

Intentional Submission

Hebrews 13:17

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It's wonderful to see you here, to worship with us. Happy Mother's Day. Let me echo Drew in that to our mothers. We're grateful for you. And it's a privilege to open God's word to Hebrews chapter 13 today. We're back there and we're in verse 17. So if you want to find your way there, Hebrews 13:17.

And as we begin, I want to invite you to imagine a scenario for just a moment. What if you came home one evening to find your house in absolute disarray? Trash is spread all over the house. The refrigerator door has been ripped off of the hinge and there's food all over the place, on the floor, on the walls. The pillows on your couch have been ripped open and the stuffing is all over the place.

The back door has been broken down and there are claw marks on the door and on the door frame. Now, if you walked into that scenario, what would you assume has happened? An animal of some kind obviously is broken into your home.

But now imagine a different scenario. Let's say that you host a party, a birthday party for a friend in your home one evening. The party runs late and you're too tired to clean up the house after the party. So you determine I will go to bed and do it in the morning. But you oversleep your alarm so you don't have time to clean. You intend to do it when you get home from work. But you get home from work and to your amazement everything is spotless. The dishes have been washed. The trash has been taken out. The countertops wiped down. The floor is mopped. Not to mention the light bulb you've been meaning to change has been changed and the cracked window in the front of the house has been replaced.

Now, what would you assume has happened in that scenario? Obviously, a human being of some kind, a friend, a family member, a church member who wanted to bless you has come over to your house and done these projects as a way of blessing you. But you would be sure that a human being has been in your house.

Now, why in the first scenario were we so sure we were dealing with an animal and in the second scenario we're so sure we're dealing with a human being? The answer boils down to one word. It's the word order.

This is why we have the phrase, for example, in the English language that there's no sign of human life or no sign of human activity. Why is it so easy to tell when human beings have been in a certain place? It is because of our creator God. God has placed within us His image. Even after the fall we still exhibit, though not perfectly, the image of God and there is a desire for order.

When we go to a place we make tools and we make even toys. We build houses. We use the natural resources around us for the sustaining of life as well as the enjoyment of life. Order then is part of who God is by nature and He has placed order within us as those made in His

image. And that order filters down not just to us as individuals but the things we're involved in.

The different institutions that God has ordained in this world also have a biblically ordained order to them. Think, for example, of the home and the family. God has given an order to family life and that husbands are to lovingly lead their wives and husbands and wives are to love and lead their children. And when this happens the home functions in the way that God intends for it to and it is a blessing to all of those in that home.

In the same way, what we're going to see today in Hebrews is that God has ordained a structure for His church, that there is to be order in the church. God has not left it without instruction on how it's to operate. It is an expression of the nature of our God.

In fact, God doesn't do anything that's not purposeful and structured and ordered and that certainly is true of His church. Let me just remind you quickly if you haven't been with us about the book of Hebrews as a whole before we dive into chapter 13. Hopefully if you've been here you remember the theme is **The Superiority of Christ**. Over and over again, Christ is better, Christ is superior. And as those who are mesmerized by this Jesus and who have faith in Him, there are certain practices that should be true of each one of us.

We've seen nine of those practices that we'll just quickly review on the screen. For those who love Christ, the superior Christ, we ought to exhibit **brotherly love, intentional hospitality, compassionate care, marital honor, contented trust, faithful imitation**. We should **reject error**. And then last time we saw practice eight and nine, **sacrificial praise and sacrificial obedience**.

Just a quick reminder of where we were most recently in verses 15 and 16. We learned there that while we're no longer under the Old Covenant, we're under the New Covenant, there is a type of New Covenant sacrificial system, but it bears no resemblance to the old sacrificial system, which was physical sacrifices for sin, because that's been completely done away with in the Lord Jesus Christ. He is the ultimate sacrifice. So what we're left with are spiritual sacrifices of praise and worship. Not to earn anything from God, but in response to what Christ has done for us. And so there we saw sacrificial praise ought to be our response, and even sacrificial obedience to God.

But that leads us to verse 17 and a tenth practice this morning. Practice number 10 is **Intentional Submission**. Intentional submission. Read with me Hebrews 13:17: *"Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you."*

In a nutshell, just simply the theme this morning that we're going to unpack is this. **Submit yourself to church leadership that they might serve with joy**. Submit yourself to church leadership that they might serve with joy.

Now, from the very beginning, I want to give two clarifying statements just to make sure we're all on the same page. First, if you're new to our church, I want to say welcome to you and explain that we practice something here called expository preaching, which means we

seek to handle each passage of Scripture in its context. We seek to understand what the original author was teaching, and then we apply that original meaning to our lives today.

