

Sermon Transcript

10.18.2026

Hebrews 13:17-19

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- Good morning. Please open to Hebrews 13:17-19.
- Thank you for your prayers last week. As many of you know, the elders took our annual retreat to Pastor Ed's buddy's cabin in SD.
- And one of the highlights of the trip is riding through the mountains on some ATVs.
- Along the way, you have to wear goggles because the mud and dust is so thick and you're going up to 65mph. And occasionally, you might have to stop and wipe them clean so you can see.
- I think that's the way we have to approach the text of Scripture as well.
- Before we can see clearly, we must wipe away the residue. Before we can construct a life of obedience, we must deconstruct what are called the noetic effects of the fall.
- Noetic relates to the mind and refers to the way that sin has affected how we understand reality. It has warped our ability to comprehend.
- In Romans 1, Paul writes that we exchange the truth about God for a lie and have therefore become futile in our thinking.
- In 1 Corinthians he says that God's wisdom seems like folly to us.
- In Ephesians, we're described as being darkened in our understanding.
- The fundamental problem of mankind isn't merely a hardened heart, but a darkened and cynical mind. Our minds are actively involved in manipulating our reality, resisting the truth, coddling error to our own detriment and shame.
- Which means that when we come to a text, we need to repent of many of our presuppositions and assumptions. We need to deconstruct error before we can build anything of substance. Think of the image of renovating a house. Depending on the condition of the house, you might need to take it down to the studs or the foundation.
- Likewise, before we can build an obedient life, we must tear down areas of disobedience, areas where we might be predisposed to misunderstand because we don't want to obey.
- Sometimes the most difficult passages to comprehend aren't difficult on intellectual or grammatical grounds, but affectional and volitional. In other words, we don't want to listen. The hardest passages to hear are the ones that we don't want to heed.
- But we can't rightly understand or apply God's word while refusing to repent of the sin that that word exposes.
- I mention that today because our passage is very counter-intuitive and counter-cultural because its contrary to our carnal nature, our fleshly desires. It grates against our sense of individualism & autonomy. It infringes upon our desire for self-determination, our libertarian conception of freedom in which anyone or anything which encumbers my expressive individualism is bad.
- In other words, this text is culturally subversive and thus offensive. This text is a threat to our fleshly desire to be like God, to have no one or nothing to which we must yield.
- No one naturally wants to submit to another. No one wants to obey another. We want to be like God, beholden to none, master of our own lives. Nobody tells me what to do, nobody puts baby in the corner.

- And so this text will challenge that fundamental inclination...an inclination birthed in the flesh and coddled by our individualistic narcissistic culture.
- And thus this text should sting. It should hurt. Like Hebrews 12 said, discipline hurts. And yet it is the sting of a surgeon's scalpel to cut out the cancer, the pain of antiseptic cleansing a deep wound. The hurt of exercise after a prolonged season of sloth.
- In God's kindness, He has provided authority for our flourishing. Authority in the home, authority in the nation, and as we'll see today, authority in the church. Yes, that authority is imperfect, but it is necessary nonetheless.
- So, with all of that in mind, let's pray for the grace to hear and treasure the word this morning.
- Self, others, me.
- Christ is better. That's the message of Hebrews that we've heard every single week for the past 18 months.
- Better than the angels, Moses, & Joshua. Better than Melchizedek & the Levitical & Aaronic priests.
- Better is the breadcrumb that leads us through the book.
- A better rest than the Sabbath. A better land than Canaan. A better sanctuary than the tabernacle. A better sacrifice than bulls or goats. A better promise. A better covenant. A better mediator.
- In any and all ways, Christ is better.
- And if Christ is better then His word and ways are better.
- As we've seen over the past year and a half, the author of Hebrews spent 11 chapters showing why faith is better, why falling away or drifting is foolish, futile, and ultimately fatal.
- Because of the superiority and supremacy of Jesus Christ, the son of God.
- Chapters 1-11 are full of indicatives. Declarative statements describing what God has done.
- But in chapter 12 we saw a shift to the imperative which are prescriptive statements commanding us to live out what God has done.
- What are the implications of our theological convictions about the supremacy & efficacy of Christ's superiority? How do we work out what God has worked in us? That's what chapters 12 & 13 give us. As we've said, the final 2 chapters of Hebrews are only possible because of chapters 1-11. Those first chapters are the foundation & fuel which empower our subsequent obedience.
- Three weeks ago, we looked at vs. 7-8 of chapter 13 where the readers were told to remember their leaders & we saw that one of the fundamental roles of those leaders was speaking the word. We talked about how those leaders had probably died, perhaps martyred for speaking the word.
- So, like the mortal & replaceable Levitical priests, even the days of faithful leaders are numbered.
- But Christ is not. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever. He is able to fulfill every promise because He is eternal, immortal, sovereign and immutable or unchanging.
- And that then presented a contrast to and defense against being seduced by strange and pagan teachings as we saw in vs. 9.
- We can rest in and trust an unchanging word because that unchanging word glorifies an unchanging Lord. We don't need a new word, a novel word, a creative word, a fresh word, we need to know, love, and obey that which we already have in Christ.
- That's what those leaders spoke. And now we return to the topic of leaders, this time looking at those who are still alive, still speaking that same word. So let's see what the text says starting in vs. 17.

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)

- We begin with the call to obey.
- Now, this is an interesting word in that it isn't the most common Greek word translated as obey in the NT. Rather, it's a word that carries the connotation of trust.
- The idea seems to be that you should obey leaders because you trust them because they have proven themselves to be trustworthy. After all, the biblical qualifications for church officers means that they are presumed to be above reproach, faithful, respectable, etc.
- I have a buddy who tearfully told a group of elders that due to some obvious deception on their part, he no longer trusted them and they responded by saying, the Bible never says you have to trust us, it just says you have to obey us...which is not only inaccurate, but super suspect and reeks of authoritarianism.
- Obviously it will be a whole lot more difficult to obey your leaders if you don't trust them. Now, that fact in and of itself doesn't excuse you from the call to obey. Perhaps your distrust is rooted in sin on your part. Perhaps you're just judgmental or cynical or skeptical or arrogant. But at least in general, obedience within the context of the local church should be voluntary and happy and built on a foundation of confidence.
- As Peter exhorts elders to serve willingly rather than under compulsion, so the church is encouraged to obey willingly, cheerfully, happily, rather than begrudgingly. In other words, if you feel as though you have a reason to not obey, you have a responsibility to act like a Christian by examining that feeling and subjecting it to the word, talking to the leader against whom you hold a suspicion, and actively seeking to gladly obey.
- In addition this connotation of trust implies that one of the principle means for galvanizing the body of Christ into action is persuasion and not mere command. In other words, leaders of the body of Christ do not operate on the level of authoritarianism. We lead by compelling and persuading and imploring and pleading rather than declarative fiat.
- Ideally, leaders should encourage and implore by means of persuasion on the basis of the word of God. Consider how Paul addresses Philemon in his letter:
 - *Accordingly, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required, yet for love's sake I prefer to appeal to you—I, Paul, an old man and now a prisoner also for Christ Jesus...* (Philemon 8–9)
- Even Paul, with direct apostolic authority from Jesus Christ, doesn't use that authority in an authoritarian way except as a last resort. He tries to convince rather than bare command.
- Is there ever a time where a pastor might rely on bare command? Are there ever times a husband simply commands his wife against her will? Are there times where a boss has to say, "I don't care about what you want, you need to do the assignment?" Of course. But that shouldn't be the default, the norm.
- BTW, this is one of the reasons why expositional preaching is so important to the health and vitality of a local church. Because in expositing a text, we're attempting to convince or persuade you to see for yourself what the text says so that you are not simply taking our word for it. Our authority is ultimately derivative authority, derived from the greater authority of the word.
- I'm trying to connect the dots for you. To help you see what God says for yourself. Thus saith Geoff means nothing. Thus saith the Lord means everything. And I do mean everything.

- Leaders don't have unbridled authority, our authority is always restrained by the word of God. I can command and compel you only to the extent that God has commanded and compelled you.
- So church leaders shouldn't normally rule by threats or domineering behavior. Peter tells elders to not domineer over those in their charge. Rather, it's a relationship of persuasion and trust.
- And insofar as the word of church leaders represents the word of the Lord, you're responsible to obey.
- And this isn't the only such command we see in the NT about how members should relate to church officers. Here are a few other passages that make similar points:
 - *Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching.* (1 Timothy 5:17)
 - *We ask you, brothers, 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. Be at peace among yourselves.* (1 Thessalonians 5:12–13)
 - *be subject to such as these, and to every fellow worker and laborer.* (1 Corinthians 16:16)
 - *Likewise, you who are younger, be subject to the elders. Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."* (1 Peter 5:5)
- So honor and respect your leaders and be subject to them which is a similar meaning to what the author of Hebrews writes next. Submit to them, a word which means to yield or defer.
- Again, submission, like obedience, is not absolute. Just as a wife is not commanded to submit to her husband if he tells her to sin, or a citizen isn't supposed to submit if the government says to stop preaching Christ, likewise, a church member's submission to leadership isn't unconditional.
- And yet, the fact that there are exceptions doesn't negate the rule.
- In fact, there are a number of biblical examples of submission even to ungodly authority. Think about how David was unwilling to lift his hand against Saul, though David had been promised the kingdom and Saul was murderously walking in the flesh.
- And in the book of Jude, we read about how even the archangel Michael refused to rebuke Satan directly. Why not? Because Satan had a higher position & status in the celestial angelic taxonomy.
- Or think of Paul when he is in front of the Sanhedrin and he criticizes the high priest. When he is rebuked for doing so, what was his response?
- I didn't know it was the high priest. If I would, I never would have said something.
- Why not? Because it's an evil thing to speak against a leader of God's people. That's in the OT law. In other words, even though that priest was wicked and vile, he was nevertheless afforded a certain respect by virtue of his office.
- As they say, you salute the uniform even if you can't salute the man.
- So if that's true in the case of a wicked high priest who was actively involved in the destruction of God's people, how much more should we submit to the imperfect, but sincere leaders that we might have within the local church?
- And yet such an attitude is strangely absent in many churches. Many evangelicals would have no problem gossiping or slandering an elder or assuming the worst of them or nursing a grudge against them or just disregarding their authority. Why not? Well, in addition to simply recognizing the tendency of the flesh to despise any external authority, there have also been some cultural changes that affect how we view leadership.

- In particular, we need to understand the egalitarian impulse of our society. We tend to think today of egalitarianism in regards gender roles, but the original meaning was much broader than that.
- Tracing back to the French revolution, egalitarianism was a much more universal impulse to reject & revolt against Christianity &, in particular, any vestige of Christian order. It was an attempt to flatten the world by tearing down institutions & hierarchies & removing traditional sources of authority in all 3 spheres of God-instituted government: country, church, and family.
- It sought to overthrow the nobility, so the king and queen were executed. It sought to dismantle the church and many priests and clerics were killed. And it sought to overturn the nuclear family, as marriage, inheritance, & education were moved under the authority of the state.
- IOW, it sought to dismantle the inherited hierarchy of estates, ranks, privileges, and social distinctions and replace them with an increasingly uniform conception of social equality. It wanted to flatten the social order such that there were no real positions of hierarchy.
- It was a very radical understanding of equality in which all people were assumed to be equal not only in their humanity, but in their position and roles and status.
- Where kings and citizens, clergy and laity, men and women are not only equal, but interchangeable. That's the key. Anything you can do, I can do as well or better. That's the spirit of egalitarianism. Rather than a symbiotic relationship between complementary partners, it strips the distinctions and create an amorphous and interchangeable uniformity.
- The problem with that is that it circumvents the grain of creation. God didn't create a flat world, but a layered world. He didn't create a world where all colors bleed into gray, but a world of diverse and different colors that each reflect something uniquely. He created the world with order and hierarchy. He designed the world such that parents have authority over their children, husbands have authority over their wives, kings have authority over their subjects, and, yes, church leaders have authority over their members.
- That authority can be abused, but *abusus non tollit usum*. Abuse doesn't negate proper use.
- Now, what happens when you take a philosophical and political movement and run it on the operating system of the sinful desire for autonomy? Chaos and disorder. Which is exactly what you got in 18th century France and is exactly what we see in the 21st century West.
- What are the symptoms? In the 18th century, off with the heads of nobility and priests. In today's world it looks like redefining marriage. Defunding the police. Destroying the patriarchy. Disregarding the constitution. Ignoring borders. Tearing down the statues of the past. Demolishing the church. Transing the kids.
- Its a revolt against boundaries, a revolt against order.
- And the church is unfortunately not immune to such disorder though the symptoms are less obvious. They are less obvious because most of us are naïvely running on an egalitarian operating system where we've already presupposed error so we don't even notice it.
- So here's what it looks like when that anarchic impulse infects the church. It looks like Christians who never actually join a church because they don't want to submit to imperfect men or who leave a church when they disagree with the slightest thing. It looks like second guessing every decision and demanding answers to every question. It looks like church membership becoming transactional rather than covenantal. One big symptom I've noticed is that anytime there is church discipline, there is an extension of empathy toward the one who is disciplined and suspicion toward the elders. We want pastoral care, but not pastoral oversight. Tell me what the Word says, but don't tell me when I'm not living up to it.

- The question has shifted in many churches and many Christians from, “Is leadership attempting to be faithful to Scripture?” to, “Does leadership align with my preferences, my judgment, and my sense of what I should have to tolerate?”
- It isn’t just that our culture is suspicious of bad authority, we are increasingly suspicious of authority per se.
- As Judges says, we live in an age in which we assume that there is no king and so everyone does what is right in our own eyes.
- But that is not the world God has created. That is not the operating system on which creation and redemption run.
- Rather, God has ordained structure and authority in our lives for our good.
- As Ephesians 4 says:
 - *And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ...* (Ephesians 4:11–12)
- Notice who gave. He gave. That is God gave.
- And in 1 Corinthians 12
 - *But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose.* (1 Corinthians 12:18)
- Who arranges and who chooses? God.
- And Acts 20
 - *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)
- Notice who has made men overseers.
- So who arranges, chooses, gives and makes church officers? God.
- But didn’t we choose elders ourselves? Didn’t we vote on me, Aaron, Ed, Kyle, and Mike? Yes. So is that a contradiction? Not at all.
- Rather, its an example of compatibilism. The truth that God sovereignly works His will through human means. As a church, we have chosen elders, but we also recognize God’s sovereign hand behind that. That’s what compatibilism teaches, that God’s sovereignty & human responsibility can both be simultaneously true. IOW, it isn’t an either/or, but a both/and. It isn’t that either we chose elders or God did, but that He worked in and thru our choices to confirm His choice.
- As God promised in Jeremiah
 - *And I will give you shepherds after my own heart, who will feed you with knowledge and understanding.* (Jeremiah 3:15)
- IOW, God ultimately stands behind the ordination and appointment of elders so our rebellion against them is a form of rebellion against Him. Is that unconditional? Again, no. Many of us have had experiences where we had to confront ungodly authority, but the default, the assumption, the disposition should be toward trust and deference.
- As Paul writes in a number of places, God has given authority in the church for our edification, our encouragement, our building up.
- For instance, in 2 Corinthians 10:8 he writes:
 - *For even if I boast a little too much of our authority, which the Lord gave for building you up and not for destroying you, I will not be ashamed.* (2 Corinthians 10:8)

- Yes, all men are created equal in the sense that we all share in the imago dei, but not all are created equal in authority, office and role. Biblical equality doesn't eliminate authority, but orders it according to biblical norms and standards.
- So the question is, do you think of authority in the church in this way. Are you quick and eager to obey and submit?
- Are you predisposed to trust the leadership or do you approach decisions with a prove it sort of attitude, second guessing and questioning every decision?
- One of the interesting things that I've observed over the years is that many of the voices who are so quick to demand respect and submission from their wives or their children or employees, never extend it the other direction. In other words, they're quick to tell others to submit to them where they exercise an office of authority, but are resistant to submit to any government that God has placed over them, whether in the vocational, ecclesiological, or civil realm.
- They're like Ryan Howard, the temp in the Office who said
- Lead me...when I'm in the mood...to be led.
- That's how a lot of guys think about leadership and authority. They give it lip service, but when push comes to shove, they don't really want to submit to another. They want to submit only when they agree, which by definition isn't really submission.
- Submission means that you are subjecting your will, your preferences, your desires under that of another.
- So do you realize that one of the ways in which you can exercise trust in God is by trusting in those whom He has ordained for your good? Are you obedient and submissive to those who are entrusted with your care?
- And why should you submit? What is godly authority doing?
- Well, the author writes that they are keeping watch over your souls.
- The verb keeping watch is derived from a word meaning literally without sleep. In Mark 13, Jesus uses the word where it is translated as keep awake.
- As a shepherd stays up to guard against wolves, so leaders are appointed to be on guard against dangers to the body. In fact, one of the primary offices that God has ordained for the church is named after this shepherd imagery since the word pastor literally means shepherd. Speaking of this, Peter writes in 1 Peter 5:
 - *So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock.* (1 Peter 5:1-3)
- Consider what it means for a shepherd to exercise oversight. It means laborious watchfulness. Watching for internal and external dangers, disease and wolves and so forth. Paying attention to where the next watering hole or pasture may be.
- This command to keep watch also reminds me of the call of a watchman in the OT whose job it was to sit on the wall while the city slept in order to sound the call for any approaching threat.
- IOW, with great power comes great responsibility. One with this calling will have to give an account to use the language of Hebrews.
- This reminds me of James' admonition in chapter 3 of his epistle where he writes;
 - *Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.* (James 3:1)
- And that fits with that image of a watchman as God tells the prophets that as watchmen they have a responsibility to warn the people lest they incur judgment for failing to speak.

- As fathers bear responsibility for the health of the family & kings bear responsibility for the nation, so church officers bear responsibility for the health of the church which means that our ability to do our job is dependent to some degree on your willingness to do your job.
- You may recall that in the various household texts in which the Bible addresses wives and husbands, children and parents, and slaves and masters, it always addresses the inferior party. By inferior I don't mean less value or worth, but inferior in office. IOW, the party in submission. Why does it always address that party first? Because to some degree the ability of a leader to lead is dependent on the willingness of a follower to follow.
- So given the nature of the responsibility, the author tells us next to allow the leaders to do their work with joy and not groaning. Peter has told elders to serve willingly and eagerly, but now Hebrews says that the body itself can play a part in that.
- How so? How can you affect the disposition of the elders?
- Well, by whether or not you are encouraging or discouraging. By the amount of grace that is shown. By being willing to overlook small slights. By being quick to hear & slow to speak & slow to anger. By not criticizing every little thing. By assuming the best. By not expecting perfection and omnipotence and omnipresence and omniscience.
- In other words by giving leaders grace. By praying with and for them. By understanding the nature and weight of the responsibility & being appreciative.
- After over 20 years in ministry & 10 years as a lead pastor, I can tell you that few highs match that of seeing your people walk in submission to Christ. Seeing marriages healed, seeing sin confessed & repented of, seeing people saved & baptized, seeing relationships reconciled and forgiveness extended. Few pleasures can compete with such gifts. As John writes in his 3 epistle.
 - *I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth.* (3 John 4)
- And yet, few lows can match pastoral pains. The pains of members who say, I don't care what Christ says, I want my sin, of members whom you have labored and watched over just up and leaving the church, often without cause or conversation, the sorrows of being slandered and criticized and mistrusted by those you're trying to help, of being constantly second-guessed, of carrying the grief of hospital visits, funerals, miscarriages, infertility, wayward children, suicide, abuse and on and on.
- As Moses found that his greatest source of frustration was the nation he was tasked to lead, so many pastors have found their flocks to be a source of groaning as even sheep bite, kick & attack, not to mention the goats and wolves.
- As many of the prophets were told to preach to people who would do nothing but resist and complain. Or as Paul said that he wept for his people or Jesus wept over Jerusalem.
- Loving and leading a people can bring comfort and pain, joy and groaning.
- Some of those pastoral pains are unavoidable. Some of those are simply what life this side of resurrection looks like. But much of that is unavoidable. Much of it would be diminished if not eradicated if Christians would simply submit to the word of God and not shoot the shepherd. If people would repent of their individualism and egalitarian impulse and recognize the order that God has established for our good.
- Speaking of our good, he next writes, it would be of no advantage to you to do otherwise.
- In other words, there is a mutual and symbiotic relationship between leaders and followers so that as the church builds up the leaders so the leaders build up the church.
- I'm reminded of Paul's words in the opening verses of Romans 1 where he says that his goal is that he and the people might be mutually encouraged by each other's faith. That's how pastoral

ministry is supposed to work. God has designed a reciprocal, synergy between church officers and members.

- So, ask yourself, how well are you doing in joyfully and eagerly obeying and submitting to the leaders of this or another body?
- Do you honor and respect those who labor for and over you? Or have you flattened the hierarchy, given in to the egalitarian impulse to compress God's order and/or elevate yourself?
- Are you a source of joy or groaning for those whom have been charged to lead?
- Or are you holding out your submission until you have perfect elders who perfectly represent your wishes and desires and preferences?
- Let's keep going. Vss. 18-19.

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)

- In verse 17, we can sum up the command with the word obey. Now we see the command to pray.
- We are to obey and pray. This passage is about submission and supplication.
- Pray for your leaders.
- Why? Because we need it.
- After talking about the grave responsibility of proclaiming the gospel as a minister in 2 Corinthians 2, Paul writes, who is sufficient for these things?
- And anyone who has ever served in pastoral ministry says Amen.
- Any pastor with an ounce of humility will feel the gravity of his inadequacy, insufficiency, & imperfection. Who is sufficient for these things indeed?
- That's why I'm always a bit hesitant about anyone who is actively campaigning to become an elder and why I think you should serve in obscurity doing somewhat menial tasks for a season before assuming the reigns of a church. There is good in aspiring to the office as 1 Timothy says, but I think that desire should be measured by a sense of sobriety and humility. That's also why Paul says that an elder must not be a recent convert, lest he be puffed up.
- BTW, I don't think it a coincidence how often pastoral failure is associated with those who were handed the reigns far too early. Who assumed leadership of a church right out of seminary or just skipped seminary altogether. Who ordained themselves or planted themselves. Who are appointed as elders when they themselves have never submitted to other elders.
- Each week as we begin our service, I ask you to pray for me. That's not just some rote tradition. That is a realization of the reality that I am in need of constant grace. That I'm handling something of infinite value and ultimate authority.
- As we read in James 3, those who teach bear a stricter judgment. That's a weighty responsibility.
- I think of the story of Martin Luther and his first communion as a catholic priest a decade before the Reformation. According to historical reports, he was scared to death due to the gravity of the act. In fact, sources say that he was trembling so greatly that he spilled the blood of Christ which only increased the sense of foreboding.
- To some degree his fear was rooted in the works righteousness he had inherited from his Catholicism, but some of it was simply a realization that handling the word of God is an awesome and terrifying task.
- If Catholicism errs by robbing believers of confidence to approach the throne of grace with boldness, then much of evangelicalism errs in the opposite direction of presumption.

- We treat God far too lightly. We handle the word as if it's an unread Apple or AT&T contract that we casually peruse if that.
- We think of God's commands as suggestions if we even think of them at all.
- And that's a big problem because chapter 12 tell us,
 - *...let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire.* (Hebrews 12:28–29)
 - God will not be trifled with and His word is not to be treated nonchalantly.
 - God is the very definition of holy. He is good, but is not safe.
- So the biblical formula is confidence, but not presumption. Boldness, but not flippancy. Assurance, but not arrogance. Familiarity, but not irreverence.
- Any leader with a modicum of humility knows that he is dependent on prayer not only in discharging the task of preaching and teaching, but of leading more generically. As Christ says, apart from me you can do nothing.
- Not a little, certainly not a lot, but nothing. Apart from Christ we can do nothing.
- After all, He holds the universe together by the word of His power as we read in chapter 1. The world isn't bound ultimately by gravity and ionic bonds, but by the sovereign word of Christ.
- So we are desperately dependent on grace in every endeavor, even and especially those that touch upon the most holy of responsibilities.
- And one of the reasons for prayer is because the writer is assured of a clear conscience. Now this is a bit of a different connotation than the word has been used elsewhere in the letter. Hebrews has previously stressed the objective nature of the conscience which has been cleansed by Christ.
- In 9:14 we read that our conscience is purified by the blood of Christ.
- And in 10:22 we read this:
 - *let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.* (Hebrews 10:22)
- So, in that sense, we all, who have received Christ, have an objectively cleansed conscience.
- But now the author addresses the subjective conscience. He is saying that in general he is unaware of any charges against him. He is above reproach. Doesn't mean he is sinless, but walking in the light and truth.
- Paul says something similar in 1 Corinthians 4 where he writes
 - *For I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me.* (1 Corinthians 4:4)
- IOW the conscience is important, but it is not ultimate. To act against the conscience is neither safe nor wise and yet the conscience is like an instrument that can be calibrated or not.
- Think of the conscience as a scope on a rifle. It would be folly to disregard the scope and shoot from the hip so to speak. But at the same time, that scope needs to be dialed in correctly lest you miss the mark. An uncalibrated scope will lead to disappointment just as an uncalibrated conscience will lead to disobedience.
- So Paul says that he works on his conscience. In Acts 24:16 we read:
 - *So I always take pains to have a clear conscience toward both God and man.* (Acts 24:16)
- IOW, he knows that if he's not careful that scope will fall out of alignment so he dials it in. He takes pains to do so. He labors to that end.
- So the question is whether or not your conscience is properly calibrated by the word of God.
- Is it too lax? Are you not ashamed of and grieved by things you should be?

- Drinking too much. Breaking just laws. Fooling around with your girlfriend. Skipping church for no good reason.
- Or is your conscience too severe? Is it too strict?
- Are you bothered by things that are neither unwise nor sinful?
- An occasional drink? Playing cards or dancing or the celebration of certain holidays or whatever.
- IOW, what are your little legalisms?
- Is your conscience calibrated by the world or the word? Are you driven by legalism or licentiousness?
- The author says that he is sincere. Desiring to act honorably in all things.
- He is not a hypocrite. There are no hidden skeletons in his closet. He doesn't have a lax or laissez-faire attitude toward obedience, but is genuinely seeking for his devotion to be evident in all things. This doesn't imply perfection, but being above reproach is a requisite for the office.
- A godly elder is aware a dozens of areas for growth, dozens of imperfections, but no scandals, no skeletons, no blatant unconfessed unrepentant compromises.
- And this is necessary for leaders lest we bring any reproach on the cause of Christ. That's one of the most grievous parts of pastoral failures as year after year another falls. Not only does it ruin the lives of that pastor and his family, but it often splits a church and gives ground for unbelievers to slander Christ.
- As 1 Peter says in chapter 2
 - *Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation. (1 Peter 2:11-12)*
- And again in 3:16
 - *having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame. (1 Peter 3:16)*
- And that fact should make the church all the more willing to pray for the leader.
- To know that the enemy is prowling around like a roaring lion seeking someone to devour and who better than the shepherd?
- So pray for your leaders. Pray for the elders and deacons. Pray for our marriages. Pray for our character. Pray for our faithfulness and energy. Pray for wisdom and courage and conviction.
- Now, the author requests prayer not only in general, but for a particular purpose. He asks for the church to petition that he be restored to their fellowship and presence.
- As he had previously written, the church is to not give up meeting together but he himself has been unable to meet, separated by some circumstance. Perhaps the author is on an apostolic mission, perhaps he is sick, but I think the most likely explanation is that he is in prison.
- In vs. 23 he will write that Timothy has been released so I think it likely that they were imprisoned together for the faith.
- Regardless of the reason, the author wants them to know that he is separated not willingly, but circumstantially and that his desire is to gather again.
- Why?
- Because a pastor knows what we talked about two weeks ago in TEC, that the church is the dearest place on earth. The same way a father longs to be with his family, at least if he's a good father, so a pastor longs to be with his spiritual family.
- I confess I felt that last week as I was driving through Nebraska instead of here with you. When I was an associate pastor in my first years out of seminary, I didn't feel this. I relished the

occasional time away from work, away from church. But over the past 10 years of pastoral ministry, my heart has been grafted to a people such that I genuinely miss being here. Going to a church isn't the same as being with my church. There is no substitute.

- A good father desires to be with his children and a good shepherd longs to be with his flock.
- So obey your leaders and submit to them, and especially if they're faithful. If they preach the gospel and not moralism or antinomianism. If they're willing to exercise church discipline and call out sin. If they're willing to say the hard things and preach the hard texts. If they don't capitulate to culture or apologize for the word. If they teach that Christ is better, better than the lies of sin, the lies of the world, the lies of pragmatism and postmodernism and feminism. If they're courageous and meek, bold and gentle.
- If their compass is the word and not the world.
- Be a Berean. Go to the text of Scripture. Don't blindly delegate your discipleship to another. But also give the benefit of the doubt. Doubt your doubts. Assume the best. Make leading easy and enjoyable.
- If you have questions, don't be passive aggressive. Don't gossip. Deal with issues like men, like Christians.
- And, to that end, pray for us. Pray for unity and humility and boldness and conviction. Pray for our public ministries and private lives. Pray for God to use such jars of clay for His good work.
- Lastly I want to say this to the members of this body. I want to say thank you. I don't take it for granted that the vast majority of you exemplify the spirit of this text already. Thank you for the grace and encouragement. Thank you for the privilege of serving this body. Thank you for the meals and texts and emails and dozens of ways that so many of you attempt to submit to this text. And thank you for the prayers.
- Speaking of which, let's pray and we'll partake of communion together.

Communion

- Fence table
- As we prepare to partake this morning, I want to think about the weight of 1 Corinthians 11 where Paul talks about division in the body in the context of communion which is a denial of the very meaning of communion which involves not only union with Christ, but communion with each other.
- Communion is both vertical and horizontal in orientation.
- Paul says that it is a contradiction to the meaning of communion to partake of it when there is division in the body.
- So, as it relates to our text today, I want to just encourage you to think about whether or not you are embodying the spirit of this text. Whether you are submitting to the text by submitting to the elders? Or whether bitterness, distrust, envy, or indifference marks your attitude towards the leadership of this body if you are a member here or another body is a member elsewhere.
- And then I want to encourage you to commit to repent if there are areas where this text might expose any sin in your life.
- So take a second and think and pray and we'll partake together shortly.
- On the night...