

Hebrews 13:1-18

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[0 : 00] A couple of weeks ago in my local Tesco, I watched a man walk in, help himself to a box of beers that was by the window, by the door, and turn and walk back out.

And the security guard who was there, a security guard in a local convenience store, wearing a stab vest and a body camera, said to him something along the lines of, you can't do that. To which he replied with a version of says who, and stepped past the guard and left.

He then stood at the bus stop right outside the shop and waited for several minutes for his bus to arrive. Brazen as you like. A few days ago at the other end of my street, I was waiting in a long line of traffic at a set of traffic lights and a car drove up. I was two lanes heading in this direction and I'm wanting to turn right and I can see in the side mirror a car comes up the outside and goes right all the way up to the end and just moves in, people beeping their horns, flashing their lights. He moves in, I say he, may have been a she, and he just edges forward into the junction. People move, they all have to stop and he turns and drives off. I'm thinking to myself, you can't do that. To which he probably would have replied says who? I just did. Now these are pretty obvious examples, but the spirit of the idea of the rules don't apply to me is rife in our culture. Right across the board, respect for authority is evaporating. If anything, you are your own authority and anybody who tries to tell you otherwise is wrong. Just did it. Says who? Now there are probably lots of reasons for this. For one, I think it's encouraged by our advertisers.

For years, Nike have been telling us to just do it. You're in control. And all kinds of brands and companies push us to think that no rules and no boundaries is the way to go.

The CEO of Netflix has recently written a book called No Rules Rules, laying out his supposed work for us on your own terms approach to staffing. The rules are there are no rules.

[2 : 41] But it's incoherent. It's nonsense. And actually, they don't really mean it, do they? Imagine how it would go if you went down to Nighttown and Oxford Circus and you went in, could I have these in a size 9, please? Tried them on, yep, I like those, great. No, you can keep those dirty old ones, I'm off. And you walk out the door. The security guard comes and he says to you, excuse me, sir, you haven't paid for those. And you say, no, you're right, I haven't paid for them. But I was pondering whether or not I should leave without paying. And I turned around and I saw on wall some inspiration. And I thought, I'll just do it. It's nonsense. And yet, it is the rhetoric that is in the air that we breathe.

You make the rules. You're the authority. Don't let anyone tell you what to do. Now, of course, it's not just the advertisers that have trained us to reject authority. We have, in many cases, good reasons to be suspicious.

Because our leaders have let us down. Whether that's in government or even closer to home, we have to be honest, in the wider church, we have seen authority misused. And so, when the topic comes up, we're already a bit suspicious. We're already thinking negatively. We're on the back foot. Which is why we need to talk about it. And that's especially the case for us as a church because we are hoping to appoint new leaders, new elders at the church here in the coming months.

As a Presbyterian church, we are under the oversight of a body of elders, presbyters. And those men collectively, as a group, possess authority to lead the church.

[4 : 17] And our focus this morning is on one verse in the reading, which makes it very clear that they have real authority. If you could turn it up again. Hebrews chapter 13, verse 17. It's on page 1010.

Obey your leaders and submit to them. That sounds incredibly counter-cultural, doesn't it? But God has established three governments in His world. He has established the state, the family, and the church. And each one is structured with those who lead and those who are led.

And in the same way that the magistrate or the government or fathers, parents at home, have authority that is real, that is given by God in their respective spheres. So it is in the church. The Lord Jesus, the one who possesses all authority in heaven and on earth. Matthew 28, 20. He sends out those first disciples into the world to go and make more disciples, to go and disciple the nations.

[5 : 20] He gets this order in place. He says, I have all authority and I'm giving it to you to go and do these things. The Lord Jesus, with all authority, rules His church through the collective oversight of elders.

And Paul tells us in 1 Thessalonians 5, verse 12, that those men are over you in the Lord. They have authority. It is real. So it naturally follows that if they have been given this authority, words like obey and submit naturally follow when it comes to their leadership.

That's not easy to do. That's not easy to embrace when the cultural air that we breathe is so anti-authority, when the message is in our world that you make the rules around here.

And it's especially difficult if we have experienced the misuse of authority in our lives at some point, whether that's in one of those spheres, the state, the family or the church.