That also means that our normal practice is to teach through books of the Bible, verse by verse, and we don't skip any of the verses. I say all of that to say I've not chosen this verse because there's some problem in our church that I am trying to quell or address.

We simply are here providentially because this is where God has brought us today, and so we'll seek to handle this faithfully in its context. But I do want to say clearly our elders and I love you, and this church is a joy. We serve with joy, okay? We serve with joy, we're not groaning, and we thank you for how you are faithful to encourage us.

Secondly, I want to acknowledge that I realize some in our congregation have had pastors and elders who have used this very verse as an excuse for heavy-handed leadership, as a way of baptizing all of their decisions as if they are beyond questioning. That is not what this verse means. It is not what we hold or what I will teach today.

And so if you have some anxiety around this verse because it's how it's been used against you in the past, I hope by God's grace you'll be able to set that aside and let's just handle the word in its context according to its proper meaning.

So let's read it again with that in mind. Hebrews 13:17

"Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you."

There really is one simple overarching point made in this verse, and it's why I've entitled practice number 10 as intentional submission. But that one point is given to us through the use of two commands. He opens the verse with two commands here. We're going to look at them in turn. Command number one is the word obey. **Obey your leaders.** What's interesting though about this Greek word for obey is it's not the most common word for obey that's used by the New Testament authors.

For example, I went to see other places where children, for example, are called to obey their parents. That's a different Greek word. There are passages that speak of slaves obeying their master. That's a different Greek word than the one that's used here. The definition of the term is simply this. It means to be won over as the result of persuasion. That's the actual definition, to be won over as the result of persuasion.

Now, that does not mean that our disposition towards church leadership should be folded arms in which we demand that they first persuade us before we will follow their leadership. Instead, if you're one of my grammar people, I know we have one or two of you at least, this verb is a present imperative. That is, it's a present tense command, and it's in what's called the middle voice.

In Koine Greek, you have the active voice, you have the passive voice, and you have what's called the middle voice. The middle voice is often used to emphasize...we don't do this in English, so it's a little hard to explain, but it often emphasizes that the person doing the

action is, in a sense, doing it to themselves, or they're putting forth their own personal effort rather than a force acting upon them. And that's what's happening here. When he says, essentially, be won over as the result of persuasion, the emphasis of the term is be persuadable. That is, foster in your heart a reconcilable nature, the desire for unity, the desire to come underneath that leadership.

And so it is that it's translated obey or follow. It's not a call to be gullible, it's not a call to be mindless or opinionless, but it is a call for every Christian to have a disposition of the heart that's ready to follow. We're fostering this within ourselves. It's our desire to come under and to follow, to find a way to see it from your perspective, so to speak.

And specifically, we're told to obey our leaders in this opening phrase. That term for leaders is used three times just in chapter 13. We've already seen it once in verse 7. There it's referring to their former leaders. If you were here, you may remember he told them, hey, don't abandon the teaching of your former leaders. They taught you faithfully. Hold on to those truths. He uses the same word here, and he'll use it again in verse 24. In these cases, verse 17 and 24, he's speaking of their current leaders. Obey the current leaders of the church, the elders, the pastors who have been placed there in authority in that local body.

Now the second command is the word **submit**. He says obey your leaders and submit to them. This term is defined this way. It means "to yield to one's authority." So we could translate it yield or give way or, as it is here, submit. This is a present active imperative emphasizing, again, in this sense, this intentional submission. It is an act of the will in which we are to intentionally give our effort to this.

But let's just be honest. Submission to authority is not easy. It's not easy for any of us. It doesn't come naturally to us as fallen human beings. And yet God, in His kindness, has designed the world in such a way that every single one of us is under authority, usually multiple authorities.

Just think about the different authorities in your life and in my life. All of us are under God's authority, even unbelievers, because He's creator. And as Christians, we might say we're doubly so because He's our creator and our heavenly Father. Then we're all also under governmental authority. Many of you have jobs, and therefore you're under the authority, in a sense, of your boss and your leaders in that organization.

The Bible teaches that wives are under the authority of their husbands. Children are under the authority of their parents. And here, church members are under the authority of their local elders. Now, each of those types of authority, other than God, have a certain sphere in which their authority is to be stewarded. But they are real authorities.

We also need to recognize something else that will help this discussion, and that is because of the fall and the introduction of sin, every human being and every human authority structure has been affected by the fall, each one of us individually, and each one of these organizations or institutions.

So just work that out for a minute. What that means is that in every situation in which you have a person called to obey a human authority, what you have are imperfect leaders

seeking to lead and imperfect followers seeking to follow. There's the rub. So what we might say is the reason submission is hard and the reason leadership is hard is sin. Sin is the culprit. Sin is the reason that this doesn't just flow naturally and easily for each of us because prior to the fall, things were not so.

