

39—Hebrews 13:17-19—Soul Profiting Leadership

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I. Introduction

- A. ¹ I was recently reading a book about pastoral authority and the author, a longtime pastor himself, tells a story about his path to buying into the leadership of the pastor long before he was a pastor himself. He was into politics and his goals were to make a difference in government. But this happened at his church...
- B. The pastor was leading the congregation to change its leadership structure from single pastor with a board of deacons to a plurality of pastors caring for the souls of the church and deacons who serve the physical needs of the church.
- C. Since there was only a single pastor, he evaluated the men in the congregation and nominated some them to serve alongside him. He had been teaching this for some time and he thought it was time to make steps towards this change. When put forward, the congregation voted them down just narrowly below the required percentage. The next month, the pastor held a town hall meeting where he explained to the church that he believed this was the right thing for the church to do and that they needed to trust his leadership in this. He nominated the same men again.
- D. The guy who wrote this book described how he was thinking about all of this because he was just a member at the time. He voted no the first time but when he voted the second time, he decided to buy into the pastor's leadership and trust him.
 1. It passed the second time and that church has not only benefited greatly but has benefited many churches. They have planted many churches now. They have revitalized many churches too. They often send their own members and some of their pastors to go do this work.
 2. But it all started when they bought in.
 3. I have one more part to share at the end.

II. Main Point

- A. Trust and gladly submit to your leaders so that it will profit your soul.

III. Outline

- A. Obey your leaders
- B. Let Them Keep Watch with Joy
- C. Pray for them

IV. Exposition

- A. As a pastor, I have very high calling that comes with high responsibility. Apart from God, there is no higher value than the souls of humanity. Therefore, to be uniquely responsible for the truth of the gospel is a weighty thing because eternity rests on the truth and it must be proclaimed and guarded so that we all find ourselves in fellowship with God at the end. One means by which God has ordained this to happen is through leaders. And God says to obey your leaders.
 1. First, I think it best to understand who the leaders are.
 - a) Back in verse 7, we discussed what seems to be past leaders who had likely, as we say "Gone on to be with the Lord." These leaders were to be remembered and the outcome of their faith was to me imitated.
 - (1) They were described as those who spoke the word of God to them.
 - b) Here in verse 17, these are the current leaders of the Hebrews. Instead of the command to remember them, they are told to obey and submit to them.
 - (1) They are described as those who keep watch over their souls.
 - (a) Let's compare this with other scriptures like Acts 20:17-18, 28 ¹⁷ Now from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the church to come to him. ¹⁸ And when they came to him, he said to them... 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.

¹ (Story and quote—*Authority* by Jonathan Leeman)

- i) So the elders of the church in Ephesus were charged with this task of watch care.
 - ii) If the price paid for something determines its value then how valuable are the souls to be watched when the price given for them was the blood of Jesus?
- (b) What about pastors? What are they supposed to do? It says in 1 Peter 5:1-2 ¹ So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: ² shepherd (pastor) the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight.
 - i) Yes. Pastors are shepherds. They keep watch over the souls the church.
 - ii) As you probably noticed, elders and pastors are the same. But so is the title of overseer.
 - iii) These are three ways to describe what these leaders do.
- (c) To confirm this, we would all agree that the qualifications for a pastor are in 1 Timothy 3 which describes that office in 1 Timothy 3:1-2 ¹ The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task. ² Therefore an overseer must be...
 - i) It doesn't say pastor. It says overseer.
 - ii) But pastors and overseers are the same office.
- (2) There are more texts like this we could explore but this seems sufficient to conclude that these leaders are the pastors/elders of this church.
 - (a) To combine the two descriptions here in Hebrews would be those who speak the word of God to them and watch over their souls.
 - i) The church isn't leader-center but God-centered because the Scriptures are the highest authority by which they lead.
 - ii) And God has given the church pastor-teachers to equip the saints for the work of the ministry and to maintain sound doctrine.
 - iii) So, they not only preach the word but attempt to hold its members accountable to it.
 - (b) How do they lead in holding its members accountable.
 - i) As we discussed last week, there are some who could be led away by strange teachings and this leader commanded them not to be.
 - ii) The Lord has given leaders to the church to make an attempt to correct those things and keep them from wandering away from the Lord.
 - (c) Some examples:
 - i) 1 Timothy 1:5-6 ⁵ The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith. ⁶ Certain persons, by swerving from these, have wandered away into vain discussion
 - ii) 1 Timothy 6:10 ...the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs.
 - iii) 2 Timothy 4:3-4 ³ For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, ⁴ and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths.
 - iv) Matthew 18 and 1 Corinthians 5 give clear instructions of how to restore someone and what to do if they refuse to repent.
 - v) However, what about the leaders? Do you obey and submit indiscriminately? Absolutely not. If I or any leader leads you into sin or in error according the Scriptures, you should not follow.
 - (1) Furthermore, the Bible also gives clear instructions on how to address a charge against a leader and what to do if he persists in it—1 Timothy 5:19-20 ¹⁹ Do not admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses. ²⁰ As for those who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear.

