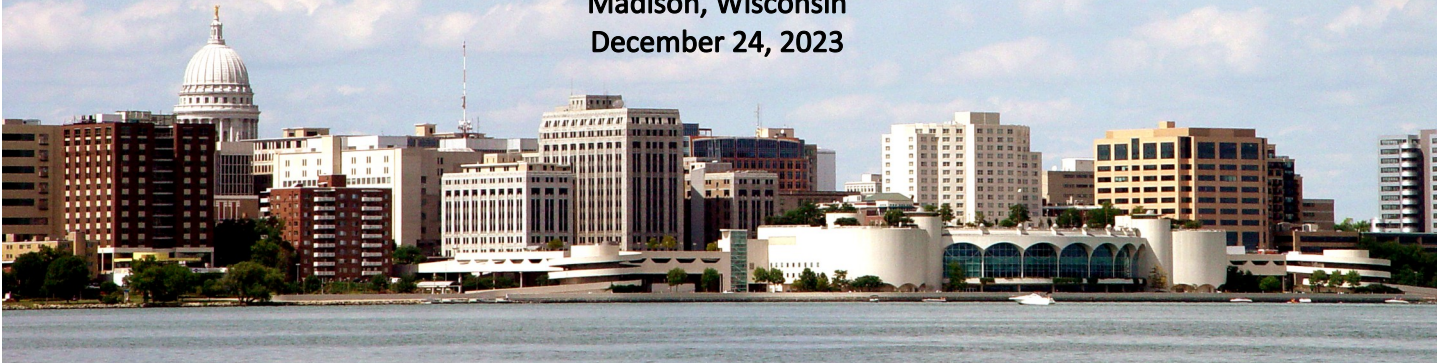


# Response to Leaders

Hebrews 13:17-19

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Four Lakes Church of Christ  
Madison, Wisconsin  
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Good morning, and welcome to the Four Lakes congregation! If you are visiting this morning or joining us online or on the phone, we are glad to have you with us. We'd like to ask that you fill out a visitor card online if you can, or you can use one of the cards from the pew in front of you. Whatever works for you, we would love to hear from you, and we invite you to pass along any questions or prayer concerns.

We are here this morning because God chose to send his only Son into this world in human form, born into a poor family as they were visiting Bethlehem, just as was predicted by Micah the prophet. From there, Jesus grew up and lived a perfect life, and offered himself on the cross as a sacrifice, giving his life for ours. He was buried and then raised up on the first day of the week. This is the good news, the gospel, and we obey the gospel by believing the message, by turning away from sin, by confessing our faith in Jesus as being the Son of God, and by allowing ourselves to be buried with him in baptism (an immersion in water for the forgiveness of sins). And (as our tradition has been) we have several examples to share this morning, starting with an update from John Pigg, who passes along some news from one of their missionaries, Alejandro, who reports last Lord's Day morning from the church of Christ at Yuriria, Guanajuato Mexico. He says, "Our sister Carolina Ayala Salazar obeyed the word and made the best decision to get to the waters of baptism we ask for your prayers for our new sister." And then they say, "Thanks to the Lord of glory!!!" So good to see it!

There are others we could have shared, but we'll end with this one from the Lord's church down in Cookeville, Tennessee. They posted a few days ago and say that, "David Freeman was baptized into Christ tonight after studying with the elders. Angels in heaven rejoice!" Don Blackwell is one of their elders, and you might remember that Don was paralyzed in an ATV accident several years ago, but he has not allowed that to slow him down. You might notice his chair that pretty much allows him to stand. But we share these two examples by way of encouragement, and this is our invitation to you to obey the gospel. If you have not yet done what these two have done, we invite you to get in touch. Pull me aside after worship this morning, or give me a call, send a text, or send an email using the contact information in our bulletin or on the website, and we would love to study together.

