

Hebrews 13:17

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you.

Analysis

Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you. This verse addresses the relationship between believers and spiritual leaders, calling for respect and submission while reminding leaders of their accountability. "Obey" (peithesthe, πείθεσθε) means to be persuaded, trust, follow—not blind obedience but willing responsiveness to godly leadership. "Them that have the rule over you" (tois hēgoumenois hymōn, τοῖς ἡγουμένοις ὑμῶν) refers to those leading, guiding, directing the congregation—elders, pastors, overseers.

"Submit yourselves" (hypeikete, ὑπείκετε) means yield, give way, defer—recognizing leaders' spiritual authority under Christ. This isn't authoritarian control but mutual cooperation within the body, with leaders serving and members following godly direction. The basis for submission: "they watch for your souls" (autoi agrypnousin hyper tōn psychōn hymōn, αὐτοὶ ἀγρυπνοῦσιν ὑπὲρ τῶν ψυχῶν ὑμῶν). Agrypneō (ἀγρυπνέω) means to be sleepless, vigilant, alert—leaders maintain spiritual watchfulness over believers' souls, guarding them from danger, heresy, and apostasy.

"As they that must give account" (hōs logon apodōsontes, ὡς λόγον ἀποδώσοντες) reminds leaders they face divine accountability for their shepherding (James 3:1).

This sobers leaders against abuse while encouraging faithful service. "That they may do it with joy, and not with grief" indicates submissive, cooperative congregations bring leaders joy, while stubborn, contentious ones bring grief. "For that is unprofitable for you" (alysi teles gar hymin touto, ἀλυσιτελὲς γὰρ ὑμῖν τοῦτο)—causing leaders grief ultimately harms the congregation, as grieved shepherds become discouraged and less effective.

Historical Context

The early church developed leadership structures (elders/overseers, Acts 14:23, 20:17, Titus 1:5) modeled on Jewish synagogue governance. These leaders taught doctrine, shepherded souls, administered discipline, and protected against false teaching. The author of Hebrews urged respect for faithful leaders (13:7) and submission to current leadership (13:17). In persecution's context, some believers became divisive, critical, or independent, resisting leadership and fragmenting community. This endangered both individuals (losing protective oversight) and congregations (undermining unity and order). The verse balances authority and accountability: leaders must govern faithfully knowing they face divine judgment; members must submit willingly, making leadership joyful rather than burdensome. History shows both leadership abuse (authoritarianism, control, spiritual manipulation) and congregational rebellion (divisiveness, insubordination, lack of respect). Biblical balance requires Spirit-led leaders serving humbly under Christ's authority, and Spirit-filled members following willingly with discernment. The 'giving account' principle (Hebrews 13:17) protects against tyranny—leaders answer to God, not themselves.

Related Passages

John 15:13 — Greatest form of love

1 John 4:8 — God is love

Genesis 1:1 — Creation of heavens and earth

Psalm 19:1 — Heavens declare God's glory

Study Questions

1. How does biblical submission to spiritual leaders differ from blind obedience or authoritarian control?
2. What does it mean that leaders 'watch for your souls,' and how should this affect your relationship with them?
3. Why is leaders' accountability to God both sobering and encouraging?
4. How can church members make their leaders' work joyful rather than grievous?
5. What safeguards exist in Scripture to prevent leadership abuse while maintaining proper authority?

Interlinear Text

Πείθεσθε	τοῖς	ἡγουμένοις	ὑμῶν	καὶ	ὑπείκετε	αὐτοὶ
Obey	G3588	them that have the rule	over you	and	submit	they
G3982		G2233	G5216	G2532	G5226	G846
γὰρ	άγρυπνοῦσιν	ὑπὲρ	τῶν	ψυχῶν	ὑμῶν	ώς
for	watch	for	G3588	souls	over you	as
G1063	G69	G5228		G5590	G5216	G5613
λόγον						G3056
ἀποδώσοντες	ἴνα	μετὰ	χαρᾶς	τοῦτο	ποιῶσιν	καὶ
they that must give	that	with	joy	it	they may do	and
G591	G2443	G3326	G5479	G5124	G4160	G2532
μὴ						G3361
στενάζοντες·	ἀλυσιτελὲς	γὰρ	ὑμῖν	τοῦτο		
with grief	is unprofitable	for	for you	it		
G4727	G255	G1063	G5213	G5124		

Additional Cross-References

1 Timothy 5:17 (Parallel theme): Let the elders that rule well be counted worthy of double honour, especially they who labour in the word and doctrine.

Hebrews 13:7 (Parallel theme): Remember them which have the rule over you, who have spoken unto you the word of God: whose faith follow, considering the end of their conversation.

1 Peter 5:5 (Parallel theme): Likewise, ye younger, submit yourselves unto the elder. Yea, all of you be subject one to another, and be clothed with humility: for God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble.

Acts 20:28 (Parallel theme): Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood.

Jeremiah 13:17 (Parallel theme): But if ye will not hear it, my soul shall weep in secret places for your pride; and mine eye shall weep sore, and run down with tears, because the LORD'S flock is carried away captive.

1 Corinthians 16:16 (Parallel theme): That ye submit yourselves unto such, and to every one that helpeth with us, and laboureth.

Philippians 2:12 (Parallel theme): Wherefore, my beloved, as ye have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.

Romans 14:12 (Parallel theme): So then every one of us shall give account of himself to God.

Exodus 32:31 (Parallel theme): And Moses returned unto the LORD, and said, Oh, this people have sinned a great sin, and have made them gods of gold.

2 Thessalonians 3:14 (Parallel theme): And if any man obey not our word by this epistle, note that man, and have no company with him, that he may be ashamed.