
Being Shepherded in the Household of God

Hebrews 13:17 | October 13, 2019

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Obedience and submission are not terms that are well-regarded in this particular cultural moment. In fact, these terms have not really ever been much appreciated by Americans. Remember, we are the country that was founded on what I believe was the most successful rebellion against authority the world has ever seen! One of our earliest flags that continues to be popular today shows a picture of a very threatening-looking rattlesnake with the foreboding words underneath: "Don't tread on me." The strong implication is, if you mess with me and impinge on my right to independence, it's a mistake you won't make a second time. My home state's motto: "*Montani semper liberi*" means "Mountaineers are always free" which could be understood to be a declaration that nobody tells us what to do. And my favorite state motto comes from the very unassuming but surprisingly feisty state of New Hampshire which declares: "Live free or die!" Again, the implication is that to submit to any kind of rule or reign that would threaten my independence or total freedom to do what I want, when I want, how I want is a fate worse than death itself. Many of you grew up in the culture of the 50's, 60's, and 70's where questioning authority and rebelling against authority were the height of being cool, and not much has changed in that regard for those who've grown up since then.

Compounding the problem is that all of us who are Protestant are identified as being from that branch of Christendom that protested the abuses of the Roman Catholic church. While the early Protestant reformers did not try to leave the Roman Catholic church, they were eventually booted out for their refusal (rightly so) to get in line with the authority of the pope. Unfortunately, the effect of that has been that while we got rid of one pope, now everyone is his own pope and does what is right in his own eyes. Institutional trust is at an all-time low. To be talking about submission in a day of clergy abuse scandals, power abuse scandals, and domineering megalomaniacs who lord it over the people sounds like it's a bit tone deaf.

But as uncomfortable as we may be with the language of submission and obedience to earthly and fallible leaders, the Scriptures are not. We've seen that clearly in 1 Timothy, we saw it last week in 1 Peter, and we see it again here in Hebrews 13:17:

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

Now, while ungodly authority should not be submitted to, the American church has largely rejected the idea of submitting to authority at all. But a bunch of independent Christians who answer to no one but God was most certainly not God's design for the church. For the reasons I've already mentioned, these may be some of the most neglected words in all the New Testament. And yet the text is absolutely clear: we neglect these words and the submission they espouse to our own harm and detriment. As surely as we saw last week that it is the responsibility of the shepherds to shepherd, so it is the responsibility of the sheep to be shepherded and to make the shepherd's job a pleasure and not a pain. As we launch into our new shepherding initiative and are asking the elders, along with our lay shepherds, small group leaders and deacons to step up their efforts to shepherd you, so we are also calling on you, the sheep, to submit to and obey your shepherds.

Here's the message in a nutshell:

God has graciously given us leaders in the church that we are to obey and submit to for the good of all.

So the application of this passage is plain as day: "Obey your leaders and submit to them." And what I want to do in this sermon is answer the questions: Who are we to obey and submit to? What does it mean to obey and submit? When do we obey and submit? Why do we obey and submit? And How do we obey and submit?

I. Whom must Christians Obey and Submit to?
The text tells us plainly in verse 17,

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

It is to the leaders of the church that we owe obedience and submission. To be clear, the word for "leaders" is plural. The New Testament does not envision a situation in which one man rules the church and everyone obeys him. That is a recipe for the abuse of power and we can point to countless examples. The Bible recognizes the proclivity for absolute power to corrupt absolutely and the vision of church leadership is not one man with all the power surrounded by yes men, but rather a plurality of godly men who are mutually accountable and submissive to one another. A church with one very strong leader can do a lot of great things and get them done very quickly, but it can just as quickly get into a lot of trouble when the leader goes off track. We are Presbyterian because we believe the biblical model is a government of elders.

Now we know elsewhere that there are other people we must obey and submit to: wives submit to husbands (Col 3:18), children obey parents (Col 3:20), all of us are called to be subject to the governing authorities (Rom 13:1), and all of us are to obey God (Acts 5:29).

Submission and obedience are things every Christian has to learn.