This morning, we are nearing the end of our year-long study of Hebrews! As we've noted in this series of lessons, it seems that the book of Hebrews might have started as a sermon, and today we continue in Hebrews 13, the last chapter, and as the author gets near the end, he looks to the future, to a time when he

would no longer be in the picture, and he encourages his first listeners (or readers) to strengthen their relationship with the elders (or shepherds) of the congregation; because, when he's gone, those leaders will still be there, guarding and protecting these people. It is important, then, for the congregation to respond well to these men. And this reminds us that although the Bible gives several guidelines for the qualifications of elders (in 1 Timothy 3, Titus 1, and 1 Peter 5), far less is said about how the rest of us respond to those who lead. The Bible does, though, have quite a bit to say about how to follow well. Jesus, for example, tells his disciples (in Luke 9:23), ***"If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow Me."*** As disciples, it is important, then, that we know how to follow well.

Before we get to the text itself, I need to confess that I laughed out loud a number of times as I prepared this morning's lesson. Over and over again, as I read what others have written on this passage, preachers would start with an apology, "I preach this passage with great reluctance," "This is a difficult subject to preach on," "I didn't want to preach on this," and on and on. And they would give multiple disclaimers, explaining that they were not preaching on this passage for their own personal benefit. And I laughed, because, you caught me! I am so busted this morning. I have preached through the entire book of Hebrews chunk by chunk, passage by passage, just so that I can preach on Hebrews 13:17 on Christmas Eve! I have been plotting, and I have waited an entire year for this. I just laughed at the absurdity of it.

But here we are, nearly at the end of Hebrews, and today we come to Hebrews 13:17-19,

***17 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. 18 Pray for us, for we are sure that we have a good conscience, desiring to conduct ourselves honorably in all things. 19 And I urge you all the more to do this, so that I may be restored to you the sooner.***

This morning, let's take a few moments to study the proper response of the church to leadership. And as we allow this passage to take root in our hearts, we find that it breaks down into two categories here...

I. **...starting with the instruction (in verse 17) where he suggests that the role of the congregation in this is to OBEY and SUBMIT.**

And right away, these two words jump right out at us, don't they? Obedience and submission! The idea of one adult obeying and submitting to another adult almost offensive in our culture. Our own nation, in fact, was founded by rebels, rebelling against authority, dumping tea in the harbor, and all that. One of our earliest mottoes was, "Don't Tread on Me." Generally speaking, we don't like obeying and submitting. To anybody. You can't tell me what to do! But here we are, and the author of Hebrews wraps up his message with the instruction, ***"Obey your leaders and submit to them."*** And the context here is within the congregation. There's so much to note here, but let's just start with the reminder that the elders (or shepherds) of the congregation are never told to force the flock to obey; they are never told to force the flock to be submissive.

In fact, Peter specifically gives a warning to shepherds in 1 Peter 5 when he warns against, ***"...lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock."*** Elders, then, are not to domineer the flock, but they are to lead by example, Peter says. Yes, as overseers they do have authority, but shepherds cannot shepherd without the willingness of those who follow. The focus here in verse 17, then, is on the congregation. So let's define the terms here. The word that's translated here as ***"obey"*** is actually a word that normally refers to being "persuaded" or to have "confidence." It's not the idea of "I will do whatever you tell me to do" (which is the word Paul uses in Ephesians 6:1 when he tells children to ***"obey"*** their parents), but it's

the idea of being “convinced.” It’s the idea of “trust,” the idea of being “won over.” The author, then, is saying **“Be persuaded by your leaders.”** He’s saying, **“Have confidence in your leaders.”** He’s saying, **“Be convinced by your leaders.”**

And the second term here is the only time this word is found in the entire New Testament, and it’s the idea of “yielding” to somebody. I think of what happens (or of what is supposed to happen) at an uncontrolled intersection. When two cars approach at the same time, I must yield to the car on my right. As I was learning to drive, my dad taught me “the Law of Gross Tonnage,” and his theory there was that the LARGEST vehicle goes first. I remember him saying, “There are a lot of people in the cemetery who can say that they had the right of way.” And I appreciate that, because not all people are good at yielding! When we had a moped many years ago, I found a great article with some good advice on how to survive on a low-speed two-wheeled vehicle, and the article was titled “Two-wheeled Urban Warfare,” and the article suggests riding under two assumptions: 1.) You are invisible, and 2.) Every body is trying to kill you. On a moped, you are your own bumper. But at an uncontrolled intersection, the law is: We yield to whoever comes in on the right (it doesn’t matter if it’s a brand new driver or Madison city bus) – the person’s perceived value or the size or value of the vehicle really should have nothing to do with it; for the system to work, somebody has to yield. And that’s the idea here. Sometimes it helps me understand a concept by imagining the opposite of it. Imagine everybody in the congregation being stubborn and contentious and rebellious about everything. That would be absolutely awful. So instead, we are to **“obey”** and **“submit,”** we are to yield to those who have been given the responsibility of leading the congregation.

