



INTRODUCTION

Hebrews 13:17-19

The letter to the Hebrews is almost at an end. The writer is not sure he will ever see them again. He asks them in verses 18-19 to pray for him and his team so that they might, if God wills, be restored to this church for ongoing fellowship. But that may not happen. Where then will the people look for spiritual leadership? The answer is that they will look to their leaders in the church.

So it's not surprising that in this last chapter the writer refers to the leaders of the church three times (and not till now in the letter). Verse 7: "Remember those who led you, who spoke the word of God to you; and considering the result of their conduct, imitate their faith." Verse 24: "Greet all of your leaders and all the saints. Those from Italy greet you." And our text, verse 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."

So we may take as a given that this church had leaders. And we may also assume that this writer of Scripture approved of that fact and wanted to strengthen the relationship between the people and their leaders. He is almost finished with his influence through the letter, and so he begins to turn the people's attention in this last chapter to their leaders. When he is finished, the leaders will still be there and will carry on the work of being teachers and examples to the people...

...The way this teaching relates to all that has gone before in this letter is simply this: When the book has been read in the congregation, leaders live it and teach it and apply it to the lives of the people; and people watch them do this and imitate them and become responsive and compliant to their leadership. In other words, the Biblical truths - about Christ and his saving work and the power of faith in future grace - that we have been savoring are meant to be embodied in the leaders of this church so that you see them lived out, and hear them taught, and have God-centered models to imitate and God-centered teachings to follow.¹

Open it

1. Are you more comfortable leading others or following someone else? Why?

¹ Sermon excerpt by John Piper entitled "Obey Your Joyful Leaders, Part 1" found @ <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/obey-your-joyful-leaders-part-1>

Read it

Hebrews 13:17-19

Explore it

2. What two things are Christians called to do when it comes to their leaders?
3. What role do church leaders play in the life of the church?
4. In healthy churches how should leaders feel about serving in the church?
5. What does the author ask the Hebrews to pray for?

Apply it

“Take Me to Your Leader”

An earlier verse in this chapter (13:7) referred appreciatively to this church’s former leaders, and there are three references to local Christian leadership; these men are to be remembered (13:7), obeyed (13:17) and greeted (13:24). We have already had an opportunity to discern the pattern of leadership most approved by our author. Faithful leadership in the Christian congregation should be both didactic and exemplary. The leader must teach ‘the word of God’ and have a faith that is worth imitating (13:7). The writer now goes on to emphasize some additional qualities which he also considers to be of supreme importance. Those whose responsibility it is to have oversight in the local church, or in any group where Christians meet, need to recognize that their leadership is pastoral, accountable and dependent.²

6. What characteristics do you look for in a leader and what about these things make it easy for you to follow?

² Brown, Raymond. The Message of Hebrews (The Bible Speaks Today Series) . InterVarsity Press. Kindle Edition.

The Greek words for “obey” and “submit” mean to obey and submit! The difference, if any, between the two words is that obedience implies going along with direction or commands, whereas submission involves an attitude. You can obey outwardly while seething with anger on the inside, but you aren’t submitting. Submission implies a sweet spirit of cooperation that stems from trust. You trust that the leaders have your best interests at heart, and so you go along with them.³

7. The author expects a whole-hearted desire to follow the leaders in the church. What makes following the lead of someone else so difficult within the church?

8. Why does the author of Hebrews tell the church that outward obedience isn't enough when it comes to following?

“Never Surrender”?

The word “obey” carries the idea of being persuaded. Lane notes, “The specific quality of the obedience for which [obey] asks is not primarily derived from a respect for constituted structures of authority. It is rather the obedience that is won through persuasive conversation and that follows from it.”⁴

9. How does a leader “properly” persuade others to follow him? In what ways can this be abused both by the leader and the congregants?

³ Sermon excerpt by Steve Cole entitled “Your Duties Toward Church Leaders” found @ <https://bible.org/seriespage/lesson-56-your-duties-toward-church-leaders-hebrews-1317-19-22-25>

⁴ William L. Lane, *Hebrews: Word Biblical Commentary*, 2 vols. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1991), 2:554.

