

*A minister friend rang me probably about 6 months ago, and as we talked, he asked how things were going: What's good, and what's tough at the moment... And I shared with him, a bit of the tough stuff we were going through at the time, and about an unexpected fractured relationship,, And he understood, in a way that only a leader of a church can (when they've gone through something similar).*

*He said, "Michael, you know how some Ministers & Pastors talk about their ministry as if it's all joy & fun times... , well, for me and my wife, ministry has been the most painful; painful experience...*

*He knew he was called to ministry, and so he persisted. (And in my opinion, he is a very good minister),,, but the toll on him and on his family (and especially his wife) has been immense...*

*Always feeling like they're living in a fishbowl – everybody's judging them.*

*The cost of always living up to everybody's expectations, and never achieving it...*

And the nature of ministry itself, is: if something is going good, God (rightly) gets the credit. But when it goes bad, "That stinkin' minister, he's mucked it up again..."

And the "enormous pastoral cost", is what they felt: They would help people through the toughest, darkest times that they experience, and they would put so much time & effort & love into them, but then, for apparently no reason, they'd get a

set against them; and desert them; and maybe run them down...

You see, sometimes, a person takes offence at a minister – offence at something that they’ve said or done (or because they’ve held them accountable) and from that moment on, everything that minister does, gets viewed through a distorted lens – a lens of condemnation – a lens that will justify their own judgment of the minister...

I’ve seen it happen to others. It’s happened to me: Where a person takes a disliking to their pastor, and it’s like they go on a quest to find the evil in them... And that is so, so painful.

And sometimes, the minister is expected to be a whipping boy... They continue to extend all grace, never complaining, always hoping and praying for reconciliation, but it never comes... For them, there’s no grace for them to receive. Only condemnation, and rejection from a hard and bitter heart...

Not sounding very cheery, is it?

I’ve known today’s topic has been coming up, for months. And I’ve been grappling with how to approach it.

You see, in **some** church cultures, like the Pentecostal churches, and maybe even in the more traditional churches, the church leaders (Ministers; Pastors; Priests; Bishops; Arch Bishops; Deacons; Popes; Cardinals; Primates; elders) .... In some churches, their culture places their leaders up on a pedestal, as a person who is **never** to be questioned –

they are always right, and if you ever disagree with them, then you're going against the Lord's anointed...

I don't believe that's what the Scripture teaches... But I must be true to the word that we have read today.

How do I do that? How do I clearly and convincingly put forward the Biblical principal of respecting and submitting to leaders (and **obeying** leaders), without it all coming across as being all very "self-serving" (because I happen to be a church leader)?

And, how do I make it "real", without trying to hide some of the most painful experiences that I've had to endure???

So, here's what we're going to do.

I **have not** written this message for you. I have written this message for another church entirely. It's a church who don't have a current minister, but they're about to get one. And so, it's a chance for them to reflect on their past, as they excitedly prepare for their new leader.

So, I've prepared this message for a church in a small country town called, Cow-Pat Meadows, and you get to listen in.

V<sup>17</sup> 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.

Obedience, hey.... Obedience **and** submission. They're not popular virtues these days... We live in an era of self. Self-empowerment; self-managing; self-determination... And yet, as Disciples of Jesus, this is what we are called to: Obedience; and submission.

- Obedience to God;
- Submitting to the Lord;
- Submitting to one another;
- Obeying and submitting to the governing authorities;
- And here, to be obedient to God, we are commanded to submit to and obey the leaders whom God has placed over us in His church...

Now, let me tell you, the flesh rebels against that. The flesh rebels against authority/ submitting to leaders...

You see, “obeying our leaders” and “submitting to our leaders” is a work of the Spirit. And the flesh, is in rebellion against the spirit.

And I bet right now, most of us could come right back at me with a whole list of reasons why we happen to be exempt, and do **not** have to obey/submit to our leaders...

- You may see yourself as a better leader;  
(I know I've been guilty of that at times); or

- maybe the leader in your church is leading in a different direction to what you want to go; or
- maybe the leader in your church isn't worthy.

On your assessment, they're:

- too proud;
- full of themselves;
- demanding;
- always act as if they're always right;
- teaching feels like it's always aimed right at you;
- only in it for the money;

And so, they're not worthy.

- Maybe the leader in your church has offended you in some way, and it rankles you....

I can't possibly submit or obey...

We can all come up with our reasons why we shouldn't submit or obey...