Not only must all learn to submit to the leadership of the church, but the leaders of the church must learn to submit to one another. All of us together

must learn to submit to Christ. Learning to yield our wills to the will of another is inescapable in the Christian life, and therefore humility is a non-negotiable virtue in the Christian life. But the particular emphasis here is on the obedience and submission we owe to our leaders in the church.

We've seen over the past three weeks, and we'll see again next week, that there is a God-ordained leadership in the church. Not only is it God-ordained, but leadership in the church is God-given. We read in Ephesians 4:11-13,

"And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ,"

God gave us leaders in the church in order to help ensure that we all grow to maturity in Christ.

Those leaders have been given authority to care for God's sheep in the household of God and those leaders are the elders and deacons of the church. As husbands and fathers are to exercise their authority in the household, not selfishly but for the good of his family, so the elders are called to exercise their authority for the good of the people. This is what we're talking about when we talk about shepherding: elders using their authority to know the sheep, lead the sheep, feed the sheep, and protect the sheep until we're all mature in Christ.

One of the most important reasons why every Christian needs to be a part of a local church is the need for shepherding. We value getting together with friends and reading the Bible and praying together and highly encourage it. That's discipleship for sure, but it's not the complete New Testament picture of life in the household of God. The biblical vision of the household of God is sheep under the loving care of shepherds who are formally recognized in that role on the basis of the qualifications laid out in the Bible.

There is no New Testament vision of sheep being disconnected from the care of actual shepherding elders. There is no such thing as biblical church apart from biblical Christians being in submission to biblical leadership.

II. What does it mean to obey and submit? The Greek words translated 'obey' and 'submit' mean 'obey' and 'submit'. In other words, this is not one of those cases where, if we get really deep into the history of the words, we can somehow escape the implications of what is being said! Nor should we even want to! To obey is to heed the instruction given by your pastors and elders from the Scriptures. To 'submit' simply looks like this: you have one opinion about something and your leadership has another opinion. Neither opinion is contrary to Scripture, just different. Submission means that you yield your will and your opinion to that of your shepherds. Wise shepherds will want to know your opinion and consider it carefully, but at the end of the day it's their responsibility to make a decision and your responsibility to submit to it. And submission is not merely an external action. It's entirely possible to 'submit' outwardly while inwardly seething with anger and spreading dissension and expressing how unhappy you are about it to everyone you know. That's not submission. Submission involves a posture of the heart, that in loving, trusting obedience you're going to follow your leaders. And that is true not only for the flock, it's true for the shepherds. There are times where decisions are made that might not be the first choice of all us elders. But when it is the will of the body to do one thing, and we've had the chance to share our views to no avail, then we too must learn submission and obedience.

Now as I alluded to before, the church is not the only place this happens. These words we translate 'honor', 'obey', 'submit' are all words that are also used in the home with a wife toward her husband or of children toward their parents. Most of us who are members of this church would agree that the Bible speaks clearly to the issue of husbands and wives and children in the home. Colossians 3:18-20 says,

"Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives, and do not be harsh with them. Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord."

Do you agree that this is a good thing in the home for this kind of order, obedience and submission to be present? Well, it is the very thing wives are called to in the home, that children are called to in the home, and everyone is called to in the church.

And husbands, where do you think your wives and children are supposed to learn what biblical submission looks like? They learn what it looks like from watching how you submit to the leadership you're under the authority of. And that includes us who serve as pastors and elders. We also must learn submission when we don't get our way. So husbands, including us who are elders, if every time we don't get our way or the leadership makes a decision we don't like we reject it, grouse about it, complain about it, and so on...what are we teaching our wives and children about submission?

I'm not saying submission or obedience are easy, not at all! It feels like a death! But we're not the first who were called to this. You see, when we live in submission and obedience to the rightly constituted authorities over us, we're actually following right in the steps of our shepherd Jesus. He came not to do his will, but the will of the Father and he continually had to yield his will in submission to the Father even as he did in the Garden of Gethsemane when he said,

"...not my will, but yours, be done."
(Luke 22:42)

Submission is not a sign of weakness, but incredible strength and dependence on God.

