

The Joy of Obeying Elders

Hebrews 13:17-19

Intro: Have you ever take one of those tests where you are asked to identify which item doesn't fit? Maybe you are shown a picture of apple, a banana and a basketball. Which item doesn't belong?

Well if you put this text in with the past two texts - this would be the basketball. At least at first glance. Some of you have commented how much you enjoyed the past two messages that's not surprising to me, given the elevated grandeur of the topics.

Verses 13-14 contains this majestic call to discipleship.

"Therefore let us go to him outside the camp and bear the reproach he endured. ¹⁴For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come."

Verse 15-16 dealt with the nature of pilgrim worship. Those are grand themes! Those are truths that will stir your heart. "Obey your leaders and submit to them" just doesn't have the same ring; doesn't have the same natural lift. At least at first glance.

But what if the Holy Spirit, who inspired these words, knew what he was doing? What if verse 17 follows those grand themes on purpose? What if these words fit perfectly with the topics of Jesus and worship because they are continuing the same theme?

And that, of course, is exactly what is going on. This entire letter is about the Christian pilgrimage – a pilgrimage that is defined by 'looking to Jesus', seeking that better country. "Here we have no lasting city" and there we have a reigning Savior. There is such great glory ahead of us. The greatest tragedy that could befall us is that we would fail to reach it. These believers are weary and some are tempted to quit the pilgrimage. But God has given them a great help – he's given them men whom he has gifted and called to watch over their soul.

I. The Joy of Obedience

"Obey your leaders and submit to them".

If we are honest, obedience and submission do not sound like happy words to most of us. We live in a culture that sees submission and required obedience as a violence against personhood and freedom. Justice Kennedy enshrined the autonomous spirit of the age in his infamous Obergefell declaration,

"At the heart of liberty is the right to define one's own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe and of the mystery of human life."

The Devil himself could not have said it better. In fact, it's nearly precisely what he said to Eve in the Garden of Eden when he tempted her to sin. Has God really said? Don't let God hinder your full human potential. And ever since Adam and Eve decided to define their own concept of meaning and ate the fruit which God had forbid, the defining characteristic of our ruined race is disobedience and the death God promised would follow.

In stark, glorious, contrast, the defining truth of the Christian is the glory of obedience. We rejoice in the good news of a Second Adam who conquered sin and death and hell through obedience!

Romans 5:19 For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous.

Praise God for the glorious obedience of Jesus! By his obedience he rescued sinners, setting us free from the bondage of disobedience! A Christian is someone who, by the power of the Holy Spirit and the gift of a new heart, embraces the glory and goodness of obedience.

Peter – "We must **obey God** rather than men." (Acts 5:29)

Obedience and submission may sound like something we **have** to do – but in fact, it is something we get to do! The more your mind is aligned with the Word of God, the more your heart is attuned to the Spirit of God, the more you will desire the blessedness of full obedience and submission to God.

One of the primary joys of heaven will be the joy of full, complete, willing, exhilarating obedience – where our heart and soul and mind and strength vibrates in perfect tune with the character of our Holy, heavenly Father.

So, Hebrews 13:17 is not a 'hard saying' requiring an unpleasant thing. It is a loving command from Christ your King, who is leading you into the liberty of glad obedience to Him.

II. The Blessing of Spiritual Leadership

"Obey your **leaders** and submit to **them**."

Christ has appointed elders, (ruling elders and teaching elders) to lead His church. And he commands those who belong to Him to gladly obey and submit to that leadership.

But notice how the writer includes words and truths to enhance our joy in this calling.

"They keep watch over your souls as men who must give an account to God"

Two things, specifically, we need to see.

1. The elders duty. The duty of an elder (teaching and ruling) is to watch over your soul. The idea of 'watching over' is taken from the fields where shepherds would watch over the flock. A good shepherd would be committed to leading the sheep into green pastures and pure water. He would watch for diseases in the flock and bind up wounds. He would be on the look-out for wolves, and use his rod to beat them off if need be. John Currie once summarized the job of elders – "Feed sheep. Fight wolves."

