

The Air We Breathe

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect. (Romans 12:2 ESV)

Authority Aversion

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Hebrews 13:17

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Introduction

Good morning! Please turn with me in your Bibles to Hebrews 13. We are continuing in our Summer Series *The Air We Breathe* in which we have been identifying and treating the subtle yet sinful thought patterns that permeate our culture and inevitably threaten to creep into the church.

Our target today is authority aversion, or, in other words, the hatred of leaders!

We despise leadership. One of the reasons for this is that we don't trust them - and why should we? Why should we trust political leaders when stories of corruption are all too common? Why should we trust our CEOs who spend millions of dollars on their vacations while I live pay cheque to pay cheque? If I am seemingly more capable of living an honest life than my leaders, why should I trust them?

Another reason for this is that we don't think we need them. This idea comes from the self-reliant thinking that Pastor Levi addressed a few weeks ago. If I can do it all on my own, why do I need a leader to help me? If I know what's best for my life, why do I need a leader to counsel me? If I decide what is right and wrong, why do I need a leader to hold me accountable? This pattern of thinking removes leaders from the equation and replaces them with *me*.

I wonder if this mindset hasn't crept into the church.

In the same way that we can find justifiable reasons to distrust authority out there, we can also find justifiable reasons to distrust authority in *here*. It is no secret that sexual, financial and theological scandals have recently rocked the North-American church. Some of you in this

congregation have come from churches that have experienced scandal like this in the past *and it hurts*. Distrust and fear of future pastors and elders is an unfortunate, albeit natural, response to this pain. We can find ourselves asking the same questions that the world asks. Why should I trust leaders? Why do I even need leaders? Everyone is asking these questions so why shouldn't we? It's the air we breathe!

But, how are we *supposed* to receive leadership? How does it work in God's design? Remember, we are called to be transformed by scripture, not conformed by worldly wisdom. So, what does scripture say? Look with me now to Hebrews 13, beginning in verse 17. Hear now God's holy, inspired, inerrant, living and active word to us today,

"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," (Hebrews 13:17, ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Before we go any further, we need to clarify a few things so that we can properly receive this teaching.

First, the author of Hebrews was likely writing to a group of Christians. Therefore, when he tells them to obey their leaders, he is telling them to obey their *Christian leaders* - this passage is about leaders *in the church*.

Second, *because* this passage is about leaders in the church, the author to the Hebrews assumes that those leaders are leading in a Biblical way. Jesus set the standard for Christian leadership in Mark 10 when he said:

"You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many," (Mark 10:42b-45, ESV)

The leaders to whom the author of Hebrews calls us to submit are *servant leaders who strive to live like Jesus*. We won't hear this passage correctly if we don't first understand that - this passage assumes that Biblical leadership is in place.

BUT ... this passage then turns on us, the congregation, and teaches us how to receive leadership in the church. Let's learn that lesson now.

How Do We Receive Leadership in the Church?

First, we are to receive leadership in the church,

1. With a Disposition of Obedience

If we look again at the start of Verse 17 we read,

“Obey your leaders and submit to them,” (Hebrews 13:17, ESV)

The lesson is clear - we must adopt a disposition of obedience. It should be our natural inclination to submit to our leaders. When we need counsel, we should go to our elders and *listen* to their advice. When they identify sin in our lives, we should respond with humility. When they make decisions for the church, we should support and trust their actions. For some of us here this morning, those responses are easy. We want to be lead and taught by our elders. That's amazing! That's what this passage *commands*.

But, for the majority of us, submission is difficult. We live in an individualistic culture where *self-reliance* is paramount, *not* dependance. Unfortunately, this mindset can creep into the church. How often can we find ourselves saying “I know what is best for me,” instead of “I need someone *else* to give me counsel?” When an elder lovingly identifies persistent sin in our life, is our reaction one of humility or of arrogance? When a decision is made regarding the church, do we support it or think of how we would have done it differently? I am afraid that for many of us, our disposition towards leadership is not one of obedience but one of distrust. We've bought into the lie that submission is not beneficial but demeaning.

