

An Exhortation Regarding Pastoral Leadership (Heb.13.7-9)

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⁷ Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith. ⁸ Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. ⁹ Do not be led away by diverse and strange teachings, for it is good for the heart to be strengthened by grace, not by foods, which have not benefited those devoted to them.

Introduction

The so called “hodgepodge” of exhortations that we find in Hebrews 13 turn out to be a diamond with many sides. Rather than a disconnected collection, randomly thrown together, these exhortations are a unit within 13 and within the book. As a matter of fact, we know that the entire letter-sermon is an exhortation (from 13.22) such that the exhortations (in the plural) are an integral part of the teaching of the letter. Accordingly, the exhortations in chapter 13 interface with the instruction about the race that we are to run looking to Christ our great high priest. This fact surfaces again in the “hodgepodge” when we come to 13.7-9 that gives “an exhortation regarding pastoral leadership.” To develop the integration of things here, to develop the integration of instruction with exhortation, it will be helpful to hang our thoughts on three hooks: 1) implications for leaders, 2) guidance for followers, and 3) encouragement for both leaders and followers.

1A. Implications for leaders

There are three implications for us to discuss. They are particularly weighty for me. It is not that these are only for me, but they are directly for me, and the third one here is especially pointed and a cause for humble prayer and reflection on my part.

1) First, the church is to have pastoral leaders

The very word “leader” (**remember your leaders**, 13.7) opens a door to a room full of implications for the church. The leaders are the people who have the responsibility to guide the church, leading the church family like fathers lead their families. Probably, most important in being the head of a family (at home or at church) is the principle of service, of being a servant-leader. We have to start with this principle because of the teaching of our Lord, who said, **The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them, and those in authority over them are called benefactors.** ²⁶ **But not so with you. Rather, let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves** (Lk. 22.26). The church is to have pastoral leaders but they are not dictators; they are workers who labor for the good of the church. They do not have their own agenda; they serve Christ in serving His people. However, the word leader does describe a ruler or governor. Joseph in Egypt became a leader when he was exalted to be a governor according to Acts 7.10. A leader is one who governs the church. It is the same word of description that we have in 13.17 and 24 (**obey your leaders** and **greet** them). The church is to have pastoral leaders who govern by serving. Clearly, the standard here contrasts to the sinful practices of governors and mayors of our country (from South Carolina and Washington DC to Detroit and Highland Park, Michigan). Moreover, it is not about power as in the self-help book for business leadership, *Forty Ways to Power*. That said, we still have to say that pastors are to be leaders; they have the responsibility of leading and governing; they cannot sit back and wait for others to shepherd the flock, they must lead.

What then does this kind of leadership basically entail?

2) In the second place, pastoral leaders are to rule by the word

The main task in pastoral leadership is ministry of the word: **those who spoke to you the word of God** (13.7). Along with prayer, pastors are to lead the church by preaching; they speak the word to you. What the text says about preachers of the past applies to preachers of the present over time.

Hence, the overlap with what Paul says in 1 Timothy about those who rule and those who also preach and teach: **let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who**

labor in preaching and teaching (1 Tim. 5.17). Therefore, we have the weighty command to preach the word with exhortation and patient instruction: **I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: ² preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching** (2 Tim. 4.1-2). My duty as your pastor has this weightiness of a charge. It is a charge I have in the presence of God and Christ Jesus against the day of His appearing and the marvelous consummation of His kingdom. I must view my work against the Day of Judgment by the Lord Jesus who, as universal Sabbath king, is the Judge of all people of all the ages of human history from beginning to end. This is a sobering thought that needs to sink deeply into my heart and conscience.

Furthermore, there is a goal that pastors must always have in front of them in their work. It is present in all preaching, reproof, instruction, and exhortation. That goal is to get the people of God *into the living and powerful word* of the discerner of hearts for their good, for their profit, especially for their strengthening in the inner persons of their hearts. This is the clear implication in this text in Hebrews 13.9b; **it is good for the heart to be strengthened by grace**. Notice the contrast with bad teaching (9a, **Do not be led away by diverse and strange teachings**). You should also note the contrast with practice that does not benefit (9c). For the record, you should know that my goal in preaching and teaching is to get you into the word; that is, into healthy meditation on the word and thinking in the word, to take you back there into the text and into the flow of thought of the text. My goal is to get you into the text for your reflection, profit, and strengthening.

