

## God's Design for Church Leadership, Part 2 (Hebrews 13:17–19)

Well, today is a continuation of last week's message on biblical leadership, church leadership, and our responsibility to those leaders. We are in chapter 13, verse 17, and I'll just read that verse to us here again as we begin. "Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you."

And providentially, we have the opportunity as a church to recognize somebody as a new elder that we're adding to the eldership of this church, and we were able to arrange it so that it would providentially work out to do that in conjunction with this passage. And so we're spending two weeks on Hebrews 13:17, and we're going to do that at the end of the message today. And I mentioned last week how awkward it is to preach on this subject for me, and I've been dreading this since the beginning of Hebrews, and all of that is true, and you might be wondering, well, it seems like spending two weeks on a verse you weren't looking forward to preaching would be an odd way to show that you really weren't looking forward to that at all. And that is true, but last week we needed to lay a bit of a foundation for this subject of church leadership and the issue of what Scripture teaches concerning leaders and their function, their structure, and the authority that they are given. And the New Testament gives some very clear teaching regarding leadership in the church concerning elders and deacons. And last week we kind of went through a lot of stuff in a very summary fashion, something that could have taken four or five weeks to go through. But we didn't do that, mostly, or partly, I should say, because we cover this in our membership class but also because I think that it just would—I didn't want to get bogged down in the details. So we kind of flew at thirty thousand feet last week. We're going to get into the details of this verse a little bit more today.

I want to give you briefly what we covered last week, just by way of reminder to sort of again set the table for us. We saw last week that the New Testament establishes two offices of leadership within the church, elders and deacons. And by the way, not apostles. There's nothing in the New Testament that suggests that the office of apostle was going to continue throughout the church age. There are apostles who are named in the New Testament. There are people who are called "apostle" in a little *a* sense—that is, sort of as a sent one or an emissary, but only twelve (thirteen men with the apostle Paul) had the status of being apostle with a capital A—that is, having the type of authority and working the signs that an apostle did. And there's no qualifications given

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in the New Testament. There's no instructions given in the New Testament for the continuing office of the apostle. There was no expectation that that office was going to continue beyond the death of the thirteen apostles in the New Testament era. And so charismatic practice aside of appointing apostles and calling people apostles of churches, the New Testament gives no warrant for that whatsoever. Just offices of elders and deacons.

Second, the New Testament establishes one office of spiritual oversight. That's the office of elder or pastor or overseer or shepherd. There are actually three different words that are used of that function in the New Testament: the word *overseer*, the word *elder*, and the word *pastor or shepherd*, better translated as “shepherd.” Those three words all describe the one and selfsame office and authority and function within a New Testament church.

Number three, elders care for the spiritual needs or concerns of the church. Fourth, deacons care for the physical needs or concerns of the church and help the elders in their task in terms of caring for the spiritual needs. Number five, the New Testament establishes a plurality of both. Remember that? We saw that it's elders and deacons in a single church. Not one man dictating from on high his vision of leadership or his vision for the church but a plurality of biblically qualified men who jointly together pastor the local church. That is the New Testament model.

Number six, the authority of the elders is delegated, limited, and accountable. They are undershepherds who will give an account to the great Shepherd when He appears. And that is something that we are reminded of in 1 Peter 5, which we read earlier, and in chapter 13 of our passage here, verse 20, where he refers to the great Shepherd of the sheep who has come back from the dead. There's a reference there to the fact that these leaders will also stand before that great Shepherd of the sheep.

And then number seven, the elders are under the authority of the Word of God. That is their sphere. They have no authority outside of the Word of God. The Word of God limits their authority and prescribes the way in which they exercise that authority. Elders do not have authority in your house to govern the minutiae of your house. They are really those who are given the oversight and leadership within the household of God.

And then finally, those are the leaders, I think, that are mentioned in verse 17. Their work is described—“they keep watch over your souls”—describing a shepherding

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ministry or spiritual care. So thus we can see that God's design in church leadership is for the good and flourishing of His blood-bought saints. That is His concern. For the good and flourishing of those for whom Christ died, that is why God appoints leadership. He establishes authority in the home, in the church, and in civil government, three different and distinct spheres of authority that God has established. And we are called to submit appropriately to the appropriate authorities in an appropriate way in all three of those realms, always for the good of His people.

