

Hebrews 13:7, 17-19

“Who Is Keeping Watch Over Your Soul?”

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Ordinary Time

Beloved, who is keeping watching over your soul? Is there someone who has that responsibility?

The Scriptures assume that none of us fundamentally watches over our own souls—but that responsibility is entrusted to someone else, someone set apart for that task.

In particular, the Scriptures teach that God has always, from the birth of the people of God at Sinai all the way through the New Testament period and up to the present day, given pastors to the church, and the fundamental calling of those pastors is to keep watch over souls, as those who will give an account to God.

This morning, our sermon text comes from Hebrews 13:7, 17-19.

And I'll just say by way of introduction that this is a fundamental passage for how I understand my own calling as a pastor, and I hope that, as we go through it this morning, you'll see it as blueprint for what pastors are for as well.

Listen now to God's holy and inerrant word - it's also printed on the back of your order of worship if you'd like to read along.

*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.*

*17 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.*

*18 Pray for us, for we are sure that we have a clear conscience, desiring to act honorably in all things. 19 I urge you the more earnestly to do this in order that I may be restored to you the sooner.*

Thus far the reading of God's word. It is absolutely true, and it is given to you because your Father in Heaven loves you.

*Blessed Lord, who caused all the holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant us so to hear this portion of your word, and to read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest these words, that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Savior Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.*

Our current age is a challenging time to be a pastor.

For example, in 2021, the religious polling group Barna reported that in the past year, 38% of American pastors had seriously considered leaving pastoral ministry in the previous year.

That is to say, well over a third of pastors, in 2021, gave serious consideration not just about leaving their current church, but to leaving behind pastor ministry entirely.

I think one of the primary challenges of the being called as a pastor in the current moment is that there is a lot of confusion about what pastors do and what pastors are for — including for pastors themselves.

Are pastors therapists? Or social workers? Or movement leaders? Vision-casters? CEOs of religious institutions? Inspirational speakers? Managers? Political activists? Spiritual gurus with compelling social media accounts?

In the midst of all this confusion, the apostle to the Hebrews has a few words to say as he moves toward the end of chapter 13.

In this short passage, the Apostle presents a compelling vision of the identity and calling of pastors —

First, he argues that pastors are those who declare the word of God to their flock.

Second, he argues that pastors are those whose lives are known by their flock, so that their faith might be imitated.

And third, he argues that pastors are those who keep watch over the souls of their flock — as those who will give an account to God for the souls under their care.

And, of course, the Apostle is not only speaking to pastors here, he's also speaking to laypeople.

Beloved, here the Scriptures are giving you a vision for what to look for in a faithful pastor — a faithful pastor is a man who declares to you the word of God, a faithful pastor is a man whose life is known to you, and whose faith is worthy of imitation, and finally a pastor is one who embraces the responsibility of watching over your soul.

Let's walk through these points one by one.

In verse 7, the Apostle begins by writing: *Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God.*

Here the Scriptures lay out a basic job description for pastors. Pastors, according to the Apostle, and according to the Scriptures as a whole, are those who are called to declare the Word of God to those under their care.

As Paul writes to Timothy and describes the pastoral calling in 1 Timothy: *“Devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching,”* and as he reiterates the same point in 2 Timothy: *“I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching.”*

As a pastor, I just want to say how grateful I am for the simplicity of this definition of a pastor’s work that the apostle gives here - that a pastor is one who speaks the Word of God to those under his care.

And I want you to know how grateful I am to serve a congregation who frees me to perform this simple but profound work.

Indeed, declaring the word of God is what I have committed myself to more or less entirely these past fourteen years since my ordination.

I speak God’s word to those in crisis or need in the many pastoral appointments I have each week. To be clear, when people come to meet with me in my study and sit on my couch, I very rarely solve their problems in any fundamental way.

But that’s not my job. My job is to speak God’s word into the situations they find themselves. And that’s what I seek to do.

As a pastor, I recite and pray and read God’s word on Wednesday and Friday mornings when we meet for morning prayer.

As a pastor, I read and discuss and teach God’s word in the Bible study I lead on Thursday mornings.

