

## **“Obey Your Leaders”**

**The British historian Lord Acton famously wrote, in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, “Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.”** Live long enough or study enough human history, and you’ll see this axiom played out in many spheres. You’ll eventually hear of one leader or another, in business or politics or even the church; who has abused his authority or disqualified himself through moral failure.

### **“Power tends to corrupt.”**

So it’s not hard to imagine why it is that for most people, trusting and obeying those in power and authority over us doesn’t come easily. We, especially in the U.S., place great importance on self-reliance and individualism. Our political system highly emphasizes the “rights” of the individual, and every “vote” counted and the importance of checks and balances. And on top of all this, there is a strong streak of “questioning authority” that has permeated our society, and even the church.

### **Corruption of those in power, it seems, is only matched by our inclination to resist their power and authority.**

Yet resistance to authority is not limited merely to a distrust of politicians, businessmen or religious leaders; nor is it purely a cultural or contemporary symptom. One of the first commands that God gave was to the littlest among us, the children: “Honor your father and mother.” God knew that from our very birth, we tend to resist and rebel against those in authority over us. No one, it seems, has to teach us how to *disobey*. It comes naturally without any instruction or outside guidance.

**Resistance to authority is the natural bent we are all born with.** Lord Acton, as it turns out, had it backwards. It’s not that power corrupts. Rather, it effectively reveals the corruption that is present in every one of us: what the Bible simply calls “sin.” Sin affects not only how we wield authority, but how we respond to it.

### **In the deepest sense, our sinful nature is at the root of both the abuse of authority and the rejection of authority: for *sin at its heart is the rejection of God’s authority over us.***

Yet in spite of this, knowing our hearts and sinful condition, God has nevertheless commanded us, from birth, to obey those in authority over us: our parents. From the beginning of our lives, he does not want us to learn to love rebellion to authority, but to overcome this self-destructive tendency. And his commands are not limited to children. He expects His people to accept and obey the authorities He designates for them.

### **That is where I’d like to direct your attention this morning: to *how*, and *why*, believers are to respond to the authorities God has put over them:**

*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. (Heb 13:17, ESV)*

### **THE “HOW”: TRUST AND SUBMIT TO YOUR LEADERS**

**1) What kind of obedience is this?** By first glance, there are numerous ways to interpret the command given here: “obey your leaders and submit to them.” In fact, this verse has been misused in history by ungodly men seeking to subject those under them to overbearing, authoritarian leadership. But a careful examination of the words used here make it clear that this is practically the *opposite* of the kind of obedience being commanded, and can best be summed up as “trust” and “submission.”

- a) Obey = *peithō* = “be persuaded by (**to listen to, obey**, yield to, comply with), **to trust**, have confidence (TNIV), be confident”

This word has multiple uses depending on its context, but at its heart has the idea of persuading someone, and having their confidence or trust:

[Mat 27:43](#) "He *trusts* in God; let God deliver him now, if he desires him.

[Act 5:40](#) So they *took his advice*, and when they had called in the apostles...

[Jam 3:3](#) If we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they *obey* us, we guide their whole bodies as well.

What this word conveys is that the church is to *trust* and *be confident* in the leadership of those over them, with the result being *obedience*. The word here does *not* justify leaders who *force* the church to follow them, but who *persuade* them through godly lives and trustworthy leading from the Word.

- b) Submit = *hypeikō* = to resist no longer but to give way, yield (of combatants); metaph. **to yield to authority and admonition**. *Only occurs here in the NT*. One translation: "accept their authority." What this verse is telling us is that our confidence in our leaders is to be accompanied by a full embracing and acceptance of their authority, not hindered by suspicion or distrust or reservations.

One test for whether this type of submissive spirit is in place is your "first instinct." If your leaders admonish or exhort you, is your first instinct to comply, or to question; to embrace and rejoice in their leadership, or receive it with caution or suspicion? **This text commends God's people to an acceptance and embrace of the authority of our leaders that is not primarily marked by reservation or resistance, but instead by full acceptance of it.**

**To sum up: how are we to obey our leaders? We are to confidently trust and fully submit to the authority, guidance and leadership of those who lead the church.**

## 2) Who are your leaders?

Who is this speaking of? Sunday School teachers? Worship leaders? We are not left to guess.