Adam and Eve, they obeyed the authority of God the Father. It was a blessing to them. The home structure where Adam lovingly was leading his wife and she's submitting to his leadership, that flowed without a problem or a concern.

And yet at the fall, what happens? They both reject God's authority. So there's a rebellion to that authority structure, which then results, we see in Genesis 3, of an ongoing conflict between them and the home where now that structure will be difficult. And that has affected every other authority structure since that time.

But let me ask you, Christian, what is our hope for both the penalty and the corrupting effect of sin? The gospel. The gospel of Jesus Christ. This is our hope. That means through the Lord Jesus Christ, there is hope for us individually when it comes to sin, its power and its corruption and its penalty. And there's also hope for the organizations we're a part of if those who are a part of that organization are truly submitted to the authority of Jesus Christ and seeking to live filled by His spirit through His word, following Him.

Now, think of it this way. Of all the institutions, if you will, that exist on the planet, which of them should most be permeated by the effects of the gospel? The church. The church of Jesus Christ, which means the way the leaders and the members of the church interact towards one another should surpass the way, for example, the leaders of our government interact with the citizens and vice versa. Right? There should be more unity, more joy, more fellowship and friendship and mutual seeking of that in the church than any other institution because we are those who by God's grace have been saved by the gospel and transformed.

And so, we are to be a light to the world as Christ's church, both in the sense that we go outside the walls of the church proclaiming the gospel and in the sense that the world should see a difference in the church. Just like they should see a difference in a Christian marriage and a non-Christian marriage, they should see a difference in the way the people of the church act towards one another than they should at work or any other place that they go.

Now, that's only going to happen insomuch as each leader and each member of the church is individually and collectively committed to following the Scriptures, to following the Lord Jesus Christ and seeking His glory. The magnification of the glory of Christ has to be our aim collectively. We have to understand that we're doing something that's bigger than just us here this morning.

And as I studied this this week, I was encouraged because I went and looked at how the words obey and submit are used in other places in the New Testament and something interesting came to the surface. And that is there is a connection for us as Christians in that submission is transformed by the gospel in every relationship in which it is commanded. Let me show you this. Just take, for example, wives to husbands.

Notice this, Colossians 3:18:

"Wives, be subject to your husbands (now notice this), as is fitting in the Lord."

You see the connection. It's not just be submissive to your husbands, it is wives, out of the overflow of your love for Christ, as is fitting for one who is a daughter of Christ who wants to magnify His name, be submissive to your husbands.

What about kids? Children to parents, Ephesians 6:1:

"Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right."

Notice how that changes that authority structure. Notice even slaves to masters, which was common at that time, Colossians 3:23-24:

"23 Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men, **24** knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance. It is the Lord Christ whom you serve."

And so it is, we assume, of course, that the same is true in the church. In every place that a Christian is called to submit to an authority, we now have a higher motivation. And that motivation is the magnification of the glory of our Savior, our Lord. And that should be true here in the church.

Christians, you don't submit yourself to human authorities anywhere, even in the church, because of who those men are in and of themselves. We're fallible, sinful people. You do that ultimately because you love the Lord Jesus Christ. And so you submit to those He said you ought to submit to because you ultimately are submitting to Him.

This is how we're to think about this concept of submission. And we have great examples for this in Scripture because our Lord Jesus Christ, in His humanity, during His earthly ministry, submitted Himself perfectly to the will of the Father. Consider John 6:38 for example Jesus says:

"For I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me."

Peter picks up on this in 1 Peter 2:21-24, speaking of Christ, he says:

"21 For you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps, **22** who committed no sin, nor was any deceit found in His mouth; **23** and while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, (listen to this) but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously; "

That is, how did Jesus endure such suffering and even submit Himself to the hands of sinners who sought to kill him? He did it because He saw himself, ultimately, as entrusting Himself to the heavenly Father, who is the just judge of all the earth. Verse 24:

"24 and He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds you were healed."

Now, we learn several things from the submission of our Lord. We learn, of course, that submission is not a sign of weakness or inferiority. It can't be because God the Son is

perfectly co-equal with God the Father and God the Spirit. They are all God. They are one God. They're all eternal. They all share the same essence and all of the attributes of deity. So He is not, in that sense, inferior to the Father, and yet in His humanity, He perfectly submitted to the will of the Father, meaning it's not a sign of weakness or inferiority. It again expresses the heart of the nature of God who's a God of order.