God calls his people sheep. It isn't necessarily a compliment. Of all the livestock, sheep are most helpless, most in desperate need of a shepherd. On our own, we are destined for ruin. In the flock we can still easily be led astray. Do you have any sense of how dependent you are upon faithful shepherds keeping watch over your soul?

Think then, of how highly you ought to regard these men.

Most of you greatly appreciate and respect your doctor because they watch over your body. They diagnose diseases and prescribe cures or helps so that you can live a healthy life.

Most of you value the local police officers, at least you should. They protect your property and work to ensure your safety. They are willing to put themselves in harm's way to protect you.

I remember, when we were living in Chino, hearing a knock on the door at 2am, and then seeing someone sneaking through the back yard, heading for the garage. I called the police and they were quickly there and caught the man as he stealing things out of the garage. I was very happy to have them there!

If you are in legal trouble of some sort, it is wonderful to have a lawyer who can care for your legal rights, guide you through the system and advocate for your well-being.

But doctors and lawyers and policeman are all protecting passing things. Your body will decline and die. Your property will be consumed or go to someone else. Your legal rights will not matter to you when you are in the grave. Your soul is immortal. When the writer says "they watch over your soul" he means, 'they watch over your eternal interest, your eternal wellbeing, your eternal safety, your eternal blessedness and happiness. How highly then should you value these men whom God has given you to care for your eternal soul??

2. The Father's Desire

And that's the second thing we need to see. When the writer says, "**as men who must give an account**" he wants us to see God's hand, Gods' purpose in all this. Elders and pastors do not exist by accident or social convention but by divine intention. They are called by God and are accountable to God. You should sense the Father's deep, protective love for you in this.

Listen to Paul's charge to the elders of the church in Ephesus which we read in Acts 20: 28.

²⁸ Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, *in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers*, to care for the church of God, *which he obtained with his own blood*.

The church is God's most treasured possession in all the universe. It is the only blood-bought item he owns. And He calls specific men to lead and shepherd and watch over this most treasured possession. Why? Because he loves you and he know that you need it. He knows we are prone to wander. He knows that the Devil is constantly on the prowl seeking to devour. He knows that we need to be continually led to the green pastures of gospel grace. God knows that we need someone to care for our soul – to diagnose our diseases, bind our wounds and fend off the wolves that surround us.

Why call fallible men to this incredible task? Why not angels? They would be much wiser, much holier. Why not angels? Because God knows we need spiritual leaders who are sinners like us and know the way to the cross.

When you see your pastor's and elders, you should see the loving hand of your heavenly Father. He bought you with the blood of His Son and has provided for you men who are called by Him, who are accountable to Him, for your eternal well-being. There is no one on earth you should more gladly receive and obey and give glad submission to than the men God your Father has given to you to lead this church and care for your soul.

That doesn't mean your leaders don't err at times. We do. We will sin. We will fail. And if we ever lead you contrary to the Word of God – refuse to obey that. Call us to repentance. Pray that we will have the ability to see it and the humility to confess it and the grace to grow from it. When you disagree with a decision – feel free to speak with us. But ask yourself, end of the day – what will be more pleasing to your Heavenly Father: Your objections or your obedience? What should be your lean: protest or submission? If obedience is a beautiful mark of the believer's life and if elders are Gods' gift to care for your soul – there should be a happy lean towards following their leadership. That lean carries the promise of joy for your elders and gain for you.

III. The Promise of Gain

"Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you."

A. Let Them Lead with Joy

"Let them, the elders and pastors, watch over your souls with joy, and not with groaning."

Boys and girls, do you know what brings joy to your parents' heart? When they see in you a happy, submissive heart. When you say, "OK mom" and then do what she's asked without grumbling or complaining. Do you know what's even better? It's when you do something kind

and good without being asked – like picking up things or being kind to your sister – just because God wants you to.

