

Title: Follow the Leader

Text: 1 Thess. 5:12-13a, Heb. 13:7,17

Do you remember playing “Follow the Leader” as a child? I do. And I also remember that when we quit playing, more often than not, it was because the followers got tired of following and not because the leader got tired of leading.

Unfortunately, the same thing is often true within the church. Church leaders—especially elders—are blamed when things go wrong, and taken for granted when they go right. No group of elders is perfect. All elders have weaknesses, and each believer has a unique perspective on how elders should operate. As a result, there is always some degree of tension between leaders and followers. Even the best elders are inevitably accused of pride, wrong judgment, doing too much or too little, moving too slowly or too quickly, changing too much or not enough, and being too harsh or too passive. As E.J. Bricknell observes, “The exercise of authority is always apt to provide resentment.” Or, as someone else has wisely observed, “The trouble with being a leader today is that you can’t be sure whether people are following you or chasing you.”

To be sure, a leader has many responsibilities. And sermons on the topic of “Leadership” most often emphasize these duties and/or the qualifications of the leader necessary to carry out those duties. But in the passages we have chosen for today’s text, emphasis is placed on the responsibility of the **followers**!

Today, as we ordain a new elder, I’d like for us to consider for a moment **our** obligations, as members of the congregation, **to** each of our elders.

And perhaps I should begin by pointing out that while neither of our Biblical texts mentions “elders” by name, or by any of their usual Scriptural designations, there are many good reasons for understanding that in **both** texts elders are at least **included** among those to whom we are obliged. (And it is quite possible that church “elders” are the **primary** leaders indicated.) Alexander Strauch in his book “*Biblical Eldership*” lists many of those reasons, not the least of which is that in each case the function of these “**leaders**” is remarkably similar (if not identical) to the task assigned elsewhere to “**elders**.” Paul even used one of the same words to describe the elder’s job in 1 Timothy 5:17 that he used to describe these “**leaders**” work in 1Thess. 5:12.

So then, from these two texts, I would summarize **three reasons all Christians ought to give special recognition and honor to their spiritual elders.**

I. Elders should be honored because God commands it.

Did you notice all the verbs and adverbs used in these passages to describe our duty to leaders?

- “**Respect**” those who work hard among you.
- “**Hold them in the highest regard.**” (That is an intensive adverb, which means “superabundantly” or “most exceedingly.” One commentator, George G. Findlay, suggests it is “the strongest intensive possible to the language.”

- “Hold them in the highest regard in love.” (We usually emphasize the importance of church shepherds loving the people, but here Paul turns the tables and charges the people to love their shepherds.)
- “Remember” your leaders.
- “Obey” your leaders. (That one is used twice.), and
- “Submit” to their authority.

Alexander Strauch, that we mentioned earlier, comments on those last two, “It is tremendously important that Christians understand God’s will regarding submission and obedience to their spiritual guides. More than any other New Testament passage, Hebrews 13:17 addresses the believer’s duty to obey the church shepherds. By using two imperative verbs, “obey” and “submit.” The inspired writer intensifies his exhortation. His charge is of utmost importance. Although it is difficult to distinguish the precise differences in meaning between these two verbs, “submit” is the stronger and broader of the two. Christians are not only to “obey” their leaders (*peitho*, meaning “obey,” “to listen to,” “follow”) but are to “submit” to them (*hypeiko*, meaning “yield,” “give way,” “defer to”). This means Christians are to be responsive to their leaders, yield to their authority, and subordinate themselves to them even when they have a difference of opinion.”

God cares about how people treat those who are in authority. When Paul, for example, realized he had spoken rudely to the high priest, Ananias, he apologized by saying, “**Brothers, I did not realize that he was the high priest; for it is written: ‘Do not speak evil about the ruler of your people’**” (Ac.23:5).

Ro. 13:1-7 and **1 Pe. 2:13-17** exhort us not only to obey, but also to honor even our civil rulers and governmental authorities. If God demands such respect for and submission to worldly authorities (who are not necessarily even Christians themselves), how much more does he expect us to honor our spiritual overseers? And if the disobedience and ingratitude of people toward their civil leaders concerns God deeply, imagine how much greater is His concern that His people properly honor their spiritual leaders.

God will not honor those who do not honor His leaders. Consider the nation of Israel under the leadership of Moses. When they rebelled against his leadership, God punished them with plagues—even causing the ground to open up and swallow some of them. Indeed, had Moses not been the dedicated leader that He was, God would have destroyed them all on more than one occasion.

And conversely, God blesses those who respect the leaders He has placed in positions of authority. Remember how David refused to take the life of King Saul or in any way harm him because God had appointed Saul king. **1 Sam. 26:7-11** = “**So David and Abishai went to the army by night, and there was Saul, lying asleep inside the camp with his spear stuck in the ground near his head. Abner and the soldiers were lying around him.**”

“Abishai said to David, ‘Today God has delivered your enemy into your hands. Now let me pin him to the ground with one thrust of my spear; I won’t strike him twice.’

“But David said to Abishai, ‘Don’t destroy him! Who can lay a hand on the Lord’s anointed and be guiltless? As surely as the Lord lives,’ he said, ‘the Lord himself will strike him; either his time will come and he will die or he will go into battle and perish. But the Lord forbid that I should lay a hand on the Lord’s anointed. Now get the spear and water jug that are near his head, and let’s go.’”

God blessed and honored David for that commitment. So likewise today, believers are only blessed as they walk in obedience and submission.

Our elders should be honored because God commands it.

