



Pulling the Oars in the Same Direction

Series: Hebrews – An Anchor for the Soul

Hebrews 13:1-19 (17-19)

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Beloved, I want you to open up your Bibles to Hebrews 13 and before we read the text this morning together I want to share with you my heart in preaching this. I'm sure most of you have read ahead and you know that the text today deals with leaders leading and the congregation obeying and submitting to their spiritual leadership and praying for the leaders.

To be very honest with you, I was apprehensive about preaching this text and I shared that with the congregation on Wednesday and asked them to pray for me – and for those of you who did, thank you so much for praying. I was apprehensive for several reasons. First, any message on obedience and submission is always a dicey proposition. Our natural fallen instinct is to rebel against a message like this. That's just the truth. But second, we all feel the effects, to one degree or another, of the strife, the discord, the trials and the angry departure of people from this fellowship over the last few years. There are a lot of stories that have been circulated by some of those people that, to be quite honest, have not been entirely honest and some of which have been outright lies and fabrications intended to undermine confidence in the faithfulness and the hearts of the spiritual leaders of this church and to weaken this body. And some of them are still at it. Third, I was concerned that, as a result of those influences, that some would see the preaching of this text as self-serving and as an attack on unnamed people that have left this body in an ungodly way. That was Wednesday and that is not where I am anymore.

I want to personally thank those of you in the congregation -- you know who you are -- that on Wednesday night and afterward, talked to me and said things to me like, "This is God's Word. You didn't write this but you do have to preach it. You preach expositionally and God has us here for a reason and we need to hear this. It's not like you cherry picked these verses to preach. This is for the good of the church. You can't control how anyone receives this

sermon or their perception, but you do have a responsibility to be faithful.” Thank you for that reminder and somewhat gentle chiding. I needed it. Thank you.

And beloved, here is what God pressed upon my heart as I was studying for this morning. The writer of Hebrews, this pastor, was opening himself up to accusations of being self-serving in writing this text. Throughout this sermon he has been preaching and teaching some strong doctrinal truth and taking some unwavering positions on that truth. He has made some strong statements regarding Jesus Christ, faith and evil unbelief, godliness and ungodliness, and written some of the most forceful warning passages in Scripture about true faith and apostasy and hypocrisy. Things that may have made him unpopular with those who did not want to hear or submit to it. But, he had done all of this, seeking to bring this congregation of believers into a steady, growing and persevering walk with Jesus Christ. And he knew that in writing these words that we are going to look at this morning, there was a certain amount of risk involved. Did this congregation truly believe that he was speaking God’s truth to them and did they trust his heart and the hearts of the other leaders for them? He couldn’t control the perception or the response of the people, but he still had to speak the truth and so do I. So let’s stand and read this text together and pray and then we will get into this text.

Read Hebrews 13:1-19

You may have looked at the title of this sermon and wondered how I came up with it. There’s no mention of a boat or oars anywhere in this text, right? Well, let me tell you where that comes from. Think of the church as a boat, as a ship, in the old days that was powered by oars. You would have the captain up on the deck giving the commands and the instructions and then one of the mates down in the belly of the ship instructing those who were at the oars to row, row, row. As long as things were harmonious and unified and everyone was pulling in the same direction, that ship moved. No matter what. Through storms and gales, through doldrums, through battles, as long as everyone was pulling the same direction, that ship would advance, it would move forward. It didn’t matter what the situation was outside the ship – it would keep moving. The problems came when the rowing got out of sync, when some refused to pull the oars at all, when some decided to pull according to their own beat, or some pulled in the opposite direction altogether. The result of that was chaos and foundering on the seas and everyone’s life was endangered.

And it is a good metaphor for the church. Christ is the captain the one giving the commands and setting the course, the leaders are the mates below calling out the cadence in obedience to Christ, and the congregation is pulling the oars. It's not a perfect metaphor -- leaders pull the oars too, right? But what makes this work is trust, cooperation, leading, obedience and submission, everyone fulfilling their roles. Christ sets the course and gives the commands, leaders must faithfully relay those commands, and the congregation receives and obeys them. If that is absent, of that breaks down, the church won't go anywhere. The relationship of the leaders to the congregation sets the tone for spiritual growth and well-being of the body, for joy in the Lord, for usefulness to Christ in the building of His kingdom, and for the health and vitality of the church. That's what is at the heart of this text today.