- a) "Leaders" = *hēgeomai* = **"those that have rule over you"** (KJV)

[Mat 2:6](#) "And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a *ruler* who will shepherd my people Israel."

[Hbr 13:7](#) Remember your *leaders*, those who spoke to you the word of God.

- b) Applies **particularly to elders** of the church. "Your leaders," in context, refers to "those who are keeping watch over your souls" and "who speak to you the Word of God" (v.7). Taken with the rest of the NT, the only office in the NT which explicitly has oversight and rule over the saints is that of elders (aka pastors/shepherds/overseers). E.g., 1 Peter 5:2-3:

So I exhort the *elders* among you...: *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.

- c) **Not just anyone** who calls himself a "pastor" or "leader" is to be obeyed. Only those who:
- i) Are Biblically qualified elder/ overseers (1 Tim. 3, Titus 1:5-9)
    - (1) Speak (uphold) the Word of God (v. 7)
    - (2) Have an exemplary life (v. 7)
  - ii) Are keeping watch over *your* souls

**When the church is led by Biblically-qualified and Spirit-filled elders who are guided by God's Word, it is the responsibility of the church to trust and submit to their leadership.**

## THE “WHY”: AUTHORITATIVE SHEPHERDING IS ESSENTIAL FOR YOUR SOULS

### 1) For your protection:

*“... for they are keeping watch over your souls...”*

The word for “keeping watch” in Heb. 13:17 means “to exercise constant vigilance over something (an image drawn from shepherds). Literally, the word *agrypneō* to be sleepless, keep awake (drawn from “a” + “hypno” = to sleep).” The first reason we need this kind of shepherding is that it is God’s ordained means to protect his church. The hymn “The Church’s One Foundation” describes well the kind of danger the church will be in until Christ returns:

Though there be those who hate her,  
And false sons in her pale,  
Against both foe or traitor  
She ever shall prevail.

God’s Word promises that the church will have both enemies as well as traitors in her own midst; and his primary means for protecting the church are the shepherds of the flock. In Acts 20:28-31, Paul reminds the elders of the church in Ephesus of the critical role of elders in guarding the flock of God:

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. I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish everyone with tears.

God has called elders to be the primary protectors of His church. So when we yield to their authority, the first benefit is that we gain the protection of our souls from false teachers and others who would assault and damage our faith.

### 2) For your progress:

*“...as those who will have to give an account.”*

Elders, as the appointed leaders of the church, will ultimately have to answer to God for how they have shepherded. This begs the question, by what measure will they be judged? Shepherds of the church will have to answer not only for protecting from “wolves,” but more ultimately, **how well they have equipped you to make progress in your faith and build up the body of Christ**. Because that is the “positive” outcome that God has given elders & shepherds to the church for:

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, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ**, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. (Eph 4:11-14)

The second benefit and reason that we need to trust and obey our shepherds is that God has given the church shepherds and teachers to equip us for the work of ministry, to make progress in our faith; so that the church of God might be built up. Our submission to their leadership is intended to bear fruit in the growth and progress of our spiritual lives.

3) For your **profit**:

*“Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no **advantage** to you.”*

- a) *alysitelēs* is defined as “unprofitable, hurtful.” It’s the opposite of “gain” or “profit” used in a monetary sense. This verse tells us that if we submit to godly leaders, we will *profit!* And this verse explicitly states that if you reject authoritative pastoral care in your life, it is to your disadvantage and hurt spiritually.
- b) In addition, the greatest profit will come when we freely submit, rather than do so begrudgingly: “groaning” / “with grief” = *stenazō* = “a sigh, to groan”

[2Cr 5:4](#) For while we are still in this tent, we **groan**, being **burdened**...

- c) Elders are commanded to shepherd the people of God “in season and out of season” (2 Tim 4:2). **This is hard, long, difficult work.** Yet according to this verse, if we trust and obey this leadership, we make it a joyful work, rather than a grievous burden. And a work done in joy is more likely to be effective than a work done as a burden.

Our relationship to our shepherds is not to be reluctant, or begrudging. The church should not grimace when its leaders are seeking to shepherd, even when making difficult decisions. Rather, **we should frequently, lovingly, prayerfully affirm our shepherds’ leadership as they pursue God’s best for the church.** And from this we will profit the most!