II. Elders should be honored because their labor deserves it.

Three times in those two Scripture texts the leaders task is referred to as “work.” **1 Thess. 5** says, “...Respect those who work hard among you... Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work.”

Caring for people’s spiritual welfare is stressful work. It is emotionally draining, time-consuming, and often monotonous and discouraging. It requires a great deal of personal dedication and sacrifice.

Likewise, our **Hebrews 13** text says, “Obey your leaders... They keep watch over you as men who must give account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden...”

The verb “keep watch” (*agrypneo*) literally means “keep oneself awake,” but here it is used metaphorically for watching, guarding, or caring for people. Like the ancient city watchmen or shepherds of a flock, spiritual leaders must always be keenly alert, conscientious, and diligent.

Watchfulness demands tireless effort, self-discipline, and selfless concern for the safety of others. It would make no sense to appoint a group of watchmen for a city, and then ignore, disregard, and disrespect the warning of any one of them. Neither would a sensible person employ the services of doctors or lawyers or other specialists, and then disobey and rebel against their advice and counsel. It is madness, as well, not to respect, honor, and heed our spiritual watchmen—the elders.

Their task, if taken lightly, could result in serious harm to the spiritual lives of God’s children.

Bible commentator R.C.H. Lenski points out that keeping watch implies potential danger: “Watching implies keeping oneself and others safe where danger is known to exist or where one fears its existence. Where no danger exists watching is not needed.” But since false teachers and spiritual pitfalls abound, since all Christians start out as newborn babes in Christ, and since

some Christians are perpetually weak in faith; watching over the spiritual development of God's people is indispensable, continuous work.

Mr. Strauch writes, "Godly leaders sigh over a brother or sister who willfully wanders after false teaching. They groan in sorrow over those who refuse to grow, learn, change, or receive correction. Moses grieved many times because of the people's disobedience and stubbornness. At one time in his life, the people's complaining became so intolerable that Moses called on God to take his life: 'I alone am not able to carry all this people, because it is too burdensome for me. So if Thou art going to deal thus with me, please kill me at once, if I have found favor in Thy sight, and do not let me see my wretchedness' (Num. 11:14-15) ...Rebellious behavior takes its toll on the shepherds. Sometimes good shepherds give up because of the painful kicks and deep bites of disobedient sheep. When that occurs, everyone in the congregation suffers."

And not only do spiritual leaders deserve to be obeyed because their work is hard, but their greater responsibility requires a stricter scrutiny and standard of accountability before God. All spiritual leaders are watchmen and shepherds "who must give an account."

Jesus said, "From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked" (Lk. 12:48). If our spiritual leaders fail at their task, God's people will be hurt. Thus they, like the watchmen of a city, are keenly aware that they will have to **render** an account to God for the critical task entrusted to them.

Last night Freida and I watched the movie "We were Soldiers" with Toby and Jennifer. Have you seen it? Mel Gibson plays the part of an army Colonel in Vietnam who commanded a lot of respect from his men. And he commanded that respect because he was accountable for their lives, and he was trustworthy. He took his job seriously, and he took his men's deaths personally. He didn't just send his men into battle; he **led** his men into battle. He was the first soldier to set foot on the battleground and the last to leave. His leadership **deserved** his men's respect.

Elders should be honored because...God commands it, ...their labor deserves it, and

III. Elders should be honored because our spiritual maturity depends on it.

Heb. 13:7 = "Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith."

God has placed men in positions of spiritual authority over us for our own good! They teach us by word and by personal example. By following their advice and good example we become better people and more profitable servants of the Master. But when we refuse their instruction we corrupt ourselves.

Why do parents lay down all sorts of restrictions, curfews, and other rules for their children? Is it for the parents' own well being and enjoyment? No! And when children do

disobey, are parents the only ones who suffer? Absolutely not! Children who disobey suffer even more than their grieving parents. Parental rules are intended to help children avoid suffering and harmful consequences.

And while disobedience likewise distresses church shepherds, it too has an even more serious impact on the wayward believer. Disobedience leads to sin and sin leads to condemnation.

Our text also implies that there is personal advantage to be gained by obedience to leaders.

Heb. 13:17 = “Obey them [your leaders] so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you.”

This statement utilizes a literary device, called a *litotes*—sort of an intentional understatement, in which a milder, negative statement is used instead of a strong, affirmative statement. (For example, instead of saying “really great work,” we might say, “not bad work.”) The expression causes the reader to stop and think and fill in the fuller meaning. Stated positively, this clause would read, “Obey your leaders so that their work will be a joy, not a burden for that would be disastrous for you.”

To cut oneself off from God’s watchmen, or to run away from the shepherd’s care is dangerous business. God may severely punish the disobedient believer, or the devil may delude his mind, or a bitter spirit may set in halting all spiritual growth.

One final observation is in order.

In addition to the obvious benefits of following a good example, submission to authority is a necessary exercise in proper spiritual growth. One learns obedience and submission to God by practicing obedience and submission to human leaders whether in the home, in marriage, at work, in society, or (in this case) in the local assembly of believers.

If I may paraphrase the apostle John just a bit, “If anyone does not submit himself to a spiritual leader whom he has seen, how can he submit himself to God whom he has not seen?”

Only when believers properly submit to their spiritual leaders does the local church have any chance to be the growing, loving, joyous family God intends it to be.

Conclusion: So there you have it. Elders should be honored because...God commands it, ...their labor deserves it, and ...our spiritual maturity depends on it.

The church needs dedicated, faithful leaders. But the church also needs dedicated faithful followers who will respect, obey, and submit to those leaders.