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Ephesians 5 – 6

“Biblical Submission”

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The word submission seems to have become a dirty word today, and the mere mention of the word submission stirs up a lot of emotion in some people, which is most often negative. The primary reason is that people are associating submission with subjugation, which is the idea that one person is superior to another. In Biblical terms, the meaning of submission is very different. The English word submission comes from the Greek word *hupotasso*, which is a combination of *hupo* (under) and *tasso* (to arrange in an orderly manner). So the word submission means, “to arrange under an orderly manner.”

The reason God has implemented structure and order is for the sake of unity and harmony. Just think of what the world would be like if there were no structure, order or authority! There would be anarchy, chaos and disorder of every kind. It’s important to note that just because God has designed structure, order and authority, that doesn’t mean that those things translate to superiority. Unfortunately, people who are on a power trip won’t understand this, but Jesus made it clear to his followers. One example of this would be the time James and John (and their mother!) were vying for the top positions of honor with Jesus in the Kingdom Age. There was a rift between James and John and the other 10 disciples, so Jesus called the 12 together. Jesus, in [Matthew 20:25–28](#) said, “*You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave – just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.*” Jesus made the point that what God is looking for is servant leadership and authority with humility.

So, in the church, when the word submission is used, it shouldn’t strike fear in the hearts of some people or a signal a power trip in the hearts of others. God has designed certain structures of authority with humility for the purpose of order and harmony. No one is better and no one is less from God’s perspective, and Paul emphasized the point when he wrote in [Galatians 3:28](#) that “[t]here is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

Some are tempted to ask about submission and pose questions like these: “Well, what if the other person is not doing their part? What if the other person isn’t even a Christian? Am I still supposed to lead or submit in a Biblical way if the other party doesn’t play by the same rules?”

Husbands and wives might say, “If my husband would love me more, I could submit” or “If my wife would just submit to me, I could love her more.” Employees might say, “If my boss were a better boss, I’d have a better work ethic.” Employers might say, “If my employees had a better work ethic, I’d be a better boss.” Or perhaps, in the highly charged political climate we know today, someone might say, “If my candidate gets elected, then I’ll obey the government!”

It would be easy to make statements and generate questions like these “until the cows come home,” but the point is that how the person who leads with humility or submits with humility conducts himself or herself should not be dependent on the other person; their conduct is to be based on how he or she wants to glorify God.

The only exception to submitting to authority is if you are required to do something that is clearly a violation of the will and the Word of God. There are a number of examples of civil disobedience in the Bible, including: **Daniel 6** (Daniel refused to pray to Nebuchadnezzar), **Exodus 1** (Jewish midwives refused to kill baby boys), and **Acts 4** (Peter and John refused to stop preaching the gospel). These examples help explain why it’s always better to obey God than man. So, there are exceptions, but if you’re a follower of Jesus – whether or not the other person knows God and does things God’s way – you must do things God’s way.

The New Testament has outlined six areas of Biblical submission: to God (**James 4:7**¹), government (**Romans 13:1**²), the church (**Hebrews 13:17**³), marriage, family, and the workplace. This study will focus on the last three, which are found in Paul’s letter to the Ephesians.

Marriage

1. **Ephesians 5:22–33** – *“Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the church – for we are members of his body. ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.’ This is a profound mystery – but I am*

¹ “Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.”

² “Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God.”

³ “Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you.”

talking about Christ and the church. However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband.”

2. Jesus must be the head of the marriage.
 - a. The Lord calls husbands to lead with love.
 - b. The Lord calls wives to submit with respect.
 - c. Husbands and wives should do these as unto the Lord.
3. Husbands and wives should do things as mutually and as prayerfully as possible, especially on the big decisions.
4. When there is an impasse, God has called the husbands to lead.
5. Husbands are called to love their wives “*as Christ loved the church,*” which is a supreme love! **(Ephesians 5:25)**
 - a. Husbands are to love unconditionally, sacrificially, and faithfully.
 - b. It’s interesting to note that there are only three verses for wives and nine verses for husbands!

Family

6. **Ephesians 6:1–4** – “*Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. ‘Honor your father and mother’ – which is the first commandment with a promise – ‘that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth.’ Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.*”
7. Children are to obey and honor their parents.
8. The Greek word for obey is *hupakouo*, which means, “to hear under; to listen attentively; to heed or conform to a command.”
9. This is the only one of the Ten Commandments that has a promise attached to it.
10. Parents who do not help their children learn to obey them and honor them are robbing their children of a promise from God.
11. If children don’t learn how to respect authority at home, they won’t be able to respect authority in the future.
12. Children are not little adults; they’re children, which means there isn’t any need to embrace the modern trend of negotiating with them.
 - a. This applies to children of all ages, as long as they’re still living at home.

13. Fathers, according to Biblical submission (or mothers in the case of an absent dad or a dad who is not a Christian), have been given the charge by God to:
- Be the spiritual leader to train and instruct them in the things of the Lord.
 - Avoid exasperating⁴ their children.

Workplace

14. **Ephesians 6:5–9** – *“Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ. Obey them not only to win their favor when their eye is on you, but like slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart. Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not men, because you know that the Lord will reward everyone for whatever good he does, whether he is slave or free. And masters, treat your slaves in the same way. Do not threaten them, since you know that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no favoritism with him.”*
15. The Greek word *doulos*, means indentured servant or one who provides voluntary service, and earthly masters refers to employers.
16. Employees are called to:
- Respect and obey (submit to) their employers as they would respect and obey Christ.
 - Obey not just to be seen, but obey even when no one is looking.
 - Do the right thing all the time, no matter who’s looking, because character counts and God is always watching.
 - Work as unto the Lord and seek his approval.
17. Employers are called to:
- Treat employees in the same way they would treat Christ (giving them the same respect that they expect).
 - Avoid threatening them (mistreating them or taking advantage of them) because God is the Master of the employees and the employer, and God doesn’t show favoritism.

Discussion Questions

- Review the introduction to the study guide with your group to provide the appropriate background.
- Read **Ephesians 5:21–22, 25** and **6:1, 4-5, 9** to provide an overview for this study.

⁴ <http://1828.mshaffer.com/d/search/word,exasperate> – 1. To anger; to irritate to a high degree; to provoke to rage; to enrage; to excite anger, or to inflame it to an extreme degree. 2. To aggravate; to embitter; as, to exasperate enmity. 3. To augment violence; to increase malignity; to exacerbate; as, to exasperate pain or a part inflamed.

3. Briefly review the first three areas of submission: God ([James 4:7](#)), government ([Romans 13:1](#)), and the church ([Hebrews 13:17](#)).
4. What are some examples of structure and order bringing harmony and unity in government, the church, the family, etc.?
5. Read the account of Dr. Louis Talbot, the former President of Biola University, who was preaching on this passage at Church of the Open Door in Los Angeles, California, in the late 1940's, and the woman who approached him after the service.
 - a. The woman said, "Dr. Talbot, if you were my husband I'd put poison in your tea." Dr. Talbot replied, "Ma'am, if you were my wife, I'd drink it."
 - b. Allow the people in your group to share their experiences regarding times they've heard sermons on submission, as well as what they learned at home when they were growing up.
6. Allow the people in your group to discuss personal examples of times when they came to an impasse in decision making in their marriage.
7. Spend time talking about the ways husbands can demonstrate their love for their wives.
 - a. Pastor Gary suggested one of the most helpful things he's ever learned was to show his love by entering his wife's world, just as Jesus showed his love by entering our world.
8. Discuss ways in which fathers (or single mothers – see #13 above) can lead their children and families.
9. Allow time for discussion and reflection on what it means to be a Christian employee or employer.
10. Close your time in prayer by asking the Holy Spirit to: recognize and accept that God has put structure and authority in place in order to bring about harmony and unity; learn to live in such a way as to model leadership/authority with humility and submission in humility; empower the people in your group to honor God in their marriage, their home and their workplace; help husbands love their wives as Jesus loved the church – unconditionally, sacrificially and faithfully; help parents raise their children to respect authority; help them as employees or employers to honor God in the workplace.