Now, the fact that all of us who have vowed submission to the church must actually follow Jesus' example and submit and obey the decisions of our leadership so far as they don't conflict with God's Word, there are some serious implications we need to consider:

1. Big decisions in the church need to be made by the body of God-ordained, congregation-

elected elders. Leadership can be provided by pastors, staff, and individual elders, but the collective body must make those decisions that may prove difficult for the congregation to submit to or obey.

2. We cannot be hasty in the laying on of hands. We must be absolutely diligent to only lay the hands of ordination on those men who are truly qualified and called to serve as elders. Men should be tested, they should be trained, they should be equipped. And we do have a process for doing that for both our elders and our deacons.

3. The elders must be committed to prayer and making sure every decision we make is in accordance with the Scripture, for the glory of God and in the best interests of the flock. Because once we make a decision, the people are bound by the Word of God and their membership vows to submit to that decision. That is a very big deal, and we ought not take it lightly.

4. To disregard the authority of the local church that you have vowed commitment to is not only to disregard your local shepherds, but to disregard the Chief Shepherd. And this is sin. Paul tells Titus, another local pastor like Timothy:

"Declare these things; exhort and rebuke with all authority. Let no one disregard you."
(Titus 2:15)

The flock will sometimes be tempted to disregard the leadership of the elders, and the elders are not to let that happen because it is ultimately the honor of the Lord that is at stake. And here's a word to us elders: we might personally not care that we are disregarded. But it is not up to us to decide that the Lord can be disregarded. And when we allow our leadership to be disregarded, it is ultimately the Lord that is disregarded.

III. When do we obey and submit? In short, we obey and submit anytime obedience and submission do not require us to act or believe contrary to God's Word. No one has the authority to ask you to sin. Nor do we have the authority to bind your conscience anywhere it is not bound by Scripture. But we are to obey and submit when our will and the will of our leaders are in conflict

in matters of doctrine, the order of the church, and the exercise of discipline. Yet, it's very rare at this point in history for a person who has an issue with a church to actually submit to their leaders. Rather, if we are confronted by our leadership or don't like what our leaders are doing, we simply go our own way to a new church and miss an incredible opportunity to grow.

Now, is there ever a time to leave? Yes there is. When submitting to leadership would require us to go contrary to God's Word, we must obey God rather than men. That is true when it comes to the extent of our allegiance to our earthly rulers. That is true when it comes to the extent of our obedience to authority in the home. And it's also true in the church. Here's the danger though: when we're upset about something, it can feel like this is a matter of obedience to God, when in fact we're simply not getting our own way. And when that happens, and we then disregard our leaders, we actually are sinning.

I made a number of vows when I became the senior pastor here, and so did all our pastors, elders, and deacons: "Do you promise subjection to your brethren in the Lord?" Likewise, you who have joined the church have made this vow: "Do you submit yourselves to the government and discipline of the church...?" Let me ask you, what are vows for? Are they for the easy days? Vows are not for the easy days, when you're getting along and not having issues. The vows are there for the hard days when you think it would be easier to quit. Likewise, in the church, your membership vows are not for the easy days when you agree with the leadership of the church. The vows are for the hard days, when you disagree and it feels like it would be easier to quit. On those days, our vows bind us to our commitment.

IV. Why do we obey and submit? The author of Hebrews lists several reasons as to why:

1. Your leaders are looking out for your spiritual welfare. He says in verse 17,

"...for they are keeping watch over your souls..."

This phrase literally refers to staying up at night and losing sleep over your spiritual well-being.

Your wealth advisor may or may not stay up at night or rise early in the morning to look after your financial well-being. Your attorney may lie awake thinking about your legal well-being, or they may not. Nevertheless, you generally listen to their counsel and follow their advice. Well, we are keeping watch with early mornings and late nights for your spiritual well-being. We're invested in you, we love you, we want you to thrive spiritually. And yes, we sometimes lose sleep over you and wake up thinking about you because we love you. Why would you disregard the spiritual guidance of people who only want the best for you?