3) Third, pastoral rule by the word is to be embodied in conduct worthy of emulation

This is the sharpest point for me in this text; it cuts and penetrates: **imitate their faith**.

The teaching is preaching and the preaching is teaching that relates to living by faith under Christ the forerunner of His covenant people. Pastors are called to have a faith that is worth imitating. Here in the book of Hebrews the reference to faith has the particular accent of faithfulness. This is helpful to see because it prevents some wrongs. On one hand, the accent on faithfulness blocks the way to being a pie in the sky preacher. That is, it calls pastors to practice what they preach. It cannot be “do as I say” with no “do as I do.” This is heavy; I am to be a good example to you of a faithful walk with God by the clear guidance of His word. So, I need your prayers (cf. 13.18) as you need my work of prayer. On the other hand, the accent on faithfulness to be emulated blocks the way to pie in the sky preaching. Preaching must come down to earth; there must be application. But let’s keep things in the right perspective on this point. Application must arise from the text for all the readers of Scripture then and now, them and us. It is not a situation where pastors have an agenda and they use the application section of a sermon to promote that agenda (or to use whole sermons to that end!). Likewise, listeners and readers ought not to begin with applications they want from the text; this may include expectations of certain religious feelings, confirmations of error, or justifications for bad conduct. Can I overemphasize this concern, namely, that we must go into the Scriptures into the flow of thought in order to have our thoughts impacted and infected by that pattern of sound words, however difficult that may be for our thinking and living? We must always come to the word with openness, with humbleness of heart, and thus with open-minded humility.

Pastors are to wrestle with the word, eat it and drink it, digest it, embody it and preach the word in its wholeness as an arrow with a point, the point of any given text in the context of Scripture as a whole. Pastors are to preach the word, but note carefully (I must note this carefully), pastors are to preach the word they live by faith so that their conduct is worthy of emulation. May the Lord strengthen me for your good in this regard!

2A. Guidance for followers

Let us take up the words defining this guidance. The guidance for readers then and readers now is here in three key words: remember, consider, and imitate. All three together are a unit that guides receiving pastoral care in a balanced way as sinners from sinners.

1) Remember

He tells the church to not forget about their pastors, but to think, think about them, keep them in mind: **Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God** (13.7a). It is interesting that he states this in such personal terms. Church members are to keep their pastors in their thoughts. I think it is easy to understand the basic reason: you are to look at them *as you look to the word they preach*. Obviously, it is their work in the word that sets them apart.

2) Consider

He goes on to clarify the reason that the flock is to remember its pastors: you are to **consider the outcome of their way of life** (13.7b). “Consider” adds something to thinking and keeping in mind; it adds the idea of careful examination. In receiving the gospel word from them, what are you to examine carefully? You are to examine the outcome of how they live; consider carefully where their conduct leads for this life and the next. This is not to be in isolation from the preached word (the *preacher’s* word about the Word), not in isolation from the word that is preached (the Word the preacher preaches). Instead, you are to examine the pastor’s embodiment of the word in living and where that leads for riches before God (Heb. 13.5-6) against the Day of Judgment.

3) Imitate

He then adds: **imitate their faith** (13.7c). The word imitate means mimic, follow, and emulate. We need to connect it to verse 9: **Do not be led away by diverse and strange teachings, for it is good for the heart to be strengthened by grace**. With verse 9 in hand, we can say it like this, “Follow their lived-out teaching by not being led astray by diverse and strange teaching.” Without question, the wrong kind of preaching, preaching that does not embody the gospel, is not good and does not benefit as it ought to. Good teaching stands in contrast to bad, false, diverse, and strange teaching. God tells us to look at this squarely; bad teaching corrupts like a cancer; on the surface things may look good and pious, but down deep in the soul the opposite is at work. We have to maintain the highest standard for what goes into the mind. Hughes has an interesting comment, he says, “History bears ample testimony to the astonishing fecundity [productivity] of the heretical mentality” (*Hebrews*, 572). Hence, the qualifications for pastors that are put in the hands of the church accent *godliness* in the context of *true knowledge* of the Scriptures.

Ministers are to be examples to follow in life, but the highest priority must be the bond of faithfulness with the word. In the context of the book of Hebrews, it is easy to see why we should understand faith (7c) as faithfulness. Simply put, the exhortation here is to follow them per the word, as they follow the word. That is the only true faithfulness worthy of following! Follow faith expressed in faithfulness, in faithfulness that reflects the truth and that the truth shapes. To be sure, Phillips has it right, “the best of men are men at best.” We must learn the lesson carefully and ponder it deeply that our confidence is “not in men of God but in the God of men” who works His will through pastors who are sinners (*Hebrews*, 593).

3A. Encouragement to both leaders and followers

Verse 8 seems isolated; out of place, but it is connected. It roots the immediate applications in the faithfulness of Christ: **Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever**. The apparent disjointedness serves a great purpose. It raises the level of the reader’s reflection by making him search for the way the doctrine of Christ relates to the immediate flow of thought. That is, you have to ponder the teaching about Jesus Christ in the book and bring that to bear here in this context. To get our bearings, we need to know that this verse is not ontological but incarnational in its orientation; it is not about our Lord’s essence but about His incarnate work. Importantly, it is about what He is in His priestly work, for us, specifically, that He is constant, true to His purpose in coming into the world, faithful in His work, and faithful to His promises.

Therefore, this striking text shows that He faithfully works behind the scenes of the work of pastors. Striking in its abruptness, this text teaches that pastoral ministry is a marvelous means

of grace. God by grace accomplishes extraordinary things through ordinary means. He uses sinners to minister the saving fruits and benefits of His high priestly work. All that is greater, fuller, and better about the new covenant comes to needy sinners by His grace through pastoral ministry of the word.

This gives us solid motivation and stable encouragement: we have the rock solid Savior who is pleased to transmit His word through frail means but with certainty in saving sinners though all time and all circumstances. This encourages the duty to remember, consider, and imitate the gospel of our Lord first preached by Him and passed on by His promise through those who heard Him; passed onto pastors of the time between, past and present (connect: 2.3, 13.7, and 13.17).

Motivation is the constancy and faithfulness of Christ in the past in His own preaching of the word, His giving of NT word through His commissioned apostles and pastors then and now who enter into their labors: past, present, and future (for them and for us today). He not only preached it and lived it for our knowledge and sanctification; He continues to minister it to our hearts by grace. He not only gave the gospel in the NT, He gives it in the exposition of the NT through pastors for the benefit of all, and, as risen Lord, He continues to apply it to our hearts for our nourishment and benefit.

Focus is on Christ not on the leaders that He appoints; they are instruments. He tells us to follow them, to remember them, and to examine and imitate the faith they embody. The call here, the duty, is to careful attention to the word that comes to us from Christ through frail instruments. What he tells us is this: imitate the faithfulness that follows tightly to the word of Christ in the NT.

Conclusion

Pastors are called to have a faith that is worth imitating. Church folk have the calling to be learners of Christ and students of His word through one anothering love with the brothers and sisters and, as stressed here, with their pastors. May the Lord help you and me fulfill this.

There are many implications here for the local assembly. Descending from the mountaintop of Zion and sights of glory, adjust your eyes and look at your very down to earth and frail leaders. But look at them in your peripheral vision; keep your eyes fixed on Jesus the author and finisher of your faith. In this way, follow your pastor in order to learn how to live the word of God with true openness and humility.

May we fall down before the majesty of the great God and our Savior Jesus Christ; may the Father be pleased to work His saving will in us through the work of Christ and by blessing of the Holy Spirit; may the Spirit be pleased to teach us great and wonderful things out of His word, through pastoral leadership, to the praise, glory and honor of the triune God, amen.