10. Do church members have to accept what leaders say and obey them without questioning? What kind of questioning and checks & balances can we do without causing groaning?

In our text, leaders is plural. The New Testament is clear that there is to be a plurality of elders over the local church (Acts 14:23; 20:17; Titus 1:5). Plural leadership is a safeguard against the abuse of authority. When all of the elders in a local church have wrestled through an issue biblically and in prayer, and they all agree, they are not infallible, but there is a fair chance that they are right. There should always be room for biblically-based discussion of issues (Acts 15), but when the elders come to a consensus, the church should follow their leadership, unless it is clearly against Scripture on a major point of doctrine.⁵

11. How is having a team of leaders helpful to the congregation as well as the individual leader? What drawback might come from such a leadership structure?

12. What types of decisions are being made by your church leaders? Are there any that seem harder to follow than others? Why?

⁵ Sermon excerpt by Steve Cole entitled “Your Duties Toward Church Leaders” found @ <https://bible.org/seriespage/lesson-56-your-duties-toward-church-leaders-hebrews-1317-19-22-25>

“Presence”

Godly church leaders help church members by keeping watch over their souls (Heb 13:17). The Greek word translated “keeping watch” (*agrupneo*) means “to keep oneself awake,” and thus, “to keep watch, guard, or care for”. The image was drawn from shepherds keeping watch over their flocks. Shepherds had to stay alert in order to guard their flocks from predators. They had to know the sheep and observe them carefully enough to know when a sheep was sick or missing. They had to go after the strays and try to restore them to the flock. They had to lead them to pasture and clean water (see Ezek. 34:1-16).

These tasks require the discernment to know where people are at spiritually and when they are heading toward spiritual danger. Leaders must love God and people enough to have the courage to confront those who are drifting. While you can only lead those who are willing to be led, godly leaders must always make the effort. **The task is more difficult in our day when there are many different churches in town. If people get upset at one church, or if the leaders there try to confront some sin in their lives, they just move down the road to another church that welcomes them. Sadly, they usually carry their problems with them.**⁶

13. In what ways do you think the leaders are staying up late to “keep watch over your soul”? What advice or encouragement could you give to those with this responsibility?

14. In what areas of life must leaders be concerned about when it comes to the flock? How do they go about knowing the condition of the souls of the people they oversee?

⁶ Sermon excerpt by Steven Cole entitled “The Responsibilities of Church Leaders”, found @ <https://bible.org/seriespage/lesson-58-responsibilities-church-leaders-hebrews-137-17-19-22-25>

“Joy”

The final phrase substantiates what has been said above. The congregation is to yield to its leaders in such a way that they will give an account “with joy and not with grief.” “The writer is eager for those leaders to have the joy of a willing and loyal response from the men and the women they serve.”

Again, if the congregation properly loves its leadership, causing them grief will not be their pursuit. Rather, the congregation will consider the ministry of their leaders and will desire to bring them joy. And if the leaders are joyful, then most likely so will be the ones they are leading. Perhaps this is what is behind the caveat “for that [causing leaders grief] would be unprofitable to you.”⁷

15. What types of things can you do that will make your leader's job a joy/burden? Why does making the leader's job a burden hurt the church in the long run?

“Shine”

The writer begins simply: “Pray for us” (v. 18). The good leader is the leader who knows his limitations. And because he knows that he is made of the same stuff as those he leads, he urges those he leads to pray for him. We see this in these opening three words. Perhaps the most important words a leader can say are, “Pray for us.”⁸

16. What two particular prayers should be prayed for church leaders? Why is a clear conscience needed for leaders?

17. Many of us hold areas of leadership outside of the church whether as parents or in our professional world. What applications does this text have for you and what does it look like to “act honorably” within that role?

⁷ Sermon excerpt by Doug Van Meter entitled “Yielded and Yielding” found @ <https://sola5.org/yielded-and-yielding-hebrews-1317/>

⁸ Ibid

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