And today we're going to look at the details of this verse and what it teaches. This is an exhortation to obedience to those who are kingdom citizens, who are looking forward to that city which is to come. Remember, the context is that we have gone out of the city, we have abandoned our past life, our past commitments, our past religious persuasions and convictions, we've gone outside of the city to the place of reproach where Christ is, and there we are a new people. There we have a new covenant community, as it were, a new people called out by Christ, and there we bear His reproach. And then having been brought into that new relationship, that new community of people, we are to submit to those whom God has appointed to take care of our souls.

I see in this verse, verse 17, three reasons why we are to obey and submit to our spiritual leaders. First, because of the nature of the care that they give; second, because of the dangers that we face; and then third, because of the account that we will give. Because of the nature of their care, the dangers that we face, and the account that they will give. Those are three reasons why we submit to spiritual leadership. Let's look at the first one, because of the nature of their care. This is not the first time that he has mentioned leaders and the care that they have given in this passage. You remember back in chapter 13, verse 7, and this was quite a while now because I was off for several weeks, but in chapter 13, verse 7, he exhorted them to “remember those who led you, who spoke the word of God to you; and considering the result of their conduct, imitate their faith.” He addresses past leaders in verse 7 and reminds them of their faithful service—“they have spoken the word of God to you”—and then he calls upon them to call to their mind that example and, having seen the outcome or the end of their faith, indicating that these were men who had served well and then passed on, he says imitate that faith. One of the distinguishing marks of those faithful leaders is that they had been faithful to the Word of God, to share and speak the Word of God with the people, and he calls upon them to remember that and to remember the result of that and then to imitate their faithfulness.

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And now he commands concerning living leaders to obey and submit to them. Verse 17 again: “Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls.” There's two verbs there. Both of them are imperatives, both of them are commands. And they go together, and they do have something of similar meaning. There's a little bit of overlap in the word *obey* and the word *submit* because they do kind of go together. And while they are different shades of the same idea, there is a bit of overlap, and some commentators say it is difficult actually to distinguish the meaning between these two. I think it's possible to distinguish the meaning between the two, but they are, though not perfect synonyms, they are very similar to one another.

The word *obedience* here means to listen to or to follow, and the word *submit* means to yield or give way to or to defer to. Now when I use the word *obey* and we see it in our passage here, we tend to think of the kind of obedience that is commanded of children in Ephesians 6:1: “Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right.” And if you're a parent, you understand the concept of that type of unquestioning, trusting, loyal obedience at the very first command, not the third or fifth or tenth time that they're told to do something, but you understand that kind of obedience. And you might think, “Is that the kind of obedience that we give to church leaders?” No, not necessarily. This is a different word that is used here that is also translated with our English word *obey*. This word has the meaning of giving heed to something or following after something. It also describes a persuasion or a certainty. It has the idea or the connotation of trusting and relying upon something, of being persuaded to something or convinced of something. In fact, it is not just translated as “obey” in Scripture. It is also translated as “trust” or “trusted,” “confidence,” “convinced,” and “persuaded.” So this is not a trust and a following that is a blind trust or a following, nor even a slavish obedience. It is the type of obedience that comes as a result of proper persuasion. That's the idea. In fact, John Owen in his commentary on Hebrews says, “The word signifies an obedience on persuasion.” An obedience on persuasion.

Now, the kind of obedience that your children are called to give to you is not an obedience upon persuasion. It is an obedience, full stop, period. You don't have to persuade them. You don't need to reason with them. In fact, children need to be trained to obey without reasoning, without persuading, without being convinced. They need to be trained to obey without question. That's that kind of obedience. This is not that kind of obedience. This is a heeding or a following after something upon the persuasion of something.