Listen to the words of verses 17-19 again. ***“Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you. Pray for us, for we are sure that we have a clear conscience, desiring to act honorably in all things. I urge you the more earnestly to do this in order that I may be restored to you the sooner.”*** (Hebrews 13:17–19, ESV) Now there's a lot here to talk about and I want us to think about these verses under three categories – the command, the rationale, and the request. Let's first look at the command.

The Command The writer of Hebrews says, ***“Obey your leaders and submit to them.”*** What do we see here? Well the first thing that we see is that there are to be leaders in God's church and those leaders are to lead. Christ leads His church by His Spirit and through His Word, but Christ through His Word has appointed godly men to lead in the church. That has always been the pattern. When Paul and Barnabas travelled around planting churches, we read in Acts 14:23, ***“And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed.”*** (Acts 14:23, ESV) Paul instructed Titus, ***“appoint elders in every town as I directed you—”*** (Titus 1:5, ESV) Every NT church had men who were appointed by God to shepherd that flock, to feed and lead the church.

Now look, we are all equal at the foot of the cross, right? Praise God that it is true. We are all sinners in desperate need of a Savior, everyone of us. No-one is better than another. This is not a matter of worth, but it is a matter of calling. All of us are of equal worth before the Lord, all of us, but some are called by God to lead. And that means that leaders need to be leaders. Every church needs a plurality of men to who will faithfully follow Christ and clearly teach and preach the truth of Scripture as they care for the flock of God. It is the responsibility of elders, under God, in submission to Him and in humility, to seek Christ's direction for the church, to lead it by example and Word, to protect the flock, to teach God's people His Word and preach the gospel in season and out of season, to reprove, to rebuke, to exhort in patience, and to train the flock in righteousness. In the words of Peter, elders are to ***“shepherd the flock of God, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have (us); not for shameful gain, but eagerly; not domineering over those in (our) charge, but being examples to the flock.*** And what is the reward, ***“when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory.”*** (1 Peter 5:2–4, ESV)

And let me just point out in passing, this is “leaders,” plural. This is not a cult of personality, where one particularly charismatic guy has some vision and by virtue of his charisma and slickness has some following or movement, and absolutely no one to whom he is accountable and so seeks for prestige and position. There is enough of that garbage in the world and in “churches.” Listen to me now. I can tell you, with an absolutely clear conscience before God, that the elders who serve in this church, right now, have not sought out this calling, do not do what they do, to gratify a desire for power, or importance, or prestige. We are seeking to lead you and shepherd your souls so that none of the souls committed to our care would be lost, so that God would be pleased, so that joy would prevail, so that the gospel would go forward to the lost, so that would be about the business of serving God faithfully and take our place in the growth of the kingdom. That is a serious responsibility. But listen, just as we are called to lead in love and humility, so you are called, by God – this isn't my own idea – to obey and submit. Leaders are to lead and the flock is to follow.

Again, the writer says here, ***“Obey your leaders and submit to them.”*** Now, contextually, the command was aimed at the Hebrew Christians so they would hold fast to the Word of God that their leaders spoke to them and follow their direction and their leadership, submitting to Christ's authority through them rather than falling away from Christ, turning back to the Jewish religion, or being influenced and ruined by diverse and strange teaching. And while our days may be somewhat different, the principle remains the same.