The joy of an elder is when we see you, the congregation, living your life with increasing humility and obedience and joy – striving to love one another because that’s what God wants you to do.

I love going on house visiting, hearing of families gathering at the dinner table, opening up Gods’ word. Coming to church every Sunday ready to hear the voice of Jesus in the Word, willing to confess their sin, longing for growth and godliness. I love hearing stories about vibrant small groups and Bible studies. I love hearing about ministries that begin out of the passion in someone’s heart to bless others in the name of Christ. I love that the HS kids sit up front in the evening service. I love hearing the little ones sing. I love hearing testimonies where Gods’ people confess their sin and cast themselves upon Jesus for his grace. These are the joys of your elders and we want you to know that we see, and we praise God for you.

But there’s also groaning. The groaning happens when we see blindness, stubbornness, belligerence. When we see marriages slowly disintegrate because of unrepented patterns of sin and people weak in their faith because of inattention to the means of grace. The groaning happens when people refuse our spiritual counsel and care less about our calling, before God, to watch over their soul. We groan when people blow off our spiritual authority – because it wounds their own soul. If you refuse and reject the spiritual counsel of God’s leaders, contrary to the specific command of Christ, how are you not refusing and rejecting Christ Jesus himself? What will you say to Him on that great and awful day?

And that’s the point the author is making when he says, don’t make your elders groan – *“for that will be of no advantage to you.”* There would be no benefit to you. If your shepherds have cause to groan over your life, to grieve your stubbornness, to sigh over your foolishness – how could that possibly be to your gain either in this life or the life to come? To ask the question is to answer it. It couldn’t be.

B. The Joy of the Congregation

But here’s the beauty of this passage. Notice how the writer appeals to your spiritual interests. The Lord **wants** your advantage. He wants your gain, your benefit! Exactly like an earthly father would. Jesus, enthroned at the right hand of God, wants to see you thrive and grow in grace. He wants you to come to the doorway of the eternal city loaded with the fruits of grace. Don’t you want that too?

Application: How you respond to your pastors and elders has a direct relationship to your gain in this world and the world to come. Obey your leaders and submit to them. It's a direct path to your spiritual flourishing and your eternal gain.

1. Submit when the submitting is hard. There is a spirit in West Michigan, of independence. We have a lot of self-made businessmen. Gifted, accomplished, people. We have people who are used to making things happen, used to getting things done, used to taking the lead. And it can be tempting to assume, in your own mind and heart, a position above your elders. A sense that you don't really need to obey and submit to them.

A sign of spiritual maturity in any church, including this one, is the appreciation the congregation has for its elders and pastors and the willingness displayed to follow their lead. If Jesus was willing to lay aside his divine privileges in order to rescue us - The sign of God at work in this body is when gifted, wise leaders in their own right, happily submit to their ordained leaders – because they love Jesus and they are deeply appreciative of the men Christ has given to care for their soul.

2. As you know, the Session has some important decisions to make. We have a variety of options before us, and we will share those options with you at the Congregational Forum this morning. I didn't pick this text for this occasion. We've just come to it. But I think it's helpful. These could easily be a time of discord for us. The direction we take, the decisions we make, may not be universally applauded. But it is exactly here that the Lord speaks to us. Obey and submit, as to the Lord, not only when you agree, but even when you don't. Do it for Christ's sake. Do it because he commands you to. Do it for your elder's sake – they are striving to do what is best for your soul. Do it for your sake – your glad submission is to your eternal advantage.

Isn't the Lord good to us in these things? God has blessed this church with elders who take their calling with utmost seriousness. God has blessed the elders with a congregation that is eager to learn and grow in the grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ. Let's never take these things for granted. Let's praise the Lord for all of it – as we continue following our Lord in this world, looking for the world to come.