

# LET THEM LEAD WITH JOY

A Call to Encourage Your Pastors





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*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.*

*Hebrews 13v17*

This verse isn't about blind obedience. It's about a joyful church family cooperating in a shared mission. One where leaders serve faithfully and members respond in love, making their work a joy and not a burden.

This booklet explores:

- Ways we may unknowingly discourage our pastors
- Practical ways to be a source of joy
- Common misuses of Hebrews 13:17
- What biblical submission looks like

# 1. When Leading is Done with Groaning

*“Let them do this...not with groaning.”*

Even faithful pastors can feel worn down by certain behaviours in the church. Here are some common unintentional (or intentional) discouragements which make their role more of a grief or burden.

- **Persistent Criticism Without Encouragement**

Pastors, like the rest of us, are not perfect. They will make mistakes. They will get it wrong. It's not wrong to talk to a pastor about something you disagreed with him about in their sermon, or in a decision the leadership team has made. However, if you never affirm or encourage your pastor in his faithful efforts, you will be a source of discouragement in their life. A critical spirit wears them down and saps their joy.

- **Lack of Spiritual Growth or Engagement**

Pastors invest deeply in the spiritual lives of others. They labour for your growth. Disinterest in growing, not applying the Word, skipping gatherings and community life makes their work feel futile. People remaining stagnant and apathetic in their growth and involvement is demoralising.

- **Gossip and Division**

Scripture is very clear on the damage caused by gossip and sowing discord. Talking behind the pastor's back, stirring up conflict within the church family, creating factions. These all break the trust and unity that enables a church to flourish. It is always painful to be talked about. It is always stressful to have to deal with division and factions.

- **Unrealistic Expectations**

Expecting a pastor to be always available, never make mistakes, and be perfect in preaching, counselling, and administration is an impossible standard. No one can meet these demands. It doesn't allow room for grace. It leads to burnout.

- **Lack of Support or Initiative**

Pastors are not called to do all the ministry. They are called to equip the rest of the church to do ministry. Sadly, many churches leave most of the ministry burden to the pastors. They assume the pastors will take care of it all. The church, then, becomes a burden to a few, instead of a body made up of many mutually serving parts. Refusing to serve or help turns the church into a consumer environment instead of a family. One, or a few leaders, doing the work an entire body is called to do is exhausting.

- **Resistance to Biblical Teaching or Correction**

Pastors are called by God to teach, challenge, encourage and confront. They are called to do this in a way that pleased God, not man. When we tune out of hard truths, react defensively to correction, pick and choose scripture, it makes the work of pastoring emotionally and spiritually draining and risky.

- **Leaving Without Clarity**

Disappearing from the church without conversation or leaving after a single disagreement, feels like betrayal. Pastors often carry that quiet grief for a long time. Threatening to leave, over small altercations or minor disagreements puts pastors on edge and feeling uneasy.

- **Withholding Prayer**

Ministry is spiritual warfare. Pastors deeply need prayer covering to persevere. Neglecting prayer for your leaders is unloving and uncaring. If we want our pastors to labour with joy, we ought to pray for their joy in Christ.

## 2. When Leading is Done with Joy

*“Let them do this with joy...”*

Encouraging pastors doesn't require grand gestures. Just consistent, Spirit-filled faithfulness.

- **Pursue Spiritual Growth**

There's no greater joy for pastors than seeing the people God has entrusted them with walking in truth (3 John 1:4). It confirms their labour isn't in vain. Listen to the Word, apply it, ask questions, grow in Christlikeness.

- **Be Faithfully Present**

Presence means encouragement. Every seat filled with hunger for God and his Word encourages their soul. Showing up shows you care. Show up consistently.

- **Pray for Your Pastor Regularly**

Knowing people are regularly praying gives pastors real strength. Many say it's the single most powerful encouragement they receive. Commit to pray for their family, spiritual strength, sermon preparation, and wisdom.

- **Offer Specific Encouragement**

Sadly, Pastors far more often hear about what people *don't like* than what helped. Specific encouragement is fuel for their soul. Say what helped. Show appreciation.

- **Serve and Share the Load**

When the church acts like the body it is called to be, with everyone doing their part, it lifts the burden off the pastor's shoulders. Volunteer in a ministry, get involved with helping in practical areas. Help with discipling others.

