

Receiving & Rejoicing (Part 1)

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[0 : 00] And I'd like you to take your copy of the Scriptures and open up to the book of Hebrews.

We're going to be in Hebrews chapter 13 this morning. We're doing something a little bit differently than what we normally do this summer. Normally we walk through books of the Bible.

We've been going through Romans for about two years now. We've been through other books of the Bible. We've been through the first 11 chapters of Genesis. We've been through 1 Peter. We've been through the Gospel of Mark over the last few years.

And we've been going through Romans. But we're taking a break this summer so that each week we're in a different passage of Scripture, focused upon that passage and trying to learn what these various passages of Scripture can teach us about what we often call the spiritual disciplines of the Christian life.

Because I am firmly convicted that when we look around us today, when we look at the church today, and not necessarily our church, but when we look broadly at the church, particularly in the Western world, one of the things that is lacking is a real treasuring of who Christ is and all that He has done for us.

[1 : 21] And one of the reasons that we fail at times to stand in awe and wonder of Him truly, who He is and who He's revealed to be in His Word, one of the reasons that we're often drawn away to false teachings rather than treasuring the true Christ and the true Gospel, is because we are not as active in these things that we call spiritual disciplines as we ought to be.

And so we're going to spend the next few weeks looking at some of these different disciplines that God has given us that can shape and mold and redirect the gaze of our hearts, so that not only do we gaze upon Christ more often, more frequently, more consistently, but when we do look to Him, we find ourselves more satisfied with Him.

We find ourselves more in love with Him. We find ourselves with a greater capacity to treasure Him and trust in Him. In fact, last week I defined spiritual disciplines as the means of grace that God uses to cause us to persevere in trusting and treasuring Christ.

So they are means of grace. These are not just works that we perform. God is at work in these activities that we take upon ourselves. He's at work in and through them to do something to us internally.

He's changing us. He's transforming us. He's helping us to trust Christ more fully. He's helping to increase and strengthen our faith. And He's helping us to treasure Christ more fully.

[2 : 51] He's changing our hearts and our desires. He's shaping us so that our satisfaction is found in Christ and not in all the other things that surround us, even the good things of the world.

And in doing that, He causes us to persevere. He causes us to endure to the end and not to give up and not to walk away from the truth and walk away from devotion to Christ, but to remain.

And God is at work. God is doing that. But He uses real concrete things in our lives, things that we're going to be referring to as spiritual disciplines throughout this series.

So this morning, I want us to fix our attention upon Hebrews chapter 13. We will begin in verse 7 and read down to verse 9. And then we will jump to the end at verse 17 and read to the end of the chapter.

And in fact, the end of the book. So I want to ask you guys to stand together in honor of God's Word as we read. The writer of the book of Hebrews tells us, Verse 17.

[4 : 18] 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.

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.

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, 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. I appeal to you, brothers, bear with my word of exhortation, for I have written to you briefly. You should know that our brother Timothy has been released, with whom I shall see you if he comes soon.

Greet all your leaders and all the saints. Those who come from Italy send you greetings. Grace be with all of you. We thank you for this word, Father. I pray that by it you would sanctify us, by it you would encourage us, by it you would equip us, so that we might persevere in trusting and treasuring Jesus.

[5 : 36] I ask this in Christ's name. Amen. 74 years ago, actually this week, I think it was on June the 8th this past week, marked the 74th anniversary of the delivery of one of C.S. Lewis' most well-known, if not his most well-known sermon.

Now, many of you are familiar with C.S. Lewis, and we typically think of him as a writer, because that's what he was. He was a writer. He devoted many of his writings to the defense of the Christian faith after his conversion.

But he did also deliver a number of lectures, and occasionally he even preached. And the most famous sermon that he preached is called, The Weight of Glory. And at the very beginning of that sermon, I wanted to share with you something that he says, that I think applied not only nearly 75 years ago, 74 years ago, but I think that it applies equally well to us today.

He says, If you ask 20 good men today what they thought the highest of the virtues, 19 of them would reply, unselfishness. Now, perhaps today people would reply maybe something differently. Maybe not unselfishness. Maybe they would say it would be tolerance or something like that. But we would see broad agreements. But he goes on to speak of this unselfishness. He says, But if you asked almost any of the great Christians of old, he would have replied, Love.