Sadly, as I mentioned earlier, some of you have legitimate reasons for distrusting leadership. You've been betrayed by a leader that you trusted, and you want to protect yourself from being

hurt again. *But*, if your plan to protect yourself from being hurt again is to forever reject something God has called you to accept, I would invite you to reconsider.

Mark Dever helpfully comments,

“The abuse of something good does not show the thing itself to be bad. Authority itself, *as God intends it to be, is good, even life-giving*...It is a lie of Satan to say that submission is inherently demeaning,” (Nine Marks of a Healthy Church, Dever, 213)

The last sentence is so helpful - “it is a lie of Satan to say that submission is inherently demeaning.” You may have been hurt by submission in the past, but that does not mean you will be hurt by submission in the present - that is a lie of Satan. Submission does not make you less than - that is a lie of Satan. Submission to *Godly leaders* is “good, even life-giving.” 2 Samuel 23 says,

“When one rules over people in righteousness, when he rules in the fear of God, he is like the light of morning at sunrise on a cloudless morning, like the brightness after rain that brings grass from the earth,” (2 Samuel 23:3b-4, NIV)

Leaders who “rule in the fear of God” are *good* - we can and we *must* submit to them. Leaders who “rule in the fear of God” are life-giving - we can and we *must* submit to them.

Ultimately we need to adopt this disposition of obedience and submission because *God* has *commanded* it. Our passage this morning isn’t the only place in the Bible we see this. Romans 13 says,

“Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is *no* authority *except from God*, and those that exist have been *instituted by God*,” (Romans 13:1, ESV)

Our elders have authority because *God* has given it to them. When we fail to submit to those He has put in power, we fail to submit to *His* authority. God has given us our leaders - to submit to them is to submit to Him. If you choose not to submit to church leadership, you choose to rebel against God.

To be clear, I am not advocating for blind submission to leaders. In Acts 17, we read of the diligence of the people of Berea,

“Now these Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica; they received the word with all eagerness, *examining the scriptures daily to see if these things were so,*” (Acts 17:11, ESV)

Luke records this event to show us that we *are* to pay attention to what our leaders say. That isn't authority aversion - that's what the Bible commends. We aren't called to “check our brains at the door” - but neither are we called to live in constant distrust and suspicion. My point and, more importantly, the *point of the text* is to command a disposition, an *initial* inclination of obedience and submission. It is a difficult command to follow, *but* it is the Word of God.

God commands us to obey and submit to our leaders, so we must! If we want to receive leadership in the church, we must have a disposition of obedience.

Second, we are to receive leadership in the church,

2. With a Posture of Humility

If we look again at Verse 17 we read,

“For they are keeping watch over your souls,” (Hebrews 13:17, ESV)

The author of Hebrews is calling upon us to recognize that we *need* someone to watch over our souls. In our self-reliant culture, it requires humility to receive that message. We need this oversight because our souls are rebellious, *commanded* to wait solely for God but *corrupted* to seek out that which does not please Him. John Bunyan gives us an example of this in the *Pilgrim's Progress*.

While walking to the Celestial City, Christian is approached by Mr. Worldly-Wiseman who asks him where he is going. Christian says that he is going to the “yonder wicket gate” to find deliverance from his burden. In response, Mr. Worldly-Wiseman tells Christian of an easier way to relieve his burden, one that strays from the path he is on, but doesn't require him to travel so far. Christian listens to Mr. Worldly-Wiseman but soon finds himself halted by a mountain, afraid to traverse it because of its size and dangers. While standing in fear and sorrow at the foot of the mountain, a figure appears in the distance. Christian quickly realizes this figure to be Evangelist, the man who set him on the original path. Evangelist approaches Christian and

rebukes him for listening to Mr. Worldly-Wiseman and abandoning the way he had been shown, before comforting him and setting him back on the path.