- (2) If any of you or I wander from the faith endangering our soul, do you want to be rescued from your wandering? Do I want you come rescue me? I can't answer for you, but I want that.
- c) Well, that cannot happen if you have no category of a pastor keeping watch over your soul and your need to be rescued from the wrong path any of us might find ourselves on.
 - (1) That's what Hebrews was written to do. It is an attempt to keep someone from wandering away from the faith.
 - (a) For all true believers, the warnings will be heeded. For those who do not heed the warnings they prove to be false believers.
 - (2) Watching over souls is a weighty matter. To be sure, you or I can't make someone turn back to Christ. I'm not God. I'm not the Holy Spirit who convicts us of sin. And I'm not the Savior.
 - (a) But I am called to preach the word as Paul instructed Timothy in 2 Timothy 4:2 preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching.
2. However, the Bible instructs the members of the church to obey their leaders and submit to them.
 - a) The word for obey here means to trust or be convinced of. Obedience is the response to the leaders they are convinced are trustworthy.
 - (1) Obedience comes when you buy in. And that goes both ways.
 - (a) I had a pastor one time that would be described as very introverted. He would not talk to anyone. Just kept to himself. He only preached occasionally but when he did I had a hard time hearing him because I never saw him as bought in to us. I spoke to him about it and he acknowledged the problem but he never really overcame the problem. He's no longer a pastor.
 - (2) Remember the story I told at the beginning about buy in.
3. The word for submit is not the typical word used in the NT.
 - a) However it means to yield to someone's authority. To show deference.
 - b) These are softer words than our normal ones used in the NT.
 - c) And that's intentional in part because leaders are fallible too.
 - d) I think this quote summarizes how we should posture ourselves in response to this.
 - (1) "Hebrews 13:17 means that a church should have a bent toward trusting its leaders; you should have a disposition to be supportive in your attitudes and actions toward their goals and directions; you should want to imitate their faith; and you should have a happy inclination to comply with their instructions." (John Piper)
 - (2) "Now you can hear that these are all soft expressions: "a bent toward trusting," "a disposition to support," "a wanting to imitate," "an inclination to comply." What those phrases are meant to do is capture both sides of the Biblical truth, namely, 1) that elders are fallible and should not lord it over the flock, and 2) the flock should follow good leadership." (Ibid)
 - (3) Because I will have to give an account for how I do that.
 - (a) That means this is a very serious matter for me and for you.
 - (b) James 3:1 reminds us that I will be held to a stricter judgment because of my role.
 - i) I don't take this lightly.
4. How does God guard the church from a leader who leads the church to do things that are unbiblical? One real important point to see in this, is the fact that pastoral leadership is meant to be more than one person.
 - a) Here in our text, it says "those who watch over the souls" of the members which is plural.
 - (1) It is those—plural—who will give an account.
 - (2) It says there in middle of verse 18, let them watch over your soul with joy.
 - (3) Verse 18 the author includes himself in that leadership and that they all desire a clear conscience.
 - b) In other words, like the book of Proverbs teaches, wisdom is gained by many wise counselors.
 - (1) The bible is very clear that a plurality of elder/pastors should be normal in all churches no matter the size.

- (a) Addressed to the elders at Ephesus Paul writes in Acts 20:28 Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers
 - (b) The Apostle Peter wrote in 1 Peter 5:1-2 ¹ So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: ² shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight
 - (c) Again Paul writes in 1 Thessalonians 5:12 ¹² We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you
 - (d) There are more—Acts 14:23 and Titus 1:5-9. But the last one is this—Philippians 1:1 Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons
 - i) Deacons are not the overseers. They serve the physical needs of the church to free up the pastors to keep watch over the souls of the members.
- (2) Union Hill Baptist church would be better served by having a plurality of elders.
 - (a) The blessings that come from this are better shepherding of the sheep. Therefore Jesus is more pleased with his church.
 - (b) More support for the ministry which creates longer, more fruitful ministry.
 - (c) More accountability which protects the souls of the shepherds and the sheep.
 - (d) It brings godly authority which causes the church to flourish.
 - (e) And finally, obedience to the scriptures which highlights the sufficiency and glory of God's word.
- B. There's a separate point to be made that certainly relates to all of what has been said, namely, let the leaders watch over your souls with joy and not with groaning, for that would be unprofitable for you.
 - 1. We talked last week how food was not profitable in your relationship to God. It cannot commend you to God. Only faith in Christ can bring us to God.
 - a) But the text also pointed out last week that offering a sacrifice of praise and doing good and sharing by faith pleases God.
 - b) I made the comment that if you go to a gym to get stronger but all you do is sit in the whirlpool then you will not get stronger.
 - 2. The same is true of how you receive watch care over your soul. Do you make it hard for me or do you make it a joy?
 - a) If you have ever been a supervisor or the lead person at some job then you know what it's like when those you're trying to lead make it hard on you.
 - (1) When I got married, I went to work a clay company. Clay is a huge industry in west Tennessee.
 - (2) About 8 months into the job, my boss asked me to bid on his job as mill operator. Naïvely I signed up and got the position.
 - (3) There were several people there who had been there much longer but they did not bid on the job. When I got the job, one guy in particular suddenly didn't like me anymore.
 - (4) He didn't make my job very easy.
 - (5) However, as time went on, I won the respect of that guy and he bought in. I made his job easier even though he made mine harder.
 - (6) Soon, he was taking care of some of my responsibilities and I didn't even know it.
 - (7) I would go to do them and they were already done.
 - (8) That's kind of what is going on in passage. God wants me to lead and keep watch over your soul and God wants you to buy into that and make my job easier but more importantly, he wants you to benefit from it and you really can't do that until you buy in.
 - b) For me to lead you with groaning is unprofitable for you.
 - (1) Just like my fellow employee that made my job difficult simply because I had authority over him but he had been there far longer than me and did not want that job.
 - (2) You needed to see me prove to you that I cared about you and that I was going to do what was right no matter what anyone thought about it.
 - (a) Transition is hard but I think we are getting there.