[6 : 58] You see what has happened, he asks? A negative term has been substituted for a positive. The negative ideal of unselfishness carries with it the suggestion, not primarily of securing good things for others, but of going without them ourselves.

as if our abstinence and not their happiness was the important point. I do not think that this is the Christian virtue of love. The New Testament has lots to say about self-denial, but not about self-denial as an end in itself.

We are told to deny ourselves and to take up our crosses in order that we may follow Christ. And nearly every description of what we shall ultimately find if we do so contains an appeal to desire. If there lurks in most modern minds the notion that to desire our own good and earnestly to hope for the enjoyment of it is a bad thing, I submit that this notion has crept in from Kant and the Stoics and is no part of the Christian faith.

Indeed, if we consider the unblushing promises of reward and the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the Gospels, it would seem that our Lord finds our desires not too strong but too weak.

[8 : 06] We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition, when infinite joy is offered to us. Like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea.

We are far too easily pleased. And he goes on in that sermon to talk about the weight of the glory of God and how it should press in upon us and we should seek the enjoyment of the glory of God.

Even in the way that I have defined spiritual disciplines for this series, I have tried to redirect our thinking so that we do not merely think of spiritual disciplines as external works that we do as Christians to try to make us more holy apart from the internal changes that those things are designed to create and to facilitate.

There has been, C.S. Lewis says, there has crept in through philosophers, Kant and the Stoics, various philosophers, this idea that we should not desire and seek after our own happiness.

And unfortunately, I think we would have to say in light of many things that have been written over the last 40 or 50 years and preached in many churches by many preachers that we would say today that there has crept in because of many Christian writers and preachers the notion that we are not to seek after and desire our own happiness.

[9 : 35] In fact, I mentioned last week that there is this division in many people's minds between holiness and happiness. And we're often told that God is interested in our holiness and not so much our happiness, that we ought to be seeking to be holy rather than to be happy.

But I find that to be an impossible thing. I find that not to fit with the biblical description of what holiness is. Holiness is not a matter of external behavior.

Holiness is a matter of the inclination of your heart and the fruit that that produces in our external behavior. So that you are not considered to be holy merely because you outwardly confirm...

What's the word I'm looking for? You confirm your lifestyle. Conform your lifestyle. Thank you. To the patterns of righteousness that you see in the Word of God.

It's not mere outward conformity. It's much more than that. It's a disposition of the heart. That's why the prophets over and over tell the people of Israel that God rejects them even though at times they were outwardly performing all of the right sacrifices.

[10 : 42] That's why Jesus chides the Pharisees. He tells them that outwardly they're doing all the right things but their hearts are not right. And because of that, they've not rightly understood God's Word.

These were men who could quote the Bible. They could quote the Torah. Oftentimes they'd memorize the entire Torah, all of Genesis through Deuteronomy. They knew in some sense the Word and yet Jesus says because their hearts are not right, they don't know the Word.

So that from a biblical perspective, I don't think that we can separate genuine true holiness from happiness, delight and pleasure in the Lord.

If our external behavior is going to be truly called holy, it has to flow from desires. It has to flow from satisfaction in Christ.

So that when we practice these spiritual disciplines, what we are really doing is we are participating in activities that help to shape and form and fashion and mold our hearts so that our delight is more in Christ and all that He is for us.

[11 : 52] All of the spiritual disciplines that we're going to talk about are designed to transform our hearts. They're not designed merely to change our outward behavior.

We're after changed and transformed hearts. That's what we're seeking after. We want to be a people who are not satisfied, who are not willing to place our happiness in things that can only supply an inferior happiness.

We are after complete. We are after full satisfaction. And that can only be had in Christ.

But our hearts, as Lewis says, our hearts are often satisfied with inferior things. Like children who do not know what is meant by a holiday at the sea, they can't fathom, they can't picture what it means to sit on a beach full of sand and make sandcastles.

They're content to just sit in a muddy, grimy alleyway making mud pies out of the sludge in the streets. And so often we are like that.

[12 : 59] So often we find things that give us some amount or measure of happiness and we remain content with those things. When the Lord is saying, I'm not calling you to abandon happiness.