So what does this mean for us? **“Obey your leaders and submit to them.”** First of all this is not some undiscerning, check your brain at the door, robotic abdication of your personhood and worth. Some people think of obedience and submission in that way and, quite frankly, it is wrongheaded. Obedience and submission to God-ordained authority is a good thing. It is not dehumanizing or esteem-crushing. It is modeled for us in Godhead itself. Jesus, in His mission to become the sacrifice for our sins and redeem us from the hell that we deserve, testified to His glad submission to the Father. **“My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work.”** (John 4:34, ESV) **“I can do nothing on my own. As I hear, I judge, and my judgment is just, because I seek not my own will but the will of him who sent me.”** (John 5:30, ESV) And of course in the garden of Gethsemane, **“Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done.”** (Luke 22:42, ESV) Moreover, He speaks of the Father’s authority and even His own with respect to the Holy Spirit, when He says, **“And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him...But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you.”** (John 14:16–17, 26, ESV) And, **“Nevertheless, I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you... When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you.”** (John 16:7,13-14, ESV) Authority, obedience and submission exist in the Godhead. It is hardly a bad thing.

So what does this mean – obey and submit. This isn’t rocket science. The two terms that are used here are intimately intertwined, so they cannot be fully separated from one another, but you could say that the word, “obey” speaks of action and the word, “submit” speaks of attitude. Taken together they communicate the idea of receiving the teaching and instruction of the Word of God, receiving instructions and commands, correction and direction of the elders, and falling in line behind them. Hearing the elders’ teaching of the Word of God and seeing their seriousness and faithfulness in following the teaching of Scripture and the leading of Christ, and obediently doing the same. And it is not out of forced compulsion, but from a heart of confidence and trust, in a sweet spirit of cooperation and a shared devotion to Christ. It is a beautiful thing. When elders and a congregation, under the leadership of Christ, relate to one another in this way, the elders

seeking Christ, understanding the weightiness of their calling, seeking to lead and care for the flock in a way that honors Jesus, and the congregation trusting the heart of the elders, believing that they have their highest spiritual good at heart, and willingly submitting in a spirit of trust and co-operation, it is beautiful sight to behold in the eyes of God.

It is not without its challenges. There are few words that generate a reaction in individuals like the words “obey” and “submit.” Our fallen nature naturally rebels against such words. And the temptation of the flesh is to take the responsibility to lead in submission to Christ and godly love for the flock and turn it toward personal gain and that is why the writer of Hebrews follows this command to obey and submit to leaders in church with this rationale.

The Rationale Look at it with me. He says, ***Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.*** Now these words have something to say to both the elders and the flock, do you see that? Let me show you.

First, he says, obey your leaders and submit to them, why? Because they are keeping watch over your souls and the idea is that they are keeping watch and nobody else. That is not discouraging personal responsibility on your part at all, but it does explain the sacred calling of the leaders in a local church on your behalf. He is saying, “These are the men who look out for your souls, who feed you the pure milk of the Word of God, who earnestly pray for you, who watch out for false teaching and seek to expose it and protect you from it and keep you out of harm’s way, who seek to guard you from temptation, who are on the lookout for spiritual laziness and waywardness and seek to return you to spiritual vitality and the narrow way of Christ, who are watchful for deceitful and divisive behavior and want to safeguard the unity of the flock.” This is weighty stuff.

In fact, the words “keeping watch,” literally mean, “to go sleepless.” I can honestly tell you that I don’t lose sleep over this church building and the physical plant, I don’t lose sleep over the budget although it is important, but beloved, I have and do lose sleep over you, over the body, over your spiritual condition, over our unity in Christ, over our love for one another

and devotion to Christ, over the damaging effects of sin in this body, over enemies to your soul, outside and within. All of the elders do.

Leadership is a hard, hard task and especially when if someone gets upset at one church, or if the leaders try to confront some sin for their own good, or if they don't like what they hear or get their way, they just move down the road to another church where no one knows them. That is just flat out disobedience. The elders are keeping a watch on your souls – you have to believe that -- and the reason why is this – we will give an account before the Lord.

We watch over you ***as those who will have to give an account***. I cannot tell you how simultaneously sobering and motivating that reality is. The elders and I will stand before the Lord and answer not only for our own lives, but for the way in which cared for the flock of God in this church. We have a greater responsibility and face a greater judgment before the Lord. We will all of us stand before the Judgment Seat of Christ and while believers will not stand in judgment for sins and salvation is of grace, freely given by God, our works will be judged. And for the elders, our faithfulness to lead this flock according to the Word of God and by dependence upon Jesus Christ and led by His Spirit – that God will judge. That judgment is a far greater motivation than any other. That is an awe-inspiring thought.

