

How to Make your Pastor Happy

Text:

Hebrews 13:17

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.

Introduction:

The Epistle to the Hebrews is a first century sermon written, most likely, to a house church in Rome. It was written to encourage its recipients to remain faithful to Jesus Christ in a time of persecution. The author makes an elaborately developed argument to demonstrate that Jesus Christ is our only hope, and then exhorts us to remain faithful to him. Today's text is a part of the sermon's conclusion. As all good preaching should, this sermon calls on its hearers to do some very specific things. Its last chapter, chapter 13, exhorts us to take some very specific actions. Now these actions are not unrelated to the rest of the sermon. Remember its overall theme: "Be faithful to Jesus Christ, even when it is difficult, because he is our only hope of salvation." The things we are exhorted to do in chapter 13, then, are things that we enable us to remain faithful to Jesus Christ. They refer to what we might class as spiritual disciplines, things that are necessary if we are to maintain a healthy, growing, and living relationship with God. Some of them might surprise you, and you might make a different list, but all who have had experience in persevering faith and have experienced the joy of the Christian life would agree that there is great wisdom in all of them. Here is a paraphrased partial list:

- Look for ways to concretely demonstrate the Love of Christ to each other.
- Look for ways to help those who are different from you, those who are foreign to your world.
- Relieve the distress of those who are undergoing special suffering and trials as much as you can.
- Make every effort to keep your marriages pure and thriving.
- Learn to be content with what you have. Avoid greed by learning to be generous.
- Do not let yourself be enticed by false teachings parading as the truth, but which upon examination are contrary to Christ.

Other than a request that they pray for him, our text is the last in this list of practical things to do. It is a text that raises the ire of some contemporary Christians, as its two imperative verbs: “obey” and “submit” both run counter to the spirit of the times. We are a people that like to imagine that we do things our own way; that we submit to no rules but our own. Of course that is an illusion, but it is a popular illusion. What I want us to understand as we meditate on this text is the logic of doing what it encourages us to do.

I. The Role of Spiritual Leaders

The first important thing that we learn from this verse is the role of spiritual leaders. The title of this sermon is “How to Make your Pastor Happy”. The first thing that you can do is to understand what a pastor, as a spiritual leader, is called by God to do. The text says: “they keep watch over your souls.” That is as good a one line definition as you will find. People have many ideas about what pastors are supposed to do, but their role as defined in the New Testament, and in classical Christian teaching is that of caretakers of souls. There is a term for this that in recent times has fallen into disuse in the English speaking world, but classically the work of the pastor was described as “cure of souls”. The idea presupposes the possibility of a spiritual life, a relationship with God that can be healthy and vigorous, or can become diseased and need treatment to regain its health. This spiritual life is not unrelated to the rest of our life. We live our lives in the world in physical bodies. Everything about us relates to our existence as beings capable of relating to God. The pastor’s role then is to so teach the word of God, both publicly and privately, that individuals can enter into a living and thriving relationship with God, and then to help them maintain a healthy and growing relationship with God. He does this by instructing them in the word of God, by pointing out things that are hindering spiritual growth and life, and encouraging them to make adjustments and changes that would be beneficial. Pastors may do many other things, but this is the reason they exist, the reason God gave them to the church.

This is the reason our text tells us to listen to them. This is their work. They watch after our souls. Now, if we give any importance to our souls, we should be delighted that there is actually someone else who takes an interest in us and our relationship to God, and who, without self-interest, seeks to lead us into spiritual health. We should seek to develop a relationship of confidence with them and to profit from the service that they offer to us. Unfortunately, this is not always the case.

II. Prerequisites of a Relationship of Trust

We have established that it is a good thing to have a relationship of trust with our spiritual leaders in order that they might be able to help us become the individuals that God intended us to be; that we might become healthy, fully-developed individuals in our relationship with God, ourselves, and other people; that we might become functional joyful Christians that make a positive contribution and fulfill the mission for which we were given life.

