

Hebrews 13:7-8, 17-21

Throughout Holy Scripture, the LORD uses many pictures to describe the relationship between God's leaders and God's people. Pastors are called shepherds and are encouraged to take care of God's flock. Sometimes Saint Paul called himself the spiritual father of God's children who were entrusted to him. But one picture you might not think of very often is the picture of a watchman on the walls of a city. Look at the example of the prophet Ezekiel. He was called by God to be a watchman over the people of Israel. He was called to proclaim God's Word to the residents of Jerusalem. It was a hard message to preach, because it was a message of destruction. Ezekiel was ordered by God to sound the trumpet and warn the people of impending danger. "God is bringing judgment on sin, people will die by the sword, and the Babylonians will destroy the city of Jerusalem." Woe to Ezekiel and woe to any other watchman who does not keep watch and sound the trumpet call of God's Word! Today the writer of Hebrews describes again leaders who keep watch over God's people. But the Word before us focuses especially on how God's people will respond to the messengers God sends them. **"God's watchmen are on the walls!"** and they have a message: **1. Consider your unchanging Savior and 2. Imitate God-pleasing behavior.**

1. Remember to consider your unchanging Savior

Change is something we have become accustomed to in our 21st century world. Our president was elected last year on a platform of change. Our economy is going through one of the greatest changes in American history. Gone are the days when someone could work the same job for 40 years from 9 to 5, Monday to Friday. Technology changes every day, and even icons like the I-Pod may be ancient relics in the near future. Change was something the readers of this letter of Hebrews also knew.

The original recipients of this letter were Jewish converts to Christianity. In the Old Testament, God had structured everything for his people. They worshipped on Saturday; they made sacrifices for their sins in the morning and in the evening. Every day in the temple they heard the squeal of animal sacrifices and learned that without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness. These regulations were the ceremonial laws God had given to Moses and the Israelites.

But Jesus Christ was the fulfillment of the Old Testament ceremonial laws. How, then, should the Jewish Christians regard the rules received from Moses? God's people were now set free from these regulations. The New Testament has no ceremonial laws about what day we should worship on or what the structure of our worship should look like. All this meant a great deal of change for the average Jewish Christian. When you go from rigid structure to gospel freedom, you can imagine the uncertainty and anxiety they experienced. Everything they knew was so comfortable and so familiar. But now it had changed. Their leaders had been instrumental in helping them come to know Jesus and what it meant to be free from the Old Testament laws. But the leaders had passed away. These watchmen had guided God's people. But like all human beings, they died. What were the Hebrews going to do now? How would they survive without their trusted and experienced leaders? First German has seen many pastors and leaders come and go. How are we going to survive the changes?

The writer tells us, "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever." The God of the Old Testament and the God of the New Testament are the same God. The way to salvation for an Old Testament person was the exact same as the way for God's New Testament people. Everyone who believes in Jesus will be saved. **Remember to consider your unchanging Savior!** Who he is and what he has done will never change. The outward worship life of the Hebrew Christians may have changed, but Jesus' sacrifice remains the same. He continues to forgive sins and welcome believers into heaven, just as he has always done. The leaders of a church may change, but the God of peace never needs to be replaced. He is the same "God of peace who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus".

You may ask yourself, what is "the blood of the eternal covenant" and why is it important? The blood is the blood of our Lord Jesus. His blood accomplished what all the sacrifices in the Temple could not—the forgiveness of sins. The people had been consumed with the laws of Moses and the Mosaic covenant. But there is an eternal covenant which God made with his people. It's the unchanging covenant God has made with you and me. The covenant is completely one-sided, a one-sided contract between God and mankind. God has done all the work through the blood of Jesus. This is the covenant which all leaders, all God's watchmen on the walls are compelled to teach God's people. You and I don't have to wonder what God's watchmen will speak. God's watchmen are on the walls proclaiming the unchanging Savior!

2. Imitate God-pleasing behavior.

When you and I trust what the God of peace has done for us, there is a change in our lives too. There is a change in the way we view ourselves and those around us, including our leaders. Here in Hebrews 13, we have a unique section of Scripture. It is one of the few places where God defines how we are to treat our leaders. We have an opportunity to give thanks to God for an unchanging Savior. What will we do to thank God? **By imitating God-pleasing behavior!**

The writer of Hebrews describes the way God wants us to live with regard to the *past*. He calls on us, “Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you.” God doesn’t want us to forget the past and live as if we are the only people to whom the word of the Lord has been revealed. Throughout the history of this church, God has blessed us with leaders who spoke God’s Word. But how do we remember them? Does God want us to simply reminisce about the good old days and constantly point out the differences we see today? Is that how we will remember our leaders? No! God wants us to “consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith”. The outcome of their way of life is not found in any outward success. We find the outcome in heaven. Consider how every leader and pastor who has believed in Jesus has entered the eternal rest. Imitate the life of faith they lived. Their connection to Jesus meant they were filled with the same compassion Jesus showed. God commands us to reach out in love and serve.

The Roman Catholic Church has many saints whom they venerate and remember. There are ancient saints, like St. Joseph, Jesus’ earthly father, and recent ones, like Mother Theresa. Sometimes you might hear someone say, “You Lutherans don’t honor the saints like we do!” But as God’s Word tells us here, the real way to remember leaders who have gone before us is to imitate their faith. The highest form of imitation is to believe God’s Word as they did. Then, in gratitude for God’s love to us, we follow the example of love others have given. We find ourselves in God’s Word and seek to serve people. These are the ways to remember the saints.

Our text also gives us God’s commands regarding leaders who are over us today. “Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account.” Here we have two commands which are closely connected—obeying and submitting. These aren’t exactly popular commands when it comes to our old sinful nature. Each one of us doesn’t want to obey or submit to another person. We want to follow the law of self. Self-motivated, self-supporting, self-help, do-it-yourself—we want to focus on self preservation. But Christ has set us free from that slavery to self. Because of the blood he shed we are now enslaved to him. We are set free *to obey*. We are set free *to submit*. We are set free to be slaves of the unchanging Savior.

But what does this obeying and submitting look like in your life and in the life of this congregation? Leaders have been commanded only to speak God’s Word in the church. To obey and submit means we lovingly acknowledge that what the pastor or teacher is saying to us is God’s Word. This is easy to do when we agree with someone. It’s a whole lot harder when we don’t. Consider what once happened to the captain of a ship who looked into the dark night and saw faint lights in the distance. Immediately he told his signalman to send this message: “Alter your course ten degrees south.” A response came: “Alter your course ten degrees north.” The captain was angered; his command had been ignored! He sent a second message: “Alter your course ten degrees south, this is the Captain!” Again a response came back: “Alter your course ten degrees north, this is seaman third class Smith!” Immediately the captain sent a third angry message: “Alter your course ten degrees south, this is a battleship!” Then a third reply came: “Alter your course ten degrees north, this is a lighthouse.”

When a leader preaches and teaches God’s Word, then we have the obligation to obey them and hear the voice of Jesus. Our Savior said to his apostles, “He who listens to you listens to me; he who rejects you rejects me” (Luke 10:16). God doesn’t give us the option to disobey his Word, God has forbidden it. There is no debate when it comes to showing compassion for one another, God has commanded it. But believing the good news is also not optional. When a pastor assures you of forgiveness, we believe him. Even though our sinful flesh might say, “You wouldn’t say I’m forgiven if you knew what I’ve done!” Forgiveness is free and it is paid for by Jesus. Watchmen announce the good news to you and we obey and submit to the message. The writer says that ignoring your leaders “would be of no advantage to you”. Talk about understatement! If what someone speaks to you is God’s Word, then disobeying the word puts your soul in jeopardy! That’s a great challenge for shepherds and sheep to face.

The trouble comes when a leader is preaching something other than God’s Word. What shall we do when leaders speak their opinions or, God forbid, say something contrary to God’s Word? What if it sounds convincing and they teach powerfully and persuasively? Must we obey them? Winston Churchill used to write notes on his speeches. One recurring note you find written is this: “Argument weak. Yell louder.” No matter how much a leader shouts, it won’t change their human word into God’s Word. Jesus tells us to test the words of leaders and compare them with God’s Word. “We must obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29). Only his word belongs in his church!

Finally, **imitate God-pleasing behavior** by praying for you leaders. Leaders are called to serve and preach the truth, but they can’t do it alone. Prayer is one powerful way to help your leaders. “The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective” (James 5:16). Send your prayers to the throne of our heavenly Father. Pray for us pastors, teachers and leaders, as we also pray for you. AMEN.