When we stand before the Lord at the end of days, the elders and I will have to answer before the Lord, “Did I preach and teach faithfully the Word of God? Did I submit my own life and the life of my family to the commands of God and set an example? Did I faithfully teach you the way of life and walk in it? Was I obedient in fulfilling my responsibility ***“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, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.”*** (Ephesians 4:12–16, ESV) Did I devote my life to you in this way?” That will be the questions that we will face in regard to our ministry toward you.

And the question for you will be, did you allow us to do this with joy or with groaning? We're connected in this. The writer of Hebrews says, **Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.** You have it within your power, beloved, to make our calling a joy or a groaning. Leadership in the church can produce either incredible joy or crushing pain. More than anything else, at least for me, the highest of joys and the lowest of lows are found right here. It is a joy to see Christ treasured and adored by His people. It is an unspeakable joy to see the faithful, unadulterated, and uncompromising preaching of the Word of God valued and treated as the precious gift from God that it is. It is unspeakably joyful to see someone who was lost in sin, under its sway, overwhelmed by its power gloriously found and saved, transformed and changed by the grace of God. It is a joy to see someone hungry for the Word of God, in awe of and in love with Christ, families united around Jesus, relationships that have been broken, by the gospel, made new again, to see husbands loving their wives and wives loving their husbands and pouring into their kids to see Christ formed in them. It is joy to see young adult's minds formed by a biblical worldview, a joy to see those who walked away from Christ for a time returning with a renewed trust in the Lord. It is a joy to see people bearing each other's burdens, caring for one another, sharing life together, dealing with sin rightly, and in grace and spurring one another on to holiness and good works. It is a joy to see people investing themselves in ministries they have never been involved in before. It is joy to see people rejoicing with one another and mourning with one another. It is a joy to be in the midst of a people who are Christ focused and not inwardly-consumed, freely and gladly worshipping Christ for all that He has done and laying down their lives for the sake of Christ and one another. It is a great joy to see a people whose greatest love is Christ and not themselves and who are committed together to knowing Christ and making Him known, following the lead and taking their part in the Kingdom. There's nothing to compare to that joy.

But there is no sorrow, no pain like seeing someone for who you have poured your life out and poured your life into who has made a shipwreck of their life and fallen away. No pain like people who refuse to repent of their sins and are determined to drag other people in and down with them. No pain like seeing people trade the glorious unity of Christ for petty infighting and squabbling. No grief like seeing rebellion against the Word or apathy toward Christ. No pain like preaching the Word of God and seeing little fruit. No pain like seeing people tearing down and chewing on the church you are laboring to grow. No pain like seeing people unwilling to reconcile. No pain like seeing the vision of what the church could and should be being derailed by issue after issue because of pride, self-centeredness and jealousy. And on a personal level, there is no pain like you and your family being the subject

of lies, innuendo, mischaracterization, unfair criticism and unrealistic expectations. It eats at the soul of a leader.

Now let me just say this because it needs to be said. I am just to level with you and I am not saying this out of desire for sympathy. Quite frequently, more often than I can count, I will meet with someone in the church about something and they will say something along the lines of, “You aren’t anything like everybody says you are” or “I don’t know why everybody say that you aren’t approachable” or “This didn’t go anything like everybody said it would.” Everybody? I hope that’s an exaggeration. Where does that come from? If you are one of those everybodies, listen, I’m not against you. We are on the same team. If you desire to be saved and you want Christ to receive the glory that He is due, then you and I are on the same team. And I know people mean well when they say that, as an encouragement, but that’s not a compliment. It’s a joy killer.