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So now I ask you, what is the basis of that persuasion? What does an elder, a pastor, a teacher use to persuade us to give heed to something or to follow something? It is the Word of God. That is the realm, that is the tool of his persuasion. So I come to you and I say, “Look, this Tuesday, you're all going out to dinner at Fiesta Bonita because they need our help staying in business. And since Micah doesn't work there any longer, they're really struggling to attract new customers, so we're going to all go out on Tuesday to Fiesta Bonita. You must obey me because I'm the pastor of the church.” Are you obligated to obey me? No. In fact, I would make the case you are obligated to disobey me for the very purpose of demonstrating that I have no authority to command you to do that at all. But if I stand up here and I say, “Husbands, you need to love your wives and cherish them like Christ loved the church, and you need to use your God-given headship to serve your family and to love them selflessly and sacrificially because here's what the text of Scripture says, that this is our obligation,” are you obligated to obey that? Yes, but not because I said it. I happen to just be the mouthpiece through which God is speaking that to you. So therefore, upon the persuasion of that, you are obligated to submit to that and obey it, not because I said it. The fact that I said it is irrelevant to the conversation. It is only an obedience upon persuasion because that persuasion comes from the Word of God. And when shepherds are doing that, then they are pleading to their people and appealing to their people to submit, not to them for the sake of submitting to them, but really to the Word of God, which they are using as the instrument of persuasion.

The word *submit* does have the idea of obedience, to yield or to defer or to give way to. It's a bit of a stronger word, also a broader word. It simply means to defer or to give up what I might prefer to somebody else. In a church almost of any size, you can't have a vote on every little aspect of church ministry and everybody gets their own little say. It's not a democracy at all in that sense. So there are going to have to be situations where people simply defer to one another. The congregation defers to the leadership on certain things, trusting that God is going to work through that. And listen, the leaders of a church defer to one another. We talked about this last week. When you have a plurality of men who are leading a local congregation under the same authority, holding the same office, no one of them above the other, there has to be deference between the men who work together in that capacity or they can't function. So there is a yielding and there is a submission.

Alexander Strauch in his book *Biblical Eldership*, which I would again commend to you— if you don't have that, you need to buy that book, *Biblical Eldership*. In fact, this

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Tuesday, you need to go out and you need to buy Alexander Strauch's book on biblical eldership. He says this:

A spirit of obedience and submission to authority is fundamental to Christian living. Submission is the fruit of genuine humility and faith. It is a mark of the spirit-filled life. True submission to God naturally expresses itself in obedience and submission to earthly authority. Thus genuine submission to God in His word expresses itself in obedience and submission in the home, in marriage, at work, in society, and in the local assembly of believers.

Now, there are two sides to this element of authority. First, the authority that is given to church leaders is a real and genuine authority. It's not simply, you know, we're just going to elect him to kind of lead the thing. It's not that kind of authority. It is a real and genuine authority to operate and function under the headship and the leadership of Christ by the authority of the Word of God for the good of the people. 1 Thessalonians 5—listen to how Paul describes this as he speaks to the Thessalonians. “But we request of you, brethren, that you appreciate those who diligently labor among you, and have charge over you in the Lord and give you instruction, and that you esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Live in peace with one another” (vv. 12–13). Notice what he says there. He says they have charge over you in the Lord and give you instruction. Their authority is not a raw authority that they have by virtue of the fact that they've gone to a seminary or are then voted in or recognized. The authority is by virtue of the work that they do in the Lord because they give you instruction, and it is a work that these men do. It's not simply a popularity contest or a beauty contest that establishes leaders in the church, at least it should not be.

In Titus 2:15, Paul says to Titus in very difficult circumstances, church circumstances—listen to this. This sounds stern and harsh to our modern ears, but listen. Titus 2:15: “These things speak and exhort and reprove with all authority. Let no one disregard you.” Now there's a reason why that instruction was given to Titus in his situation. And I'm going to get to this a little bit later on when we talk about the dangers that we face. He was in a serious situation that required him to stand with a spine of steel and to reprove those who were contradicting truth and to do so with sternness. Titus was dealing with false teachers, with false converts, and he needed to refute those who contradict.

So there is an authority, and this is the two sides of authority. There's an authority that is to be used to serve and encourage the flourishing of the people who are under that

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authority. All authority should be used that way. All authority, everybody in authority will be called to an account for how they use their authority, and it must be used for the good of those over whom they are given charge. Having established that, that it is servant leadership, sacrificial leadership, for the good of other people, there are also times when the threat is severe and the situation is tense and it is necessary for those who are in authority to draw the line and to draw it firmly and say, “This far and no further,” and to rebuke and to reprove with all authority and let no one disregard them. There's a spectrum there, obviously. The person who is always gentle and never firm is like a parent who gets walked over all of the time, and the person who is always firm and stern but never gentle and caring and compassionate is like a parent who doesn't deserve the respect of their children because they're always harsh to their children. So there's a spectrum there of how that authority is to be used for the good of people.

As Peter said—we read this at the beginning of the service—“Shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion” (1 Pet. 5:2). That is, you shouldn't be forced to do it. You shouldn't do it if you don't like to do it, you don't want to do it, you don't want to serve in that capacity. So not under compulsion, “but voluntarily, according to the will of God” (v. 2). And not with the wrong motive. Peter says, “Not for sordid gain, but with eagerness; [and then listen to this] nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge” (vv. 2–3). You don't lord it over those allotted to your charge. “Now that I've got this position and this title and my name is on the wall inside the office, people are going to start listening to me.” That's not how any biblically qualified man would ever run anything.

Now, is authority abused, even spiritual authority abused inside of churches? Yeah, it certainly is. I've seen the situations, not here in this church, but I've seen situations where spiritual authority has been abused to the detriment of the flock. It is a disqualifying feature when somebody who is in a position of spiritual authority lords it over or abuses those who are under his charge, allotted to his care. Instead, authority is to be used with humility and love and grace, compassion, kindness, gentleness, and patience, to use that authority and that calling for the flourishing of others, to advance the holiness and obedience and faithfulness and endurance and spiritual well-being of other people.

This is a spiritual work, which you see from the word that is translated as “keep watch over your souls.” It's a word that means to keep oneself awake. If used literally, it means to force yourself to stay awake and on guard and to look out, like a watchman would

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look on a wall, constantly scanning the horizon for danger, alert to the danger. He doesn't allow himself to fall asleep. But when the word is used metaphorically as it is here, it has the idea of guarding something and caring for something and keeping watch for something. And it is over souls that the leaders of the church are to take care. The word soul there, *psyche*, means life or soul. It can also be translated as “you” or “yourself.” It describes the inner person, the heart, the mind, the life of the inner person. The NIV translates it “you,” and they translate it this way: “They keep watch over you.” But I think in this context, what is meant here is the idea of inner life or soul. The elder is not just looking over physical bodies, but his desire is for the good and the flourishing of those under his charge, particularly their inner self, their inner life, their soul, their spirit. He has an interest to the care of things that go for their good and for the good of their soul. In other words, the shepherd is concerned for one's spiritual health and growth and development, not marketing the brand or enlarging the platform or getting likes on social media or buildings and lands and numbers and any of that. But instead, it is the guarding of the flock and the watching out for the things that endanger the flock spiritually that is the concern for an elder.

And you see that this is the example that is given by the author of Hebrews. He's been doing this from the very beginning of the book. He warned them about the dangers of disobeying the truth. He has warned them of the dangers of false doctrine, encouraged them to look to Christ. He has exhorted them to their endurance and to cast their gaze upon Christ, looking to Jesus, the author and perfecter of your faith. He has encouraged them. He has consoled them. He has exhorted them to spiritually good disciplines and spiritually good beliefs and theology. He is shepherding their souls in this way even through this book. This book is one long shepherding of their souls and instructing them in the things that they need. And we should submit therefore to those who do that work because of the nature of their work, the nature of their care. Elders and deacons have authority from Christ to care for His people, and that care is intended for the good and flourishing of God's blood-bought people. And therefore, that's the first reason we should submit to it.

Second, because of the dangers we face. And this is implied by the word “they keep watch over your soul.” You don't need to keep watch over something that does not have the potential of being endangered. We keep watch over things that have risk of being endangered by something else. The word *shepherd*, one of the three words that's used of an elder or an overseer, that word has the idea of bringing out to pasture, of leading and feeding and tending and protecting, to protect namely against wolves and

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predators and hirelings and thieves and robbers. That was the imagery of the first century in an agrarian culture. They would have been familiar with the imagery of a shepherd. His job was to lead them around, to protect them, to watch over them, to keep guard over the flock, to be aware of the dangers. Long before the wolf was in the midst of the flock, ravaging the people, the shepherd had to see that wolf on the horizon and to know of it and to alert others to its presence and be aware of where those dangers were at and of their proximity to his flock of people. That was his charge. And if he was negligent or if he fell asleep or he wasn't watchful, then that could mean the loss of sheep.

The dangers to our souls include sin and falsehood, the deceitfulness of sin, the deceitfulness even of our own hearts, the allure of the flesh, and the temptations of this world, and our ability to rationalize our sin and to justify it and even to ignore it is truly jaw-dropping and stunning. We have a capacity to deceive ourselves concerning our sin that should horrify us at the deepest part of our being. That must be guarded. That must be watched over. Not only that, but falsehood. False doctrine, false prophets and teachers. Scripture warns about these things. Small errors in theology that will hamper your progress in the faith. And then there are big errors of theology that will poison your soul and even rob you of eternal rewards. And the proliferation of that poison in our day with the speed of the internet is just stunning. So a shepherd needs to know the history of error and the history of theology, the history of the church. He needs to know the difference between what is true and what is almost true. He needs to know what is false. He needs to have the ability to spot it, to answer it, and to explain why it is that that is false, why it's falsehood. That's the job of a shepherd.

The danger is always real and it is ever-present. In the book of Acts, chapter 20, which we read last week, in verse 28, the apostle Paul was giving encouragement and exhortation to the elders of the church in Ephesus, and he had called them out to the shore at Miletus and gave them this charge. Listen to the somber and sober language that he uses in verse 28 and following.

28 Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.

29 [Now listen to this; I want you to hear this with soberness] I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock;

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30 and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them.

31 Therefore be on the alert, remembering that night and day for a period of three years I did not cease to admonish each one with tears. (Acts 20:28–31 NASB)

Threats from without and threats from within; that's what we have to guard against.

Second Peter 2:1—Peter warned, “False prophets also arose among the people, just as there will also be false teachers among you, who will secretly introduce destructive [that is, soul-destroying] heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing swift destruction upon themselves.” So elders must aggressively at times deal with that danger and have an ability to refute those who contradict and to deal with the error that is sometimes inside the camp and sometimes outside the camp.

In Titus 1, I mentioned the serious situation that Titus was dealing with when Paul, after he gives the instruction for elders at the end of that list of qualifications in chapter 1— Paul says this: They must hold fast “the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching, so that he will be able both to exhort in sound doctrine [that is the positive aspect of teaching] and to refute those who contradict [that sound doctrine]” (v. 9). Why? Paul says this:

10 For there are many rebellious men, empty talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision,

11 who must be silenced because they are upsetting whole families, teaching things they should not teach for the sake of sordid gain.

12 One of themselves, a prophet of their own, said, ‘Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons.’

13 This testimony is true. For this reason reprove them severely so that they may be sound in the faith,

14 not paying attention to Jewish myths and commandments of men who turn away from the truth.

15 To the pure, all things are pure; but to those who are defiled and unbelieving, nothing is pure, but both their mind and their conscience are defiled.

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16 They profess to know God, but by their deeds they deny Him, being detestable and disobedient and worthless for any good deed. (Titus 1:10–16 NASB)

That is some of the most scathing, rebuking, and reproofing language that you will read in all of the New Testament. And it was given to a man who was on an island, who was told to appoint elders in every city, as he was directed. These are the qualifications. “And then, Titus,” he says, “these men who are teaching these things need to be reproofed and rebuked, and they need to be silenced because they are destroying people's lives, families.”

Now contrast that kind of instruction and attitude with the attitude of the sleeping shepherds, which we are so familiar with in our own day, when it is not uncommon to be in a church or to be part of a church where the shepherds don't even know what the dangers are. They couldn't identify a false teacher if one walked into a service wearing a T-shirt that says, *I'm a false teacher*. They still wouldn't believe that. “Give them the benefit of the doubt.” They don't understand the difference between truth and error, or even the nuances of that. They can't spot the dangers anywhere, in the flock, outside of the flock, and even if they think somebody is a danger, they're very hesitant to even call them a false teacher or to identify them at all. That's the mark of a modern American evangelicalism writ large. That's the fact.

That's so much different than what we find in the New Testament, where Paul, with the motivation of love, says to Timothy,

5 The goal of our instruction is love from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith.

6 For some men, straying from these things, have turned aside to fruitless discussion,

7 wanting to be teachers of the Law, even though they do not understand either what they are saying or the matters about which they make confident assertions. (1 Tim. 1:5–7 NASB)

Jude at the end of the New Testament—he says in verse 3, “While I was making every effort to write you about our common salvation, I felt the necessity to write to you appealing that you contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all handed down to the saints.” Then Jude says in verse 4, “For certain persons have crept in unnoticed.”

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They've slithered their way into the church. "Those," Jude says, "who were long beforehand marked out for this condemnation, ungodly persons who turn the grace of our God into licentiousness and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ."

A qualified shepherd, one that is doing his job, can spot the danger to the flock on the horizon before the flock even knows that the danger exists. That's the point of a shepherd. That is not what everybody in a congregation is able to do, but the shepherds must all be able to do that. The author of Hebrews does that very thing in this chapter. Remember back in verse 9 when he says don't be carried away by varied and strange teachings that have to do with food and the altar and the sacrifices? He's warning them about the danger of false teaching. And one of the ways that they are protected against the dangers of false teaching and strange teachings is by submitting to the elders and the shepherds who are watching out for their souls.

So we should submit because of the nature of their care, because of the dangers that we face, and then third, because of the account that we will all give. There is an accounting to be given by everybody, those who lead and those who are called to submit to that leadership. Both parties are accountable. No one escapes this accountability. "As those who will give an account" (v. 17) is a reference to the leaders; they have to give an account for their leadership. That's true. So if you defer to a leader and you say, "It's not the way I would have done it. I don't necessarily like that," here's the good news. You don't have to give an account for what it is that you're deferring to them for. And there's bad news there for shepherds that we have to make sure that we are doing our duty with diligence and with fastidiousness and diligence. Otherwise—did I say diligence twice? With fastidiousness, diligence, both the same thing. That we have to make sure that we are doing our duty in that way because we have to give an account. In other words, we all have to stand before the great Shepherd. Those who are called to submit to that leadership, the warning to them is this would be unprofitable to you if you make their service to you a grief instead of a joy.

So first a word about the accountability of shepherds. You'll notice in verse 20 where the author says, "Now the God of peace, who brought up from the dead the great Shepherd of the sheep through the blood of the eternal covenant, even Jesus our Lord," he is describing there the great Shepherd of the sheep. And though this passage does not describe in detail the accountability of the elders, it does describe the elders as being those who must give an account. And I think that the reference in verse 20 to the great Shepherd of the sheep is a reminder to the elders that you will stand before the

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One who called you to shepherd His people. In other words, there is a Shepherd who is over the shepherds in the church, and they must give an account to Him. First Peter 5:4 says, “When the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory.”

Now the account that an elder is to give is not an account that has anything to do with his salvation. I want you to understand that. We're not talking about his salvation. It's not that you're going to show up and a negligent shepherd is going to find that his negligence in the flock or his lack of due diligence has resulted in his loss of salvation and now he goes to Hell. No, like you, a shepherd's salvation rests entirely upon the work of Christ and what He has done. It has been forever secured. So we're not talking about salvation, but we are talking here about the gaining of rewards or the suffering of loss. In other words, it would be unprofitable for a shepherd to not do his shepherding well, just as it would be unprofitable for somebody to not submit to well-given leadership and shepherding and care for your souls. So we're talking about the gaining of reward or the loss of reward. Peter describes the reward for shepherds as the unfading crown of glory.

Now the accountability of the sheep is described in that phrase, “This would be unprofitable for you” (v. 17). That's something of an understatement. It's an understatement given for the effect of emphasizing it. So it's kind of a way of emphasizing something by understating it. In other words, if you were to state it positively, [the author of Hebrews] is saying this would be disastrous for you. What would be disastrous for you? If you conduct yourselves in such a way that you cause grief to the shepherds of your souls instead of joy. For he says in verse 17, “Let them do this”—not let them give an account, but let them keep watch over your soul—“with joy and not with grief.” Because if it is with grief, then this would be unprofitable for you, this would be disastrous for you, he says.

When a congregation causes their shepherds and their leadership great joy in their work, the shepherds end up doing that shepherding with eagerness. They continue in it, they flourish in it. It's easy for them, and then it becomes profitable for the entire congregation. Their diligence and their hard work is rewarded by the fruit in the lives of the people and by joy in their own life. And the reward of joyful shepherding bears fruit in everybody's life in the entire congregation. In other words, if somebody is doing something good and fruitful to my soul, and I encourage that by nourishing and feeding that activity and making it a joy for them to do that for my soul, then who benefits from

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that? They do and I do because I get more of that care and attention, and they get more of the joy that belongs to them for doing what God has called them to do.

But when a congregation makes the lives of their shepherds a grief and not a joy, the entire congregation gets less of the good shepherding because the shepherds then become sorrowful and they get worn down and discouraged and disheartened, and some of them even go out of ministry, and then the church ends up losing good men. And we are living in an age when we do not need any fewer good men in leadership in the churches. And I have good friends who have been run out of pulpits and run out of churches because of a handful of people in their congregation who made their lives a living hell for years, and finally, they just bail because they cannot deal with the stress, they cannot deal with the grief that it brings to their families, to their kids, or to their grandchildren, and to their lives. That is not the case here. I'll say that right off the top. That's not the case here. But I know of men where that has happened. And then the church gets abandoned over to men who are not qualified and men who will give in and cannot lead, and then everybody suffers. The entire congregation suffers.

It is therefore unprofitable in the short term as well as in the long term with your spiritual reward and interest to resist or disobey or to reject good soul care. In the long term, we'll stand before Christ who is the Chief Shepherd. All of us will. I sometimes look at those other congregations with people who have done that to those good men, and I think to myself, "What will it be like for you to stand in front of the good Shepherd on that day and give an account for what you did to His appointed man who was there to care for your soul? And you resisted that, you treated him like that, you did that to him, and made the entire congregation suffer." Because to reject that kind of leadership is to reject the kind of leadership that Christ wants for His church. We all stand before the great Shepherd, those who are in leadership and those who are under leadership. Nobody escapes the reckoning. So we should submit to leadership because of the nature of the care that they give, the dangers that we all face, as well as the account that we must all give to the great Shepherd. That is God's design in giving leaders to us.

Now verses 18 and 19, they belong with this theme of leadership. And normally at this time, I would kind of wrap this up and I would save verses 18 and 19 for next week. But there's not really a whole sermon in those two verses. Well, let me back up. I could make a whole sermon out of those two verses, but I think if I were to do that, you would feel like I had called a time-out when I could have just let the clock run a little bit. So in the interest of not being seen as calling a time-out when I could let the clock run a little

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bit, I want to sum up these two verses because they're really some personal comments, some issues between the reader, and a little bit of their history, and there's not a lot there that would really make for an abundant sermon. So let me sort of sum up these two verses and we'll bring them in here because they have to do with the issue of leadership.

He requests prayer for them. Look at verse 18: “Pray for us, for we are sure that we have a good conscience, desiring to conduct ourselves honorably in all things. And I urge you all the more to do this, so that I may be restored to you the sooner” (vv. 18–19). Now the reason for the prayer request is straightforward. The author is one of their leaders. He has been a leader among them at some point. He has been with them at some point. Verse 19 describes returning to them and being restored to them. So we can assume that this is one leader who for some reason has been called away and is absent from the congregation. His heart is really to be back with the people. And he's simply asking them to pray for us—verse 18—pray for us, meaning not only myself, who has been taken away from you for a period of time, but also for the rest of the leaders. So after describing the work that the leaders do, how heavy it is, how serious it is, that they will give an account for the work that they do and watching over souls, knowing that, he immediately asks prayer from them for himself and for the other leaders. This reminds us of the duty that we have to pray for those who are in spiritual leadership over us, who have charge over us in the Lord and give us instruction for our good. We should pray for them because their work is heavy and their work is serious and they must give an account. So in describing in verse 17 the leadership and the responsibility, he then turns right around and says now pray for us. And one of the reasons or one of the things that you can pray for me specifically, he says, verse 19, is so that I may be restored to you and able to come back to you even sooner.

Matthew Henry says this: “They should pray that God would teach those who are to teach them and that He would make them vigilant and wise and zealous and successful, that He would assist them in all their labors, support them under all their burdens and strengthen them under all their temptations.” That's what is meant by verse 18. “Pray for us, for we are sure that we have a good conscience.” In other words, he is saying, “We believe that to this point we have conducted ourselves in a way that is honorable and above reproach in all things, and we're asking that you would pray that we would maintain that and continue that.” And so I would suggest to you that if you want to know how to best pray for those who are in spiritual leadership over you, this is a good

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place to start. Pray that we will fulfill our duty and labor well and keep a good conscience and remain above reproach in all things. Leaders need prayer.

Verse 19, his desire is to be with them. Something had called him away. He wants to return. And this shows you the heart of a godly leader. He doesn't like to be away from his people for a long period of time. He would rather be with them than anywhere else. And he wants to do his duty well. He wants to do it honorably. He wants to do it with joy. He wants to see fruit in their lives and in his own. And above all, a godly shepherd wants to cross the finish line with all who have been under his care and to do so with rejoicing and to see them endure with joy and with fastidious faithfulness all the way to the end of their race. He wants them to have the reward for their endurance and their obedience, and so for this entire Epistle, he has been encouraging them on to this, stopping every once in a while to warn them of the dangers of apathy and indolence and unbelief and getting distracted, and encouraging them to maintain their confidence and maintain their faithfulness and maintain their steadfastness, even in the face and in the midst of hostility, so that they may, having looked to Jesus who is the author and perfecter of their faith, run with endurance that race that is set before them and finally cross the finish line. And here is the goal for those who lead and for those who follow, that we would all, with arms linked, cross the finish line at some point and do so with joy. And then we can sit down in eternal feasting and eternal joy and feast and drink together and enjoy the presence of Christ together for all of eternity without end. That's the goal. Shepherds want nothing more than that. Nothing more than to see every last person that they serve, that they love, that they pray for to finally cross the finish line and to do so with joy and to sit down in eternal glory. That's the heart of every shepherd.

Now, I want to repeat something that I said last week, and that is that this passage was not decided—I didn't decide to preach on this passage because there is some big issue between leadership and the congregation that needs to be addressed in this church. There isn't. There's no stunning, glaring issue that needs to come up where everybody needs to be reminded of, you know, shut your hole, know your role, stay in your place. There's nothing like that, none of that. I say to you as one of the elders, and I know that I speak for all four of the elders, including Jeff Miller, that we feel loved and appreciated and treasured here. It is our great joy to shepherd this body. We love to see people grow in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ, to see them grow in their faith. We pray for you, we delight in you. We know that many of you pray for us. And it is something that we do with great joy. It doesn't mean it's not work. It doesn't mean that

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there are not issues that come up, that no issues come up that need special prayer or attention or cause us vexation or sleepless nights. Those things do come up, but it is a joy for us to serve this congregation. We love you, we delight in you. I can only say that from the bottom of my heart. I mentioned this at the annual meeting when I expressed this. I have no plans to go anywhere. I'm actively planning to not go anywhere because my greatest delight and joy is to be here in this fellowship, in this congregation, with the people that God has called and brought here. As Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 2, you are our joy and our crown of rejoicing, even in the presence of Christ our Lord. Truly a delight in every way.

The degree to which we will continue to enjoy the unity, the love, the fellowship, and the blessings of this church body is the degree to which we will in the future continue to give heed to the instructions of this passage. It would be my greatest joy to know that the kind of unity and love and affection, camaraderie, and fellowship that exists in this body will continue to exist for my children when they are my age and my grandchildren and my great-grandchildren for generations to come if the Lord should tarry. God has built a very special thing at Kootenai Community Church. We know that. We don't take it for granted. We love this body. We truly do with the depth in the bottom of our heart. You are our joy and our crown of rejoicing, and it's a joy to serve here. And it's a joy to do so knowing that God continues to add men to this number who will fulfill the responsibility that God has given to them "to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood" (Acts 20:28).

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