So, I want us to take time in this verse this morning. Because here the author gives us two reasons why we can confidently lean into the authority of elders.

[6 : 30] Two perspectives, you might say, that should help us follow their lead, embrace their leadership as a good thing. And that is because elder authority is directed towards the good of those under their care, and those elders are answerable to God for how they use it.

If you want a summary of the sermon, that's it. Elder authority is good because it is directed to those under their care, and it is accountable to God. When we consider authority along these lines, I hope this morning it will both encourage us all and challenge those of us who are elders and or aspiring elders concerning the nature of authority.

So, point number one, elder authority is advantageous for you. It is advantageous for you. Obey your leaders and submit to them. Four, here's the reason why, they keep watch over your souls. Then he says later, let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you. In your elders, you have a group of people who are keeping watch over your soul.

A group of men who have accepted responsibility to provide spiritual nurture while you are under their care. That is why their authority is a good thing. They direct it towards your spiritual growth, your spiritual betterment, maturity.

[7 : 56] I want to suggest they do this in at least six ways. Six ways. Number one, they attend to their own spiritual health. When Paul wrote to Timothy to tell him how to lead in pastoral ministry, he told him, he said, watch your own life and doctrine closely.

In order to use their authority well, elders first need to ensure that they are spiritually healthy. Sick people can't lead sick people into health. So, they need to work on their own spiritual health.

It's the old airplane illustration. In the event of an emergency, what do they say? The mask will fall down and you put your own mask on first. Why do you do that? You're no help to somebody if you can't breathe.

Same in church leadership. Elders stay close to Christ, not just for their own sake, but so that they can provide an example for others to follow. They stay close to Christ that they might be spiritually alive in order that they can bring that life to others.

Paul could say to the Corinthians, follow me as I follow Christ. Same for elders. Following their example as they follow Christ will be good for your soul.

[9 : 12] Elders, the challenge for us is to look at our lives as sober judgment and ask the question, if people followed my example in my devotional life, in my family, in my priorities, in my giving, how healthy would the church that I lead be?

If we don't like the answer, we need to make the necessary changes. Point number one, they attend to their own spiritual health.

Number two, they get to know you. They get to know you. At a high level, this means they define the membership of the church. Elders, don't keep watch over everyone's soul. Every Christian in this country is not under the spiritual oversight and care of the session of elders here.

They do this with a group of people that have freely and willingly chosen to submit to their oversight. The elders here, shepherd, we shepherd the flock that is under our care, to use Peter's words from

1 Peter 5.

And to do that, we need to know who you are. Your part in that then is to formally join the church. One author has said this, It is not enough to say that we are part of the universal church.

[10:29] We must also commit ourselves to a local or visible group of God's people. The New Testament does not contain even a hint of someone who was truly saved, but not part of a local church.

It couldn't be any less clear. When you do this, the elders will get to know you. They'll ask you questions about your soul, about your spiritual life.

They'll ask you how you're getting on as a Christian. They'll ask you about temptation. They'll ask you about how you're getting on. And while it's true that as the church grows, every elder can't know every member personally, it is the case that every member is under the care of an elder.

Back in Acts chapter 20, when the Apostle Paul gives his charge to the Ephesian elders, he understands the elders' work there to be marked by two qualities.

And then he talks later about his time with them and talks about how he had deep affection for them.

[11:37] He admonished them with tears. Those are the qualities. Careful attention and deep affection. Those two are only possible if the elders know the people.

Point number three, they pray for you. How do elders keep watch over your soul? They pray for you. When you belong to a church, you have a group of people who are invested in your spiritual growth such that they bring you by name to the Father regularly.

I suspect in most cases it's daily. Often it's more than that when there's a particular need. This is surely one of the most significant blessings of belonging to a local church.

Must be. When you have needs, there are people praying for you. There are people who know the Lord and are spiritually healthy and they are bringing your name to the Father.

When you wander off, they are praying for you that you come back. When you thrive, they are giving thanks and enjoying that with you in the Lord. The elders are committed to bringing your name into the heavenly courts to ask for the Lord to be active in your life.

[12:55] What a blessing. To have leaders that are doing that for you. Next, they feed you God's Word.

They don't just pray for you, they feed you God's Word. Ministers do this from the pulpit Sunday by Sunday. Along with prayer, this is the most important thing that ministers do. That's what they're set aside for, the Word and prayer.