To establish that relationship of trust certain prerequisites must be met. To understand what I am saying let me give you a down to earth illustration that will help you grasp what I am saying. Let me restate the first part of the verse as follows: “Pay attention to your mechanic and do what he says, for he is watching over your vehicle.” Why wouldn’t you follow the advice of your mechanic? Two basic reasons would be: (1) you don’t think he knows what he is doing and, (2) you don’t trust him. Now it is obvious, that in the case of a mechanic, he could just be guessing about what he thinks the problem is, and that he could be acting out of self-interest, for his own profit, not for your good. This is the reason why, historically since the advent of the automobile, people have liked to have a close relationship with their mechanics, and have felt frustrated when they needed a mechanic away from home and had to rely on someone they didn’t know. This is the reason why we seek the recommendation of others before choosing a mechanic, and especially why modern dealerships which isolate us from the person doing the actual work frustrate us. We want to know that the person repairing our vehicle really does know what he is doing; that he really is fixing what is wrong, and that once he is finished we can again drive with confidence, and that we are not paying for something that is unnecessary. So a good mechanic needs at least two qualities: competence and integrity. He knows what he is doing, and he will not do more than he needs to for his own profit.

Now we can carry that image over to the relationship that exists between us and our spiritual leader. We need the confidence that they are competent and that they are trustworthy if we are to develop a relationship of trust that enables us to benefit from their counsel. If, on the one hand, we question the truth and wisdom of what they are saying, or, on the other hand, we question their motives in saying it, we will never really listen to what they are saying. Of course it is their responsibility to strive for competence and integrity. These things are not givens, they must be achieved and demonstrated, but they are essential to what we are striving towards.

III. Obeying and Submitting

Now we come to the difficult part of the text, those two verbs obey and submit. We can soften them a bit as Eugene Peterson does in the Message when he paraphrases: “Be responsive to your pastoral leaders. Listen to their counsel.” In the end, however, it is a matter of acting on what they tell us. Allow me to return to my mechanic for a moment. Generally, when we go to

the garage it is with a certain amount of apprehension, even when we know and trust our mechanic. We fear the worst. We don't want to hear the diagnosis. But remember an honest mechanic will give an honest diagnosis. What would you think if your brakes were in dangerously bad condition, but your mechanic, not wanting to upset you by making you pay for the necessary repairs, told you that everything was fine. You might be disappointed that you are going to have to pay for new brakes, but you understand that it's not the mechanic's fault they are worn out. He didn't drive your car, you did. Now our souls are much more personal than our cars, but there is a parallel between the two. When your spiritual leader tells you what is wrong, he didn't create the problem; he is only pointing it out to you, and showing you what you need to do to remedy it. He is watching over your soul as one that will give an account to God, not seeking his own interest, but your good.

It is important to add here, that he could be wrong, and any wise and competent spiritual leader will acknowledge his limitations. Just as with your mechanic it is ok to ask questions, to push him to explain his diagnosis, but you must be honest. You must be honest in what you tell him. He can only act on the basis of the facts you give. He cannot dismantle your soul, as your mechanic dismantles your motor independently of any participation on your part. In fact, it is at this point that the analogy breaks down. You must be an active participant in your own cure. The honesty must flow in both directions. If you expect him to be honest in his evaluation of and prescription for your problem, then you must be honest in your description of it. Pastors have been given gifts by God to perform their work. One of those gifts is perception, but they are not mind readers.

So what makes pastors happy? The same thing, I think, that makes anyone happy in their work; having a clear idea of what they are trying to accomplish and then seeing it come to fruition. What makes it more complicated for pastors than, say for carpenters, is that in the end it depends on the cooperation of those with whom they work. They can exercise their ministry with competence and compassion, but if we do not respond to that ministry, they cannot experience the joy of accomplishment. John stated it this way in his third epistle: "I can have no greater joy than this, to hear that my children follow the truth."

Let me conclude as the text concludes. To make your pastor happy is in your own best interest. In fact, you should not even set out to make him happy; that would be a false goal that would lead to nothing good. Don't worry about his happiness. Your goal should be to be spiritually whole, to be in a good and growing relationship with God and with others. His job is to help you achieve that goal. If you do he will find joy in his work; if you don't he will still do his work, for that is what God has called him to do, but the text says he will do it with a certain sadness, and you, the text says, will gain nothing. So everyone gains when things are as God intended them to be. Our spiritual leaders watch out for our spiritual well-being, and we, being also

concerned about our spiritual well-being, help them in their work by being honest with them and by listening and responding to the counsel they give us from the Word of God. When that happens we both grow and experience God's joy.