

Faithful, True, and Blessed.
Hebrews 13:17-25

Ezekiel 3:16-21
Philippians 2:12-18
Responsive Psalm 125

Ok, So today is the day that we are going to be finishing out the book of Hebrews. Let us start this morning by reading our passage, Hebrews chapter 13, verses 17-25. So right off the bat this morning we have verse 17, where the Author here is instructing his readers to obey their leaders, and to submit to them. This passage has of course been used by leaders with nefarious intentions as a bludgeoning tool to keep their congregation submissive. It is also used by husbands, and parents to justify their abusive, controlling actions. But as we know, all of this could not be any farther from the truth of what is intended.

We need to only go back a few verses to see the nature of this type of leadership, verse 7 “Remember those who rule over you, who have spoken the word of God to you, whose faith follow, considering the outcome of their conduct.” Again, all of this must be understood through verse 1, “Let brotherly love continue.” If those who lead over you are not doing so by this principle, if brotherly love is not the motivator of those who are your spiritual leaders, then I tell you now...flee, for they are self serving, false teachers. They shall be known by their conduct, and their conduct shall be driven by the love for the children of God.

Those to whom this letter was written to have already been exhorted to remember and to imitate the faith of their former leaders, the Author here listed a whole bunch of faithful people in chapter 11, who stand as examples of this faith. Here he is imploring them again to be submissive to those who are ruling over them now, in the present time. It is apparent by this admonition that the Author here has confidence in the current and present leaders of this group, or groups to whom he was writing. And this maybe one of the reasons as to why there was a drifting away, a falling away and being lead astray toward things such as angel worship, because they were not listening, and respecting those who were the leaders of that fellowship, and instead were going about on their own.

While it is only speculation, for there is not true way of knowing, some believe that this may be exactly why this Author wrote this letter. That it may be a direct response to the leaders of the church who were reporting to him the issues that they were having. This idea, does at least make sense with the admonitions here, and in verse 7 to listen to the leaders. True Christian leadership is meant to be something that is an advantage to all, for the leader is in fact the servant of the flock, and the flock is in fact a servant to the leader. In Christian leadership there should always be a symbiotic relationship, there should never be one of authoritarianism, for again it goes back to serving one another in brotherly love. Both those who have been appointed leaders, and those to whom are under the leaders both serve each other out of love.

Therefore the Author says here in verse 17, “Be submissive, for they watch out for your souls.” The Christian leaders role is one of a guardian, and teacher who out of love cares for the souls of the flock, and they must give account for their ministry, and their conduct. Many seek the role of leaders, many want the authority, and supposed power that they believe comes with such a role, yet...teachers, preachers, elders, anyone who is in a spiritual leadership role has more to account for, For if they are an unjust leader, God will judge them accordingly. It is not wise for one to seek such a role in the Christian community if it is not born out of love for that community, for if it is used for power, and selfish ambition, they will be judged, and will be held accountable.

As Paul wrote in 2nd Corinthians about this ministry, he says, “we are hard pressed on every side.” This ministry is not one of personal gain, or selfish ambitions, but one of struggle, one of pain, but in a great contradiction that can only be found in God himself, it is also one of joy. As Paul says, those who minister such as himself, are “persecuted, but not forsake, struck down, but not destroyed, knowing that he who raised up the Lord Jesus will also raise us up with Jesus and present us with you. For all things are for your sake, that grace having spread through man, may cause thanksgiving to abound in glory to God.”

There are those who look at the organized church from the outside, and see nothing but corruption, they see the leadership as power hungry hypocrites, and some may even claim to believe in God, but refuse to gather in a formal fashion saying that such distinctions as pastor, and elders in the church should not exist. But here is the problem, without leadership, without those who have been appointed as teachers, and watchmen over the souls of the congregation, there is chaos, and it only opens the door for sin, false teaching, and manipulating individuals. IT is for this reason many fellowships observe not only such roles as Pastor, Elders, and deacons, but also maintain a membership role among the fellowship. While not really born out of scripture itself, for the only distinction that we have in scripture is the gathering of believers together, to fellowship, to pray, and the read God's word, they are none the less things done in good order in an attempt to guard the body from false teachers and sin.

If such a structure begins to falter, whether by a rebellious spirit among the fellowship, or from a leadership whose does not operate out a love for the congregation it creates an environment of chaos, ripe for discord, deception, sin, and false beliefs. As Chrystosum said, “Such an evil, the occasion of many calamities and the source of disorder and confusion, moreover a people who do not obey a ruler is like one who has none, and perhaps even worse.” .So we can see why this Author has put such an importance in this admonition, having addressed it twice within this one chapter. And likewise Paul wrote to the Thessalonians instructing them as well when he said, “We beseech you brethren, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work.”

This authority that Paul speaks of, and that our Author here in the Hebrews is talking of is not one of an Authoritarian nature, These leaders are fully deserving of such obedience and respect because they are men who, out of love,are keeping watch, unceasingly and without regard to themselves, over your soul. These are those who are to be followed, these are those that God has appointed and set in these roles. Not men with selfish ambitions, power needs, or the tendency to need to control, but rather those who serve the fellowship out of love and compassion. As Calvin wrote, “Only those who who faithfully exercise their office, for those who have nothing except the title, and indeed those who abuse the title of pastor to destroy the Church, deserve little reverence and even less trust.” The authority of Christian leaders must be exercised in the light of eternity, since truly the ministry is about eternal issues. For the very eternal state of the flock to which such a leader has been appointed is reflected in their ministry. Such leaders are leaders who give an account to God for their ministry, and this fact should not only effect the quality and focus of their leadership, but also the quality and focus of the obedience with which the christian community responds.

