

Title: Someone Trusted the Church and...
Text: Hebrews 13.18-19
Theme: Life in the body
Series: Hebrews #61
Prop Stmt Relationships in the body are unlike relationships in any other organization
Aim I aim to help my people grasp the vision of bringing glory to God by prayerfully pursuing humility, service and joyful submission for the joy of others.

Read Text:

I ended the sermon last week by giving you a challenge. I asked you if you wanted your life to be like a 500,000-megawatt sky tracker light that blazes for Christ? We then looked at Philippians 2. 14-15 where Paul writes that if you simply don't complain, your life would do just that. Simply, don't complain. Ha! It's not that simple is it? One guy e-mailed me that this challenge was particularly timely since his wife backed his car into a fire hydrant the next day.

We are particularly prone to complain and belittle in relationship to leadership. We live in the kingdom of this world. We hear the language of the kingdom of this world. The language is harsh, cutting, cruel, caustic and toxic. When disagreements arise, we tend to rip the person apart instead of addressing the problem. But, as followers of Christ, we are part of a different kingdom. The way that we relate to one another is driven by the gospel. The way we look at leadership, is to be driven by Christ.

When you look at the qualifications for an elder in 1 Timothy 3, you realize that apart from being able to teach, the guy himself is not all that impressive. Nothing is said about his appearance, his humor, his personality, his business contacts, or any of the things that image-makers emphasize. He is a simple man who is faithful in life, consistent at home, solid in doctrine and faithful in carrying out the ministry that is entrusted to him.

I have often told you of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the pastor in Germany who dared to speak out against Hitler and against the German church because of its capitulation to Hitler. The German Church sold its conscience in exchange for a "seat at the table." Leadership is not titles, offices, pomp and ceremony. As Bonhoeffer said, "*Genuine authority realizes that it can exist only in the service of Him who alone has authority.*" Later on in his book called, *Life Together*, Bonhoeffer writes, "*Pastoral authority can be attained only by the servant of Jesus who seeks no power of his own, who himself is a brother among brothers submitted to the authority of the Word.*"

All of that is reflected in this text. The author of Hebrews recognizes that he is in need of God's enabling grace, just like everyone else. As I read this, I get the sense that this writer is himself a former elder who ministered with these people. It sounds as if he has enjoyed deep relationships with them and for some reason is no longer with them, but longs to be back with them. Notice that verse 18 is plural and verse 19 is singular. I take that to mean that when the AH says, "pray for us" he includes himself as one of the leaders of the church and is speaking on behalf of the leaders. But, in verse 19 he speaks only of himself because he is asking them to pray, as it relates to him that God would be pleased to allow him to return to being with them. Listen with your heart to the intensity of verse 19. This man longs to be back with these people. What kind of a church is this, where there is homesickness on the part of those who are separated from the fellowship of this body of believers? What do we see even from these verses? We see

1. **The Evidence of Humility** – *Pray for us*

What kind of a leader says, "Pray for us"? The kind that recognizes that he does not have it all together. This is what is so endearing about this church and this leader that we have been studying. He not only calls them to follow the leadership of the elders but he demonstrates humility which gives the people of God greater affection and greater motivation to want to follow a leader like that.

When leaders "have no faults" it creates an atmosphere of pretend. You have heard the accusation. The church is full of hypocrites. What does that mean? If you mean by that, that the church is full of sinners, then you are exactly right. But, being a club of sinners does not mean that the church is hypocritical. Churches are guilty of being full of hypocrites, when they do not acknowledge that they are sinners and do not deal with the truth about themselves, but instead pretend that they have no problems. But, if we have no problems, then why pray, other than to thank God that we are not as bad as others are, which is a complete joke!

So, here is a leader who says, "I need you." I need you to pray for us, because we are not sufficient to be able to be what we need to be nor do what we need to do. We are in desperate need of Christ to sustain us, protect us, keep us, give us wisdom, open doors for us and provide for us. Unless God helps us, we cannot accomplish a thing in our own strength. So, we are looking to you. We are depending upon you to go to God on our behalf. We are depending upon you because we do not have it all together. When a leader lays this out before a congregation, he is not only acknowledging the truth, but he is providing a great example of how we are to relate as brothers and sisters. We are to relate with each as interdependent people, who in reality need each other.

Do you believe that? Do you really in your heart of hearts believe that you are in need of other believers? This issue, perhaps more than any other determines if

we as a church are really going to enjoy Christ, and the sweetness of fellowship, or if we are only going to give lip service to it. Do you see how this issue is so directly tied to the gospel? The gospel begins with God who is gloriously righteous and pure and the fact that we are infinitely needy compared to him. We are in need of forgiveness because of the offensiveness of our sin. We are in need of cleansing because of the polluting effects of our sin and we are in need of righteousness, of which we have none. That, right there, is why the gospel is so offensive to people. We do not want to admit the truth about ourselves. But, the truth is, I am needy. I am in need of forgiveness that I cannot earn and righteousness that I do not have. I have no resources to bargain with before God in order to get the forgiveness that I have to have in order to escape his just wrath and I have no source for righteousness that I must procure in order to live with Him and enjoy Him. Now, forgiveness and righteousness are available, but only when I first admit that I am in need and not just in need, but in desperate need. I have no source for forgiveness and righteousness except Christ. When I acknowledge that, then I am in a position to receive them from Christ. Christ lived the life that I could not live, and in doing so, he provided in my place the righteousness that I must have. Then, when he died, he died as the payment for my sin, so that I could be pardoned because my penalty was paid.

Do you know why we are part of the body of Christ? Do you know the only reason why we are part of the body of Christ? Do you know why we belong here and belong to each other? It is because of Christ alone! In order to be part, I have to admit that I do not deserve this. I am needy. I am needy because I am a broken, wounded sinner. Christ is the only one who can meet me in my broken, wounded, offensive condition and change me – and He does. That is why the gospel is so glorious and humbling, all at the same time. And that is why a “proud church” or a “proud Christian” is such an oxymoron.

Now, we come to Christ for salvation and we live, relying upon Christ for daily grace, strength and wisdom. I live in desperate need of Christ every day to help me think, love, forgive, serve, persevere, respond, be merciful and thoughtful. I need Christ so that I am not so arrogant or harsh or complaining, or self-centered. I need to be reminded of my sin. I need to see my failures. I need to know where I have broken a promise and not kept a commitment. If I do not see those things, then I will not make much of Christ and the only way that I am going to see those things is if God is pleased to point them out. I need you. I need you to pray for me and pray for the elders so that we continue to see how much we need God and are called to serve you and not ourselves. Part of our service to you, is to help you realize how much you need the body. When you choose not to really connect with others by staying to yourself, you are saying, that you are okay, by yourself.

That which we fear (being needy) is what we are. But only when we acknowledge it are we met with grace. The sweetness of Christ is experienced by people who

embrace their mutual and deep dependence upon Christ. But there is more here that helps us see why there is a sense of homesickness when

2. **The Evidence of a Clear Conscience** – *we have a clear conscience*

The way he puts it, the author of Hebrews is stating that his clear conscience is a reason why they should pray for him. How does that fit here? When you look at these verses, it is clear that this writer was at one time intimately acquainted with the former leaders of the church who had presumably died, and knew the present leaders well enough to speak of how much they cared for the souls of the people. As I said earlier, it seems to me that the author of Hebrews was most likely at one time a leader in this church and, as we will see from verse 19 is now separated from them. He can confidently call upon these people to pray for him and those with him because he knows that when he was with these people that he cared for them and treated them in such a way that he now looks back with no regret.

That is priceless. But, this is what makes the fellowship so sweet and his longing for reunion so strong. There was a true connection that he had with these people. They had been through deep waters together and pressure reveals what we really believe. There is a priceless bond that is developed between believers who journey together through the deep night of difficulties. We all wonder how we would respond if we were the ones who received “the news”. And when you face the adversity and find yourself resting on the promises of God and helping others do the same as this writer apparently did, it forever welds your heart to those who went through the long night of the soul with you.

It is so common for political insiders and business insiders to write “kiss and tells.” They, like Judas, feign loyalty for the purpose of getting all of the inside dirt in order to write an account that hangs all of the dirty laundry out in public. We assume that the closer you get to people the uglier they really are. Here is a guy who is baring his soul before this church. He speaks of having a clear conscience, and in his humility, he requests prayer. If you got close to him, there were no warts, no secrets, no cover-up, no “other life.” It was the gospel, simply believed and simply followed. But this church enjoys deep relationships because of ...

3. **The Evidence of Honorable Intentions** – *desiring to act honorably in all things*

Again, this phrase is linked to his request for prayer. The verb that is translated desire is a very strong word. You can say for example, “I wish that I could play the piano” and simply be expressing a desire. But, if you willed to play the piano, then the desire is now a set direction. That is the idea of this verse. This desire *to act honorably in all things* is a firm intention to live in such a way that when he

and the others that are with him come to the end of their lives, like those mentioned in verse 7, that the same things can be said of them.

This little section speaks volumes to us about life and leadership in the church. The church has always been influenced by the world's view of leadership. Do you remember how Paul addresses this issue with the church at Corinth? They were complaining about how unimpressive Paul was in person. They all agreed that he wrote good letters, but speaking? Appearance? He wasn't much in person. Well, what probably contributed to that, was the fact that Greece, in those days, was heavily influenced by their Pantheon of gods and the mythological stories that went along with them. These gods and their physiques were set up as the picture of pure leadership. It is a lot like Russia. If you go to Russia you see images (statues) all over the place of the Russian Man and Woman, portrayed as young, strong, and virile. So, it is not surprising that Putin has pictures taken of him self fishing without a shirt on, or doing intense physical activity in order to show his people that he fits that image. Well, the people in Corinth liked their leaders to be like that. There was even methods they had to remove body hair in order to emulate the gods. It was truly image-driven. And then there's Paul. When you put all of his personal comments together and consider all that he endured, he really was not much to look at. And beloved, that really does not matter. If you have a church that prays for its leaders and you have leaders who minister with a clear conscience and with honorable intentions, you will experience something that is rather rare, but will be ours forever, and that is, genuine fellowship.

4. **The Evidence of genuine Fellowship** – *that I may be restored to you the sooner*

Similar to verse 17, these two verses give us a picture of how body of Christ is supposed to function. The people are to pray, and the leaders are to serve with a clear conscience and honorable intentions. You need and you want, and you thrive best when your leaders are serving you honorably and joyfully. You are best served when the elders love serving you in that capacity and instead of counting the days until their term of service is done; they instead are saddened to see that time of ministry come to a close. Pray for them. Pray for us. It is natural to be cynical and sarcastic about leaders; just as it is natural for leaders to be self-centered and hypocritical. But, the gospel is super-natural. And the Kingdom of Christ is not like the kingdoms of this world. When you pray for your leaders and when they care for your souls with a clear conscience and with honorable intentions, then there is an atmosphere of trust that provides the freedom for joy and for soul-laughter.

I once served on the staff of a church where people were polite, but the climate was rather impersonal. Even on the staff there was an atmosphere of competition and jostling for exposure. One day the pastor from another church was back in the area and a man who had served with him came to see him. It had been a long time since they had seen each other and the reunion happened right in front

of me. These two men hugged and expressed how much they had missed serving together. There were tears, there was joy, there was longing, and there were memories. That is what the AH is writing about. I miss serving you. I miss being with you and reading the Word with you and praying with you and singing with you and teaching you and seeing God's grace at work in you. So, I URGE you the more EARNESTLY to do this (pray for us) in order that I may be restored to you sooner.

It's been more than fifteen years ago now when one cold December evening, a large downtown church in Winston-Salem, NC was hosting a number of Christmas events. Many people were coming and going but at one point, a man noticed a little boy, who looked to be 2 years of age pushing against the massive oak doors of the building in an attempt to get out. He was crying as if his heart would break. The man picked up the boy and realizing that he did not belong to anyone in the building went outside in time to see an older model car speeding off in the darkness. The little boy had been abandoned, and he was left at the church. It wasn't long before word spread in the church and people stepped up to do what they could. TV stations interrupted their programming to run the story and a picture of the boy in order to attempt to identify him. The next day, one of the city's newspapers ran a front-page article and started the story with this line. "Someone trusted the church last night, and the church came through!"

But, the church doesn't always come through, does it? But, how can we be a people who reflect the pre-eminence of Christ that is thundered through the pages of this epistle? How can we be a people who, like Christ come through?

The gospel humbles us because it reveals our sin and it reveals our Savior. The gospel cleanses our conscience and enables us to serve each other with honorable intentions.

The gospel puts us into a family where we really belong, forever. The true church will come through, but only by grace.