Now, I don't know you people at the Cowpat Meadows Church, but I do know the heart of man. I do know, how the flesh doesn't want to submit or obey... And I also know, that when we overcome this – when we learn sacrificial servanthood and submission to others – when we learn to love each other and support one another, the church becomes the Spiritual powerhouse, Christ has built it to be....

Now, having said that:

- Sometimes there are **false** teachers;

- Sometimes there are false prophets, who are leaders of churches.
- Sometimes a leader **must** be disqualified because of their continuing sinful lifestyle and their unrepenting, wicked heart...

And at times like these, the **Godly** leaders in that church must take action, and remove:

- the false teacher;
- the false prophet;
- the wicked person from leadership...

And if the leaders in **your** church are **not** taking action against those who should be disqualified from leadership, ask them “Why not?”... And if they still refuse to take action, then maybe, it’s time to leave that church and find a fellowship who do have Godly leadership.

But first and foremost, we must always search ourselves. Is that leader truly evil? Or is there something in me, that is causing me to reject them and to judge them unfairly??? Is there something in me, that robs them of joy, and causes them to groan as they serve, because I’m making it so hard for them...

So, why? Why should you people at Cowpat Meadows, submit to the leaders that the Lord has placed over you?

Well, we don’t have to guess. We’re told why. As they serve God, their work, is of benefit to you. . **for they are**

keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account.

Who do you suppose, a church leader has to give account to? God... And let me tell you, this is **not** something that any church leader should ever take lightly.

One of the most terrifying verses in the Bible for me, is James 3:1, which says that not many of us should want to become teachers, because those who teach, will be judged with a greater strictness...

Are you:

- a church pastor;
- an elder;
- Sunday School teacher;
- Bible study leader;
- worship leader....

You and I, will be judged with a greater strictness... There is One to whom we must give an account...

Every single person in Jesus' church, is precious to Him. So leaders, tread carefully.

- Watch over the flock;
- Care for the flock;
- Serve the flock,

with the greatest of care and concern, for they are precious to Jesus. And to **Him**, we are answerable...

And so, the role of a church leader, is to keep watch over the souls of those who are in the church...

That will include all sorts of stuff, like:

- teaching;
- encouraging;
- exhorting;
- calling to repentance when one has sinned;
- helping with discerning what is good and true and pure...

Sometimes it will include:

- rebuking; and
- calling one to account

That is a tough job. And the Scripture is telling us, “Don’t make it any tougher for them.” Don’t take away their joy. For them, serving in leadership is meant to be a joy...

But if our:

- behaviour;
- contempt;
- retaliation;
- scorn;
- displeasure and disobedience

causes our leaders to groan in their duty of even having to meet with us (never lone watching over our souls) what advantage is that to us???

Cowpat Meadows Church, if we do not model: forgiveness; obedience and submission,, not only will our leaders be miserable,, you will be too...

But the thing is, the flesh is wired to:



- a) get its own way; and
- b) to treat a leader with contempt when we **don't** get our own way...

And it is this contempt, that causes us to **judge** our leaders rather than to submit and obey.

BTW I want you to take comfort in this:

Jesus is unyielding in **His** judgment of leaders who abused the flock. I think of passages like Luke 12:42–46 (ESV)

<sup>42</sup> And the Lord said, "**Who then is the faithful and wise manager, whom his master will set over his household, to give them their portion of food at the proper time?** <sup>43</sup> **Blessed is that servant whom his master will find so doing when he comes.** <sup>44</sup> **Truly, I say to you, he will set him over all his possessions.** <sup>45</sup> **But if that servant says to himself, 'My master is delayed in coming,' and begins to beat the male and female servants, and to eat and drink and get drunk,** <sup>46</sup> **the master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he does not know, and will cut him in pieces and put him with the unfaithful.**

You see, Jesus has got this. And any leader worth his salt knows that he will have to give an account to the Lord, because He is the judge... And if you believe that Christians are **not** going to be judged, you haven't properly read all of your bible...

But the trouble comes, when we usurp the roll of Jesus...  
**Jesus** is the judge – not you and me...

**Let** [our leaders keep watch over our souls] ... with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.

*Get up, it's time for church.*

*I'm not going to church today, and there's 3 reasons why:*

- 1. I don't like the people;*
- 2. The people don't like me;*
- 3. I don't want to go.*
- 4.*

*You ARE going to church, and I will tell you why:*

- 1. You're a Christian;*
- 2. You're 42 years old;*
- 3. You're the minister....*

Cowpat Meadows, I don't know if you have a history of **supporting** your ministers or church leaders; or a history of burning them out... But I can tell you, that God has **not** appointed you to be their judge. Nor is it your calling to go on a mission to expose every little fault that they might have...

How about you allow your leaders, the grace that they preach for you.

They have been appointed to keep watch over your souls. They are accountable to Jesus. And so, let them serve our Lord, with joy...

Over the years, I've seen a lot of churches (good and bad). And I am convinced, that some people relish a form of sadistic power, they like to hold over a church leader... I have met some who have openly admitted that if they make it difficult for their minister, they will eventually leave, and the next one, might be someone they like.

But, Hebrews states the reality: **that would be of no advantage to you** Why? Because God has placed them there, for you – to watch over your soul...

And history reveals that a church that demoralises and destroys **one** minister, will often do it again; and again; and again... And they think to themselves "We are so unlucky. We have had such a bad run of ministers"... "Just as well we were able to move them on..."

And sometimes, it only takes one or two vindictive people in a congregation,, and it shackles the whole place... It becomes a place where people walk on egg shells; backstab; and criticise each other behind one another's backs...

My brothers and sisters, that is not the church of Jesus Christ...

Cowpat Meadows, my prayer for you, is that you will love your minister. Not because he's lovable; Not because he's perfect (because he won't be), but because:

- The Lord has placed Him there;
- they are going to keep watch over your soul; and
- Christ is in you, you will love Him for all you're worth.

My prayer, is that ministry at Cowpat Meadows, will be a joy. A joy for your pastor, and a joy for you.

My prayer, is that you would repent of pride and self-determination, and learn to obey and submit, to those who are in leadership.

Now, when we get to V18, we realise that the writer to the Hebrews is not merely giving general advice about leadership and obeying and **submitting** to leadership... We realise that there's also something very personal going on here... It is an appeal for themselves.

<sup>18</sup> Pray for us, for we are sure that we have a clear conscience, desiring to act honourably in all things.

And he leads off with prayer.

Do you pray for your leaders? I hope you do, because your leaders need your prayers... BTW, there's two types of prayers? There are prayers of spite, and prayers of love. Do you know the difference???

A prayer of **spite** might go, “Yeah Lord, fix all these problems in this minister. He’s no good; This is wrong with him and that is wrong with him... Fix him up, will you”...

But a prayer of love, is a prayer:

- of grace and mercy;
- appealing for them to grow deeper in communion with God, and for Christ to shine out through them;
- for relationships to be restored;
- for your church to be the reconciling community we’re meant to be...

And when we pray (with love) for our leaders, “*resentment*” *dissolves*; “*tensions*” *relax*’...

And so he doesn’t only ask for their prayers. He **commands** them: Pray for us for we are sure that we have a clear conscience, desiring to act honourably in all things.

Cowpat Meadows, I don’t know if you’ve ever done this to a pastor, but as I read V18, I’m hearing the cry/appeal of a man of God, who has been unfairly judged...

Should such a leader be expected to cringe and submit to unfair judgment??? Or should that leader speak up and defend themselves... You know what? Usually when they do, they just get criticised “You’re just trying to justify yourself”...

“Our consciences are clear.” he says “We have always tried to act honourably in all things...”

I don't know if you can see it, but I recognise this cry of pain, because I've been there... Where to the best of my ability, I have acted honourably; tried to do the right thing,,, but a group of people were offended, because for me to keep watch over their souls, I had to tell them, “What you are doing to this other person, is not acceptable/Godly...”

And I copped it...

Pray for your leaders. Sometimes they have to make hard decisions. And you don't understand why, when you confront them, they don't immediately fall on their knees and repent and ask for your forgiveness... The reason may be, because they have been acting honourably, and their conscience is clear before God.

And the author to the Hebrews, is asking for their prayers, because he wants them to be restored to them, sooner. Now, I don't know what that means. I don't know if he's in jail, and so he needs to be released to come and visit them. Or maybe it's because they don't want him to come and visit...

Whatever it is, the answer is prayer... Pray for me, so that I can be restored to you...

You see, when there's a broken relationship, the way of the flesh, is to distance one's self; or to get rid of the one we have trouble loving... But the way of Spirit, is this thing called

“restoration”... Do you have a broken relationship with a leader in your church? Love them; Pray for them; Pray for restoration; and reach out to them...

Cowpat Meadows, you’ll need prayer for that, so hear the benediction:

<sup>20</sup> Now may the *God* of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, <sup>21</sup> equip you with everything good that you may do His will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through *Jesus Christ*, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Lane W. Word Biblical Commentary Hebrews 9-13. Word Books, Dallas Texas. p.556