Aquinas cited the shepherds in the nativity story in such a way, saying that they were “keeping watch over their flock at night, and said that is an example of the care that Christian pastors are to follow. Hugh Latimer, a preacher of the English Reformation said the same thing, “Now these shepherds, I say, the watch the whole night, they attend upon their vocation, they do according to their calling, they keep their sheep, they run not hither and thither, spending the time in vain and neglecting their office and calling....here by these shepherds, all men may learn to attend upon their offices and callings. I would wish that clergymen, the curates, parsons, and vicars, the bishops, and all other spiritual persons would learn this lesson by these poor shepherds, which is this; to abide by their flocks and by their sheep, to tarry among them, to be careful over them, not to run hither and hither after their own pleasures, but to tarry by their benefices and feed their sheep with the food of God's word, and to keep hospitality, and so to feed them both soul and body.”

While the pastor's of a fellowship must give account, and are held accountable to God for their conduct, and ministry, likewise it is the same for the congregation as well, they too will be held accountable for their love toward the one God has appointed, we see this in the last half of verse 17 as a warning where it says, “Let them do so with joy, (that is, minister and watch over your souls) and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you.” In other words, when the day of reckoning comes, when we on that day stand before God and give account, will not bode well for those who were not submissive, who did not likewise operate in love toward the spiritual leader who was appointed to them, for it says, Let those, the pastors and spiritual leaders give a account of joy, and not one of grief, let them present to God an account of joyful ministry, to the benefit of those to whom he ministered, but the opposite is an account of grief, one defined by disloyalty, discord, troubles, and sin, which will be no advantage to you.

Honestly, I think that this is a message that should be preached far and wide, for far too often it seems that there are fellowships, and congregations which are full of those who are contentious, who back bite and gossip, who complain and cause strife.....and the warning here, is such things are not profitable to you who are doing them, when we stand before God, the almighty righteous judge and give account...will you be known as one without love? And is not this love, the basis and foundation of our faith? To love the Lord our God, and each other? One could argue that such actions amongst the fellowship is a reflection of the heart, it is showing forth the lack of God's love within the individual, and without God's love, how do you think that will bode in the day of reckoning?

This warning is not only to Pastors and other spiritual leaders to not be full of pride, and selfish ambition, to not deal falsely with the fellowship, to not manipulate, control, and ultimately be abusive toward God's people...but it is also to the fellowship to likewise not to do the same to the pastors and spiritual leaders. As we read this morning in Ezekiel is this very principle, “When I say to the wicked you shall surely die, and you give him no warning, nor speak to warn the wicked from their wicked ways, to save his life, that same wicked man shall die in his iniquity, but his blood I will require at your hand. Yet, if you warn the wicked, and he does not turn from his wickedness, nor from his wicked way, he shall die in his iniquity but you have delivered your soul.”

A spiritual leader will give account for his ministry, if his ministry is false, driven by pride, arrogance and selfish ambition...is not focused on the gospel, does not warn of the judgment to come, then the blood of those who die in their sins will be on his hands. What a heaven burden and scary thing that placed upon the ministers of the word, which...side note, is actually each and every one of us, for we are all called to be ministers, and to share the hope that is in us.

But likewise, if those who minister are faithful, but the congregation, is full of envy, strife, gossip, and all manner of troubles...the judgment will be upon them. So much focus now a days is put upon the leadership of a church, but as we see, the congregation is likewise held accountable for their own actions. The reality is, that the church organization is a symbiotic relationship between the leaders, and the followers Both need each other, both minister and witness to each other, and both must first be focused upon the love of God and all things must be a reflection, and driven by this love of God that we have for each other. This is why Paul when he wrote to the Philipians he called them, his joy, and his crown. Or John, who wrote "no greater joy can I have than this, to hear that my children follow the truth."

Our churches, and the world would be a different place if this was taught and believed. The leadership in the church, properly administered would likely cause for many churches to be smaller. A fellowship that is submissive, and attentive to the leadership would likely cause for many to leave once they realized they can not enact their own selfish ambitions and power needs. IF the focus was taken away from running the church as an organization, as a business, concerned about finances, and how to be successful, or draw people in, . and rather focused upon the word of God and ministering to the saints, preparing them to minister to the world.. even if that means people maybe offended, people may leave, the reality is the health of the church would be better, through smaller, it would flourish for it would be operating as intended without distraction and bloat from all this world sees as success.

Though a church maybe small in number, if its focus is right will be full of blessing, and is a joy to God. Scripture doesn't say, where 2000 people gather, I will also be in their midst, no.. it says where 2 or 3 gather in my name, I will be with them. It is better to be 2 or 3 who gather in the name of Jesus, who's focus is ministering to one another, in love, to be those who support, and exhort, one another...then it is to be a large group successful in the eyes of man, yet empty, robotic, and without this love. Today, in closing...I want to just read the last verses of this passage to close out the book of Hebrews...but not as words written to this specific group of Hebrews to which it was intially written..but as to us, for truly this word was written to us today, as it was to them. These words are relevant to the church today, as it was to them, and these words are true to us today, as it was to them.

Now, my fellow brothers and sisters, may the God of peace who brought up our Lord Jesus from the dead, that great shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant, make you complete in every good work to do his will, working in you what is well pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. And I appeal to you brethren, bear with this word of exhortation, for I have written to you in few words, Greet all those who rule over you, and all the saints, Grace be with you..amen.