Of course, spiritual leaders are not infallible or perfect. None of us would claim that. Of course there are times that you can disagree with a pastor or an elder, even to the point of accusing them of sin, but there is a right way and wrong way to do it. Scripture tells us, **“Do not admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses. As for those who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear.”** (1 Timothy 5:19–20, ESV) But this text is speaking of reliable witnesses, not those who have an axe to grind, or sins to cover, a reputation to protect, or just simply do not like a decision that the elders have made. The proper Scriptural attitude toward your pastors and elders is **“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.”** (1 Thessalonians 5:12–13a, ESV)

You have it in your power to make the burden of leadership a joy or a groaning, but listen it is to your advantage, it is spiritually good for you to do the things that make it a joy. We have, gratefully, as a church, experienced and are experiencing these joys I have spoken of, right? Unfortunately, and painfully, we have experienced and still deal with the things that make for groaning as well. Which one do you want? Everyone suffers when even a few are rebelling against Christ, against His Word and against the spiritual leadership of church. It leads to factions, divisiveness, the inability to receive God’s Word, sapping of energy that should be used for ministry in order to deal with petty things, suspicion. But, there are few richer blessings than life in a unified, godly, spiritual church in which we belong, and each of

us plays a vital role in building up such a church. It fosters cohesiveness, unity, joy, a shared focus, the Word goes forth in power, vitality and energy expended for the Kingdom, trust, ministry. And one of the most vital roles is prayer. Let's close this out by looking at

The Request The writer of Hebrews closes this section in verse 19, saying, ***“Pray for us, for we are sure that we have a clear conscience, desiring to act honorably in all things. I urge you the more earnestly to do this in order that I may be restored to you the sooner.”*** (Hebrews 13:18–19, ESV) The pastor humbles himself and on behalf of all of the other leaders in the church, he asks the Hebrew Christians to pray for them. Notice that he appeals to a clear conscience here. Evidently there had been charges or rumors about him and the other leaders – we don't know what they are – maybe that he had been harsh, or was out for personal gain, or poor in his leadership. Whatever. But he appeals to his conscience, in essence saying, “I know what the responsibilities of an elder are and I am striving to fulfill my calling.” Philip Hughes says, ***“As a genuine Christian friend and mentor should, he has spoken very frankly of the perils which he sees to the spiritual wellbeing in the congregation. And he is sure that he has a clear conscience. That is, that his conduct in relation to them can stand both the scrutiny of men and of God, but the impulse behind his stern admonitions has not been hostility or an authoritarian desire to inflate his own reputation at their expense. He has spoken the truth in love and compassion and that is confirmed by the fact that he appeals for them to pray for them.”***

He has an earnest desire -- a serious longing is the idea -- to act honorably in everything that he does. He longs for their prayers that he would be faithful, serving God with a clear conscience and honorably fulfilling his a calling and responsibilities to Christ and for them. He knows he is a sinner and in need of grace, that he has any number of weaknesses that Satan would gladly exploit, that he grows tired and weary and that there are times that, in his flesh, it would seem a great relief to throw off the yoke of leadership for lesser accountability. He knows that as a shepherd, he will be the object of spiritual attack because if Satan can strike the shepherd, the sheep will be scattered. He wants to be restored to face-to-face fellowship with the Hebrew church and so he pleads to them, “Pray for us.”

When Charles Spurgeon was asked the reason for his power and success of his ministry, he said, “My people pray for me.” And he meant it. I am pleading with you, beloved, pray for us. Pray for our elders, pray for our pastors, pray for me. Without your faithful praying, our ministry will not succeed, our church will not be what it could be. But with your prayers,

there is no limit to what God might be pleased to do in and through us. Pray for an abiding walk with Christ and for our faithfulness. Pray for our families. Pray for us as husbands and fathers. Pray that we would grow more and more in our understanding of the Word of God and for our preaching and teaching, for the times when we counsel with people and must confront and deal with sin, pray for our decision-making and leadership, pray that we will not grow weary. Pray that all of us together, our church, would love and honor Christ and make Him known with our lips and our lives.

I think about this a lot. I dream about it. What would it be like, if with Christ as our captain, we are all committed in humility and love, in trust and co-operation, to all of us, consistently “pulling the oars” in the same direction? Our egos out of the way, Christ where He belongs, all of the fulfilling our roles, all committed to Christ as we should be. What would that look like? I live for that. I long for it and I pray that you do too.

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