

Marriage in Christ: submission

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Next Sunday, we're going to talk about the roles God has established for husbands and wives in a marriage. To understand those roles well, I want to spend all of this morning talking about submission. Having a firm grasp on how the scriptures define and understand submission is a prerequisite to honoring Christ in our marriage (and, honestly, in all of our lives). But most followers of Jesus don't understand submission and, therefore, haven't properly incorporated it into their lives. Here are a few examples of that.

Husbands get submission wrong...

- When they think it means they can demand anything from their wives.
- When they think their wives are sinning by ignoring their every wish.
- When they think submission doesn't apply to them.
- When they feel some superiority because God instructs wives to be submissive.

Wives get submission wrong...

- When they think it means they can't have their own thoughts or opinions.
- When they think it means they should tolerate an abusive situation.
- When they think they can't be vocal or passionate about important family matters.
- But also, when they think it's old fashioned and optional.

I'm ready and eager to help you, my dear brothers and sisters, put to death and bury the ideas and practices that are associated with an ungodly, unbiblical view of submission. They've been around too long and they've wreaked too much havoc in our marriages. I'm really excited to share this truth from God's word to you young people out there. When I was a teenager, nobody told me what submission meant; nobody ever told me that submission was something for every Christian including myself. And so when I read this large, nuanced, and carefully-crafted book called the Bible that talks about wives submitting to husbands, nobody corrected me when I totally took that the wrong way. I want you young people to have a better start than me. I hope you're ready.

Before I get into our main passage today and establish what biblical submission truly is, I want to say this first because it goes straight to what we get so wrong about submission. Here it is: submission is for everyone. If you are a follower of Jesus Christ, you are called to live a life of submission. If you are a man or a woman; if you are young or old; if you are a prestigious person or an everyman; if you're a person entrusted with great responsibilities or not. Every person who calls Jesus Lord is a person who should be submitting in many areas of his or her life. Let me give you some examples.

- God tells you to submit to the governing authorities he has established (Romans 13). Think about our local, state, and national leaders with authority... God says we should submit to them.

- God tells you to submit to the church leaders God has given you for the good of your soul (Heb. 13).
- God tells you to submit to your brothers and sisters within the body of Christ (Eph. 5).
- God tells husbands and wives to submit to one another (Eph 5). There's a kind of submission parents and children practice with one another. There's also a kind of submission employers and employees practice.

Too often and for too long, too many in the church have applied submission to only one set of people - married women (and in some cases, all women). You have to ignore a lot of your Bible to think submission is only for women or only for married women. So, can I give a word of correction to my brothers out there (in love!). If you're concerned or disappointed or frustrated by what you would call your wife's lack of submission, look yourself in the mirror and ask yourself: Am I a submissive person? Maybe your wife doesn't submit because you've been a bad example to her of what submission looks like. Maybe you haven't helped your wife understand what submission is by your failure and unwillingness to submit to the authorities in your life - like your boss, your church leaders, or governing authorities. If you'd like to receive the blessing of a submissive wife, show her what submission looks like by obeying God yourself. It's not just a command for her; it's a command for you, too. I mean this in all sincerity: what a difference it would make to our wives, brothers, if we set the example of submission and practiced it ourselves - and like I've said, it's something God commands us to do, too.

What is submission? Turn with me to Phil 2. While the word submission is not used in this passage, it is a great picture of it. Let me tell you what we are about to read. Paul is teaching this church how to relate to one another. They are to consider each other's interests and needs more important than their own. They are to put away their selfish desires so they can serve their brothers and sisters. It starts with a certain mindset, Paul says. It takes the mind of Christ, which (get this) Paul says is already yours. When we are made new by God, we're given a new way of thinking and looking at the world. When we become born again, when we are made new by God when we put our faith in Christ, we get the mind of the Spirit and begin looking at the world like God intends us to. Now, it still takes refinement and instruction from God's word, but this new mind is our's in Christ. And what we are about to read is Christ's example of that mindset, which in my view, is where we learn what submission is (READ vs. 5-11).

The first thing that jumps out to me is this issue of equality. When we talk about submission in a marriage, particularly when we read God's words about wives submitting to their own husbands, something inside of us jumps up and says, "That's not fair! That's not equal!" But does submission mean unequal? If a person submits is that some admission that he or she is not equal? Paul says in vs. 6, "though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped." Let me establish a theological foundation here. The One True God of the universe, the God who saved us and secured for us our forgiveness and eternity with him, exists as dynamic relationship of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Our 1 God exists as 3 persons who have different roles and functions, but who are equal in essence. The Father is not better

than the Son; the Spirit does not have a leg up on the Father... they are equal because they are One. But look at the example of Jesus. Though he was God himself (equal with the Father and Spirit in every way), it says he did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped. He didn't count his position, his status something to hold onto or demand. He laid it down.

So, get this: submission never implies inferiority or deficiency. Submission has nothing to do with one person being better than another; it's completely unrelated to the differences of our abilities or gifts. When a husband (a human being created in the image of God) submits himself for the good of his wife (another human being created in the image of God), it's an act within a relationship between two people who are equal. They are both loved, valued, people with inherent dignity by virtue of their humanity. The reason why this is so important is because submission has been used to support or maybe even bolster the idea that one person is better than another. Submission has nothing to do with that.

But it's also true that you won't submit yourself to others in worship to God if you try to hold onto or grasp this equality. If you're constantly looking to establish yourself, put yourself *per se* at the front of the line, chances are you're not going to be interested in lowering yourself. Rather than Jesus holding onto his position of glory and power, what did Jesus do? He did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, (vs. 7) but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men." Look at Jesus' example and examine these words: emptied himself; became a servant; if you jump forward to vs. 8 you see the phrase *humbled himself*. These are absolutely essential attitudes and actions in submission. If you're not willing to humble yourself; if you're unwilling to be a servant, to let go of status, then you will never submit. And if you're not willing to submit, you're not willing to obey God. And if you're not willing to obey God, that means you don't know him and his Spirit does not live inside of you.

It's also important to consider or notice that Jesus did this willingly or voluntarily. The Father didn't make Jesus become a servant; it wasn't an unloving demand. Jesus freely gave himself and became a servant to the glorious purposes of saving the world for the glory of his Father. And submission is the same thing for us: it's voluntary. We can't demand submission; we can't force it. It's always an act of glad obedience to God. That's why ugly demands and manipulative or forceful attempts to make someone be submissive are completely useless and wrong. Attempting to make some submit is not submission, but domination and abusive. Submission is always something someone freely does and if it's not free it's not submission.

Finally, pay special attention to this idea of becoming a servant. At the heart of submission is being a servant. Jesus has some important things to say, of course, about being a servant. Servant's don't demand their own way; they don't look to be first; they sacrifice their desires for others; they sacrifice what's good for them for what's good for others.

Do you remember in John 13 when Jesus is hanging out with his disciples before the Passover meal? Do you remember what he did? He got a basin of water, some linen, and started washing his disciples' feet. Even though he was the master; even though he was the

teacher; he was the great one. But he lowered himself to serve others. It's how our great Savior and Lord is: he's conquering king who won the world by serving.

So, with all of this in mind and with Jesus as our prime example, here's my working definition of submission: *Even though equal in dignity, submission is voluntarily lowering oneself to serve another and/or to respect another's authority to see the purposes of God achieved.*

Now, let me show you from the scriptures why this is so important for all of us to know, especially both husbands and wives. Turn with me to Eph. 5. What I'm about to show you is an example of why it's so important to work to understand an author's intent. Too often, I fear, we read our Bibles as if the words on the page were randomly and mysteriously placed by the Holy Spirit when the heavenly pixie dust originally fell onto the papyri when these letters were written. And so every verse is like fortune cookie we can read without taking into consideration what the verse before or after is saying. No! The author had a plan; he had an idea. The author had a purpose in what he was writing for his particular audience. And we can discover that when we read it thoughtfully. And as the author was writing very purposefully, the Spirit of God was working on him so that what he wrote came from God; what was produced was inspired, breathed out by God.

Look at the big idea Paul is giving the readers in vs. 15. Be careful how you walk, or how you live as a follower of Jesus. Be wise; not unwise. What he does next is explain how you can walk wisely as a follower of Jesus. You won't walk wisely if your intoxicated by alcohol all the time, that's for sure (vs. 18). Instead of being filled with wine, but filled with the Spirit (vs. 18). How will that happen? Well, find many ways to get the word of Christ in you. Get it through instructive songs. Get it through addressing and encouraging each other, again, use songs to help (they help things stick in your memory better) (vs. 19). You walk well when you live with gratitude (vs. 20). And then look at vs. 21; walking well includes submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.

So, notice a couple of things. 1) We are to submit to one another. There's a way that I'm to submit to you; and there's a way that you are to submit to me. This is something we practice with one another, not just certain people at certain times (and others never need to worry about that). 2) Why do we submit to one another? Out of our love and reverence for Christ. Our worship to Jesus motivates my submission to one another. I don't submit to others because they deserve it; I don't submit to others because they're better than me or because I revere them as some super spiritual person. No, I submit to others because I love and respect Jesus.

Now, I want you to notice what Paul does next. Paul now highlights three relationships. The marital relationship, the parent-child relationship, and also the servant-master (or maybe in modern times, we might say the employee-employer relationship). Do you know what he's doing by bringing up these three relationships? He's highlighting three relationships that most of us experience at sometime in our lives and what it means to submit to one another out of reverence to Christ in them. Here's how a husband should submit to his wife and how a wife

should submit to her husband. And here's how a father or a mother submits to his or her child and how a child submits to his parents. Paul even wants to help us understand submission in relation to authority structures connected to our labor and work. Submission permeates every relationship within the church. When we follow Jesus, we are called to follow his example and submit to one another. And when we do in faith, Jesus is honored. And now, next Sunday, we're going to example how husbands submit to wives and wives submit to husbands.

So, what have you learned today? What did God say to you today through his word that has made you say, "Wow! That changes some things for me." I'd love to know; tell me sometime. But more importantly for you, tell someone close to you. When you go home today or when you're having lunch, ask each other what God used to change your thinking or behavior. Or, the next time you're with your friend, strike up a conversation about this topic. I want to challenge you, my brothers, show some initiative and bring up the topic. Maybe start with a confession; "I was really convicted about.... I think God wants me to change...." Use today's message as an occasion to change the culture in your family to one where we talk about the things of God. We talk about what we learn from his word. We question ourselves, our faith, and our actions in light of scripture.