I'm telling you that that's not enough. I'm telling you that I want more for you. I want your heart to refuse to be satisfied with anything less than me.

God has created us in such a way that the deepest longings of our hearts, the greatest happinesses that we can experience, only happen in communion with Him.

That's what we're designed for. That's what we're made for. And He's made not only us, but the entire universe to reflect that reality. We often say that God has made all things for His own glory and we should say that often and that should be imprinted upon our minds.

We should know that about who God is. God, by His very nature, creates all things for His own glory. That's who He is. If He created it for some other cause, there would be something greater than Himself and He would no longer be God.

[14 : 10] So He makes all things for His own glory. And that truth reminds us of the greatness of God. But we are reminded of the goodness of God when we see that He has designed us, made in His image, to bring Him the most glory by finding maximum happiness in Him.

You see what I'm saying? The greatness of God is revealed in His making us and all things for His glory. But the goodness of God is revealed in designing us in such a way that He gains the most glory when we gain the most happiness and satisfaction from Him.

So that the glory of God and the happiness of His creatures are intertwined in a way in which they cannot be separated. And our great dilemma, our great problem as followers of Christ is that we are still torn.

We are still pulled toward those inferior forms of pleasure when we ought to have all of our hearts set upon Christ. And so much of the Christian life, so much of our lives after our conversion until the time when we die, so much of them are spent fighting against those old desires that tend to try to creep back in.

So much of our life is spent trying to escape those inferior satisfactions. And so the question that we have to ask is, how can we lessen our desire for the things of the world that do not ultimately satisfy?

[15 : 45] And how can we increase our desire for God Himself and all that He is for us in Christ? How can we increase that? And the answer is, the spiritual disciplines have been provided for us by God as a means by which He causes us, He changes us, so that we persevere in trusting and treasuring Jesus all the more throughout our lives.

And so every week now as we discuss these spiritual disciplines, we're going to be asking the question, how can this help me to treasure Christ more? And the first of the spiritual disciplines that I want us to talk about is probably the most obvious one, and that is the discipline of receiving and reflecting upon and responding to and ultimately rejoicing in the Word of God itself.

So important is this spiritual discipline that we're going to spend two weeks dealing with this very issue. Now I know that we are, by and large, a people committed to the Word of God.

You wouldn't attend a church, you wouldn't be a member of a church where somebody preached the way that I preach slowly through books of the Bible if you didn't care at all about the Bible. If you didn't want to hear it, if you would rather hear something else, you would go somewhere else.

And I know that. So I know that to a certain degree the fact that we are all here, especially those of you who have been here for a while, I know that we are a people who at least on some level already treasure the Word of God, already desire to receive the Word of God and respond to it in all the correct ways.

[17 : 21] But if you're like me, you still find yourself at times falling short. You still find yourself at times not meditating on the Word the way that you ought to.

You still find yourself lacking in understanding the Word, lacking in having enough of the Word implanted in your mind and your heart to help you through some of your daily struggles.

And so I want to take time this week and next week so that we can look to the Word of God and answer the question, how do we become better receivers of the Word of God?

This morning we're going to look specifically though at how do we do that corporately? How do we do that as a body, not merely as individuals? Next week you'll consider, we will consider, how do we do that as individuals?

What are some practical things that you need to do in your life? What does the Bible have to say about the impact of God's Word on you merely as an individual? But this morning I want us to ask the question, how do we corporately, how do we all together, how do we receive the Word of God?

[18 : 28] And then how do we respond rightly? What things do we do together that help us? So let's take a look at the passage here. In this passage we are directed toward a group of people that are called the leaders.

They are called leaders. And we are told that they are those who bring, who speak the Word of God to us. In fact, there are four or five commandments throughout this passage in chapter 13, five commandments that are directed toward us, the readers, but are telling us how we ought to respond to or how we ought to think about and treat those designated as leaders.

Take a look in verse 7. You'll see the first two commandments. The first is, remember your leaders. And then we are told to consider the outcome of their way of life.

We are to consider the outcome of their way of life. And then, if you'll turn down a little bit further to verse 17, we receive two more commandments. We are to obey our leaders.