But every elder knows that what you need, what you really need, above everything else, when you struggle, when decisions have to be made, in the good times and in the bad, is encouragement and exhortation from God's Word.

You should expect your elders to open the Bible with you, to speak Scripture to you, to bring you the encouragement and the exhortation from God's Word. Now, they do that in various contexts. This is one of them, but one-to-one, personal meetings, home groups, pastoral meetings as well. If you meet with a number of elders, they will be seeking to hold Scripture out to you, seeking to apply Scripture into your life.

[14:01] They'll be feeding you with God's Word. But they don't just teach you, they will also help you learn how to feed yourself, how you can handle the Bible better for yourself, how you can read it in a way that is going to nourish your soul.

If reading the Bible is a new thing to you, I know that we've seen some people come to faith in Christ recently in our congregation, a wonderful thing, if reading the Bible is a new thing to you, ask an elder how best to get going in that.

It's a big old book. Where do you start? How do you get going? They'll instruct you in that. They'll help you feed yourself. If you're wanting to grow in a particular area, ask an elder to help you.

You know the old, if you give a man a fish, he'll eat for a day. If you give him a fishing rod, he'll sell it on eBay or whatever the thing is, you know. He'll feed others for life, whatever.

Elders provide the fish and the fishing seminars. So they give you the food, they help you to find food yourself. They feed you God's Word. Number five, they lead you.

[15:05] They lead you. How do they keep watch over your soul? They lead you. Just as the Lord leads His people beside quiet waters, Psalm 23, just as He guides us in paths of righteousness for His name's sake, Psalm 23, again.

Just as the Lord Jesus is the one who says, My sheep hear my voice. I know them and they follow me and I give eternal life to them, in John 10. So it is for the under-shepherds of the church. Elders are shepherd leaders after the example of Christ. Now, it's worth saying that the shepherd image, I've heard this recently.

If I heard it here, it does no harm to reiterate it to you, but I heard it recently that, you know, the shepherd image is all over the Bible. And I think in the West we can often misunderstand it because we're familiar with the idea of watching a shepherd.

Maybe we've seen those series of one man and his dog or something like that. The shepherd's at the back, he whistles a bit and the dog follows. Or nowadays, maybe on a quad bike riding behind his flock. So the flock are out front and he's behind.

[16:10] But in the time of the Bible, the image in the Bible, the shepherd leads from the front. That's true in the Middle East today. That's the biblical image. What that means is, very different perspective.

The shepherd out front, he's the first to encounter danger. And the shepherd is the one who provides the path for the sheep to follow. So it's dangerous.

It's a selfless task then, because it's more concern for the sheep than for themselves. You're going to walk into danger for the sake of this group behind. But that means that when elders meet to make decisions that concern the congregation, in session meetings, elders meetings, presbytery or synod, they are leading in the broad purposes of the church, but they are doing so not for their own benefit.

But as Paul says in Ephesians 5, they're doing it to equip the saints for the works of service, to the up-building of the church, Christ's body. They are leading with those behind them, as it were, to use the shepherd imagery, with their good in view.

They're providing a path that they will follow in safety. As elders follow Christ, we lead the way. We provide a path for those who follow.

[17:27] Number six, the sixth quality, keeping watch over your souls. They protect you. Elders protect you. Now again, our protection ultimately comes from the Lord, the one who, again, the imagery of Psalm 23, He shepherds us with His rod and His staff.

We are ultimately secure in the grip of the Lord Jesus, who assures us that no one can be lost out of His hand. John 10. But elders in Christ's church are called to protect the sheep.

This is a vital element of watching over your souls. And it bears in mind the danger both from within and from without. The danger that exists within the human heart and outside the threats to the church.

It bears in mind both how prone we are to wander and the threat of wolves coming in who seek to destroy the flock. And therefore, this protection requires both compassion and courage.

Compassion and courage. Much of the protection that elders will provide comes in the form of warning from the Word of God. Warning about the dangers of choosing your own desires over God's Word.

[18:46] Choosing to go your way rather than to follow the Lord Jesus in obedience. The temptation that we feel to turn down the volume on the bits of Scripture that cut across what we want in the deep place of our heart of hearts.