- **Respond Well to Correction or Leadership**

Although God calls pastors to offer spiritual correction and confront certain issues, this is one of the hardest tasks in their calling. Many pastors are often anxious about this. Be teachable and humble as they faithfully obey God in this hard area.

- **Pursue Peace and Unity**

Unity frees pastors to focus on shepherding instead of conflict resolution. To build, not constantly mend. Refuse to gossip or hear gossip. Resolve conflict quickly. Promote harmony in the church.

- **Honor Their Humanity**

When people show compassion and realistic expectations, it creates a safe environment for longevity in ministry. Remember and recognise that they are only human. They have limits, families, emotions. They need rest, space and grace.

- **Support Their Family**

When a pastor's family is loved and thriving, the pastor can serve freely, with peace of mind and heart. Encourage the pastor's spouse, be kind to their children.

### 3. Misusing this Verse

Not every appeal to “obey and submit” is godly. Here’s how this verse can be twisted:

- **Authoritarian Leadership**

Biblical leadership is *servant-hearted*, not domineering (see 1 Peter 5:2–3). Leaders are called to *lead*, not *lord it over* people. Hebrews 13:17 is not a blank check for pastors to control people. Biblical leadership is humble, not heavy-handed. A pastor or leader cannot use this verse to demand unquestioning obedience and submission.

- **Silencing Legitimate Concerns or Questions**

Scripture calls us to test everything (1 Thess. 5:21), even what leaders teach (Acts 17:11). Biblical submission isn’t blind loyalty. Obey and submit doesn’t mean “Don’t think, don’t speak, and don’t question”. It is wrong to use this verse to say that Church members who raise concerns about unhealthy practices, spiritual abuse, or false teaching are being rebellious and not submissive.

- **Minimizing Spiritual Abuse**

Abuse flourishes in silence and false submission. True shepherds protect the flock, not themselves (John 10:11-13). It is wrong to use this verse to excuse manipulation, control or abusive behaviour.

- **Guilt-Tripping the Congregation**

God loves a cheerful giving and service (2 Cor. 9:7), not a guilty one. Shepherding should be done with integrity, not manipulation. Pastors cannot use this verse to shame people into serving and giving more

- **No Accountability**

Leadership without accountability is dangerous. Leaders are not above correction. Leaders cannot use this verse to leverage power and set themselves above accountability structures.



## 4. What Does Obey and Submit Mean

This verse calls for cooperative spiritual health, not authoritarian control. It's a high call for both pastors *and* people: for pastors to lead like Jesus, and for congregants to support them in a way that honours Christ.

This verse is about:

- Mutual respect and trust between leaders and members.
- A church culture that values joy, not fear.
- Humble leadership and willing followership under Christ.
- Spiritual maturity through community and shared responsibility.

Let's break down this verse a little more:

- **Obey**

Be persuaded by their teaching (not blind obedience). Entrust yourself to their care and leadership. Be willingly convinced by them. Joyfully yield to them. This is not a military-style command. It's not a command to do whatever the pastor says without question. Rather, it's about listening with openness and responding with trust. It's about being teachable and willing to follow faithful, biblical leadership.

- **Submit**

Yield in a cooperative spirit. This word implies voluntary, respectful deference, not enforced subjugation. It's a willingness to be led, not coerced compliance. It's about placing yourself into the care and guidance of pastors. It doesn't mean you must agree with or obey every command without discernment.

- **Watch**

Pastors aren't CEOs or kings. They are watchers of souls, and they are accountable to God. Their authority is limited to what Scripture speaks, for the building up of the body, in a way that embodies Jesus' humble leadership. The call to obey and submit, then, is a call to respect your leaders because they have a serious spiritual responsibility.

We are called, then, to submit to our leaders as they submit to Jesus. Submission is always filtered through Scripture. We are never called to submit to sin, false teaching, or spiritual abuse. We do not submit to something that violates God's word or our own conscience.

"Obey and submit" means trusting and supporting your spiritual leaders as they faithfully shepherd you according to God's Word, not blindly following them regardless of their character or teaching.

The goal of obeying and submitting is joyful partnership in the Gospel. The verse ends by saying that making pastoring a joy benefits the church: "...for that would be of no advantage to you." A joyful pastor often reflects a healthy, united, spiritually growing church. When you follow well, and they lead well, the whole church flourishes.

## 5. To the Groaning Pastor

Maybe you're reading this booklet as a leader who knows all too well what it means to groan under the weight of discouraging ministry.

Maybe you've preached faithfully, and it's met with apathy and criticism. Maybe you've poured your heart into people who disappeared without a word. Maybe you've laboured in prayer and preparation, and felt like nothing changed. Maybe you've courageously confronted sin, only to be resented. Maybe you've served sacrificially, and been misunderstood or maligned.

- **You're Not Carrying This Alone**

You may be a shepherd, but you're also a sheep. The Chief Shepherd sees you (1 Peter 5:4). He carries the weight of His church. He carries you.

- **Your Groaning Is Not Wasted**

The grief you feel isn't meaningless. Every sigh, every sleepless night, every sermon prepared is known by God. You may sow in sorrow now, but you will reap in joy.

- **Faithfulness Is Success**

You may not see all the fruit. Some seeds won't sprout in your lifetime. But if you've been faithful to the Word, to prayer, and to your people, you have not failed.

- **Don't Shoulder This Alone**

If you're discouraged, tell someone. Talk to your elders. Seek out a pastor friend or counsellor. You don't have to wear a cape. You're not a machine. You're a human being with a soul that needs tending too.

- **Remember Why You Were Called**

You're not in this for the applause of man. You're not in this to please people. You're in this because Jesus called you, and He will sustain you. God is not unjust so as to overlook your work and the love that you have shown for his name in serving the saints.

## **Prayer Examples**

### **A Prayer of Repentance (When You Realize You've Been a Discouragement)**

Father, I confess that I have not always honoured those You've placed in spiritual leadership over me. Sometimes with words, sometimes with silence, I've discouraged rather than built up. I've been quicker to critique than to encourage, quicker to demand than to serve. Forgive me, Lord. Forgive the gossip, the pride, the apathy I've allowed to take root. Help me to be a source of joy, not grief, to those who watch over my soul.

### **A Prayer for Your Pastor's Encouragement and Joy**

Lord, thank You for my pastor. Thank You for the hours no one sees, the burdens they carry, and the love they pour out for the good of Your people. Please refresh them today. Give them joy in their calling, clarity in their preaching, and peace in their soul. Shield them from discouragement, burnout, and bitterness. Let them see fruit, even small fruit, to remind them their labour is not in vain. Guard their family, strengthen their faith, and surround them with friends who care for *them* too. May my words, my prayers, and my presence be an encouragement to them.

### **A Prayer for the Discouraged Pastor (When Ministry Feels Like a Grief)**

Father, I am tired. Some days I wonder if any of this is making a difference. I try to lead with grace, but the criticism cuts deep. I pour out, but feel so empty. Lord, lift the weight I'm carrying. Help me to remember that You see every hidden act of love. Guard me from resentment. Guard me from despair. Guard me from pride. Let me rest in the truth that faithfulness is success, even when fruit feels far away. And remind me I am not alone. You walk with me.

### **A Prayer for the Rejoicing Pastor (When Ministry Is a Joy)**

Father, thank You for this season of joy. Thank You for a congregation that listens, responds, grows, and loves. Thank You for unity, for teachability, for shared burdens and answered prayers. Let me never take this for granted. Keep me humble in the fruitfulness, and grateful in the praise. May I shepherd with gentleness, wisdom, and Christlike love. And when hard seasons come again help me remember this joy, and know that You are faithful in both abundance and affliction.

## Questions for Reflection and Discussion

- **For Reflection**

In what ways might I have unknowingly discouraged my pastor(s)?

Am I praying regularly for my spiritual leaders?

Do I tend to respond with humility or defensiveness when corrected?

What one thing can I begin doing this week to be more of an encouragement?

- **For Discussion**

Why do you think pastors today often carry silent burdens?

What are some real, tangible ways we as a church can become more intentional about encouraging our pastors?

What would a “joyful partnership in the gospel” look like in our church?

Is there anyone we need to thank, encourage, or reconcile with as a result of what we've read and discussed?

- **Before you close this booklet**

Take five minutes to:

Write a short note of encouragement to your pastor(s).

Pray for them by name.

Ask God to show you where repentance or growth is needed.



