

Here is how we are to respond to this kind of leadership.

To know them. The word here means that we are to have an instinctive knowledge which leads to appreciation. He chooses not to use the word which means to know by experience. Too often, what we know by experience of elders are their failures and weaknesses. Paul is pointing us toward an appreciation of our godly elders whose ministry is characterized by labor, governance and admonition.

To esteem them. Here is an interesting word which heaps superlative upon superlative. It means to honor and respect, to hold them in high esteem. This esteem comes from the motivation of love and is prompted, not because of their office, but because of their work. An elder may not be the cuddly lovable person we all like to have as pastors, but he is to be respected and held in high esteem in love because of his work in ministry.

Mutual Goals

This phrase is addressed to the brethren which takes in elders and congregation. So then, what does *living in peace* look like?

It means that the elders and congregation may not declare war on one another. In both instances, there must not develop an “us against them” mentality. We must see ourselves as joined together in the great work of the kingdom God has given us. We will recognize that the enemy of our souls de-

lights in getting a foothold in the congregation when we allow offense and anger to master us.

It means that petty differences in perspectives, styles and personalities are to be overlooked in favor of character, conduct and ministry. Peace and unity are to be maintained in the midst of diversity, not at its expense. In the midst of doctrinal unity, we will prize ministry and personal diversity. This will come as we understand and live out Christian liberty.

It means that loving sacrifice is demanded of the elder and loving submission of the congregation. We do not like to think in these terms. But we, in our submission to Christ who sacrificed for us model that submission and sacrifice in our homes and in the church.

It means that the gracious oil of the Holy Spirit must be applied to all our points of friction. Heat is a result of friction in both physical and relational things. But God has poured out His love in our hearts by the Holy Spirit so that in all our relationships we are to put on love and have a sincere affection for one another.

What does living at peace look like? It looks like loved, respected and esteemed elders moving among the congregation with hard work, diligent governance and loving confrontation with truth.

In the Actions that Please God

Hebrews 13:7-21

The author of Hebrews is closing the book with a series of commands that are to direct our conduct in God-pleasing ways. Generally, these are commands are addressed to the community of believers, the church. They show us how we ought to live in our lives together.

Honor those who have led you

(v.7-8)

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. ⁸ Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.

The church to whom this was written had had an exemplary leadership in the past. For whatever reason, these men were no longer with them. It is possible they were martyred, we do not know for sure. They were marked out as their teaching elders who had spoken God's Word to them and had lived godly lives whose faith sustained through to the end. That sort of faith is to be carefully evaluated, esteemed and emulated.

Elders are commended when they live out their teaching in lives whose faith causes them to be faithful. Do we as leaders live and conduct ourselves in such a way that people see faith through us so clearly that they can imitate the faith?

We are to make an effort to learn about the faith and faithful lives of great men and women in Christian history. To this end, we can read biographies and glean from them God-pleasing conduct flowing from faith. Do you know anything about Chrystrom, Luther, Calvin, Knox, Spurgeon, Mueller, Owen or Rutherford? What about the missionaries like the Stamms, Hudson Taylor

or Jim Elliot? Who of us have not been spiritually stimulated by Elliot's, "He is not so foolish to give up what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose."

Even though leaders come and go within God's providence, Jesus never changes. Though we can find much to admire and imitate in the lives of godly men and women, we must build our lives in the foundation of Jesus Christ. Leadership must learn and grow and cultivate grace and experience sin overcoming victory—that is to say, human leadership changes. But Jesus never does.

Hear those who have taught you (v.9-14)

These people had sat under good teaching from godly men. Now, in the hardships of the hour, they risked being captured by a variety of doctrines foreign to the New Testament. In this section the author models for us how we ought to hear the Biblical and wise instruction of those who lead us.

A summary command or statement (v.9)

⁹ Do not be led away by diverse and strange teachings, for it is good for the heart to be strengthened by grace, not by foods, which have not benefited those devoted to them.

The author commands them not to be captured by different and strange errors. These errors are replacing living by grace transforming the heart with living by the Old Covenant law.

Exposes and engages the error (v.10-14)

¹⁰ We have an altar from which those who serve the tent have no right to eat. ¹¹ For the bodies of those animals whose blood is brought into the holy places by the high priest as a sacrifice for sin are burned outside the camp. ¹² So Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood. ¹³ Therefore let us go to him outside the camp and bear the reproach he endured. ¹⁴ For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come.

Our author exposes the error by asserting two key truths.

We have a New Covenant altar not for those who remain under the Old Covenant (v.10).

We seek a future city, the new Jerusalem and Mt. Zion (v.14).

These two truths then counter the false teaching that Christians may or should go back to the Old Covenant law. That false teaching argued that there was present spiritual benefit from participating in the old rituals. It also wrongly asserted that Jerusalem was the permanent place of God's presence and blessing.

The error is then related to the Christ and the cross. All false doctrine at some point is either an attack on the person or the work of Christ. Remember that this book is written to Jews, some of whom had professed Christ and others who were attending, but had not yet fully committed by leaving Judaism. Since the death and resurrection of Christ, Old Testament Judaism is an apostate religion. It rejected Christ and the cross and was rejected and condemned by God.

The author says that Jesus suffered a full and final sacrificial death outside the city physically and outside the camp figuratively. Those who were in-

volved in Judaism, had to leave it (the city and the camp) and go to Jesus outside. They must be willing to bear the disgrace because they are like Abraham, looking for the heavenly city.

It is no different today. Professing believers are to be exhorted to leave false religions and apostate churches if they are to be received as true believers. No matter how close its vocabulary may be to Biblical Christianity, any religion that teaches a works salvation is apostate. This includes those who deny the Trinity or the full deity of Christ like the Mormons and the Jehovah's Witnesses. This includes those which teach baptismal regeneration, including the Catholic Church, the Church of Christ, the Disciples of Christ and the so-called "Christian" Church.

Commands what will counter the error (v.13-14)

Notice the command in this text in verse 13, "Let us go to Him outside the camp bearing the disgrace (of the cross) He bore." If professing believers were to leave Judaism at the time of the writing of this text, then professing believers must leave apostate churches today. Why? Because it was in Judaism that they were being taught the alien doctrine of the spiritual empowerment of ceremonial food. And today, it is apostate churches that teach various kinds of doctrines alien to the Bible.

Highlight what is Biblical and pleasing to God (v.15-16)

¹⁵ Through him then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name. ¹⁶ Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.

Since we are not to worship in the sacrifices of the Old Testament, what are the sacrifices of the New Covenant?

Sacrifice of praise – Praise to God is commanded, it is to be continual, it is to be cultivated like fruit and is confessing the Name of Jesus. Our worship of God is to be marked by cultivating continual praise that confess the character and supremacy of Jesus. God is pleased with people whose lives are marked by a passion for Jesus that bears fruit in praise to Jesus.

Sacrifice of sharing – Doing good and sharing with others must not be forgotten in the midst of our Godward focus. God is pleased with people who sacrificially love one another with good deeds for one another and with sharing their lives and resources with one another.

Great love for God in passionate praise to Him should lead to sacrificial love for others in selfless sharing with them.

Heed those who are leading you (v.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.

There are three commands that are given as part of following spiritual leadership. Two were given in reference to their own elders and one in reference to the author. Some of what I have to say to you here may appear to be self-serving. So I am going to carefully exposit what the Scriptures are saying and then reflect on how I have applied these to my own life.

Obey your leaders

The word is usually translated by the words *be persuaded* or *be confident*. The verb here is an imperative or a command in the passive voice. So we are being commanded “to be persuaded” by our spiritual leaders. (There is no passive use of the word *confidence*.) Look at how the author of Hebrews uses the word in 11:8 and in 5:9. It is significant that every translation I have in English and in German and Spanish translates this word by “obey.” So I am persuaded to obey my spiritual leaders.

Submit to their authority

This phrase is one word in the Greek. Most translations make it “submit” and then add “to them” for clarity. The word means “to put oneself under another.” In the battlefield, it meant to withdraw or surrender. It is an imperative or command in the active voice. So I put myself under the authority of my spiritual leaders.

Both of these words are colored by the idea of conflict and disagreement. It seems to me that what they are being commanded to do is to be persuaded by their spiritual leaders and to surrender or withdraw from conflict with them. Now we know that sinning elders are to be dealt with (1 Timothy 5:19-20). Elders are to be open to the counsel and opinions of those in the congregation. And the congregation is to not stubbornly resist the spiritual leaders.

What is to motivate us to obey and submit?

The elders are responsible to give an account to God for you. We are like soldiers on the night watch. We carefully stay alert because we will give a report to the commander.

This makes shepherding a joy and not a burden. There is no joy like seeing children progressing growing up in humble submission. And there is no grief like a rebellious, stubborn son who resists and will not bend his will.

This makes the ministry profitable to you. Sometimes the usefulness of ministry fails because of failure in the elder or elders. Sometimes the ministry is without profit because of the people.

Pray for us (them)**(v.18-19)**

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.

Here is the final command. The author exhorts it in relation to himself and those ministering or shepherding with him. Because of that, he can assure them that his own conscience and conduct are pleasing to God. Since specificity is important in prayer, he requests that he be restored to them soon.

Following your spiritual leaders in submissive obedience is much easier when you are praying for them. Maybe you see needs and shortcomings in their lives. When you do, you are faced with a choice. You can criticize or gossip or you can pray, talk to them and give God time to change them. In other words, you treat them as you expect or want to be treated.