2. Your leaders are accountable for your soul. He writes in verse 17,

"...as those who will have to give an account..."

One day, I'll give an account and your pastors and elders and deacons will give an account to the Chief Shepherd for you. I do not want to hear the words God delivered to the shepherds of Israel in Ezekiel 34:4,

"The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the injured you have not bound up, the strayed you have not brought back, the lost you have not sought, and with force and harshness you have ruled them."

Please remember your leaders in prayer, because there will be a day when we will stand before God and we will give an account for how we have or have not faithfully shepherded this flock, every single one of you, and that is a tremendous burden, even as it is a tremendous privilege to serve you and minister.

3. Your leaders' task is challenging enough without you being difficult. That's the final piece here, he says at the end of verse 17,

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

In other words, don't make shepherding you become a miserable task. And that is a scriptural command. We must shepherd you either way, the easy way or the hard way. But when you cooperate with the shepherding ministry, it

makes our task a joy and that gives us energy and enthusiasm to do this work with vigor. And we need vigor because there's a lot of work! The number one frustration of shepherds today is the unresponsiveness of those they're trying to shepherd. You might get a call or an email from your shepherd asking how he can pray for you, if there are any needs we can help with, or just to check-in on your well-being. You would be blown away if you knew how many of those outreaches go unanswered completely. When you respond, it gives us joy. You don't want to be one of those people that make your shepherds sigh or groan. I'm not saying you shouldn't have difficulties or struggles, not at all! That's why we're here! What wears your shepherds down is not the hard work, but hard hearts. An unwillingness to forgive when you must, an unwillingness to repent of sin when you must, an unwillingness to be reconciled to another believer when you must.

The greatest gift you can give your shepherds, and the chief shepherd, is an eagerness to believe and obey God's Word.

Notice what he adds here, that it is of no advantage to you or anyone else when you are difficult to shepherd. It is good, godly, and in your best interest to make shepherding you a pleasure. So, as we relaunch our shepherding ministry, you have a part to play in this, a biblical responsibility. Let your shepherds do this with joy, and that starts with being responsive to their efforts to reach you and care for you and pray for you. And as the relationship develops, they may challenge you along the lines of Scripture, encouraging you to live the Worship, Grow, Serve, Go Rhythm of Discipleship. Don't run from that but embrace it as coming from those who love you, who are committed to your maturity in Christ, and will have to give an account for your soul!

V. **How do we obey and submit?** This is difficult, and I'm under no illusions that it's not. None of us want to obey and submit in the home or in the church because it feels weak, it feels wimpy, it feels like losing. It feels like surrendering our

freedom. It feels like losing control and it may feel humbling. So where do we find the power to do this? The gospel.

1. Remember that you are dearly loved and bought with a price. You are not your own, but belong entirely to the Lord your God. He loved you with an everlasting love and he instituted the church and shepherds to care for your spiritual well-being. When you submit to authority on earth as a Christian, you are submitting to His authority in heaven.

2. God's intention is to use our humble submission and obedience to make us like Jesus. When it feels like death to lay down our will, to go another's way, or to joyfully accept a direction we wouldn't have chosen, know that the Good Shepherd sees you. He knows. And he delights to see you walking in his steps, who for your salvation said "Not my will, but yours, be done." As we collectively practice this humble obedience and submission according to the Scriptures, we can be sure that we will all grow up into maturity in Christ.

Discussion Questions:

1. Why is church membership so important? If you're not a member of a local church (Covenant or some other), what is keeping you from making such a commitment and what should you do about it?
2. How does knowing that submission and obedience are the calling of every Christian help you obey and submit to the authorities in your life (such as parents, a husband, elders of the church)?
3. Why is it so important to only ordain to church leadership those men who have proven character and godliness?
4. How do you feel about the fact that the elders must give an account for your soul? What does it do to your understanding of a shepherding ministry in the church?
5. If you are a member of Covenant and currently have a shepherd assigned to you, are you making it a joy for them to shepherd you? Whatever your response to that question, how might you make it an even greater joy for your shepherd to keep watch over your soul?