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Hebrews 13:1-17  
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“Follow the Leader”

God’s grace and peace to you,

The text for today is Hebrews 13. And it’s a good thing I didn’t say Hebrews 14, because Hebrews 13 is the last chapter in the book. And perhaps you have grasped this by now, but a lot of the letters in the Bible use the last chapter of the book to throw everything in and tie it all together. So often, we get a lot of short verses which are like little reminders that loom large. The result is that Hebrews 13 covers a lot of territory in a short amount of time. As I looked at this text and was trying to get a handle on it, I realized that it touched on so many topics, it was kinda like a mini-Bible all in itself. Hebrews 13 has Christology, justification, sanctification, plenty of application on how to live, it gives a basis for Christian leadership and pastoral care, and Hebrews 13 even features a weird Old Testament connection—that’s how complete it is! So I feel like this chapter has it all. But if I were to put my finger on it, I would say the central thought is about how to live as a Christian. Whom should we imitate and why? Who has a right to speak into our lives? Who gets that access? And in the end, Hebrews 13 is about being strengthened and built up, so that we actually can be good examples ourselves. We can be people of integrity—if we recognize we are not in this by

ourselves. Just as flock has a shepherd, God arranged for the church to be tended, led and guided. The relationship between the leaders of the church and the people of God is meant to strengthen the heart. But let's be honest...You can love the Lord, but not exactly like or care for the guy He has put in that place of leadership. I haven't liked every pastor I've had, or I've liked some pastors more than others. So what do you do with that when Hebrews 13 talks about obedience, submission and considering their example? This is why the Christian leader—in the home, as well as in the church—has to be clear. They do not say, "Follow me." They say, "Follow me as I follow Christ." Or like Paul said, in 1 Cor 11:1, "Imitate me as I imitate Christ." Christ is the ultimate leader and He does not change, He "is the same, yesterday, today and forever" (Heb 13:18). Therefore, we always have a point of reference and point of reverence. The steadfastness of Christ is a helpful orientation to have as everything else in life can change so quickly.

So what should the Christian life look like? Well, it should look something like Christ! Practically speaking though, what does that mean? We need something tangible. Parents are meant to be that example to their children. Church leaders are meant to be that example to the congregation by how they live. One of the questions we ask church workers when they get installed, "Will

you adorn the gospel of Jesus Christ through holy living?” The gospel is already beautiful and complete and that’s where the power is for sure, but it’s meant to be lived out. We make the gospel even more beautiful when we yield to it and it works in our lives. It brings about that change, that Christ-likeness that we are so hungry for. We adorn the gospel of Jesus Christ, by actually taking the message to our head, our heart and our hands. We adorn the gospel through our lives. Some of us do it better than others, some days are worth writing home about, some days are worth writing off, but we’re called not just to faith, but to live out faith.

The author of Hebrews would have us know what that looks like with a string of commands. Let brotherly love continue. Don’t neglect hospitality to strangers. Remember those in prison. Remember those who are suffer for the faith. Honor marriage, keep the marriage bed pure. Keep your life free from the love of money. Be content. Remember your leaders. It’s interesting to note how these are all communal instructions. We need to be taught how to live life together in community. And yet, we can’t have community unless we apply these words individually. Our private lives have a public effect on our fellowship, our friendship, our relationships. And there’s no way you can keep that from washing over as much as people try to segment and compartmentalize their lives. These instructions are not superficial, but all reach to the core of who we are, and how

we think about other people and the things we like to have—things like money, sex, power. These desires can be so useful to the enemy. For example, the enemy of our souls wants to do everything he can to encourage sex *outside* of the marriage **bed** and he wants to do everything he can to discourage sex *inside* the marriage **bed**. Christians must recognize this strategy and not give it a foothold.

And Hebrews 13 says, have a desire above those worldly desires. Let Christlikeness take charge. We know Christlikeness is kicking in when we start to care and think about other people. Brotherly love, hospitality, caring for those who are out of sight or maligned. Sally's go-to quote on hospitality is that "Hospitality is a sustained commitment to the belief that how we treat one another matters deeply." That sounds fine, who would object to that? Well, if you're a task-oriented person, it's easy to forget about relationships because you're just trying to accomplish the objective and get it done. But if people matter, we find a way to preserve or strengthen those relationships in the process. My go-to quote is this: "In the business world, relationships exist to get work done. But in the church, work exists to build relationships." That's why God gave us work—so we would work on it together. That means we need to recognize the authority God put in place for the church and not let it be abused or neglected.

Well, that's easier said than done. How many of you have heard of the Didache? It was an early church "ministry manual," written perhaps somewhere between A.D. 90 and 110. It had this to say about how to tell if a false prophet abused the hospitality of those in the church:

*Let every apostle that comes to you be received as the Lord. But he shall not remain except one day; but if there be need, also the next; but if he remains three days, he is a false prophet. And when the apostle goes away, let him take nothing but bread... but if he asks for money, he is a false prophet. And every prophet that speaks in the Spirit you shall neither try nor judge; for every sin shall be forgiven, but this one sin shall not be forgiven. But not everyone that speaks in the Spirit is a prophet; but only if he holds the ways of the Lord. Therefore from their ways shall the false prophet and the true prophet be known. (From *The Ante-Nicean Fathers*, Volume 7, page 380)*

Hebrews 13:7, "Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith." Did their lives adorn the gospel? This verse is speaking to former leaders who have died. That's why the outcome of their way of life can be considered. And it's also why the way leaders live at present matters. Because their way of life is so

visible. No one should expect or portray perfection. But people should expect integrity and humanity.

