



Responsibility to Our Elders

(Read Hebrews 13:7-25)

Bill Goring

REMEMBER OUR ELDERS

(verse 7)

At the time this was written, some of the leaders of the church, due to persecution, were in prison. Others were in hiding, still ministering to the flock, knowing that if they were ever caught, it meant a death sentence. Some were already dead. In those days the leaders were the first victims of violence when it came upon the church. It was a dark, lonely, physically dangerous time to be an elder.

It is hard to suffer for the sake of Christ and to continue ministering to God's people in the face of difficulty. Such suffering is never easy, even when it is for such a noble cause. One of the things that helps immensely, during such a time, is to know that what you are doing counts for something. People need to be reminded of that from time to time.

Perhaps the greatest disservice we would ever do for our leaders is to forget the sacrifice they are making or have made for us and for the cause of Christ. By "forget," I mean taking them for granted as though their work means very little to us and is unimportant. All of us, small or great, have a basic need to know that our life is counting for something. This need is heightened as the work and sacrifice grows greater. Perhaps Satan's biggest victory over good leaders is won when he convinces them that their work is forgotten or insignificant. In other words, it counts for nothing.

On the night when President Lincoln was assassinated, some newspaper clippings were found in his pockets. One was written by British statesman, John Bright, stating how Lincoln was "one of the greatest men of all times." Today, that's common knowledge, but in 1865 millions shared quite a contrary opinion. His

critics were fierce and many. How sad it is to think of this great leader seeking solace and assurance from a few old newspaper clippings. Leadership can be a lonely place in the Presidency and in the church. We must remember those who lead us so that they never have to feel that their work is in vain.

IMITATE OUR ELDERS (Verse 7b)

John Maxwell said, "A leader is one who knows the way, goes the way, and shows the way." There is a great accolade in the second half of verse 7 for the elders of the first century. The hebrew writer's words, "*whose faith follow,*" presupposes they had a faith worth imitating.

There are two sides to the responsibility mentioned here: that of the leader and that of the follower. According to 1 Peter 5:3, the elders are to be "examples to the flock." Our responsibility is to follow that godly example. We are to imitate them as long as they imitate Christ.

OBEY AND SUBMIT TO OUR ELDERS (Verse 17a)

These are not the most popular words in our time. Most people don't want to obey anyone, anywhere, anytime. They don't want to submit to anyone either. They want to be a law unto themselves. Such anarchy never works, however. At some point someone has to lead, and someone has to follow. God has ordained elders to be leaders and members of the church to be followers. If we have problems with that, we have problems with God, because it is His way.

1 Timothy 5:17 says, "*Let the elders that rule well be counted worthy of double honor. . .*" According to God's Word, the elders are to rule the congregation. It is the duty of members to allow ourselves to be ruled. The church isn't a democracy where everyone has a vote. That idea is foreign to the New Testament. It wreaks havoc wherever it is adopted. The church is a theocracy with God as its head and trusted, proven, congregationally approved leaders carrying out His wishes.

The word "obey" means to assent, to listen, to follow. It means to yield to. The word "submit" means virtually the same. Wuest, in his *Word Studies In The Greek New Testament* points out that both of these words are in the continuous present tense. He translates verse 17 this way: "*Keep constantly obeying your rulers, and constantly be submitting to them: for they are constantly watching for your souls, knowing that they are to give account . . .*" Our obedience and submission isn't just an occasional thing. And notice—the elders are not instructed by God to make

anyone submit to them. The instruction is given to us as members. It is our obligation to submit. If we do not, God will hold us responsible.

But what if an elder makes a mistake or leads us in the wrong direction? First, let me say, that is the reason we are to be sure a man is qualified before he takes on this leadership role. Thus we minimize the possibility of wrong turns. Beyond that, though, recognizing that elders are human beings capable of error, and can be wrong, there needs to be a cooperative effort between leaders and members to keep the lines of communication open.

An elder should not be above considering the input of the congregation before making important decisions. As a matter of fact, he is foolish if he does not. James 3:17 says, that wisdom from above is *easy to be entreated*. When someone entreats an elder, they reason with him. He should listen to what they say before making a decision.

Another consideration along this line is the fact that in the New Testament there is always a plurality of elders. No one elder is a law unto himself. It is the eldership that makes decisions. Thus, there is a system of checks and balances. No elder is an authority unto himself, though his judgement should carry a lot of weight with us. It is within the **eldership** that authority lies.

Evidently, though there is a time to question an elder's rule, it is not to be done over trivial, petty matters. Individual accusations where there are no witnesses to testify to their validity are to be rejected.

God's way is that the congregation obey and submit to its elders, and that the elders not abuse their authority. Provision is made for extreme variances, but for the everyday matters, even when we disagree, we should submit to their leadership. With these ideas in operation, problems will be minimized.

GIVE JOY TO OUR ELDERS **(Verse 17b)**

If a congregation wants its elders to be fruitful and successful in their work, they need to create an environment in which they may serve with joy. Joy makes heavy work lighter. The opposite of joy is also mentioned in this passage. It says, ". . . *that they may do it with joy and not with grief.*" It is the nature of a good shepherd to be involved with those under his charge. An elder's life gets all tied up and tied in with the members of the church. If one of them stumbles or falls, or wanders away, it brings grief to him that is very real. One of the greatest ways to fill an elder with joy is to have a willing submissive spirit toward God and His Word. If an elder or

eldership has to come and correct you, your attitude should be one of appreciation for the man's concern for you rather than anger that he has admonished you.

There are other things you can do to fill the elders with joy and make their work lighter such as attending all the services. It's much easier to speak to 200 people at once than to have to go to 200 individual homes! It's frustrating to see brethren forsake the assembly and ultimately fall away. Elders cannot shepherd if we are unwilling, uncooperative sheep. If we are faithful, and commit ourselves to our families and homes and brethren in love, we will bring joy to our elders. There is a subtle warning in verse 17 to anyone who decides not to make the elders work joyful. It says, ". . . *for that is unprofitable for you.*" I don't know all the theological ramifications of that, but I do know if God says it, He backs it up!

WE MUST HONOR OUR ELDERS (1 Timothy 5:17-18)

The word honor indicates we should hold in high esteem. We should treat them with utmost respect. Paul even adds to that. He says "*double honor*" is to be given to those who work hard at preaching and teaching. Those words "*labor in the word and doctrine*" do not mean that an elder must be a great orator. He must, however, be a hard worker in the Word! And when he is, he is worthy of double honor! Actually there is strong inference to a paid eldership in verse 18.

CONCLUSION

William Arthur Ward once said, "Everyone has the power to make others happy." Obviously it follows that we also have the power to make others miserable. It is up to us. I challenge every Christian to be that one who makes others happy. Do your best to bring joy into the lives of others and work hard at being a good Christian. It is the best way for us to carry out our duty to our elders and ultimately our Lord Jesus Christ.

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