### “GOOD PREACHING” IS NOT ENOUGH – YOU NEED SHEPHERDING!

Books and recordings of sermons have deeply helped me to have a greater understanding of God and what it means to follow Him. In this day and age, we have the benefit of world-class preachers at our fingertips with downloadable sermons and, if we like, at conferences just a short drive or flight away. I believe this is a tremendous gift from God to His churches today.

But **we are deeply mistaken** if we think that listening to such preaching, reading such books, and attending conferences is the same as being **shepherded**. This is why I appreciate the perspective that church planter and conference speaker C.J. Mahaney offered on his blog (<http://tinyurl.com/czde44>):

I understand the natural inclination to take our own pastors for granted. It’s easy to esteem someone else’s pastor. It’s easy to honor the guest speaker. It’s easy to esteem the featured speaker at a conference. It’s easier to honor the well-known author. Yet honoring the pastors “among you” is Paul’s directive to the church in Thessalonica. And for good reason.

I was once reminded of this ordering of priorities. I had delivered a message on this very point at a conference. At the conclusion of the meeting a man approached me and said, “C.J., I really appreciated hearing you preach this evening. But you are no Mike Pierson.” I laughed and applauded his statement and here is why:

*Mike Pierson is his pastor.*

And he was right—I am no Mike Pierson. I am not his pastor, I am not caring for his soul, I am not teaching him God’s Word each week, and I am not accountable to God for this man.

It’s not enough for your spiritual well-being to **simply sit under the preaching of the Word** without any commitment or accountability. **No matter how many amazing sermons** you may hear or insightful books you may read, **God says that’s not enough: you must be shepherded!** And that is something that men like MacArthur, Piper, Swindoll, etc., will never do for you, because **they aren’t praying for your soul, caring for your needs, and holding you accountable to live according to the gospel! They will not answer to God for whether they’ve watched over your souls. That’s the responsibility of your shepherds!**

## QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

### 1) Are you a *member* of a church?

One of the main points of our text this morning is that Biblical, authoritative shepherding is absolutely essential in the life of every believer. But **how can you be shepherded? The answer is simple: become a member of a church.**

- a. **Why is membership a prerequisite?** “If there is no identifiable membership, there is no one for leaders to lead. Submission to their authority as Hebrews 13:17 requires becomes nonsense if the leaders are not responsible for a group, and that group is not attached to them in some way.” – Thabiti Anyabwile, *What Is a Healthy Church Member?*
- b. **Membership is fundamentally making a public commitment to a church and identifying yourself as a member of the “flock” who would be “shepherded.”** If you are not a member, but merely attend regularly, you’ve made no visible commitment to this body of believers. You have never made a clear statement of who *your* leaders are. And the leaders of this congregation, honestly, have no God-ordained responsibility or accountability for your soul. If you think merely attending church is sufficient, you risk depriving yourself of critical spiritual oversight and care.

### 2) Do you *delight* in trusting and submitting to your shepherds?

**As we considered from the outset, our remaining sin affects our ability and willingness to trust those in authority over us, even in the church.** But God says that we *need* this kind of shepherd-care to help us to thrive and mature in our faith. If you are skeptical or reluctant to confidently trust and submit to spiritual shepherds, you are, in effect, presuming that you know better than God what you need. And that is sheer folly for your soul.

In the end, as much as church leaders will have to give an account to God for their shepherding, each of us will give an account for how we have submitted to it.

**But this not merely a harsh obligation: this is a command with a promise.** It is not as if we are being told to take some foul-tasting experimental medication with only a slim hope of benefit. **Faithful shepherds are a gift from God, and He has given them to us for our protection, our profit, our ongoing progress in the faith.**

**So I close with an invitation,** particularly to those who are members of GBF. If you are reluctant to fully trust & accept the authority of your spiritual leaders, I invite you to repent, and trust God’s good design for His people. I urge you to remember the Great Shepherd of the sheep, Jesus Himself, whose care over you is so detailed that He has called elders to care for you. Will you trust God, by trusting your shepherds? Will you commit yourself to submitting joyfully to them as they shepherd your souls?