As a pastor, I teach the Scriptures in Sunday school. As a pastor, I meditate on God’s word and select various portions of it as I put together our worship services each week.

And of course, the culmination of my work as a pastor is when I declare God's word to the gathered assembly on Sunday mornings in the weekly sermon.

And all of this emphasis in my ministry on speaking and declaring God's word means that I am constantly at my desk in my study, wrestling with and studying the Scriptures — every week, I am in different portions of the Scriptures - Old Testament, Psalms, New Testament, Gospels - reading commentaries, thinking about how different passages fit together, considering the meaning of this text or that.

I want you to know, beloved, that I do not see myself as called to be an expert on anything other than the Scriptures.

And my studying and preaching and teaching of the Scriptures is a task I carry with the utmost solemnity and intention. Because I see it as the primary thing I am supposed to be doing with my time on your behalf.

And I have to say how grateful I am for this calling. Fourteen years ago, when I was ordained, I knew the Scriptures, yes — but coming out of seminary, I knew the Scriptures like the graduate student I was — pretty well, but still, in some way, at a distance.

Now, fourteen years later, I am starting to know them in a completely different way. I am beginning to know the Scriptures as a farmer knows his field, as a sailing captain knows the sea, even as a man knows his wife.

And I have to say that cannot imagine a finer way to spend my life than to grow as much as I possibly can in my knowledge of God's word, so that I might speak it as faithfully as I can to the people God gives me to pastor.

But in verse 7, the Apostle also gives more definition to the pastoral calling. He goes on to write: *“Consider the outcome of their [that is, your pastor's] way of life, and imitate their faith.”*

What the Apostle is saying here is that the moral character, holiness of life, and personal faith of a pastor is an essential part of the ministry that he is to provide for God's people.

Aside from being the person in the church who is charged, in a particular way, with declaring the word of God to the people of God, the pastor is also meant to be a living witness, in his manner of life, to the blessedness that is promised to those who set their hopes on God and persist in their faith in Jesus Christ his Son.

As Paul exhorts Timothy regarding the pastoral ministry he is called to: *"Set the believers an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity... Keep a close watch on yourself and the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers."*

About a decade ago, a fellow pastor said to me in a conversation, "Your congregation will want you to be lots of different things for them, and you will be tempted to play all kinds of roles. But what your people need, more than anything else, is for you to be a holy man."

And ever since then, that statement has both haunted me, and also given me a framework for how I consider the entirety of my life.

As a pastor, there is no part of my life that is truly private, that is my own, that does not belong, in some way, to the church. All of it is a part of my calling, all of it is related to my ministry.

How I spend my money matters. What I do with my free time. How I speak to my wife and children. How I conduct myself at parties. How quick I am to confess my sin and ask forgiveness.

How hard I work. How I respond to people who are unkind to me. How I drive. How I speak. How I practice hospitality. Whether I am gentle. All of these things are a fundamental part of my calling.

And of course, as I examine my life and compare it to the law of God or the example of our Lord Jesus that I read in the gospels, I find a million different ways that I fall short.

But I do believe, by God's grace and the persistent activity of the Holy Spirit, that I am slowly becoming a more wise and holy and mature man than I was five or ten years ago.

And I want you to know that my desire, above all things, is to be made just as holy as I can become in this life — even knowing that I will always fall far short of the standard that my Great Shepherd holds out for me.

But I also want you to know, beloved, that as you consider my role as your pastor, one of the things you should be considering very seriously is the outcome of my way of life, and the Apostle encourages you to imitate the faith in Jesus Christ that I hope you see me display before you.

This means that there is always, a deeply personal and even intimate relationship between a pastor and his congregation. Inevitably, there will be a resemblance between the spiritual maturity of a pastor and the spiritual maturity of his congregation.

Inevitably, the extent to which the fruit of the Spirit — love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control — characterize the life of the pastor will influence whether that same fruit of the Spirit is characteristic of the congregation.

So choose your pastors carefully. For it is an undeniable spiritual principle that who they are before God will deeply, over time, influence who you are before God.