By the way, if you're here this morning and you don't know the Lord Jesus Christ, hopefully you didn't miss it, but what we just read there in verse 24 is the glorious gospel, the good news of the gospel. He himself bore our sins in His body on the cross so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness for by His wounds you were healed.

This whole conversation of submission to church authority and submission to authorities outside of that is only rightly understood through the lens of the gospel, coming to understand that Jesus Christ, the God-man, lived the perfect life in your place that you and I should have lived all the way to the point that He died on the cross as a sacrifice to pay for sins and then rose again on the third day. That's why the Bible says, for those who would repent and believe in Him and Him alone, they would have salvation.

It begins there at marveling over the gospel, at responding to the gospel, but Christians, if you're already in Christ, I want you to see it doesn't end there. It continues to be a motivation for obedience as we think on the submission of the Son to the father.

Now, with that biblical backdrop in mind, let's talk for a moment a little more practically about this issue of obeying church leadership and let's answer the big question in the room. This is really the question when dealing with any human authority and that is, what are the limits of that authority? In what way is it limited? Because every human authority is limited other than obviously the divine authority of God. Every lesser authority is limited.

And it is important to understand that our authority is only a secondary authority and we see this clearly in Acts chapter four verses 18 to 20 when the apostles are told to stop preaching the gospel by the Jewish leadership. It says:

“18 And when they had summoned them, they commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus.”

(So basically, they say, hey, stop preaching about Jesus, stop preaching the gospel.)

“ 19 But Peter and John answered and said to them, “Whether it is right in the sight of God to give heed to you rather than to God, you be the judge;”

(Basically, they say, listen, you're asking us to obey you instead of God. Tell us if you think that's right, which they would have known that's not right even though they're asking for it.)

“20 for we cannot stop speaking about what we have seen and heard.”

Now there's an implication there, a principle that we can apply to other areas of authority in our lives. And that is in every case, we must always obey God rather than man. Always,

always, always, which means the authority that is delegated to elders is defined between the bindings of this book.

Because here we have the revealed will of God in Scripture. And if any authority, even a church authority asks you to do something that God forbids or they ask you not to do something that God commands, they are out of their depth. They do not have the authority to tell you to do that and you're to obey God rather than men. Those are the guardrails on church authority. They're really the guardrails on all authority.

But in the church, this concept of God's authority as Him being our ultimate authority is in a sense doubly true, we might say. Because if you think about it, we have a special privilege in Christ's church because the church is the only institution on the planet that Jesus Himself has said He is the head of that institution. Of all of them, consider for a moment Colossians chapter one verses 15 to 18. This is a wonderful passage. Speaking of Jesus:

***15** He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. **16** For by Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things have been created through Him and for Him.*

Now before we read verse 18, just consider what this said. Jesus created everything that is in existence. And yet when we come to verse 18, He only says He's the head of one of those things in creation: ***18** He is also head of the body, the church;*

This is the special privilege of being a believer who's in Christ's church. We are a part of this group of redeemed people over which our Savior literally presides as head.

Let me say this very clearly. The church has only one head and it's the Lord Jesus Christ. No other human being on the planet, man or woman, or group of people is the head of the church. Not me, not our elders, not you, certainly not the Pope or anyone else. There is one head of the church. It is the Lord Jesus Christ.

And we as elders and as members have to keep that ever before our eyes. This is not my church. This is not your church. This church and every other true church belongs to the Lord Jesus Christ. And therefore, we are all bound to this inspired book where He's revealed His will to us and how His church is to function. And we dare not step outside of that.

So what are the limits of elder authority? Well, we are bound to this book because we are bound to our head. And therefore, we are stewards of a secondary authority that we might ultimately honor and obey Him.

Now let me just quickly give you a flyby of how Christ has set up the New Testament church. I did a whole series on this. If you'd like to go back and listen to this in more depth, and you can there hear other messages on ecclesiology, the church. But let me just give you a flyby.

The Bible says there are two offices in the church. There's the office of elder. There's the office of deacon. We have currently five elders in our local church and we're in the process of training and raising up deacons. Only one of those offices in the Scriptures is referred to as an authoritative body in the church. And that would be the elders. The deacons serve alongside the elders to help carry out some of the administrative needs of the ministries of the church. But the elders are given the authority to lead the church.

The Bible also outlines there are clear qualifications and gifts that elders must have. You can find those in 1 Timothy 3 and in Titus chapter 1. I encourage you to go and see those. The Bible also explains that God has not ordained that a single elder will lead His church, but a plurality of elders.

You can see this in places like Titus 1:5 where Paul says to Titus:

"5 For this reason I left you in Crete, that you would set in order what remains and appoint elders (plural) in every city (singular) as I directed you,"

And the idea is that each city would have had its own church planted there. And now a plurality of elders is to be raised up in each one of those churches.

We see it implied also in Acts chapter 20 when Paul comes to visit the church of Ephesus or the elders. He says:

"17 From Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called to him the elders (plural) of the church (singular)."

So, elders lead the church. Deacons serve alongside them. And we're to have a plurality of elders, not a single elder. That's a protection, by the way, for the elders and for the church.

Now, what is the elders' role and responsibility? Again, I wish we had time to go through this in more depth. I recommend that series to you. But here's a summarized list of what the Scripture says the elders' role is to be with the passages from which I drew these bullets.

The elders are called

- to teach the Word of God,
- to pray for the members of the church,
- to defend the church against false doctrine and false teachers,
- to equip the church for the use of their gifts in the local body,
- to provide oversight of the local church,
- to shepherd the souls of the local church,
- and to set an example that the members of the church can follow.

And you'll see this in the passages listed below.

(Passages to Consider: Acts 6:4, Acts 20:28-30, 1 Timothy 3, Titus 1, 1 Peter 5:1-3)

So, in summary, what that means is the elders' authority is a delegated authority by God. It's a stewardship given to them so that they're able to fulfill those listed things there on the screen.

Why is it that a plurality of elders is called biblically to be made up of men who know the word of God and whose lives are characterized faithfully by living in submission to the word of God? It is because their role will be to teach the word of God and to come alongside to equip the people to obey and fulfill the word of God.

Now, in the administration of that role, here's where the difficulty comes. Because the elders are clearly called to lead the church in fulfilling the commands of Scripture, where we

can put our finger on a chapter and verse, thus saith the Lord. The elders must obey those and call the church to obey those.

But the elders are also to lead out in the oversight of the church when it comes to matters that the Scriptures do not give us exact direction on how we're to carry out certain commands. In those cases, the elders must apply the biblical principles of wisdom to make those decisions. And this happens all the time. Let me just give you some examples of how churches have to face this.

For example, the Bible commands clearly that the church has two ordinances, baptism and the Lord's table. Now, if we as elders were to stop doing either one or both of those, hopefully, you would raise a hand and say, um, pause, we can't do that. And you would be exactly right. But the Bible does not say the exact nitty gritty details of how each of those is to be administered in every local church.

For example, how often are we going to have baptisms in the church? How often are we going to take communion together? How is it going to be served? Are they going to come down the center aisle? Are they going to go outside the outside aisles? How are we going to do these things? Is there going to be a class you have to go to or an application you have to fill out to be baptized? The elders have to use the principles of Scripture to wisely make choices for that local body. And in my experience, both as a church member and as an elder, this is where the rub often comes.

Most of us, as believers, I hope, see the word of God as authoritative, as inspired, and if it says it, we better do it. The problem comes when we're trying to apply that to a certain scenario and we may have different preferences and opinions on how to best apply that to our circumstance. That's where the difficulty comes. So, elders have to have the boldness and the conviction to lead out in the church to follow the commands of Scripture. They also have to have the wisdom to apply the principles of scripture to those decisions that have to be made that are outside of the clear instruction of scripture when it comes to the exact details of how something is carried out.

Now, the reason that that's more difficult to come to unity over those preference issues is because on those kinds of questions, there are times when there are multiple faithful solutions to a given problem. What I mean is your preference could be this and mine could be this and if we went either way, we would not be sinning against God.

But we have to make a decision and the elders may have made a decision to go this way and you desire to go this way and while that's not wrong, it's not the way we're going and therein lies the conflict. And so what I would say is we as leaders need your prayers. We need your encouragement and honestly, we need your wisdom and we need your insight and we value it highly to know your thoughts and your opinions. We want you to speak to us and talk to us. Don't ever think you cannot come and ask a question or even express a disagreement. That's okay. We're not going to be angry at you for doing that.

But when all is said and done, we also need to take this passage seriously and it does say very clearly, obey your leaders and submit to them. There's no way around the clear wording of this passage. This is what it says and so if the elders ultimately, after prayer and

after discussion, land on a different preference than you do and we're not asking you to do something that's a sin against God or that's disobedient to his word, then we need to apply this passage. Be reconcilable. Be convincible. Foster that in your heart to come under the leadership of the church and in so doing, honor your savior.

But as is often the case, it does bring up the question, why? Why has God called us to do it this way? Thankfully, the Scriptures are exhaustive in their instruction and we're given here in this verse two reasons to obey elder pastoral authority. Reason number one is **The Role of Church Leaders**. The role of church leaders. Look back at verse 17:

"Obey your leaders and submit to them, for (here's the reason) they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account".

They keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account.

Now this is a verse that is both softening and sobering all at the same time. It emphasizes both the present outworking of the elder's role and the future outcome of the elder's role.

Throughout the Scriptures, you're likely aware that spiritual leaders are referred to as shepherds, both in the Old Testament and the New Testament, predominantly so in the New Testament. They are pictured as a shepherd who is to be loving and to be caring and to watch over the flock that is given to them.

In fact, Jesus used this illustration to distinguish Himself from the unfaithful leaders in His generation in John 10. He says I am the good shepherd. Why was He the good shepherd? Because He laid down His life for the sheep. When the other religious leaders of the day were using the people and abusing the people for their own benefit and running away when trouble came, Jesus says, no, I'm the Good Shepherd and I lay down My life for the sheep.

This is the language that Jesus uses in His restoration of Peter. If you remember that intimate scene, Peter has denied Jesus recently, at this time, three times. After the resurrection, on one of those appearances, Jesus takes him graciously aside.

And remember this conversation, John 21:15-17:

*"15 So when they had finished breakfast, Jesus *said to Simon Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love Me more than these?" He *said to Him, "Yes, Lord; You know that I love You." He *said to him, "Tend My lambs." 16 He *said to him again a second time, "Simon, son of John, do you love Me?" He *said to Him, "Yes, Lord; You know that I love You." He *said to him, "Shepherd My sheep." 17 He *said to him the third time, "Simon, son of John, do you love Me?" Peter was grieved because He said to him the third time, "Do you love Me?" And he said to Him, "Lord, You know all things; You know that I love You." Jesus *said to him, "Tend My sheep."*

Now it's interesting. Keep that scene in mind and now consider what Peter is inspired to write to elders when he writes 1 Peter chapter 5. Verse 1:

"Therefore, I exhort the elders (elders, pastors) 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, 2 shepherd the flock of God among you,"

(He passes on that command that was given to him. If you love me, care for my sheep. And he says, Elders, if you love the Lord Jesus Christ, shepherd the sheep. And what will that shepherding look like?)

"exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness; 3 nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock. 4 And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory. "

So the call of the elder then, when you think about the role of the elder, is to love Christ and as an overflow of that love, to shepherd and care for His people. Loving and caring for the people of Christ's church is at the heart of the elder's role. And notice the emphasis here in verse 17 is that this is not so much a physical caring for the sheep, it's a soul care. He says,

"for they keep watch over your souls."

The illustration is so helpful because when we think about the way a physical shepherd would care for his physical sheep, they know each of those sheep. Often, they're bringing them in and they're examining them to make sure their physical bodies are well.

In a spiritual sense, the elders are to know the sheep in their church. They're to know the condition of their soul to the best of their ability and to come alongside and to equip and care for and to teach and to pray for those souls.

The author's point is that we can use this information as a motivation for submitting to our leaders by just reminding ourselves, wait a minute, when our hearts are struggling with a certain decision the elders may have made or our preferences are not aligning exactly with their preferences, we remind ourselves, these men love me. They are shepherding my soul. They pray for me. They care for me. Though we may disagree, I know their heart and their desire is for my good and not for my harm. That's the idea. This is a reason. It's a way of motivating yourself to be convincible, to be reasonable, to come underneath the authority of your local church leaders.

Listen, we freely admit, I freely admit, we are not perfect men. We do not make perfect decisions. We cannot do that. We are fallible men. And so this is a tall order. It's a tall order to lead. It's a tall order to follow. But by God's grace and the empowering of His spirit through His word, we can, by God's grace, be a church that's unified and that is faithful in what God has called us to be. Use this information to encourage your heart.

But also, he reminds us of something else here. And that's the fact that elders are accountable to a higher authority. He says:

"for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account."

Now, for every elder in the room and anyone who would aspire to eldership, this should catch your attention. This should wake you up. This is a sobering statement. They will give an account.

And another way to comfort your heart as a church member, if you're not in alignment with a decision that's made, that's not a sinful issue or false doctrine, but it's a preferential issue, the way you can comfort yourself is to say, ultimately, I can lay that at the feet of our Chief Shepherd because He will hold them accountable if that turns out to be a faithless decision, a poor decision. Guess who ultimately will make all things right? It's the Chief Shepherd who knows all and sees all.

The Bible doesn't give us all the details of exactly how this accounting will be played out, but the Bible is very clear an accounting will happen. He will hold them to an account as Peter reminded us at the verse four of chapter five, that the Chief Shepherd is coming and He's coming in two meanings. He's coming to give gifts, to reward so to speak for faithful service, but the Bible is also clear He's coming to hold us accountable.

I want to be very careful here. The Bible distinguishes between a judgment for believers and a judgment for unbelievers. Christians, if you're in Christ, there's no condemnation in the Lord Jesus Christ. We will never be judged again for our sin. Our sins are paid for and done, but the Bible is clear that there is a judgment that we call the Bema seat judgment of when we're talking about rewards for faithfulness.

It's described in part here in first Corinthians chapter three verses 10 to 15. I like this passage because it's a helpful way of thinking about how this works. Paul says:

10 According to the grace of God which was given to me, like a wise master builder I laid a foundation, and another is building on it. But each man must be careful how he builds..."

Think about that. So we're talking here about ministry, serving Christ. We've got to be careful how we serve the Lord, how we build upon this foundation.

11 For no man can lay a foundation other than the one which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.

12 Now if any man builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw,"

Notice the first three descriptions are of non-flammable objects. The other three are all things that will burn in a fire. That's going to come into play here. He's saying, be careful what materials you use in your service of the Lord. Verse 13:

13 each man's work will become evident; for the day will show it because it is to be revealed with fire, (That is, it's going to be put through the test of fire) and the fire itself will test the quality of each man's work. 14 If any man's work which he has built on it remains, (that is, it's not burned up by the fire) he will receive a reward. 15 If any man's work is burned up, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire."

That is, he's not losing his salvation, but he may lose the reward for his service if it was not done in accordance to the will of the Father.

All believers, including elders, will be included in this judgment as it relates to faithful service and rewards. All of our desire is to hear, well done, my good and faithful servant, but you can rest easy knowing that ultimately it is our Savior's job to do the judging in this sense

and to hold accountable and to either reward or to take a reward away. It's a warning that all of us should heed, especially the elders of the church.

But there's one more final reason here as we begin to draw this to a close that we ought to obey and submit to the leaders in the church and that is **The Encouragement of Church Leaders**, the encouragement, not only their role, but the encouragement. It says here:

"Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief (literally with groaning), for this would be unprofitable for you."

Now, I actually like the translation better of the Legacy Standard Bible and the Holman Christian Bible because there's a particular wording that I think is important. Listen to the Legacy Standard. *"Obey your leaders and submit to them for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account so that they will do this with joy and not with groaning."* Those words, "so that", are literally there in the Greek text which emphasizes this is not a new main point the author's making. It's a second reason for doing the main point of obeying and submitting to the leader's authority that it might bring joy to them.

I do want to say that both the elders and the members in the church play an important role when it comes to the fulfillment of the final part of this verse. As elders, it's our desire to lead in such a way that it is easy to follow us. We want to lead with humility, with transparency and with wisdom to make it as easy as possible to follow our leadership.

That's our part to play, but the members of the church play a part as well in that it ought to be your desire to be easy to lead. Not to have to be drug along or convinced at every turn through a debate but to come under the leadership of the church. Our aim is to be easy to follow. Your aim is to be easy to lead. And when we work together in that, you know what? Leadership is a joy. It's fun.

But when it's not that way, it can become a time of groaning. Literally the word is of a sigh. Kind of a (sigh). That's what the word means. And if you're a parent, you know all about that groaning, don't you? You know what it's like to come home after work. You're excited to be with the family, have dinner, maybe have a game night or watch a movie or do something fun and go out but there's one or maybe more of the children that's just in a mood.

Dinner's not good enough. They don't want to play the game that everybody else wants to play. They don't want to watch the movie. And nobody ever wants to do what they want to do and it just sort of sucks all the life. And as parents, it's like, (sigh) could have been a real fun night. Could have been fun. You're sucking all the joy out of our time together. That's what the word means. A groaning, a sighing, grief.

Now I do want to reiterate, this is not how I feel as your pastor. It's not how your elders feel. Okay, I'm describing the passage. We're not sighing. We're not groaning. We're very happy in our leadership and you are wonderful to lead.

But you may have the question, what are the kinds of things that can tempt us towards sighing and groaning in this sense? And so I'm just going to give you a short list of the kinds of things that can cause this.

- One would be refusing to put effort towards spiritual growth. As Paul said, he has no greater joy than to see his spiritual children walking in the Lord. When you're encouraging and teaching and praying for and there's no effort. There seems to be no desire to grow. That's a groaning moment.
- Hardening your heart towards God. It's grieving to see people harden their hearts and stiffen their necks against the clear teaching of Scripture.
- Not assuming the best of the elder's motives and becoming embittered towards us without even a conversation to talk through those things.
- Refusing to address your concerns to an elder directly but freely talking to others about them. That's a temptation to groaning.
- Promoting your opposing views to others in the church either actively or passive aggressively. A worship pastor friend of mine told me once that years ago their elders made the decision to introduce drums as an instrument they were going to use in worship and there was a segment of people who really found that distasteful, so to make it known they would stand in the lobby during music with their hands folded and wouldn't enter the church. And then when music stopped they would go in and sit for the preaching as a way of passive aggressively protesting this use of drums. That's something that makes you groan. Makes you sigh.
- And then I would say responding to preferential matters with the same passion as essential doctrinal matters. That is only having one voice, only having one response, where the color of the carpet is as held tightly by you as the doctrine of the Trinity. We need to be careful that we understand the realm that we're arguing in. Are these preferential matters or are these truly doctrinal concerns?