## APPENDIX

### “EXCEPTIONS” TO THIS COMMAND

Is this an absolute command? Are we trust/obey the leaders of the church no matter what? There are three types of situations that come to mind where we might be given to question whether this text applies:

- **Authority in churches that have swayed from orthodoxy (sound doctrine):** e.g., Catholic Church abandoning the authority of the Word, the true gospel, e.g. the Reformation
- **Authority in churches that have swayed from orthopraxy (sound practice),** which is really just a cousin of departing from orthodoxy. This would be a church that technically still holds to sound doctrine, but is no longer putting it in practice; or whose leadership is no longer practicing Biblical shepherding.
- **The abuse of authority:** e.g., Boston Church of Christ (which was actually heretical in their doctrine, e.g., "baptismal regeneration" and claiming to be the only valid church). In fact, the L.A. Church of Christ was actually banned from the UCLA campus for their cultish and highly controlling “discipleship” practices!

To understand the “limitations” of this command, it’s important that we place this command in its proper Biblical context.

- 1) **A healthy church leadership & overall culture is marked by humble service, not by ongoing / excessive use of authority & hierarchy** (cf. John 13:14, Mt 23:11)
  - a) A shepherd who is constantly bossing his sheep around is doing something wrong. A shepherd leads his sheep to pasture (feeds them) and protects them from harm. Shepherds should not be erecting ongoing frequent structures of hyper-accountability in a chain of hierarchy; such would qualify as a case of abusive authority.
  - b) Shepherds who “lord it over” those they shepherd, who foster a highly hierarchical, authoritarian structure, disqualify themselves by failing to lead in the fashion that Jesus taught his disciples.
  - c) This also implies that one of the limits of this command is recognizing that authority/submission relationships are **not** to be the dominant culture of the church, but rather “one another” ministry. Where a church is most distinctively a church of authoritarianism, that is no longer a church where Biblical shepherding is taking place, and one should *leave* if the leadership is not responsive to correction.
- 2) **The command is to submit to leaders who truly watch over our souls, not merely those who call themselves leaders:**
  - a) John Calvin: “[This text] speaks only of those who faithfully performed their office; for they who have nothing but the title, who use the title of 'pastors' for the purpose of destroying the Church, deserve but little reverence and still less confidence.”
  - b) Speaking of the Roman Catholic church's claim to authority, Calvin added: “... when we are invited to obey our pastors, we ought carefully and wisely to find out those who are true and faithful rulers... In order, therefore, that the Pope and those who belong to him may derive support from this passage, they must all of necessity first prove that they are of the number of those who watch for our salvation.”

- c) The measure of the "legitimacy" of a leadership is based on whether it's Biblically formed and functioning. If the pastors/leaders of a church are no longer practicing Biblical shepherding, but only furthering their own goals, then we are not to follow them. It is here that the saints must be able to handle well the Word of God, and practice spiritual discernment and not simply follow blindly. It should also be noted that in most cases, this kind of illegitimate authority is *personality-centered*, with one man (or woman) being the center of attention without true accountability.
- 3) **That some have abused this authority does not excuse us from obeying this command in general, but should cause us to be mindful that God is in fact in control.** Abusive or imperfect shepherding does not invalidate the Word of God, in anything it confirms the worldview of the Bible -- that sin is prevalent and affects everything, even the church. Our deepest comfort should *not* arise from false expectations (that will lead to discouragement or disillusionment), but from **God's ultimate accounting**. "For they will give an account" in this verse reminds us that the Biblical perspective is that all of us, ***including leaders***, will have to give an account before a holy Judge. This should give us both comfort and "fear" (cf. James 3:1).
- 4) **There are three key principles in Scripture to avoid / prevent / address the abuse of authority.** A healthy church should be applying these practices:
- a) **prerequisites (prevention):** by not being quick to appoint elders and using Biblical standards (1 Tim 3:1-7)
  - b) **plurality:** the NT teaches that there should be multiple elders/shepherds over a given congregation to ensure accountability within the leadership, and wisdom in the abundance of counsel (Titus 1:5; Prov. 24:6)
  - c) **accountability:** leaders are not to be immune from criticism or correction, given sufficient grounds of concern (1 Tim 5:19f)