All of that is going on within. And out of compassion, faithful elders will have the hard conversations because they are watching over your soul and you're in danger.

When we do that, when we choose our interests and our appetites and our desires over obedience, we are in danger. And we need elders who will have compassion to step in and tell us that.

Then in terms of external threats, they'll warn about the sorts of things like the full-throated cultural opposition to our faith that we experience today. Whenever you face danger, opposition on opposition, because you're a Christian, the temptation then to compromise theologically because of that pressure is massive.

The desire that we have just to live a quiet life, not to cause any fuss, just to go about our business. The temptation that we have to want to be respectable, to keep our reputation in the company.

[20:05] The temptation that we feel to want to be cool amongst our friends. Boys and girls, can I say to you, the pressure not to stand up for Christ in school is enormous. I know that.

But faithful elders will summon the courage to sound the warning, to say, Stand, boys and girls. Name the name of Christ. Choose obedience over respectability.

Choose, yes, I'm going to unshakably follow Jesus, no matter how uncool people think I am. Faithful elders will sound that warning.

Compassion and courage. That's what it takes. And here's the thing. Let me say this. I have yet to meet a faithful shepherd, a faithful elder, who enjoys this element of their ministry.

In many ways it would be easier to say nothing. In many ways it would be far easier just to pretend everything is great and to smile and crackle. Yeah, you do what you like. It's okay.

[21 : 07] We'll all pretend everything is fine. But I've also yet to meet an elder who didn't warn the flock and who remained faithful to God. Elders who are faithful, who are keeping watch over your souls, do so because they've been called to protect you.

That requires compassion and courage. It requires hard conversations. They're doing it because they love you. We were on the beach this summer. Those lifeguards on the beach, they don't blow their whistles and they don't yell down those megaphone things at you for their own good.

They do it because if you go over there or if you keep going in that direction, you're going to get swept away. Elders who are keeping watch over the souls of the congregation warn the flock for exactly the same reason.

Not for their own good, but because if you keep on that path, you're going to get swept away. So, can you see why those six things?

Can you see why the sort of authority that the writer to the Hebrews has in mind is advantageous for us? When elders steward their authority, not for their own good, but towards the leading and the feeding and the protecting of those who have been placed under their care, it enables us to flourish.

[22 : 26] It is for our good. And so, when we read words like obey and submit to that kind of authority, we think, no problem.

It is good for me to do that. I'm going to actually choose to do that. It is good to submit to that kind of rule. There's also a second reason that gives us confidence about this authority.

And it's really like a guardrail, you could say, around the elder office. Because, secondly, elder authority is accountable to God. It is advantageous for you.

Secondly, it is accountable to God. Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls as those who will have to give an account.

One of the things that people were most upset about during COVID was the lack of accountability it seemed that there was in the government. It seemed that they used their authority to make decisions that affected lots of people and they didn't have to answer for any of the consequences.

[23 : 35] That's what stirred up a huge amount of the kind of anger that we came across in social media and so on. It's not like that in the church. Oh, and by the way, it's not like that in government either.

Everybody will have to give an account. One day we will all stand before God, from the least to the greatest, to give an account for how we have lived our lives in His world. Give an account for what we have done with His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

However, those who have served the church as elders will have to give an account specifically for the way that we have stewarded this responsibility.

I don't know what the voice will sound like, but the one who breathed the cosmos into existence will ask each one how they kept watch over the souls of those entrusted to their care.

It is a terrifying thought. It is deeply sobering for elders and for those who aspire to the office.

[24 : 38] And I often wonder whether some of the people that I meet who believe themselves to be called to ministry have read this verse. But it's good that it's sobering for elders.

It is good for you. It is good for all of us that it is sobering for elders, that they would take this seriously because it gives us confidence about their accountability. Good elders will always check their instincts by this fact.

Now, not that they'll do everything perfectly. That is not what's intended. That's not what God expects. He knows our frame. He even knows the frame of sinful elders. But this reality, the reality of this accountability will make us ask, Am I willing to answer to God for this decision?

Any elder that consistently does that will use their authority very well. But what's equally encouraging?

So, we are in a context where our leaders are ultimately accountable to God and are making decisions with that sober judgment and view. You think, well, that's good for me.

