

***Hebrews 13:7-8,17-21. Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith. <sup>8</sup> Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. <sup>17</sup> Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you. <sup>18</sup> Pray for us. We are sure that we have a clear conscience and desire to live honorably in every way. <sup>19</sup> I particularly urge you to pray so that I may be restored to you soon. <sup>20</sup> May the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, <sup>21</sup> equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.***

It's all about Jesus: The Great Shepherd tends to and equips his church

- I. He gives Shepherds to his Sheep
- II. He gives Sheep to his Shepherds
- III. He equips us for a life of service and an eternity of praise

I think each one of us has a special place in our hearts for a certain pastor. Maybe it was the one who baptized us. Maybe it was the one who taught us catechism. Maybe it was the one who walked us through Bible Information Class, or married us, or baptized our children. Maybe it was a pastor who guided you through a difficult time in your life. Good pastors are indeed a blessing from God.

Last week we heard about the important role of pastor; how it is a noble task. Paul listed for Timothy the qualifications that outlined what kind of man a pastor or an overseer should and should not be. Today we continue to expand on the relationship that God has intended for pastor and his people.

As Jesus looked at the crowds gathered around him in Mark 6 he felt for them. He had compassion on them because they were *like sheep without a shepherd*. The Lord Jesus knew that these people needed the gospel, he knew they needed instruction in the word, he knew they needed the hope and peace that comes from faith. And so he spent time with them, he taught them. He cared for their spiritual needs. For a time he truly was their shepherd and he served as their pastor as he taught them many things. But Jesus wasn't always going to be with them. He would have to send out his disciples and later many pastors to care for his sheep.

The title of pastor, itself, is a title that contains such warm significance. Embedded in this title of pastor is the idea of a shepherd. He is to be one who cares for God's people like a shepherd caring for the sheep. There is to be a loving watchfulness that the pastor

will employ for his people. He is to lead them to the life giving waters of God's Holy Word and Sacraments. There he and his people will find refreshment. There they will together find spiritual food and spiritual peace. The pastor is to instruct his people in God's Word. He is to show them God's ways. That means that he must speak the harsh words of the law as well as the sweet words of the gospel. He is to expose sin, and warn the people of the dangers of sin so that they may avoid spiritual harm. All this he does, not just because it is his job; but he does it with it love and genuine concern, as a called servant of Christ. The pastor gladly serves his Lord as an overseer of God's people and under-shepherd of that Great Shepherd of the Sheep Christ Jesus.

Jesus in his grace wanted his people to be fed and nourished spiritually. And so our Lord in his grace and mercy has established his church in this way that he has blessed us with pastors who tend to our spiritual needs by faithfully administering the means of grace, the gospel in word and sacrament. Jesus is the Great Shepherd of the sheep and he tends and equips his people by giving us pastors. He gives shepherds to his sheep. What a blessed relationship God has established.

But what about the other side of the relationship; what kind of instructions does God have for his people? Several places in Scripture we hear that God has entrusted pastors and spiritual leaders with a serious responsibility. We are told that such overseers and under-shepherds are given a solemn charge to faithfully watch over God's people as men who must give an account. This is a high calling. This is a noble task. We are told this frequently. But it is not too often that we are told in the Scriptures how the Christian is to respond to their spiritual leader. I suppose we are shown both good examples and bad examples of those who listen or refuse to listen to their spiritual leaders, but we are not given many specific instructions or exhortations. In this final chapter of the book of Hebrews we find such instruction. After an extensive exposition of the gospel message, the writer to the Hebrews ends his letter with various applications, and included in these final encouragements is the application of how we as Christians are to treat our pastors and our spiritual leaders. So what instruction does the writer to the Hebrews give us? How does God want his people to treat those placed in spiritual authority over his people? The writer says <sup>17</sup> ***Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you.***

Obey and submit. These are words that I think we all immediately bristle underneath, whatever the context. Remember and emulate former leaders - we can do that just fine. In fact, that is rather enjoyable. We can and often do look back with fondness; but obey and submit to our current leaders, that is, a bit more of a challenge. After all, we naturally have trouble submitting to anyone but ourselves. We don't want to listen to anyone who says something we might not agree with or goes against our actions or thinking, even if that rebuke is coming from our pastor. But we are told, by God's Word, to obey and submit.

However, the full flavor of these words, obey and submit, is lost when we lose sight of the nature of this relationship. This is not a slave obeying his master. This is not the pastor ruling over and subduing and controlling his members with an iron fist. But rather this is a loving relationship that God has established for the good of his church. It is an obedience rooted in the trust, reliance, and confidence that God has placed this person over me for my spiritual care. What good does it do a person to resist or reject those whom God has put in a position to feed and nourish his or her soul? What good does it do to ignore or avoid a pastor who is only faithfully carrying out his duty? ***Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you.***

And so, listen to your leaders and obey them because not only will this make things easier for you and your congregation and your spiritual leaders; but when you serve them, when you follow them, when you listen to them you know that it is as if you are serving Christ, because Christ Jesus uses these imperfect men to take care of you. Christ is working through them. Christ is speaking through them. When your Savior wants to communicate words of forgiveness or rebuke to you he does not rip apart the heavens and speak from the clouds, but he speaks through a modest ordinary man standing in front of you. Your Savior speaks to you in the words of the liturgy spoken by the pastor. He speaks to you through your pastor with words spoken in the sacristy, in the back of church, in the pastor's office. He speaks to you through a reassuring voice heard next to your hospital bed, or over the phone, or in your home. He speaks to you through a voice that may not always have all the answers but a human voice that is there to care for you and guide you into God's Word.

This is a blessed relationship that God has established for the benefit of his church. But because of sin, pastors and their people, abuse and mishandle this relationship. God did not ordain the public ministry that men might simply hang a title from their name and therefore fill up their egos. He did not ordain the public ministry to give men a higher status, or more social clout. And yet it is an unfortunate truth that men, by way of selfish ambition and impure intentions, have used the position of pastor for selfish gain and have strained and even broken the trust between pastor and congregant. Lord, we pray that you would keep pastors from abusing their position.

But of course, it is not only the pastor who can be guilty of straining and mishandling this relationship. The typical member of the congregation can easily fall into harmful habits. Too often I think people underestimate or devalue this relationship of pastor and member, of under-shepherd and sheep. Too often members of Christian congregations shun a relationship with their pastor because in sinful pride they are determined to handle their spiritual care on their own, or carelessly think it is not important to utilize the connection to Jesus that God offers through church and pastor. Too often a Christian stubbornly takes up the attitude who is that pastor to tell me how to live anyway. It doesn't take too long to think of possible examples. A young woman assumes after catechism and confirmation that she no longer needs her pastor's help and therefore frequents church irregularly, and never contacts her pastor even though her

faith is being tested and strained. A married couple might avoid marital counseling because it just seems too difficult or too embarrassing to go to their pastor for help and work through their problems. A young man is struggling with a sin and getting himself into trouble and instead of looking to his pastor for help, he and his family do their best to cover things up so that the pastor won't find out. A man advanced in years has fallen on hard times and sits in his home confused about God's plan for his life yet he has no desire to speak to his pastor. As believers we often wander and we stumble through this life and yet we refuse to seek, ask for, or even receive help even though it is often right there in front of us. This is spiritual help and support that Jesus our loving Good Shepherd has established for our good.

Our Lord Jesus Christ loves you. He wrapped his glory in the humility of flesh, lived for you, and then died for you. He fulfilled the covenant of blood, his covenant of forgiveness and eternal life. Our risen Lord, that Great Shepherd of the Sheep, wants you to know more about what he has done for you. He wants you to know about his Word and he wants you to know his will for your life. And he wants you to believe in him as your Savior and to trust in him and rely on him day after day. Our Great Shepherd wants to equip you for lives of service. He wants to guard and keep you until you praise him for all eternity in heaven. Thus, he has built, and he maintains the relationship between a pastor and his people to that end. He works through pastors to strengthen your relationship with God, to keep you close to your Savior. He works through pastors who faithfully administer the means of grace so that they might fan the flame of the Holy Spirit within your heart so that you live for you LORD now and dwell with Jesus forever in heaven.

With fondness in our eyes we look back to previous pastors who taught us the Word. We certainly would do well to remember them. We are to imitate their faith. But it is not about the pastor himself, but it is about the message that he brings. It's all about Jesus. Pastors get older. They move on, get called away, or retire. Eventually they go on to their eternal home. But the message that God passed down to you is eternal. As it says here in the book of Hebrews, ***Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.*** As those with a rich heritage in the word of God we are blessed in that the message that your former pastors spoke to you is the same that your current pastor speaks to you. It is the same that your future pastor will speak to you. It is all about Jesus. Jesus' love, His word, His life-changing gospel, his life-directing wisdom - that doesn't change. But God in his goodness has established the public ministry so that this unchanging word of Jesus may be applied over and over to the changing lives of his people. Jesus has a great desire to keep you in his word, to equip you for lives of service and to bring you home and so in his love the Lord of the Church Christ Jesus will continue to send out faithful pastors year after year and generation after generation to tend to his people and to teach and apply his saving word. To Jesus Christ, that Great Shepherd of the Sheep be glory now and forever. Amen.