

Submission to Authority

By Jim Davis

Are you struggling with confusion in your life? Do you find that knowing God's will seems an impossible task? Part of the problem may have to do with how you relate to God-given authority. The Bible teaches us that subjection to authority is right and good. How we submit to the authority that God has placed over us and how we learn to exercise authority will greatly effect our usefulness for the glory of God. It will also greatly impact the fulfillment of God's purposes for our lives.

Power is greatly abused in our fallen world. Those who have been given places of authority have responsibility before God for the exercise of a certain amount of power and influence over others. This is true in every divinely established institution. The institution of marriage and family, the institution of church and the institution of government are all declared in the Bible to be established by God. Yet no one would argue that there are many abuses in all of these institutions.

In light of the reality of the clear command from Scripture for submission to authority contrasting with the undeniable abuses, how do we keep a proper perspective on authority? Here are some Biblical principles for submission to authority. We will also consider the benefits of submission to authority. And we will examine some of the living examples of the principles and benefits in the life of Christ.

The Principle of Submission

Instruction is given in the New Testament for four structures of authority. Those structures would be government, business, church, and family. In order for social relationships to function properly instruction is given to family members, workers, citizens, and church members.

Structural Authorities

Government:

“Let every person be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God” (Romans 13:1)

Business:

“Servants, obey in all things your masters according to the flesh; not with eye service, as men-pleasers, but in singleness of heart, fearing God...Masters, give unto your servants that which is just and equal, knowing that you also have a Master in heaven” (Colossians 3:22,4:1).

Church:

“You younger men, likewise be subject to your elders . . . I exhort the elders among you . . . to shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness; nor yet as lording it over those allotted to our charge, but proving to be examples to the flock” (1 Peter 5:5,1-3).

Marriage:

“Wives, be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives and do not be embittered against them” (Colossians 3:18-19).

Family:

“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 BE WELL WITH YOU, AND THAT YOU MAY LIVE LONG ON THE EARTH. And, fathers, do not provoke your children to anger; but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord” (Ephesians 6:1-4).

Many times when you start speaking about submission to authority there is a negative reaction. I liken it to the territorial nature of a mean dog. The dog will not bother you as long as you stay away from its territory but if you get too close you see their teeth and watch the hair bristle and stand up on the back. The issue of authority often brings you into a territorial conflict with people. If your hair is bristling and your teeth are showing right now, my programmed response is that it is God’s word and not mine. But also, it is good to consider some of the benefits of submission. There are many reasons why you should submit to God-given authority.

The Benefits of Submission

The first benefit is that *it pleases God*. God’s word commands it. Children are to obey their parents because it is right (Eph. 6:1) and because it is well-pleasing to the Lord (Col. 3:20). Wives are to be subject because it is fitting (Col. 3:18). Servants are to work heartily, as for the Lord, knowing that from the Lord they will receive reward (Col. 3:23-24). Every person is to be in subjection to the government (Rom. 13).

Another benefit is *protection*. There is the obvious benefit of protection from harm. There are many rewards for good behavior. Citizens who submit to the laws for driving their vehicles avoid the sorrows and expense of damaging property and taking lives. There is the benefit of protection from temptation. For children there is the promise of long and well lived life for honoring their parents. Parents establish rules for their children in order to help them avoid temptation. Children do well to submit to the rules of the home and they avoid many complications in life. The teenager who accepts the parental rules for curfew and dating will enjoy the benefit of protection from pressures to conform to ungodly standards.

God-given authority is one of *the best sources of direction* for a person. Those who are self-willed become confused about God’s purposes for their lives. Rebellion against God becomes manifested in the relationship with God-given authority. The loss of direction for the future leads one to reject wisdom and soon they may begin destructive behavior. This is why Fathers are exhorted not to exasperate or provoke their children so that they lose heart. Those who lose heart under abusive authority and become rebellious will inflict harm upon themselves and others.

Jesus exemplifies the principle and benefit of submission. He demonstrated how to submit to authority. The Bible states that He humbled Himself and became obedient to His Father’s will even unto the death of the cross (Phil 2:8). He paid taxes to the abusive Roman government. He submitted to the corrupt religious authorities. He suffered grave injustice but He kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously (1 Pet 2:23). God incarnate Jesus Christ could have called twelve legions of angels (Mat 26:53) but He

yielded to His Father's will.

It is impossible to properly submit to authority, especially abusive authority, unless you entrust yourself to Him who judges righteously. Believing that God is sovereign and that either here or in eternity He will judge justly is essential to obedience to this principle.

Conclusion

God has a plan and it involves submission. The Bible teaches us both the principle and benefit of submission. Jesus demonstrated both the principle and benefit of submission. Loss of direction and purpose in life may alert us to the problem of a wrong relationship to God-given authority.

In the future we will consider the principle and benefit of the proper exercise of authority. Those who learn humility and service as Christ modeled will be prepared for the responsibility of leadership. We will also consider the Biblical exceptions. When and how should we oppose abusive or tyrannical authority?