And this leads us to the **“leaders”** in this passage. Before we move on, let’s just note that **“leaders”** is plural. It doesn’t say that we are to obey and submit to our “leader,” but to our **“leaders”** (plural). So we have a reminder that the Lord’s church is to be led not by one man, but by a plurality of men serving as shepherds. The church, then, doesn’t depend on one dynamic and charismatic personality, but the church is led by a group of men serving together, men who are accountable to one another. We first appointed elders here at Four Lakes on December 27, 2015 (eight years ago this coming Wednesday), and through the years we have often repeated (to one another) the reminder that “shepherds shepherd shepherds.” And the idea is that yes, we are responsible for shepherding the congregation, but we are also responsible for shepherding one another. As an elder, I am also a member of the congregation, and that means that Aaron is my shepherd, meaning that there is a sense in which I (as a shepherd) must submit to the eldership. As an eldership, by the way, we have never voted on anything. We discuss, we open the word of God, we come to a consensus, we yield, and we move forward together, not as individuals, but as an eldership.

So, this is the concept: We are to obey and submit to our leaders, but why? He gives two reasons, doesn’t he? First of all, because these men (the leaders of the congregation) **“keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account.”** To **“keep watch”** (literally) is to have “no sleep.” It’s the word for sleep with an “a” in front of it, which makes it negative. Obey and submit to these men, because they have “no sleep” over your souls! I might have shared this before, but this is one of my favorite memes relating to the eldership. For those of you who can’t see it, it’s basically the view off of somebody’s back porch with a dark field full of sheep standing there with glowing eyes. You may be able to see it better on the monitor in the back, but the caption says, “We heard you couldn’t sleep.” I am of the age where many of many friends from college are being appointed as elders, and I’ve been sharing this right about bedtime on their first night as shepherds. This is my “welcome to the world of sleepless nights,” because serving as a shepherd over God’s church can be a role that brings with it sleepless nights of concern for God’s people. But the other part of this is that the shepherd must, in fact, **“keep watch.”** One of the words used to describe the role of shepherd is **“overseer.”** A shepherd will “look out over” God’s people, looking for sheep who may be wandering, but also looking out for threats of danger. We think of the concept of a **“watchman”** in the book of Ezekiel.

And by the way, speaking of Ezekiel, I should mention this again: Just a few days after we appointed elders here in Madison, some of you may remember that I was walking along Highway PD near our house on the southwest side of Madison, and I passed something sitting in a snowbank. It took my brain a few seconds to process, but I thought to myself, "That almost looked like the page layout of a Bible." So, I went back to take a look, and it was a chunk of the Bible, just a few pages, waterlogged, and open to Ezekiel 34, God's condemnation of the shepherds of Israel for neglecting their duty to properly feed and protect the flock; in fact, they were taking advantage of their position, and God condemns them for that. I would highly recommend reading Ezekiel 34 this afternoon if you can, but it was a terrifying reminder to this new shepherd, so I dried it out and framed it as a constant reminder. But the elders are God's **"watchmen"** over the church. And this is important, because most of us have seasons in life where we may care more about this life than we care about eternity, and it's the elders' job to look out for us, to warn us, and to bring us back. But either way, whether "losing sleep" or **"keeping watch,"** the role of shepherd carries with it a great weight of responsibility.

And that's the other part of this here: Leaders in the church will someday **"give an account"** for how they have done this. The shepherds of the congregation will answer to God for each soul entrusted to their care. Most of us may be at least a bit nervous about meeting God in judgment when this life is over and giving an account for our own lives; elders must do this as well but must also give an account for each member of the congregation. When the Chief Shepherd appears, I believe he will ask, "What about this person? What happened? This soul wandered away; what did you do about that? What steps did you take to bring them back?" The elders will give an account.

For this reason, the author says, **"obey"** and **"submit"** to these men, because these leaders will **"give an account."** So, there is some reasoning to this. This isn't blind obedience, but as sheep, we need to think about this – there is a reason for our obedience and submission. And if a shepherd says something that seems off or doesn't make sense, ask about it. Last week, I said we were looking at the last of 13 **"let us"** statements in Hebrews, and one of our young adults pulled me aside afterwards and basically said, "Hey, I'm only finding 12. What's up with that?" (I'm just paraphrasing). Well, I went home worried that I had taught something that wasn't right, so I looked, and I could only find 12! I went back and checked multiple translations: Still 12! I worried about it some more, and looked again a day or two later and realized that Hebrews 12:1 actually has two **"let us"** statements in it, which both of us were missing. So, there really are 13 **"let us"** statements in Hebrews. I share this simply to emphasize that we can **"obey"** and **"submit"** and still ask questions and hold our leaders accountable. So, the first reason for doing this is that the elders keep watch over our souls as those who will give an account.

The second reason to obey and submit comes at the end of verse 17 as the author explains, **"Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you."** In other words, we obey and submit, because it's good for us spiritually, and the alternative would be disastrous.

A few days ago, I told my dad what I was working on this week, I recited the verse from memory, and I asked him, "Based on your years of experience as an elder, and based on this passage, what advice would you have for the congregation?" And he immediately said, "Don't cause trouble!" And the reason is: If you cause the elders grief, this is not good for anybody! Some of you may remember a discussion in our Sunday morning Bible class a few months ago where I referenced the "Y'all Bible." In English, "you" can refer to "you" individually, or it might refer to all of "you" as a group. Well, Greek is more specific, and the "Y'all Bible" fixes this by using "y'all" whenever a "you" is plural. So, here is Hebrews 13:17, **"Obey y'all's leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over y'all's souls as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for y'all."** My point in sharing this is that if one person causes

trouble for the elders, that ends up being unprofitable for EVERYBODY, even for those who never caused the trouble in the first place. When one or two wreak havoc in the church, everybody suffers.

And I would also point out that the author refers to both *“joy”* and *“grief”* in this passage. Those who serve as shepherds will encounter both ends of the emotional spectrum. What causes joy for a shepherd? Although he wasn't a shepherd himself, let's allow Paul to answer that question, because he straight up tells us in Philippians 2 when he says, *“Therefore if there is any encouragement in Christ, if there is any consolation of love, if there is any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and compassion, make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose.”* Or, we could let the apostle John answer this question, and he was an elder. He says (in 3 John 4), *“I have no greater joy than this, to hear of my children walking in the truth.”* Or we could ask any parent: Do you enjoy parenting more when your kids are obedient or when they are rebellious? The same is true of shepherds in the church.

On the other hand, the word *“grief”* is a word that refers to groaning, sighing, or moaning inwardly. As an elder, there are joys I wouldn't trade for anything. But on the other hand, there are sorrows that are also beyond description. One older man suggested that elders will weep FOR others, WITH others, and BECAUSE OF others. It's this last category we're discussing here. Clear as day, I can remember the first time I saw my dad weeping. He was at his desk upstairs in our home at some point in the mid-80's, and it was over an issue he was facing shortly after being appointed as an elder. Paul spoke of such a situation in Philippians 3 when he said (in verses 18-19), *“For many walk, of whom I often told you, and now tell you even weeping, that they are enemies of the cross of Christ, whose end is destruction, whose god is their appetite, and whose glory is in their shame, who set their minds on earthly things.”* We need to try to live our lives in such a way so as not to cause our shepherds grief.

Would you like your elders to be able to serve with joy and not with grief? Come to us directly with your concerns. Refuse to gossip. Grow in your faith. Be teachable. Be ready to be corrected by the word of God and we will do the same. Assemble together on the first day of every week, and have your Bible open. Volunteer before being volun-told. There's so much more we could learn from verse 17, but I would summarize by simply sharing a paraphrase from Eugene Peterson, where he puts this passage in his own words and says, “Be responsive to your pastoral leaders. Listen to their counsel. They are alert to the condition of your lives and work under the strict supervision of God. Contribute to the joy of their leadership, not its drudgery. Why would you want to make things harder for them?” Amen to that.

II. Before we wrap it up today, let's notice a second instruction in this passage, where the author instructs us (in verse 18) to PRAY for those who lead.

*“Pray for us,”* he says. And I was surprised how many other New Testament books end like this. In Romans 15:30, Paul says, *“Now I urge you, brethren, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to strive together with me in your prayers to God for me.”* In Ephesians 6:19 he says, *“...and pray on my behalf, that utterance may be given to me in the opening of my mouth, to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel.”* In Colossians 4:2-4 he says, *“Devote yourselves to prayer, keeping alert in it with an attitude of thanksgiving; praying at the same time for us as well, that God will open up to us a door for the word, so that we may speak forth the mystery of Christ, for which I have also been imprisoned; that I may make it clear in the way I ought to speak.”* In 1 Thessalonians 5:25 he simply says, *“Brethren, pray for us.”* In 2 Thessalonians 3:1-2 he says, *“Finally, brethren, pray for us that the word of the Lord will spread rapidly and be glorified, just as it did also with you; and that we will be rescued from perverse and evil men; for not all have faith.”*

There is a reason why the very first item in our prayer list in the bulletin is to pray for our “shepherds and

deacons.” Of all the things we pray for, I’ve put that as #1 for as long as I can remember. But that’s reminded me this week that I don’t pray for Aaron as much as I should. I’m confessing that, and I’m fixing it. If this guy is responsible for watching out for my soul, I want him to have all the help from God that he needs. Pray for both of us – that we don’t get distracted by the concerns of this world, that we shepherd as we should, that we have courage to teach and preach as we should, that we are protected from the evil one. I’m thinking of those old war movies where the officers in the field hide anything indicating their rank, because the enemy would try to take out leadership. So also with Satan. We need to be praying for our leaders. Some of you remember Marge Holden. She made a point of reminding me that she prayed for me by name every day. We need more of that.

Pray for us to have a ***“good conscience, desiring to conduct ourselves honorably in all things.”*** Whoever wrote this wants to look back at his time with this congregation knowing that he did everything possible to serve honorably. That takes prayer. That task is too big for anyone to accomplish on their own. Shepherds must lead as if they desperately need prayer, because they do. Again, we think of what Paul said in 2 Corinthians 1:12, ***“For our proud confidence is this: the testimony of our conscience, that in holiness and godly sincerity, not in fleshly wisdom but in the grace of God, we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially toward you.”*** If I have someone in my life who’s willing to lose sleep over my soul, if I have someone in my life who’s willing to go to war over my soul, if I have someone in my life who’s willing to teach me and correct me when I need it, I need to be praying for this person.

And in verse 19, ***“...I urge you all the more to do this, so that I may be restored to you the sooner.”*** Some have suggested that the author may be in prison, maybe it’s an illness, but he’s praying for something that’s completely out of his control. And this may be why this letter is a letter and not a sermon! The author wants to be with these people, but he can’t, so he’s asking them to pray.

### **Conclusion:**

And as we close, I just want to make sure all of us review the “Charge to the Elders” on the front of today’s bulletin. This is what we agreed to when we took on that responsibility eight years ago. We are a work in progress, learning as we go, so thank you for your patience. And in the meantime, all of us have a responsibility to obey and submit as well as to pray for the leaders of the congregation.

We’ve been challenged by the word of God’s this morning. Let’s go to God in prayer and then Michael will lead us in a song as we think about what we’ve learned this morning:

Our Father in Heaven,

Thank you so much for being concerned about our spiritual health. We are thankful for elders who teach, and warn, and encourage. We pray for patience and strength, and we ask for your blessing.

We love you, Father, and we come to you today through Jesus, who gave everything. AMEN.

To comment on this lesson: [fourlakeschurch@gmail.com](mailto:fourlakeschurch@gmail.com)