Just as we can, Christian had wandered from the truth he had been shown and desperately needed a *leader* to find him and point him back in the right direction. Just like Evangelist watched over Christian's soul, so we, too, need leaders who watch over ours. When we stray from righteousness and pursue temptation, our leaders hold us accountable and seek to point us back in the right direction. Without them, we are lost. The Book of Judges gives us a clear example of this, saying,

“In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes,”
(Judges 21:25, ESV)

We *need* leaders to help keep us on the narrow path.

We *need* someone to call us when we haven't been at church for a month!

We *need* someone to pray for us when we are facing significant trials in our lives!

We *need* someone to hold us accountable when we stray from the narrow path!

We have a multitude of needs that our leaders are called to provide. We must be humble enough to recognize this. We *need* oversight. We *need* accountability. We *need* guidance. If we are humble enough to submit to this leadership, we become the beneficiaries of these gifts.

Ephesians 4 says that God,

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, (Ephesians 4:11-13, ESV)

God *gives* us the gift of leadership to help us grow individually *and* as the body of Christ. If we didn't have leaders, we would be a discordant collection of individuals. Praise God that we do have leaders! Proverbs 11 says,

Where there is no guidance, a people falls,
but in an abundance of counsellors there is safety, (Proverbs 11:14, ESV)

Without guidance we fall. Praise God that he gave us leaders like Athanasius, Martin Luther, and Billy Graham and many others to guide us through heretical doctrine, reformation and revival! Praise God that he continues to raise up these leaders today! *We* need leaders just as much as Christians of the past needed leaders. When authority aversion creeps into the church, we lose sight of this.

Hebrews 13:17 calls us to be humble enough to receive the gift of leadership.

Third, we are to receive leadership in the church,

3. With a Commitment to Accountability

If we look at verse 17 again we read,

For they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account, (Hebrews 13:17, ESV)

Leaders are called to keep their flock accountable *but* that does not mean that they *too* are not accountable; the reality is that we *all* need accountability. That is the beauty of the Body of Christ. This passage however puts emphasis on *leaders* accountability to *God*. Now, let's not *overhear* that.

As I mentioned in my introduction, many of us have been wounded by corrupt leadership in the past. It is a sad reality that the Bible is aware of. Acts 20 says,

and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore be alert, (Acts 20:30-31a, ESV)

Leaders *will* come who teach false doctrine and lead sinful lives that will threaten to destroy the church. When they come, it is our responsibility to speak up *and* our responsibility to hold them *accountable* for their actions. When writing to Timothy about how to deal with corrupt elders in the church, Paul says,

As for those who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, (1 Timothy 5:20a, ESV)

The Bible makes clear that when leaders espouse false doctrine and model unrepentant sin, the congregation has a responsibility to hold them accountable for their sin and to rebuke them of it.

BUT ... *this is an exception to the rule*. Remember, the focus of this text is on leaders accountability to God.

There *will* be times when we are called to hold leaders accountable for their actions *but*, the clear teaching of the New Testament is that those times are exceptions. If we do not see overt sin, our disposition is to be one of obedience and trust. This disposition enables us to confidently direct our energy towards receiving leadership as opposed to being suspicious of it.

But, you may be thinking, does this mean that we shouldn't pay attention to the actions and words of our leaders at all? Shouldn't we assume there are skeletons in their closet that need to be exposed? Our text this morning answers these questions.

When the author of Hebrews writes that leaders are "those who will have to give an account," this account is *to be given to God*. He is the Great Judge who sees all and will *hold all* accountable for their actions upon his return. This is why James writes that not many should aspire to be teachers.

When we direct our energy towards receiving leadership, we don't allow ourselves to believe the lie that leaders are inherently untrustworthy. We allow ourselves to view them as inherently *trustworthy*. Mark Dever says,

"[Trust] must be given as a gift – a gift in faith, in trust more of the God who gives than of the leaders he has given," (Nine Marks of a Healthy Church, Dever, 208)

God has ordained our leaders and so we should trust those whom God has put in place. Remember, leaders are a gift from God. Does it glorify God when we view his gifts to us with disdain and suspicion? Further, Godly leaders are fully aware of the account Hebrews says they will have to give. They know they will be held accountable for all that they say and do. The fear of the Lord helps propel them to conduct themselves in a manner that is above reproach. They

are called to watch over us with care, so that they can give an upright account on Judgement Day. In Acts 20, the Apostle Paul address the leaders of the church in Ephesus and warns them to

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.
(Acts 20:28 ESV)

For some of you, the wounds are deep - you may continue to ask how you can ever trust leaders. Let this verse be your answer. God has *bought* the church, he has bought *you*, with his own blood. If you cannot shake your disposition of fear, ask yourself - will God *ever* cease to watch over you? Will he ever cease to watch over his *church*? When God gives us leaders, we can trust that they are *good gifts* from the *Good Shepherd*. You do not have to be the protector - *God* is the protector.

So, if any of our elders ever preach something from this pulpit that is contrary to the Bible, hold them accountable for it! If they begin to engage in overt and unrepentant sin, rebuke them publicly and remove them from office! I know they all give a whole-hearted amen to that. But, apart from those two exceptions where we are called to step in, God is the one who will hold our elders to account. So, let's resolve to pray for them, that they would receive a "well done, good and faithful servant" when they reach the finish line.

Finally, we are to receive leadership in the church,

4. With an Attitude of Gratitude

The end of Hebrews 13:17 says,

"Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you," (Hebrews 13:17b)

We must be transformed by the words of this verse and cultivate an atmosphere that enables leaders to serve us with joy *so that* we can be the beneficiaries of their service.

I want you to picture two classrooms. In Classroom One, all of the students show up to class on time each day with their pens and paper, eager to learn. They sit at their desks quietly, listening

to the teacher and always raising their hands. When they are assigned homework, it always comes back the next day completed and well done. All of the students study for their tests and work to the best of their abilities. In Classroom Two, none of the students show up to class on time each day with any school supplies. They all slouch in their desks, ignoring the teacher's lessons. When they do have something to say, they blurt it out and interrupt their teacher. They never complete their homework or study for tests. Which class do you think will receive better teaching? Which teacher do you think will be more eager to pour into their students?

We are the students and our elders are the teachers. When we conduct ourselves with respect and obedience towards our elders, eager to learn and quick to accept reproach, always seeking to grow under their guidance, our elders *want* to invest more time into our lives. We make it a joy for our elders to lead us!

When we disrespect and disobey our elders, content to ignore their advice and remain in our sin, we will drive our elders into despair. Eventually, we may find ourselves without elders *because nobody wants to be one!* Our attitude towards our leaders directly influences their attitude towards us. Albert Mohler comments,

“Grudgingly obeying our leaders does not sharpen our hearts; it hardens them,”
(Exalting Jesus in Hebrews, Mohler Jr, 233)

When the mindset of authority aversion creeps into the church, we harden our elders and harm ourselves. If we are a people that are difficult to lead, we will have angry leaders or none at all. How terrible would that be! Redeemer City Church should be a congregation whose members are so grateful for the leadership they receive that people *want* to be elders.

A transformation of our minds allows us to see leaders as vital, not useless. It allows us to trust leaders, not be suspicious of them. It allows us to love leaders, not despise them. It allows us to see them as gifts that are intended to help us grow. In 1 Corinthians 11 the Apostle Paul writes,

“Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ,” (1 Corinthians 11:1, ESV)

Our leaders strive to imitate Christ *so that* they can be examples for us. Let us resolve this morning to abandon the mindset of authority aversion and instead adopt the mindset that we have been commanded to adopt in God's word:

“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,” (Hebrews 13:17, ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

Let's pray.