

"Those Who Rule Over You"

Today is an exciting day for our church. Today we will, Lord willing, ordain and install Mr. Jeff Hibbitts to the office of ruling elder. And then we will also receive Madeleine Antonio as the newest member of our church. Both of these things represent answers to prayer. And so we should be excited as we see God at work in our church. God is answering our prayers. He is raising up leaders in our midst, and bringing new saints to us to join us in proclaiming Christ to the world.

And on this important day we've heard the reading of God's word from this chapter in Hebrews. I think this is a very fitting passage for us today. This passage speaks to elders as rulers in the church. And it speaks to members and their relationship with the leaders of the church. And so this passage speaks of both eldership and membership. Because of this, I think this passage will serve to give a fitting charge to all of us today.

Now this passage explicitly speaks about the leadership of the church in verse 7 and in verse 17. In both of those verses the author writes to the church concerning "those who rule over you." Of course, today we are ordaining and installing a ruling elder. And so this is imminently pertinent for us. Verses 7 and 17 very specifically deal with a Christian's relationship with the elders of the church. In light of today's events, those are the two verses that I'd like us to primarily consider this morning. I'd like us to see what this passage has to say about the role of the ruling elder in the church.

But rest of the passage in between those two verses addresses a different subject. In verses 8-16, the author warns about strange teachings. These verses don't mention anything about the rulers in the church. And so at first glance verses 8-16 might seem completely unrelated. They might seem to be a tangent by the author. But with a little further reflection, I think you'll see how verses 8-16 are a very fitting complement to verses 7 and 17. So this morning, I'd like to first look at the middle section of this passage. I'd like to look at verses 8-16 first. Then I'll have us return to verses 7 and 17 and think more specifically about the Christian's relationship to the elders of the church.

The main warning of verses 8-16 is found in verse 9. Look with me there. The author warns the church to no be carried away with "various and strange doctrines." The contrast to the strange doctrines is in verse 8. Verse 8 says that Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever. The church that the author writes to has been already taught Christ. Christ had been proclaimed there. They had received the gospel of salvation through his blood. But Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever. That means that any new teachings that come along that teach a *different* Christ, are, simply put, wrong. They are heresy. The church must reject any different teachings about Christ, because Christ hasn't and won't change. He's the same yesterday, today, and forever.

Scholars have speculated a lot about the strange doctrines that are referred to here in verse 9. Some think that the author has a very wide scope in mind, not just one specific heretical teaching, but anything in general that might try to lead the people away from Christ. Others think that there is a more specific heretical teaching in view here. We don't know for sure, and certainly we should be warned against either. But what does this passage tell us about the strange teachings? What specifically does the author warn about?

Well, the author clearly goes on to contrast the new covenant in Christ against the old covenant still practiced by the Jews. Implied here is that there are people who have been calling the Christians of that church to return to the cultic practices of the Jews. We know at that time there were people known as Judaizers, people who tried to get Christians to follow all the cultic practices of the Jews. So it would seem that the author has at least this group in mind. And so the author goes on to show how these specific old covenant practices no longer have validity under the new covenant. The author shows how these things in the old covenant were merely foreshadowing the coming of Christ. They looked forward to something better. And now that the better had come, the old types and shadows were obsolete.

For example, in verse 9-12 the author compares the Old Testament sacrifices with the one sacrifice of Jesus Christ. He speaks of the priests who eat the food from the sacrifices. But what does verse 9 say about such food? It does not profit those who have been occupied with them. Instead verse 9 says we need our hearts to be established by grace, not foods.

You see in the old covenant there were sacrifices for sin. The author of Hebrews has already pointed out in this letter how Christ is the better, ultimate, sacrifice. He's what all the sacrifices for sin in the Old Testament pointed to. Now that the one, final, sacrifice for sin has come in Jesus, there is no need for another. And so the many sacrifices of the old covenant are obsolete. That was part of what had been previously proclaimed to them as part of the gospel. There is no benefit in going back to them. Actually there is danger in going back to them. We'd miss the significance of the finished work of Christ.