I think many of you know my dad was a pastor and he used to say to me son, I have three categories of things. I have things I'd give my lunch for, I have things I'd give my house for, and I have things I'd give my life for. And it's good to know which one of those we're talking about when we're talking about disagreements and it gives us guidance in how passionately we should stand on that issue.

So what should you do if you have a question or a concern or a disagreement with the elders which is likely to happen, is bound to happen, and we want to know your questions, we want to know your concerns. We want to be able to talk through those things. What should you do? Let me give you a guide here and this really is a guide for how to address an authority in your life in any realm.

- But one, prayerfully evaluate your own heart and the spirit of Matthew 7, that is take the log out of your own eye before you take the speck out of your brother's eye.
- Assume there must be an explanation or information behind the decision you're unaware of. This is how we assume the best. There's got to be more to this, there's probably some details that I'm not in the know of as to why they made this decision.

- Remember that your leaders, like you, are fallible and need for you to have grace with their weaknesses. The truth is we're not perfect and we may have made a poor decision and we would ask for your grace in those times.
- Remember that the elders love Christ, they love you, and they're seeking to make decisions that honor Christ and care for your soul. While we're not perfect, I will say this is our aim. We genuinely are seeking to lead in such a way that is honoring to Christ and a benefit to your spiritual life.
- Approach an elder privately with a spirit of reconciliation, that is approach an elder with the true desire to come under, to say hey, we're going to leave this conversation convinced, reconciled, and on the same page. Have that as the motivation.
- Express your concerns or questions with love honesty and humility and
- Remember Christ is the Chief Shepherd and each of us will give an account to Him.

This is how we can rest at the end of the day if the elders go a different way on a preferential matter than you would desire. Leave it in the Lord's hands and this is how we obey Him.

Finally, there's one other phrase I want to mention quickly at the end of the verse. He says: *"let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you."* That is, it's unprofitable for you and the rest of the body when the leaders are leading with sighing and groaning because there's disunity, hardness of heart in the body. Instead, willingly come under them for the glory of Christ and that will be profitable for you, it will be profitable for the body as a whole as it promotes unity among us.

And so as we draw this to a close, really by way of application I just have one thing for you. **Consider Your Perspective of Church Authority.** Honestly, do a heart evaluation. What is your current perspective?

I know some of you come from situations where you've been deeply wounded by previous leaders in your churches either because of heavy handedness in their leadership or because perhaps a leader you respected turned out to not be who you thought they were in their character. If that's happened to you, I'm deeply grieved and sorry for that, but I do want to encourage you to guard against allowing the pain of that situation to cause you to be fundamentally suspicious of all church leadership. This can be an unfortunate byproduct of that pain, to sort of keep all church leaders now at an arm's length and assume there must be something that they're hiding.

Listen, Christ is still building His church, which means He's still raising up truly godly leaders who are not perfect men but who are faithful men who genuinely love Him and genuinely love His church and so you can trust your Savior.

Let me ask you, do you frequently struggle with an anti-authoritarian spirit? Is that one of your struggles in life? Would you say that you're a person who's easy to lead? This ought to be the goal based on this passage. Be convincible, be easily persuaded by those who you know are lovingly seeking to care for your soul, and as we seek to be easy to follow and you seek to be easy to lead, the Lord will use all of that for His glory to create a church which I

believe is what He's done here that is unified and that is a joy to be a part of and a joy to lead.

At the end of the day, we as elders and you as members are just all seeking to do our part to serve our Savior that He might be glorified as He continues to build His church up to a mature man until He returns. May we only do that more and more faithfully with each passing day.

Let's pray together. Lord God that is our prayer. That's our desire, to be a church that honors You in every way, in our structure, in our teaching, in our service and fellowship even, in our thoughts towards one another and the motives of our heart towards one another. God, help us to honor You, help us to love You. Continue to build Your church not only here at NBC but around the world. Save Your people, sanctify Your people, glorify Your name, until You come. We thank You for the privilege of being Your people and having You as our head. We would want it no other way. It's in Christ's name we pray, amen.