We are to submit to our leaders. And then finally, at the very end of the book, there's one more command that pertains to leaders that seems to be disconnected, but I think that it's a very important commandment as we'll see in a bit.

[19 : 46] In verse 24, we are told to greet all your leaders as well as all the saints. So we have these commands to remember, to consider, which results in imitating those two who are connected together, to remember and to consider, to obey, to submit, and then to greet your leaders.

Now you might say, why are we getting into this business about leaders if we're trying to talk about how we corporately receive the Word of God? Because of how these leaders are described. Because we are told over and over in the New Testament that while each of us has a personal responsibility to receive the Word of God ourselves, we also have those designated among us whose duty it is to help us to receive the Word of God, to bring us together corporately, to teach us, and to guide us in our understanding of the Word.

So that we need to think about how do we, what do we do with these leaders? How do we think about these leaders? What is their, what is their role in my receiving of the Word of God?

Because if there were no corporate reception of the Word of God led by some other individual besides ourselves, then we wouldn't gather together as often as we do.

Perhaps we wouldn't gather together at all. We would just have our own copies of the Scriptures. We would have our daily devotionals. We would spend time reading and memorizing the Bible ourselves.

[21 : 12] And that would be all that was really necessary. And yet we gather together on a weekly basis even more often than that. We gather in the middle of the week even to hear and receive the Word of God from our leaders.

So the first question that we need to ask though before we can get into how we receive the Word from these leaders is who are they? Who are the leaders that the writer of the book of Hebrews has in mind? Who specifically are they?

When they're first mentioned in verse 7, it seems that they are leaders who led the people in the past. I say that because we're told to remember them, which doesn't necessarily imply that they're in the past.

We're to remember others earlier in the passage. But we're to remember them but then also consider the outcome of their lives. In other words, consider the end result of their lives. So these seem to be leaders who have passed on from the scene.

Perhaps they've been martyred or perhaps they've just lived a long life and they're gone. Or perhaps they were there for a time with these believers and then they moved on as the Apostle Paul often did in his ministry.

[22 : 14] Whatever it is, the influence of these leaders and as their life intersected with the lives of the readers, that appears to be, at least in the first instance of leaders, that appears to be something in the past.

But it's not always in the past because as you arrive at verse 17, it's clearly present day leaders. So we have a broad conception of leaders at the beginning that would include past leaders and then a narrowing of it down into those who are presently leading the people to whom this letter was originally written or to whom this sermon was originally preached.

So who are the past leaders? The past leaders probably are both the Apostles and those that we often call the elders. If you look in the book of Acts, you will see that in Jerusalem, and this book is written to Jewish Christians, so it could very well be that it was directed toward believers in Jerusalem or perhaps more broadly in Judea.

But in Jerusalem, where many of the Apostles remained for a good portion of the beginning of their ministries, oftentimes the Apostles and then the elders of the church in Jerusalem would gather together to make decisions.

So at the beginning here in verses 7 and 8, I think what the writer has in mind is both the Apostles and this group that we oftentimes call the elders, which the book of Acts calls the elders, and Paul later on refers to as the elders.

[23 : 33] As we arrive later in the passage, I think it's simply the elders because by then the Apostles, I think, have probably passed from the scene for the most part, if not completely. So that broadly we could say that these leaders include the Apostles, but the focus throughout most of the passage is upon the local church leaders which are called the elders or at other places in the New Testament they are called the overseers, translated bishops in the King James, or called the pastors in a couple of places.

So these are the pastors of the church. These are the elders of the church. And what we see throughout the New Testament is a very consistent pattern that every church that is started, every church as it begins, over them are put elders in charge of the church.

So that we read that Paul and Barnabas appointed elders in every town. That is, every town where they started a church before they left, they would appoint elders and then they would move on.

And we're told that this was their custom. This is what they normally did so that we should expect every church, every church patterned after the New Testament to have elders within the church or what we oftentimes today will call pastors.

And in fact, we see a consistent pattern of more than one pastor in the churches, more than one elder in the churches. That's why, that's one of the reasons that I'm very excited about where we're headed as a church because from the very beginning of the church, we never had it in mind for me to be just a solo pastor making decisions by myself.

[25 : 06] That was never the vision, that's not the New Testament model and that's not what we want. And so, it's exciting to me as I look toward the future, I believe that we will probably have some other elders before the end of the year so that no longer will I be by myself leading the church but there will be alongside me other men called by God to lead the church so that we can more fully match the New Testament pattern.

But that's who these leaders are. They are the elders of the church primarily. But we need to say more than that. Not just what their title, what their title is. What do they do? What's their function? And that's where we're tying in to the reception of the Word of God. Notice exactly how they're described at the very beginning. Verse 7, Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the Word of God.

So the first duty, the first thing that we would say the elders are to be about is that of speaking the Word of God. Now that will oftentimes take the form of what I do right here.

As I preach week in and week out in front of you, oftentimes it will take the form of official, formal preaching in front of the congregation. Sometimes it takes place in smaller settings like Sunday school groups or fellowship groups or other types of small groups.

[26 : 18] Sometimes the elders' teaching happens in one-on-one counseling sessions. But the task of the elders is in fact to speak the Word of God to the church. That's what the elders are primarily to be engaged in.

But then there's something else that has to go along with that. It's the way of life. Take a look at what he says next. Consider the outcome of their way of life imitating their faith.

So that not only are we to remember them as those who speak the Word of God, but we are to consider them, think about them as those who live an exemplary lifestyle.

It's not to say that they live perfect lives. It's not to say that they always make all of the right decisions within the church or even within their own personal lives. I can testify to you that I'm still sinful.

I still struggle with a lot of the same things that you all struggle with. Being an elder does not remove from anyone the struggle with sin, the reality that we still have to deal with pride and anger or sometimes we say the wrong things to people that say things we shouldn't say.

[27 : 24] We still struggle with the same sins. But on the whole, when you look at the lives of those that are called to be pastors or elders, they should be leading an exemplary life. One that if you were to imitate their life, by and large, you would be faithfully following Christ as you imitate them.

So that there is the Word as it is spoken to the people and there is, I believe, the Word as it is lived out in front of the people. Those are the things that are required required of elders or required of these leaders that the writer of Hebrews has in mind.

So that everything that the elders do, that these leaders do, everything that they do is to be centered upon the proclamation and the living out of the Word before the congregation.

That's what an elder is and that's what an elder does. And when the elders do that, and when they do that well, the church receives and responds to the Word of God as it is mediated through the elders to the people.

So important is this role, is this task for the leaders of the church that very, very early on in the life of the church, the apostles and the elders of the church in Jerusalem took it upon themselves to say, we need to have some other individuals within the church who are dedicated to taking care of many of the needs of the church, the physical needs of the church.

[29 : 00] So that as an issue arose in the congregation at Jerusalem where some people were being neglected as some food was being shared in the church and passed out and that was brought before the elders and the apostles, the elders and the apostles response was, we don't have time to deal with that as important as it is because we have to be continually, constantly preaching and teaching and spreading the word and praying for the people.

That's what we have to be about and so they took it upon themselves to set aside another group of people within the church that we now call deacons that the rest of the New Testament refers to as deacons and their primary task is to free up the elders to teach and pray so that the church can benefit from receiving the word so that in some ways we have the elders who preach the word and then we have the deacons who become the exemplary servants of the word enabling the elders to do their tasks so that the entire church benefits from that.

In fact, after I finish preaching we're going to call Joe up here and we're going to pray over Joe because we're going to install Joe Flynn as our first official deacon recognizing that he has been serving in the capacity of a deacon practically since the church started but recognizing and saying we recognize that God has called him to a specific role and that role relates to the elders in that what he will do will free the elders to be able to be more dedicated to preaching and proclaiming the word and praying on your behalf that you might respond to and receive the word itself.

So the elders are this group of people and their job these leaders is to proclaim the word of God through mouth and through their lifestyles. That's what they are to do and the church is to respond to that in a certain way.

The church is to respond to that by receiving the word. The church is to respond to that by imitating their lifestyles but more than that I want you to look down at verse 17.

[31 : 01] Verse 17 I believe is not it's not a blanket statement telling you how to respond to the leaders of the church at all times in all circumstances. We are told we are given two commands to obey and submit to these leaders.

Obey your leaders and submit to them. I say that that's not just sort of a blanket statement of how we're always supposed to interact with the pastors or with the elders. I say that because of that command near the end of the chapter where the writer of this letter tells his readers to greet all your leaders and all the saints.

how does that simple command that just seems almost seems like a throwaway command how does it relate to these other two commands? I think that it shows us that the church that those who are originally receiving this letter that they do not receive the word of God merely and only through the teaching ministry of the elders.

That in fact you yourself are responsible you are responsible to be in the word. Otherwise this letter and all the other letters of the New Testament would have been written directly to the elders.

And yet we do not find letters in the New Testament written to the elders or written to any other set of leaders in the church. They are directed toward the believers themselves to the church itself so that over and over you will find that letters are addressed to the saints in and then there will be a city.

[32 : 33] To the whole church not just to the leaders so that when the writer of Hebrews at the very end of this letter says I want you to greet your leaders what he's indicating is that I've written this to you.

I've written this for you church so that we do not as a church receive the word of God merely through the ministry of the elders or the pastors.

We have a personal responsibility to receive it ourselves. And that means that the ultimate authority over our lives is Christ as he exercises that authority through his word not the leaders.

The leaders possess authority only in so far as they accurately both preach the word and live according to the word. With that in mind now I think we can think about these two commandments. Obey and submit to your leaders. Obey and submit to them. Now the way that this is translated in the vast majority of English translations makes it sound as if the first command to obey is much stronger than the second command to submit.

[33 : 37] But that's not actually true. The word that's translated as obey in the English Standard Version really indicates something like trusting in someone, leaning upon someone, being able to depend upon someone.

So it's not just this obedient, unquestioning sort of obedience. It's actually reflecting the character of the men who are elders. That they are those that you are able to trust.

That you are able to lean upon. That you can know that their ministry is a ministry of the word. So that it's not obey them without question. No, that's not what it is.

We all corporately receive the word of God. This letter is written to all of us. But as our leaders, as the elders teach and explain the word and apply the word to our lives and model obedience to the

word, as we look upon them as those who do that, we recognize that they are those whom we can lean upon.

We can trust. We can trust their discernment. We can trust the decisions that they make. Not that they always make all of the right decisions, but we can trust their decisions.

[34 : 43] And that trust leads to a willingness and ability to submit to them. To yield to their authority and to their decision making within the life of the church.

Now, if there is anywhere where we struggle in our relationship to our leaders, it's probably here with the issue of submission. Because we're sinners.

And it's wired into us to rebel against authority structures in our lives. The rebellion of Adam and Eve was essentially a rebellion against the authority of God's word in the Garden of Eden.

And now, as the word of God comes to us being taught by those who are leaders in the church, there is within us a natural sense of, I don't want to do that. I don't want to submit to that.

In fact, one of the things that I've noticed and I've, you know, on the one hand you laugh at it, but on the other hand you're really saddened by it, is that I have noticed that many people are very in favor of submission to leadership until they happen to disagree with those who are in leadership.

[35 : 55] You see that? And that happens in the home, that happens in the church, that happens at work, it happens in the home. Many wives will preach that women should submit to their husbands. The Bible says that, but when they disagree with their own husband, they don't submit to him at all.

Or within the church we'll say we should submit to our leaders, but the moment the leaders make a decision that we don't like, that we don't think is the best decision, we're not going to submit to them anymore.

Or we do it at work, our bosses make a decision, we don't like it, we've been a good employee up to that point, we've even encouraged other people when they've not liked the boss's decision, well he's the boss, but the minute it begins to cut against the grain of our own desires, we are no longer willing to submit.

But the truth of the matter is that submission that only exists in the presence of agreement with the leaders is not submission. It's not. It is delayed rebellion against leadership.

But we should have such leaders whose ministry is so centered upon the word and the proclamation of the word and the living out of the word that we should delight to be able to both trust in them and yield to them as they make decisions in the life of the church.

[37 : 10] Not unquestioning obedience, not in any way. We have a personal responsibility. But a yielding to the leadership of those who proclaim the word to us on a regular basis.

Why do we do that? I mean, aside from the fact that we're commanded to, aside from the fact that we're simply told to in the Bible, why would we do that? It runs so counter to both our own natures and the culture that we live in.

Why would we be willing to do that? Why even bother receiving the word of God corporately all together on Sunday morning rather than just handling it myself?

Some of you might think, I can handle the Bible better than Chris can. I'm smarter than Chris. That's entirely possible. I'm not ruling that out, okay? You may be able to handle the Bible better than me. You may understand it better. You may have more Scripture memorized than me. And so you might think, why should I receive it from him or from any of the other elders that we're going to have rather than just from myself? Because this is a means that God has provided.

[38 : 14] Because God himself has set up the church and he's put us all in relationship to the church and its leaders in such a way that when we follow his ways, that is, when we follow the spiritual discipline of submitting to those who proclaim the word to us and indeed through that submit to the word corporately, we find that God through that transforms our hearts.

And in transforming our hearts, he's protecting us. He's not just guiding us. He's not just giving us new desires. He's protecting us from bad things. We keep saying, how can we in our daily lives not only pursue God, but how can we avoid pursuing inferior pleasures?

When it comes to our responsibility before the word of God, the question becomes, how can we not only delight in the truth, but how can we avoid being tangled up in things that are not true?

Because let's face it, the false gospels that we find being preached out there in a lot of places, they have a surface level appeal. They really do. When you hear a preacher tell you that you can have a bigger house and a nicer car if you will just do X, Y, and Z, that's a message that's appealing to people.

There's a reason why health and wealth or prosperity churches are by and large full of poor people many times. There's a reason why that message has taken off in the third world because it appeals to those who lack physical things, right?

[39 : 48] It's appealing. It appeals to the sinful desires of our hearts. And so we are drawn away to those kinds of things. But not only those kinds of things, all manner of false teachings, we would be tempted to drift toward over time.

But God has given us not only the Word, but He has given to the church leaders, elders, who teach the Word and counsel you in the Word to direct your heart and your mind away from those things toward the truth.

And that's, I'm not grabbing that out of the air. I'm not getting that from just anywhere. I see it here in the passage that we're looking at. Look back up again to the beginning of where we started reading in verse 7.

We're told to remember the leaders who proclaim the Word of God, consider their way of life. But then in verse 8 there's a strange statement. It seems disconnected to everything else when you first read it.

It just suddenly says, Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. That's a verse we love to quote and we like to quote it by itself, partly because it sort of seems to stand out by itself.

[40 : 54] But it's not. It's intimately connected with everything. Because the Word that is proclaimed by these leaders is in fact the Word of Christ and the Word about Christ.

Now if we weren't just grabbing some verses from chapter 13 this morning, if we were carefully making our way through Hebrews like we are through Romans and we have through other books, then when we arrive at this we would see this connection between the unchangeable nature of Christ, we would see that and we would see its connection to the Word because we would have walked through Hebrews.

Let me give you a quick tour though, really quick, about a minute. Turn back in Hebrews to chapter 1, verse 1. Well we're told that long ago, and it is in the Old Testament times, at many times and in many ways God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days He has spoken to us by His Son.

So God speaks by the Son, He speaks through Christ. But not only that, when you move your eyes down to chapter 2, you'll find this in verse 2, you find first a reference to the Old Testament Mosaic law.

Since the message declared by angels, that's the old law, since the message declared by angels proved to be reliable and every transgression or disobedience received a just retribution, how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation?

[42 : 17] It was declared at first by the Lord. What? Salvation. The Word. The Word of God that came through Christ. It was declared at first by the Lord, that's Jesus, and it was attested to us by those who heard, that's the apostles, while God also bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to His will.

So from the very beginning, from verse 1 of Hebrews, there's a concern with the Word of God spoken ultimately, finally, completely, through the Son, passed on by the apostles.

And we have now in written form the words of Christ, the Word of the apostles here preserved in the New Testament. Turn to chapter 4. We're told this about this great Word of God.

Verse 12, The Word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the vision of soul and spirit of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

And no creature is hidden from His sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account. The Word of God comes with great power. It comes in to help us to discern, to help us to make the distinctions.

[43 : 27] It comes in to help us, to hinder us from sin, to help us in the path of righteousness. All that is in mind as we arrive in chapter 13, as we see this statement that Jesus Christ, the ultimate revelation of God, the Word then passed on through the apostles.

It never changes. He never changes. The Word of God never changes. It is sure and steady. Why would it be placed here? Because we just learned about those who proclaim the Word of God and now we know that Jesus Christ, the center of that Word, the Word itself, never, ever changes.

And then, the command, do not be led away by diverse and strange teachings. For it is good for the heart to be strengthened by grace, by the gospel, not by foods.

That is, not by returning to the old regulations and laws of the Mosaic Code. We're not going to go back to that. It never benefited those who were devoted to them, he says.

Don't be led away by diverse and strange teachings. How can we avoid that? How can we avoid the slow drift toward false teaching? How can we avoid the attraction of things that do not line up with the Word of God?

[44 : 45] It doesn't happen merely through your personal reflection upon the Bible. Nearly every major cult that has deviated from the Scriptures in major doctrinal ways, whether denying the nature of God by denying the Trinity or whether by denying justification by faith alone and once again returning to a works-based salvation or doing both of those and a hundred other things.

Nearly every cult that has deviated from Scriptures in those major ways has happened. They have arisen because you had an individual who thought that they understood the Bible better than everybody who had come before them and every leader in the church presently.

And on their own, they sat, they read, they came up with strange and diverse teachings and then they took those to lead others away who had not been grounded and strengthened by the Word proclaimed by those whose task it is to proclaim the Word and protect the church.

It is the work of the elders to keep watch over your souls. That is the sacred duty given to every pastor to labor, to give their lives away for the sake of guarding the souls of the flock.

And an elder that does that well by the authority of the Word is one who can be trusted to help you to shape your heart in such a way that those false teachings no longer have an appeal for you.

[46 : 12] But through the gift of God's grace, the means of grace, the corporate reception of the Word through the leaders of the church, you are now protected and your heart is now strengthened and enabled to delight more fully in who Christ really is and in all that He's done for us as it's revealed in His Word.

So that corporately we are to receive the Word. That's what you're doing right now. Corporately we receive the Word. We hear the Word proclaimed and then explained by elders within the church.

That's the primary reason that we gather together. We say, well, we gather together for worship.

Yes, but what's the height of worship? Delighting in God as He reveals Himself in His Word.

So we gather together to receive the Word corporately as the body of Christ. That's why we're here. That's why we gather together. That's what church is all about.

Receiving the Word of God. But then we not only corporately receive the Word of God, we also have a way of corporately reflecting upon the Word.

[47 : 20] Corporately considering it together. That doesn't necessarily mean that we all stay right here after church and talk about the sermon, but it means that as you drive home or as you go to lunch, you're talking about the Word that was proclaimed in the sermon with your kids or with your spouse or with your friends that you go to lunch with from church afterwards.

You're reflecting upon it. You've received it together. You reflect on it together. And then you respond to it together. Not just you as an individual trying your best to do what the pastor says you're supposed to do during the week, but all together in systems of accountability.

Whether that's through the fellowship groups that we've established which are more formal ways of reflecting and responding together or whether that's through family discussions or whether that's sitting with your spouse or you're a close friend and accountability partner in the church sitting talking about it.

We don't receive it merely and then move on. We reflect and we respond. We find ways and we challenge one another to find ways to more completely put into action the things that we have learned on Sunday mornings.

And then ultimately, ultimately we rejoice in the Word. We're not just aiming to live rightly in response to what we've heard.

[48 : 39] We are aiming to rejoice in the Word of God itself. In fact, I would challenge you this week to go home. It's a very long, it's the longest chapter in the Bible.

But to go home at some point this week and sit down and read Psalm 119 and underline every place where David says he delights in the law, he loves the Word of God.

Underline every one of them and you will see very clearly and quickly that the pursuit of our lives in regard to the Bible is not merely to know it but to rejoice in it.

So that we're going to receive it together as a body. We're going to reflect upon it. We're going to respond to it together as a body and then ultimately together we ought to be a people who rejoice in the Word and God is in all of that transforming your heart causing you to persevere in trusting all that Christ has revealed to be for us in His Word and in treasuring Him with all your heart. Let's pray. through this through this through this idea of through this through this through this idea of through this idea of through this idea of through this idea of through this through this idea of through this idea of through this idea of through this idea of idea of idea of idea of idea of