Another example the author gives is in verse 14. He says that we as Christians have no continuing city. He's referring to Jerusalem where the sacrifices he was just describing took place. Under the old covenant, the physical city of Jerusalem had a lot of significance. It was the capital of the nation of Israel, the chief city in the Promised Land. And it was where the temple was located. That was where God's special presence dwelt among his people. That's where the priests ministered. But the author has already said us in this letter that Jerusalem and the Promised Land also looked forward to something better. It was also only a type and a shadow of something better to come. In Hebrews chapter 11, he made the point that even Abraham recognized this and so he lived in tents, even while being physically in the Promised Land. In chapter 12, verse 22, the author tells us, "But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem." And that's what he says again in verse 14 of our passage. As Christians, we don't look for an earthly city anymore as our holy place. We don't have a holy city. The Jerusalem on this earth has no more significance for us. We look forward to a city to come. That same city to come is referred to as the New Jerusalem in the book of Revelation. In other words, just as the sacrifices in the old covenant looked forward to the sacrifice of Christ, even the inheritance of the old covenant looked forward to something better. The inheritance of the earthly Jerusalem looked forward to a heavenly inheritance. One where God will dwell with his people forever.

You see, the ceremonial things in the old covenant that looked forward to something better, had found their fulfillment with Christ. When Christ came, he brought the substance of these types and shadows, and so the former things became obsolete. These things in the old covenant weren't wrong. They had just served their purpose. It's like a high chair for a child. Nothing wrong with a high chair, but eventually the child grows up and no longer has need of it. That's a simple example to tell us that the old covenant served its purpose. And we must recognize

those aspects of that old covenant that have found fulfillment in Christ, and are therefore now obsolete.

Of course the author here is not just warning about strange doctrine. He's also concerned about our actions. You see, our actions flow out of our doctrine. Our theology will affect how we live. What we think informs what we do. They go hand in hand. And so verse 15-16 talks about our actions in light of the warning. After warning us to keep from strange teachings, such as those teachings that would have us return to the old sacrifices, the author then tells us what sort of sacrifices we should be offering. We should give of ourselves as a sacrifice. Verse 15. We should give a sacrifice of praise. We should give thanks. Verse 16. We should do good. Praise, thanks, and godliness. That's the sort of sacrifices God wants Christians to be doing. Of course what this points out is that our sacrifices are no longer to atone for sins. That sacrifice already happened with Christ. But because of that, we offer our whole lives back to God in gratitude.

And so our actions and our thinking go together. Our doctrine and our living go hand in hand. The author warns these Christians and us of this important truth. That's what verses 8-16 are about. We are warned that if anyone brings us a different Christ and a different faith than that which was once for all delivered to the saints, we must not accept it. Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever. We must hold fast to the consistent message of faith in Christ and the actions that go along with that faith.

And so how then do verses 8-16 relate to verses 7 and 17? What does this warning against strange teachings have to do with how we as Christians relate to the leaders God has given us? Well I hope you are already beginning to see the connection. But let me flush it out for you. Let me start by telling you that the structure we see in this passage is a very common thing done in Hebrew and Greek. It's not that verse 7 is interrupted with some side tangent and then the author get's back on track in verse 17. No this is a common literary structural device. They didn't have paragraphs back then and so you could use something called an *inclusio* to set apart an idea. An *inclusio* is where you bracket content with some repeated words or concepts. It's like two book ends. You've got books with the same book ends at each end. That's what we have in this passage. Verse 7 and 17 are repeated parallel ideas. They both refer to those "who rule over you." They are like the book ends. They tie together the middle verses.

Well how do they tie them together? Well very wonderfully actually. Look first at verse 7. Verse 7 seems to refer to different leaders than those in verse 17. Verse 7 begins with the command, "Remember." "Remember those who rule over you, who have", past tense, "spoken the word of God to you." The leaders referred to in verse 7 are past leaders. For the Christians that this letter was originally written to, it might have referred to all the past elders and apostles that helped establish the church. It referred to their forefathers of the faith. The church was supposed to look back and remember these former leaders. But verse 17 refers to the current leaders. The ones who are actively watching over their souls at that time. To those leaders the charge is not to remember them, but to currently obey and submit to them.

So are you beginning to see the relationship of these book ends to the rest of the passage? The author was warning the church against new strange teachings. They shouldn't follow after these new teachings. They shouldn't be lead astray by them. What were they supposed to do instead? They were to follow their God-given leaders. They were to remember their leaders of old who preached Christ. And they were to follow their current leaders who preached Christ. Remember verse 8 - that's a crucial connecting verse. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and

forever. The former leaders proclaimed the one true Christ. The current leaders proclaim the one true Christ. The future leaders must do the same. Any new teachings inconsistent with this consistent testimony must be rejected. You see, that is one of main roles of the elders of the church. They are to protect the flock against strange teachings. They are to make sure that the same Christ is proclaimed and the same faith is lived out.

Just look at the contrasts in this passage. Verse 9 warned about strange doctrines. Verse 7 tells us that the former leaders spoke the word of God. They gave the foundation of faith to these Christians. Implied in verse 8: they preached the one Christ. They gave the right doctrine. That is the job of all future rulers in the church. They are to speak the word of God. Not strange teachings. The word of God.

Notice another contrast. Verse 9 warns against being carried away by these strange teachings. But in verse 17 the rulers are said to watch out for the souls of those in the church. Of course that doesn't mean individual Christians aren't supposed to be also watching out for their souls themselves. That was last week's sermon. Jesus calls us to watch and pray. But isn't this good news. Not only does Jesus call us to watch and pray, but he also establishes leaders in the church to watch over us as well. It's nice to know that someone is looking out for you, isn't it? When you know that your neighbors in your community are looking out for each other, that's a nice feeling isn't it? It's especially good news to know that God puts ordained leaders to look out for the flock. To look out for people's souls. The elders in the church are like night watchmen. They are on guard against anyone who would lead the church astray. They are to be careful to make sure that no one brings a different Christ to the church. They do this as men who are to give account. God will call his leaders to give an account for how they have guarded the flock. That means that they must take their job seriously.

But the role of the elders in the church is not only in teaching the right doctrine. It's not only about keeping bad teaching out of the church. Their job is also related to godly living. Specifically, they are to live out the faith that they are teaching. They need to practice what they preach. You see the warning in verses 8-16 touched not only on doctrine, but also on living. It ended with a call to offer the right sorts of sacrifices: praise, thanksgiving, and good deeds. That's part of the danger of bad teaching, is it leads to bad living. But in contrast to that, the church is told in verse 7 to observe the conduct of the former leaders. The members of the church are to study carefully the complete lives of the founding fathers of the faith. The members are told in verse 7 to follow that faith. The idea in the Greek is very clear. We are to study the conduct of these leaders and then mimic them or imitate them. But interestingly, the text doesn't say imitate their actions, it says to imitate their faith. "Whose faith follow," as the NKJV says. This doesn't mean that we're not supposed to model their actions. But I think it emphasizes the word "faith" here, because our actions flow from our faith. That's why verse 7 connects the conduct of the rulers with their faith. That's why the very next verse talks about Christ being the same. Their faith was in Christ. It affected their conduct. We must imitate their faith, and that will in turn affect our conduct.

This is all part of the role of the elders. Their leadership in the church is both doctrinal and practical. They are to hold fast to the consistent message of the gospel. And they are to hold fast in living it out. When we ordain a ruling elder or teaching elder in the church, that's where their authority comes from. They are being divinely authorized to a mission. If they depart from this mission, they depart from that authority. If they stay fast to this mission, then they are to be obeyed and honored as those who come in the name of Christ.

In other words, if I as a teaching elder, or Marlin or Jeff as ruling elders, should ever bring a message of a different Christ, then we should not be listened to. At that point, the bounds of our authority have been overstepped. Lord willing, I am not preaching to you anything different than what Pastor Miller has preached. And Lord willing Pastor Miller didn't preach anything different than the founding pastor of this church, Rev. Robert Graham taught. And Lord willing that Rev. Graham taught the same Christ that all the previous Christian ministers taught. Now certainly we know that good men have some disagreements on the minors of the faith. But the core of the gospel must be maintained. We can't change who Christ is. We can't come up with a new Christ. We must be willing to draw the lines for the sake of the gospel. It's what this passage tells us that the elders of the church *must* do. We must seek to protect the flock by keeping pure the message of Christ who is the same yesterday, today, and forever. We must look to preserve the consistent message of Christ that has been passed down to us once for all from the saints.

In the same way, the ordained leaders of the church must live out the faith. And we must shepherd the church members to do so as well. This is all a part of the role of the elders in the church.

I'd like to close out this message with some specific exhortation to the ordained leaders of this church, and then to the members of this church. First to the ordained leaders. This exhortation applies especially to the elders, but also to the deacons. There's a lot in this passage that charges us with some great responsibilities. We've already talked about that. But I'd like to appeal to you concerning two things. Your attitude and your actions.

First your attitude. Verse 17 tells us that we must serve with joy and not with grief. It says that otherwise we don't profit the people. It's easy to find ourselves serving with the wrong attitude, isn't it? We can think of all sorts of reasons why our bad attitudes are justified. Usually it's because it's tough working with people. And maybe we'd be right in some sense. But ultimately we serve Christ, not man. And yet Christ is the one who served man, didn't he? He served sinful man by going to the cross. Christ died on the cross to save rebellious wayward men. It's those Christians who've been saved by Jesus that Jesus has entrusted to our care. We ourselves as ordained officers are no different. We too have been saved by the free gift of God. If that's the case, how can we not follow our Lord by genuinely loving the people he's put in our care? Pray that you would have such love. That your attitude would be shaped by Jesus to truly have compassion on every member in our church and on all who walk through that door.

Second, your actions. Verse 7 says that the members of the church should look back on the completed lives of the former leaders. Their conduct is to be studied and their faith is to be followed. If people are going to observe our living carefully, and they will, we need to live out our faith. We need to live so as to be remembered for our faith. And the reality is that people will remember our faith through your godly living. And so pray that God would work godliness in your lives.

Now I'd like to direct some exhortation specifically to the members of this church. This passage is full of commands specifically to the members of the church. Remember. Consider. Follow. Obey. Be submissive. This passage calls us to have a high honor and regard for the leaders God has ordained in his churches. I would urge us all to be living this out. People don't like to think of the church having authority anymore. Many people nowadays want a watered down church. They've seen

too many abuses with the organized church. They've seen leaders abuse their position. That's certainly true. That should break our hearts. But that doesn't mean that we should throw the baby out with the bath water. Authority in the ordained leaders of the church is not a man-made thing. It's a biblical thing. It's a biblical command to have leaders in the church with authority. It's a biblical command that the members submit to their leadership (to the degree that it is faithful to God's Word). We might not like to think about that. Parents might be quick to point out that the Bible says children need to obey them. Husbands might be quick to point to the passages in the Bible of how wives are called to submit to their husbands. To the degree those offices of authority are properly administered, then they are a very good thing. But often the same people don't want to think about the leaders of the church as something they are called to submit to. But this too is a biblical command. As much as God calls us to things like being baptized, he calls us to be in submission to the elders of the church. As much as it is a sin if you are not baptized, it's a sin to not be in submission to the leaders in Christ's church. That doesn't mean that you aren't a Christian. You could be a Christian without being baptized, but that doesn't mean it's the right thing to do. Or the beneficial thing for you to do. The same is true with being in submission to the leaders of the church.

God has given the church elders and deacons as the official leaders of the church. When they serve in the capacity they have been authorized to do, not only is it a blessing and privilege to the members of the church, but it's also an obligation. But this is a good thing. In a day and age where authority is abused, we have to be careful here. But when authority is properly exercised, it is such a good thing. How frustrating it can be to have ungodly leaders. How refreshing it is when you have godly ones. Pray for your leaders. Encourage them. Support them.

Think about verse 17. I told the officers just a moment ago that we have to watch our attitudes as we serve. But the command in verse 17 is actually most specifically directed to the members as a whole. You see the members in a church will have an effect on the attitudes of your leaders. Think about parenting. If your children find every possible way to subvert your leadership, it can be tiring and frustrating. Verse 17 reminds us that this can be the case for the leaders in the church. You are called to submit to them in such a way so as to encourage their leadership. To give them joy in serving. That will be to everyone's benefit. And to the glory of Christ.

So let's all stand firm in Christ. As members, or as rulers in the church. And if you find yourself today in neither category, as someone on the outside looking in, I invite you today to join with Christ's church. To respond to the good news of Jesus Christ. That he died to save sinners, and he offers you to unite to him and his church through faith. If you are ever interested in becoming a member in Christ's church, please speak with me or one of our elders. And we'll be happy to share with you the message of Jesus Christ, who is the same yesterday, today, and forever. Amen.

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