It's also worth pointing out that inherent in this exhortation by the Apostle is the assumption that a congregation will know their pastor well enough and interact with him with enough frequency and intimacy to both judge and be influenced directly by the nature of his life among them.

What that means for large churches where members don't really know their pastor on anything beyond a superficial level is a question that I don't have time to comment on today, but it seems to me to very much worth considering for the church today.

In verse 17, the Apostle gives a final key component of the pastoral calling. He writes: *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.*

This, in the end, is what it means to be a pastor — to keep watch over the souls of the men, women and children who have been entrusted to you, knowing that, on the last day, the Lord Jesus himself will require you to give an account of your pastoral care for them.

And, on the flip side, beloved, this is what it means for you to have a pastor (and why you need a pastor!) — your pastor is the person whom God has entrusted in a specific way with the task of watching over your soul — and God himself will hold your pastor accountable for how he performs that work.

One on level, this verse is of course somewhat terrifying for me...in what I think is an appropriate way.

To be clear, I believe that what this verse teaches is literally true.

On the last day, when our Lord Jesus returns in glory and raises the dead, all of humanity will stand before him to give an account for their lives.

And as a pastor, I will be required to give a particular account for how I kept watch over the souls under my care. And that is a fearful and solemn thing for me to consider.

But this passage is not only somewhat terrifying. It is also remarkably clarifying and even freeing for me as a pastor.

Because, beloved, what this passage means is that it is not my job to help you solve all the problems you have or you might imagine you have in your lives.

It's not my calling, in any fundamental way, to unlock for you the secrets of a happy marriage, or to help you manage your anxiety better or to give you some parenting skills or to solve your frustrations at work, or to help you manage your money more wisely.

It is not even my calling to help you become happy or fulfilled, at least as far as the ways in which the words happy and fulfilled are typically used.

No, my calling, above all things, as your pastor, is to keep watch over your soul.

And I cannot tell you how many times I have sat in my study with someone under my pastoral care and said to them in so many words — what I need for you to do, friend, for just one second, is to stop thinking primarily about your happiness or your desires or your frustrations or your complaints and just consider for a moment what this or that decision or continuing in this or that kind of behavior means for your *soul*.

Because that's my calling, as a pastor.

To help people remember that they actually *possess* eternal souls, and that what matters more than anything in their lives is not actually any particular experience or achievement but whether their souls are kept safe for God.

What I mean, beloved, is that I understand my primary calling as a pastor to be to ensure the people under my care are as prepared as they can be for the day of the Lord, that blessed day when our Lord Jesus will come again in glory to judge both the living and the dead.

And it is in this context that Christian people are called to obey and submit to their pastor. To listen carefully and heed wisely the counsel and words of their pastor when he is exercising care for their souls - particularly when he is warning them against something they must not do, or exhorting them to embrace something they must do.

Because this is what pastors do. They keep watch over souls. They prepare men and women and children for judgment day.

I love the way that the Apostle concludes this passage. As a pastor, he says to this congregation some of the most intimate words I can imagine.

In verses 18-19, he says: *Pray for us, for we are sure that we have a clear conscience, desiring to act honorably in all things. I urge you the more earnestly to do this in order that I may be restored to you the sooner.*

Pray for us, he says. Do this earnestly, he says.

And beloved, besides making sure that my family is well provided for, besides obeying and submitting to me when I speak the word of God to you out of concern for your soul, this is how you can love me best.

You can pray for me.

I am not, in any way, sufficient for this almost absurdly difficult and high calling of serving as your pastor.

And so I depend on you to intercede with God on my behalf.

Pray for me at your dinner tables, in your family devotions, in your morning and evening prayers.

Pray that God would protect me from the evil one. Pray that God would keep me healthy so I can serve you. Pray that God would protect my marriage, that he would watch over my wife and children.

Pray most of all that the Lord Jesus would strengthen and lead me to spend and be spent for the sake of the Gospel, and that he would make me a holy and loving servant and faithful shepherd of the flock for whom he has shed his precious blood.

And in this way, God, in his kindness, will make us holy together.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen!