



“Obey Your Leaders”
(Hebrews 13:17)

Introduction: The author to the Hebrews has been giving us a variety of exhortations in the closing chapter of his sermon, all of which, of course, are based upon the work of our Lord Jesus Christ, which he has so clearly explained to his readers. He has exhorted us to love our brethren, whether they are near or far, whether they are free or in prison, whether they are in good circumstances or in difficult ones. He has exhorted us to be faithful in our marriages, to be content with the Lord and what He has given us in life, and to imitate those whom the Lord has placed over us as spiritual fathers. He has shown us the great blessing Christ has given to us in that we have an altar in heaven from which God abundantly supplies all of our needs, and how that for us to partake of it, we must be willing to forsake the world. And he has shown us that even though Christ has come and fulfilled all of the Old Testament sacrifices which pointed to Him and has taken away our sins, yet the Lord still requires of us certain sacrifices, namely, that we offer praise to God and seek to do good to all men. This is simply another summary of the whole of the Ten Commandments, for we cannot worship God as we should, nor do good to man, apart from that standard which God has commanded us.

This evening, the author again returns to the subject of our relationship with our leaders. Before, he told us how important it was for us to consider the outcome of their ways and to imitate their faith, since by following them, we are in essence following Christ, for He never changes. Tonight, he emphasizes the importance of recognizing their spiritual authority over our souls, as he tells us that

We are required to obey and submit to those whom He places over us to rule and govern us spiritually.

I. First, he gives us the command, “Obey your leaders, and submit to them” (v. 17).

- A. This recognizes, first of all, that the Lord has appointed spiritual authority in His church.
 1. This shouldn't really surprise us since the Lord has appointed authority in all other spheres of life as well. We could not really function well in any group of people without authority.
 - a. God has ordained that in the state, there should be authority. Paul writes, “Let every person be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God” (Rom. 13:1).
 - b. God has ordained that in marriage, there should be authority. Again, Paul writes, “But I want you to understand that Christ is the head of every man, and the man is the head of a woman, and God is the head of Christ” (1 Cor. 11:3). “Wives, *be subject* to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the church, He Himself *being* the Savior of the body” (Eph. 5:22-23).
 - c. And God has ordained that in the family, there should be authority. Paul writes, “Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. Honor your father and mother (which is the first commandment with a promise), that it may be well with you, and that you may live long on the earth” (Eph. 6:1-3).
 - d. Without authority, there would be anarchy -- *i.e.*, every man doing what is right in his own eyes. God is not a God of confusion, but of order, and if this is true in these areas, how much more is it true in the church, which is His visible kingdom on earth?
 2. This shouldn't surprise us, but on the other hand, it shouldn't worry us either, because the Lord has appointed this authority not for our oppression, but for our good.
 - a. He has appointed shepherds to watch over our souls, to lead us in the right way, and to feed us with the good word of truth.
 - b. Paul told the Ephesian elders, “Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them” (Acts 20:28-30). God's shepherds are your guards, watching over you, so that the wolves which are in the world -- and there are many --

- , don't carry off any of you. They are for your good, not for your harm.
- c. And lest you become afraid that your leaders will lead you astray, after their own way, we must also remind ourselves that this authority Christ gives them is nothing less, nor more, than His own. Peter writes, "Therefore, I exhort the elders among you, as *your* fellow elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ, and a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed, shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to *the will of God*; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness; nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock. And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory" (1 Pet. 5:1-4).
 - d. They do not rule in their own authority, but in Christ's. He has appointed elders in His church, endowed with authority both to teach and to rule, so that He might guide His people according to His will. This shows us how dangerous it is to have a man in the eldership who either doesn't know the will of His master, or who knowing it, is unwilling to guide the flock according to it, because he would rather please man than God. And, on the other hand, what a blessing it is to have God-fearing and knowledgeable men to lead us in the ways of the Lord.
- B. But because it is Christ's authority and not man's, it is to be obeyed. The author writes, "Obey your leaders, and submit to them."
1. When you obey those whom the Lord has placed in His church to rule over you, you are obeying Christ, for it is His Word that they are declaring to you and ministering to you. When it is put like this, it's easier to submit to it, for your love and respect for Christ should be far greater than that which you might have for any man.
 - a. Now practically speaking, when are you to do this? When are you to obey and submit? After all, how often do the elders come to you with any kind of a command?
 - b. Well first of all, by the time this day is over, you should have been commanded and exhorted several times by the minister, in the preaching of the Word. This is the Word of Christ, and it comes with His authority. Therefore you are to obey it, for Christ's sake.
 - c. There will also be times when the elders will believe it to be necessary to correct you, if they see you getting off the straight and narrow path. When you fall into sin, and they come to you with the corrective Word of your Lord, you are to obey and submit to them, just as you vowed that you would when you became members of this church.
 2. But what about those times when it is not clear what the Word of Christ says, and the elders have one opinion and you have another?
 - a. Well, if what the elders believe doesn't contradict any part of the plain teaching of Scripture, and it doesn't cause you to violate your own conscience, so that you would not be sinning by doing what they say, then you need to submit to them in the Lord.
 - b. Certainly, we would all admit that this is what must happen in our families. When there is a dispute between children and their parents, and there is a question as to who is right and who is wrong, those in authority must make the final decision. Children submit to their parents, not parents to their children.
 3. But what if the elders decide on a course which is clearly sinful, or which you believe is sinful?
 - a. Well, you need to remember that Christ has not given to His elders the right to force you to sin, just as He has not given the state, the husband, or the parents the right to do that. He has not given to anyone the right to require anything which God forbids, or to forbid anything which God requires.
 - b. We do need to be careful here, however, that when we take exception to what those in authority believe is right, that we truly believe it is sinful. We may not refuse to submit merely because we don't want to, or merely because it isn't what we think is best. It must clearly be sinful to do or not do what they say, or it is sin on our part to refuse to listen and obey.
 4. But let's also not forget the reason why the elders do what they do, and what it is that Christ has

called them to. They are keeping watch over your souls for good.

- a. They are guarding you, protecting you, seeking to keep you safe from those things which might end up destroying your souls.
- b. They are watching out for false doctrines which might cause you to stray from the truth of Christ. They are watching out for false ethics, which might lead you into sin. They are watching out for sinful practices into which you might fall, which may lead you captive to sin and away from Christ. In short, they are doing everything they can to ensure that you make it to heaven, and that the devil doesn't capture you and take you with Him to hell.
- c. It is very difficult in these days to walk on the straight and narrow path. Satan has so many counterfeits. Sometimes he works through outright lies. At other times, he changes the truth just slightly to make it sound right, but yet causes it to deviate just enough so that at the end of the road, you have missed heaven by a mile. At still other times, he works on your heart, so that even though you know what is right, your affections will lead you in directions which you know are clearly wrong.
- d. Christ knows that the devil is crafty. He knows that the world is full of snares. And He knows that our hearts are full of evil. Therefore, He appoints godly, mature men in His church, those who know the truth, and who by His grace are enabled to walk in it, to guard your souls and to guide them through these pitfalls, all the way to heaven's gates. Listen to them, therefore, obey them as they bring you Christ's Word, and submit to their instruction.

II. This brings us to the second point: What should your and their motivation be in keeping this command? I believe that we can see in this text two motivations, one in this life, and one in the life to come.

- A. There are really two motivations which are biblical, but it is difficult to know which of the two the text is really emphasizing. The question is, does the sentence, "Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you," refer to "for they keep watch over your souls," or to "as those who will give an account." If it is the first, then what the author is saying is that we are to let them watch over our souls with joy and not with grief, for the latter would be unprofitable for us.
 1. What this means is that when we buck and complain against the rulers which God has appointed over us, for no biblical reason, but simply because we don't like the way they do things, then we cause a great deal of grief for them.
 2. And by causing them grief, we not only hinder them in their work, but because we are hindering them in their work of watching over our souls, we are also losing out. We are losing the profit which we might otherwise have by lessening their effectiveness on our behalf. The work of an elder is difficult enough as it is. It is much more difficult when the people they are shepherding are hardening their neck under Christ's yoke.
 3. The exhortation then would be that we must stop rebelling and fighting against their leadership, but submit to them, so that they can get about the business of preparing us for heaven.
- B. But if it is the second, then what the author is saying is when we all are gathered together on the day of judgment to receive the fruits of our stewardship, and the elders who have watched over you give their account with grief because of your stubbornness and unwillingness to submit to their leadership, then that will result in an unprofitable situation for you.
 1. We mustn't forget that one day we will all give an account of what the Lord has given to us. He will look to see whether or not we have been faithful, and He will reward us accordingly.
 2. One of the things He will examine is whether or not we have been faithful to respond to each of His commandments as we should have, or whether we have disregarded them in some measure.
 3. Your elders will give an account on that day of how well they have taught and led you, and will receive a reward accordingly.
 4. You also will be judged as to how well you have followed their teaching and leadership, and will be rewarded accordingly. If it should turn out that they have both taught and led you in the ways of the Lord, but you did not follow, it will not reflect on them, but on you.
 5. Be careful therefore what you do, and how you treat those in leadership over you. It will not only affect their effectiveness to do what the Lord has called them to do here, but it will also affect how the Lord will deal with you on the day of judgment.

6. May the Lord help us to consider the things He has reminded us of this evening, repent of anything we have done which is sinful, and help each other to do the best we can to have a full and complete reward on the day of His righteous judgement with full and complete joy. Amen.