But with Jesus, that's exactly what we have. Perfect integrity, perfect humanity. "Jesus Christ is the same, yesterday, today and forever." So that means, don't be led astray by strange teachings or strange teachers.

Now here comes an Old Testament connection. In Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, there's a sense that holy things belong in the city. Unholy things go outside the city, beyond the city gates and walls. They go outside the gate, outside the camp. It's like going to the dump. I love the dump! Best place ever! The idea is separation. I don't want to live with this stinking mess, get it away from me. There's a spiritual dump and under the Levitical system, they would burn the bodies of the animals outside the camp. Their blood was used and splashed on the altar. But their bodies were burned outside the camp. Here's the connection, verse 12, "So Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his blood."

Jesus died on the cross as we all know, but maybe we forgot to think about the location of that cross. Why would it matter? Because that cross was outside the city walls of Jerusalem. So outside the walls was a place of rejection, a place of suffering. But it's how and where we sinners are declared holy. We have a

personal altar in the cross. He is both the priest and the sacrifice so that the profane becomes holy and the holy becomes profane. It's a reversal because of what the Holy One suffered for us. And the author of Hebrews says, "Let's go to him outside the camp and bear the reproach he endured." This is the equivalent of "Take up your cross and follow me." Do we see how personal, and yet also, communal these instructions are? The very act of sharing our faith should meet the hopeful request: Take me to your leader. Give them Jesus by following Jesus.

No one can do follow Jesus for you. No one can take away responsibility or authority from you—these things are God-given. But that doesn't mean people in the church haven't tried. Especially when you have verse 17, "Obey your leaders and submit to them for they are keeping watch over your souls." Huge responsibility! And it's something pastors will give an account to God. But this is not a taking away of responsibility from the people—it is a responsibility **for** the people.

Sadly, but predictably, some have taken the idea of submission to leaders in the church much too far. The "Shepherding Movement" was a clear example. Do you know about the Shepherding Movement? It was almost like a pyramid scheme for the church. It was like Amway meets Yahweh!

From "Got Questions":

*The Shepherding Movement is a controversial method of church leadership that grew out of the Charismatic movement in the 1970s. It began as “Christian Growth Ministries” in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida, reached its peak in the 1980s, but its impact has since lessened. The Shepherding Movement has received well-deserved criticism for its cult-like manipulation and intimidation tactics and its emphasis on the non-biblical idea of a “spiritual covering.”*

*The basic idea of the Shepherding Movement is one of submission to authority. The Shepherding Movement called for five leaders at the top of a global leadership pyramid. These men were responsible for one another’s spiritual health and keeping each other on track by “covenant relationships” and mutual accountability. Beneath each of those five “shepherds” were five other people, responsible for one another but submitted to the authority of their shepherd. And so on, down the line. Each of these groups of five was called a “submission,” and their devotion to their shepherds was absolute. No major decisions were made without first consulting with one’s shepherd—marriage and career choices included.*

*The Shepherding Movement set up an alternate structure for the church that does*

*not exist in Scripture. By creating a hierarchy of submission and authority, the five original “shepherds” promoted a legalistic paradigm in which the Holy Spirit was hindered and believers suffered spiritual abuse under authoritarian supervisors. ... The Shepherding Movement put roadblocks between Christ and His church, creating an unnecessary and harmful chain of command. People in the movement had to choose between the authority of their shepherd and the authority of the Great Shepherd.*

*Many of the original leaders of the Shepherding Movement have admitted that the movement was a mistake and have disassociated themselves with it. But how much damage was done?*

My question is, why would people go for that? It’s not just because a church leader said so. It’s because many seemed to welcome the abdication of personal responsibility. They were willing and even eager to hand over authority because someone else would be responsible and held accountable for their lives. They were willing to make that trade. That’s now how following Jesus works.

As a pastor, I am to teach people to submit to God, and follow after Christ by way of example. And there’s God-given authority to that end. So when speaking from the authority of God’s Word, pastors do have a right to tell us how

to live and walk after God. People may not like it, or they may go about it the wrong way, that happens, but ultimately, the task of shepherding is done knowing that one day, we will be held accountable for the care of souls entrusted to us. “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.” So then, let us choose joy.

Put it all together and what does Hebrews 13 say about the church? It suggests to me that the vitality of a congregation is not best measured by its programming or the pastor’s charisma and good looks, or the style of music or anything else. Rather the vitality of the congregation is best seen in how it loves, demonstrates hospitality, how it identifies and remembers those on the outside margins of society, how it upholds marriage, how it shares what it is given with contentment, and how it recalls and imitates the exemplary behavior of those who have gone before us—as we all follow the Leader.

In Jesus’ name, Amen.

**Head (what?)**

Why is showing love to one another a necessity of Christian living?

What benefits are there to be content with what you have?

What spiritual privilege and responsibility does God place on pastors and leaders?

**Heart (so what?)**

What personal sacrifices has God asked you to endure to follow Him?

Why may we be hesitant to trust, obey and/or imitate our leaders?

Do people think more or less of Jesus by the way you lead your life?

How does discipling someone usher in accountability?

**Hands (now what?)**

Where is God calling you to 'do good' in your home, work, and community?

How will you help your pastor or elder "keep watch over your soul"? (v. 17)

How will you be more mindful of others who are out of sight—strangers, fellow believers in prison, etc?