- (b) I'm here to stay unless the Lord takes me out. I could die anytime. My parents could decline so rapidly that I have to either go there or bring them here. I could develop a serious health issue that keeps me from doing this.
 - (c) That's another reason to have a plurality of pastors so that the sheep are never without a shepherd.
- (3) I'm here to please God and if I am pleasing God then you ought to be pleased too. But I can't please all of you.
 - (a) Right now there are some of you who wish it were colder in here and some of you want to turn the heat on.
 - (b) We all must learn to live in joy together while not having every preference.
- 3. Keeping watch over your souls is a difficult task because we are by nature prideful. We all find it hard to ask for help.
 - a) This word for keeping watch literally means to lie awake which I can certainly relate to. It is a preparedness or readiness.
 - b) But seeing problems with a person's soul isn't easy.
 - c) Troubled souls usually give external evidence. But sometime it's too late when that evidence becomes visible.
 - d) Therefore, we need humility. A humility to be open and honest with me about where your soul is troubled.
 - e) It will not profit you if you keep it concealed.
 - f) If left unchecked, it will turn into something very grave that will make us all groan.
 - g) As the title of the sermon indicates: I hope you want soul profiting leadership to be carried out how Christ has ordered and commanded his church to operate.
- C. Well finally, we have heard the commands to obey and submit to the leaders and we've been exhorted to let the leaders keep watch over your souls with joy so that it will profit you but now we here one more command—to pray for the leaders and the author who is part of that leadership.
 - 1. The last section of this letter doesn't give us all the details that would like.
 - a) We see from verse 19 that the author is not with the church but we do not know where he is and why he's not there.
 - b) One clue may be down in verse 23 where it seem Timothy was released from prison.
 - c) The author may also be in prison. That may be what he means when he asked for prayer.
 - (1) He is eager to be restored to them sooner rather than later.
 - 2. Was he arrested for the faith? Whatever happened and wherever he is, he is sure that he and the other leaders have acted with a clear conscience.
 - a) The conscience is that inward determination of what is right or wrong.
 - b) He and the rest believe they have made the right decision.
 - c) In fact, they have an upmost desire to act honorably in all things.
 - d) This whole letter to endure suffering for the sake of the name of Jesus could be exactly what this leader is doing.
 - 3. The possibility of this leader suffering for the faith is very high.
 - a) Peter and John were arrested for preaching in Jerusalem after the resurrection. Later Peter was put in prison and the church prayed for his release and God sent an angel to rescue him.
 - b) Paul and Silas were in chains and God caused an earthquake to open the prison door and break their chains as they sang hymns to the Lord.
 - 4. Please heed the command. Pray for me.
 - a) Pray that I would act honorably in all things.
 - b) Pray that I would lead biblically and graciously.
 - c) Pray that I would be willing to suffer without compromise for the gospel.
 - d) Pray that I would have wisdom and understanding to lead this church well.
 - e) Pray that I would be joyful in my keeping watch over your souls that it may be profitable to you.
 - 5. I want this church to be profitable for you and for this community for years to come until Jesus returns.

- a) Circling back to the story at the beginning, the guy who wrote that book said this:
- (1) Remember he voted against plurality of pastors the first time but here's his response to the second attempt: "You might expect my heart to have gone into rebellion-hyperdrive at the moment. But for some reason, somehow, it didn't. His request...made sense. It landed softly on my heart. He is my pastor, I thought. I should trust him."
 - (2) "You might call this my rich-young-ruler's moment. I didn't have much money to give up, but I did have a high opinion of myself...but I voted yes and enough people joined me and it passed the second time. [Something unique happened.] This began to change my life. I changed from nonconformist to team player; from rebel to disciple; from raising-my-hand-to-stump-the-pastor to raising my hand-to-ask-a-question-that-might-help-the-group. I began to grow in the faith—fighting sin, reading the Bible, wanting to do good in the lives of my fellow members. Sometimes I wonder if that whole affair was when I actually became a Christian."
(Jonathan Leeman—Authority pp. 62-63)
- b) Do you trust the Lord to do what he has instructed his church to be and for us to do?