Our author makes his request for himself a part of the flow of this text. After all, if the church there is not pleasing to God in their following of their spiritual leaders, would they really pray that this absent leader be able to come to them, along with Timothy (v.23)?

Maybe whether you pray for your spiritual leaders is really the gut test of following them.

In the Ability to Please God**(v.20-21)**

Now let us be frank. Most of these exhortations are not easy for us. Some will be because of our bent. But for most of us, somewhere one or more of these commands really challenges us in our sanctification. Some find imitating the faith of faithful people easy, others are too individualistic. Some find standing strong against apostasy and error easy, others struggle with wanting to be gentle and loving. Some find praise in worship easy, other struggle with emotions. Some find caring and sharing their lives natural and easy, others are more private and withdrawn. Some find obeying and submitting for the joy of their leaders easy, while others struggle with stiff wills.

For none of us is our weakness and struggle an excuse. We do not get an absence slip for being tardy in pleasing God. So how can we be pleasing to God in every aspect of His perfect will?

This prayer by our author has within it what is needed for godly obedience.

²⁰ Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, ²¹ equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.

Our Divine Resources**(v.20)**

The Author brings all these resources to bear on our need. He brings forward the character of God, the power of the resurrection and the shepherding aspects of the lordship of Christ.

The God of peace – This is an oft used title by Paul in his epistles. We must remember that we are called to please by obeying the God of peace. When we do, we begin to experience the peace of God.

The God who raised Jesus – The measure of the power of God is not in creation or in restoration. It is in the resurrection. There the power of God available to accomplish the purposes of God was most fully revealed.

The Lord Jesus, our great shepherd – Jesus is our good and chief and great shepherd. He is our good and chief and great pastor. He is the one whom we all obey and submit to together. And He is the one whose care and chastening of us is perfect.

In other words, when the conduct that pleases God seems out of reach at certain points, here is God – the God of peace whose resurrection power is available to those whom His Son is pastoring.

His Enabling Request

(v.21a)

To see the heart of this request, it is helpful to underline the main subject and verb. “May God equip you in every good thing to do His will, working in us that which is pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ.”

What is requested

may God equip you

The word “equip” means to build up, shape or prepare fully. So he is praying and asking that God would do all that is necessary in every area so that we are able to do His will. He is asking this of the God whose character and power and care have just been described. Do you think that God answers this prayer? If so, when and for whom did you pray it last?

How it is done

working in us

How is this full equipping or preparing brought about? By God working in us what pleases Him through Jesus Christ. Earlier he said that it was good that we were inwardly strengthened by grace. Well, here it is in other words. We work because God is working in us.

Now we do not passively wait until we “feel” that we are ready. No, we bend our wills and extend our efforts to begin obeying. And we do so because we believe God’s promise that He is working in us with all these divine resources to fully prepare us for the next choice of obedience. This is faith, loved ones. This is believing God in an obeying way.

Its Exalting Result

(v.21b)

When we, believing God is working in us to shape us in every way for to please Him in doing His will, when we choose in the midst of the mess to obey, then Jesus Christ is glorified. Jesus Christ is magnified in the eyes all who see believing obedience. Magnifying Jesus is the goal of believing obedience.

Reflect and Respond

So, what about 1 Timothy 5:17ff? Why are we not looking at that text this morning? I frankly do not want to cloud this talk this morning with money. The double honor in that text is talking about honoring particularly those who labor hard in preaching and teaching with an appropriate salary. But it is a means of showing honor to those who give their lives to preaching and teaching.

May God continue to give us the gift of people who will serve as godly leaders who watch over our souls.

May we be the kind of people who love, honor, pray for and submit to our leadership so that their service is not a burden, but a great joy.

May God then grant us the grace to be pleasing to Him with our church's leaders:

In our attitudes...

Because of their godly character and labor
Because of our Biblical responsibilities
Because of our shared aims and goals.

In our actions...

By honoring godly leadership in the past
By hearing the teaching of the leadership
By heeding those who are leading in the present.

With graced ability...

Under our Divine shepherd
With God's enablement
For His great glory.

Notes

⁴ In Acts 20:31 Paul warns and reminds the elders of the church at Ephesus, "Therefore be on the alert, remembering that night and day for a period of three years I did not cease to admonish each one with tears." He also told the church at Rome in Romans 15:14, "...concerning you, my brethren, I myself also am convinced that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, and able also to admonish one another." Paul wrote the Corinthians, "...not to shame you, but to admonish you as my beloved children." (1 Corinthians 4:14). Admonition is a part of worship in music, "Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms *and* hymns *and* spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God" (Colossians 3:16) and in preaching, "And we proclaim Him, admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom, that we may present every man complete in Christ" (Colossians 1:28). Instructing in holiness is even what we do with those who are under the discipline of the church as in 2 Thessalonians 3:14-15, "And if anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of that man and do not associate with him, so that he may be put to shame. 15 And *yet* do not regard him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother."