

“The Need for Godly Examples”  
(Hebrews 13:7)

As many of you here know this morning, I have been conducting an officer training class over the last couple of years to help prepare those men in the congregation who believe that they might be called to the office of elder or deacon. Since these offices are so important to your spiritual well-being, and to the overall health and future of this church, I haven't taken this responsibility lightly, but have tried to cover with them all the most important areas of doctrine. This is also why the Session had the men teach the adult Sunday School class, both to find out if they have the gift to teach, as well as if their teaching would be beneficial to build up the church. But now we are approaching the end of this particular phase of training. What will happen next is that the men will be examined, both in their theology and in their personal qualifications by the Session, and then after that, those who are approved will be presented to you both to nominate and to confirm their qualifications and calling to the offices of elder and deacon. This will most likely take place, Lord willing, at the Congregational Meeting in late January. But now since you will be taking a role in confirming the Lord's call on their lives, you need to be instructed as to why the Lord instituted these offices and what the qualifications for them are. And so over the next several weeks I will deal what the Bible teaches in this area, first with the office of elder – why we need them, what they are to do, and what the Lord requires of a man to be an elder – and then with the office of deacon – again, why we need them, what they are to do, and what the Lord requires of a man to be a deacon. This morning, we're going to start with why we need elders, and what I want you to see first is that the Lord has given elders to His church to be an example for His people to follow. The author to the Hebrews writes, “Remember those who led you, who spoke the word of God to you; and considering the result of their conduct, imitate their faith.” Here elders are placed before us both as an example to *remember* and to *imitate*.

The book of Hebrews, as you may recall, was written to a church that was primarily made up of professing Jewish Christians. The problem they were facing was that Rome had just begun to recognize that Christians were not the same as Jews. At first, not really understanding the differences that existed between them, the Romans assumed that Christianity was simply another sect of Judaism, and as long as they believed that, they left the Christians alone, since the Jews had the right to practice their faith without interference. The reason the Romans had granted them this privilege was that they had conclusively demonstrated that they would rather die than abandon their faith. Therefore, Rome had declared their religion to be a legal religion. Now when it became apparent that the Jews were persecuting the Christians, and that Christians really weren't a part of Judaism at all, Rome began to persecute them, requiring them to give up their Christianity and to worship the emperor, or be put to death. Suddenly, these professing Christians were faced with a decision: either to push forward toward Christ – with the possibility that they might die for it – or return to the Jewish ceremonial system – which would keep them safe from the Romans. When you couple this with the fact that Christianity is a very spiritual religion – that for the most part it's internal, that there's not much to see on the outside, that the worship is very simple – while Judaism was very complicated and concrete – that it's very external, that there are all sorts of things to look at, and that it's very ritual oriented – you can see why these Jews were being tempted to return to it and run away from the persecution of Rome. The whole book is one continual exhortation to these Jewish Christians to keep moving forward toward Christ and not to return to the ceremonial system. To turn back

would mean certain destruction. It would be to fall away from the New Covenant, from salvation by grace, from everything the Old Covenant system was pointing toward. But to move forward would secure their salvation in Christ Jesus, forever.

Now one of the key elements to their success in moving forward and reaching their goal would certainly be their leadership. Leadership is extremely important when it comes to reaching a certain end. People tend to follow those who lead them, both in what they say, and especially in what they do – at least they do this if their leadership is respectable. Now we mustn't forget that respectability is a very subjective thing. Sometimes those who aren't worthy of respect are looked up to, and at other times, those who are worthy of respect are looked down on. Obviously this has a lot to do with *who* is making the evaluation. If a person is himself wise and faithful, he will follow wise and faithful leaders. But if he isn't, he won't. Or to put it in other terms, people will follow those whom they believe to be right, but will reject those they believe to be wrong. Now if their idea of what is right is good, then all will be well. But if they are wrong, then they will follow those who are wrong. Our Lord, of course, wants us to have the right idea and follow the right kind of leadership. Just compare the warning Paul gave to Timothy, "For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate to themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires" (2 Tim. 4:3). The author wasn't telling them to look at their leaders to determine whether or not they were faithful. He had already concluded – based on the Word of God, based on God's standard and not the people's – that they were, and that therefore the people should look to them and remember them.

But now what specifically about them were they to remember? He says consider "the result of their conduct." Presumably these leaders not only ruled over this flock according to Christ's will, teaching them, as we saw two weeks ago, to observe all that He had commanded them, but they had also, at least in some measure, lived up to that standard. They had become an example that was worth following. This is why the author was pointing to them. This also is why the qualifications for the office of elder are so high. The Lord wants mature believers as His elders, those who know His will and are experienced in the Christian life, so that His people will have an example that is worth following. After all, if their leaders aren't able to guide their own lives according to God's Word, how will they be able to help others? Literally, the author is saying that they should observe very closely what happens when these men obey the Lord – what the outcome of their faith and obedience is. Well, what do you suppose that outcome was? Certainly, we would have to say that in every case, it caused their lives to be blessed by the Lord. Whenever we obey God's Word, it always results in blessing, because God blesses obedience. Now this doesn't mean that things will always go well for us. Jeremiah obeyed the Lord and was persecuted for it. Isaiah obeyed Him, and the same happened to him. The author to the Hebrews had already reminded his readers of several instances where the saints had been faithful, but had been severely persecuted for being so. But the reason they were persecuted was their faithfulness in ministering to a very obstinate and disobedient people. Now does this mean that obedience leads to blessing or curse? Even though there was persecution, obviously, they were blessed. The author to the Hebrews tells us that they obtained a "better resurrection" (Heb. 11:35). Jesus tells us, "Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 5:10). The author was writing to these Jews to consider the result of the conduct of their leaders to encourage them to do the same. Even though they were persecuted, in the end, they were far happier and far more blessed. They were blessed in this life, with the knowledge that they had faithfully served their Lord. They were blessed with a stronger assurance, because they found that they really were willing to suffer persecution in His name. Certainly, they would receive a

greater blessing in the life to come, because Jesus had promised, “Blessed are you when men cast insults at you, and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely, on account of Me. Rejoice, and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you” (vv. 11-12). The author points them to their leaders and tells them to think about these things, to consider the end of their conduct, what their reward would be, so that they would be encouraged to do the same, no matter what opposition or persecution they might have to face as a result.

But this wasn’t the only reason. He also wanted them to think about their lives so that they might imitate them, that they might imitate their faith, their trust and obedience to the Lord, so that they might also inherit the same blessing. This is the blessing of having godly leadership, that you not only have someone to teach you the Word of God, but also to live it, so that you might have an example to encourage you to do the same. Now it’s true that our heavenly Father has already given us a perfect model in our Lord Jesus Christ, and His example can never be improved upon. But it’s also true that the Lord wants us to have living and mature examples before our eyes. As I said, this is one of the reasons why He gives us elders, and certainly the reason why He wants those elders to be mature. Paul wrote to the Corinthian church, “For if you were to have countless tutors in Christ, yet you would not have many fathers, for in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel. I exhort you therefore, *be imitators of me*” (1 Cor. 4:15-16). Paul pointed to himself as a father not only because he was the one who gave birth to the Corinthians through the Gospel, but also because he was a mature believer. This is why he calls them to *imitate* him. Now did Paul think that his example was better than that of Christ’s? No. He says later in the same letter, “Be imitators of me, just as I also am of Christ” (1 Cor. 11:1). The reason Paul wanted them to imitate him was that he was imitating Christ’s example. It is Christ we are to follow. But His example is best followed when it is lived out in front of our eyes, and Christ has given elders to His church so that we might have that example. This doesn’t mean that there aren’t things in other Christians, in other mature believers, in both men and women, that are worth imitating. It simply means that the Lord wants some who are specifically set aside to be examples to His flock of His love, His mercy and His faithfulness. And let’s not forget that when our Lord calls us to imitate their faith, that we are not merely to mimic what they do, but we are to pray that God would give us the same inward reality of faith and love that moves them to do these things, as well as to do the good works themselves.

Now in closing, the application I will make is simply this: think about those who will be presented before you for your consideration as to whether or not God has called them to be elders. Ask yourselves, Are these men like Christ? Do they not only teach God’s Word in truth, but do they also live it? Are these the kind of examples you can follow, that you want to follow? Now I’m not saying that you should only approve of their calling if they are perfect. If that was true, then no one would qualify but Christ Himself. What I am saying is that you should not approve of them unless they are significantly like Christ. Now I’ll fill out what that means in the next few weeks. But for now consider that you should not approve of the calling of any except those who are like the Savior. If you want to be like Christ, you must choose those who are like Him. Otherwise, you will find that your leaders won’t help you at all, but hinder you. And for those of us here this morning who are elders, let’s not forget that we need to continue to strive to be like Christ, not only for our own sakes, but also for the sake of the flock. Yes, we fail in many ways, and we always will, but by the grace of Christ, we must continue to press forward and encourage the Lord’s flock through a godly example. May our Lord grant us His grace to do so, that we may prepare His people for the day of His judgment. Amen.