

The Heart of Submission

1 Peter 2:18-20

Its really easy to go wrong preaching on this subject of submission. And here is the problem. It is all too common to consider submission as a subject that you teach to others. Perhaps that is never more obvious than the way in which a typical husband would understand submission. In other words, submission is something that I teach my wife. Submission is something that I define for and apply to my wife. Submission is something that impose and enforce with regard to my wife. She is to obey me.

Or, my children. Submission is something that I teach my children. Submission is something that I require from my children. Obedience, period. That is the only issue at hand.

Sadly, I have seen that pattern in the exercise of counseling as well, where it would seem every difficulty or problem in marriage ends up with the duty laid upon a wife to be submissive. And I have seen the great harm that causes to women, the great and grave potential for abuse it provides to men. We put women in grave danger if the only biblical counsel we offer is to impose submission upon a woman. I've seen that counsel offered in the face of physical abuse that could become life threatening, and even sexual abuse that should be considered criminal.

Sometimes, that same understanding is found in Elders within the church. Submission is something that I require of you, that an Elder imposes upon someone else, even under threat of discipline. Everything would be find as long as you simply do whatever I say. Many a man would use that standard as the definition of his leadership, and I've known some of them. And maybe all of that sounds right and accurate. But that is not how

the Bible teaches submission.

Submission is not a subject that the Bible addresses to the person in authority, as the be-all and end-all of what it means to exercise authority. Specifically, the command to a husband is not a command to enforce submission. Rather, that command is to love. To love your wife in such a way as to die for her, to lay down your life for her, even as Jesus did. Jesus didn't abdicate his position of authority, but he laid down his life for those over whom he was responsible to lead. He loved so much, so fully, that he laid down his life for his sheep. He was a shepherd, not a prosecutor. A shepherd who, in the exercise of authority, loved his sheep. A shepherd who died for his sheep.

And even with respect to children, even though parents are given the right to discipline their children in order to train them in the ways in which they should go—even so, the command to fathers is a prohibition, isn't it?

Eph. 6:4 "And you, fathers, do not provoke your children to wrath, but bring them up in the training and admonition of the Lord."

Don't exasperate! Don't exercise your authority in a way that exasperates those who must live under your authority. It's a warning, a prohibition. In other words, don't be heavy-handed. Don't be harsh. Don't be overbearing. Don't be unjust or unfair. Don't play favorites. Don't be selfish, or proud or stubborn. Don't lose your temper. Don't be unreasonable, or lack mercy.

Similarly, Elders are given essentially the same warning.

1 Peter 5:2 "Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; 3 nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock."

My point is this, that as we study the subject of submission, this is not a subject that you ought to think about in relation to what you might impose on others. This subject is a matter of your own heart, and that's where I want to start this morning, my first point.

I. SUBMISSION IS AN ATTITUDE OF THE HEART.

Your heart. And my heart.

Two weeks ago we studied submission with respect the civil government, and we made applications last week to what it means to be free.

v.13-17

This morning we apply this principle to the context of servants and masters, though as I have already introduced the subject, our focus today will be upon the heart. Peter writes about slaves and masters, and I will say something about that later, but notice how he goes deeper than the mere surface level of what we normally think about with regard to submission.

v.18-20

And just to keep all of this in context, let me read the verses that we will study next week, which with such encouragement point us to Jesus himself.

v.21-25

So let me begin today with that focus upon your own heart. Before I even try to explain what Peter is teaching with respect to slavery, let's consider the virtue of the attitude of submission as it applies to your own soul. So notice carefully verse 18. Not just, "Servants, be submissive to your masters." But what Peter adds, "with all fear." That's the New King James translation. The NASB, the NIV and the ESV have "with all respect."

So submission is,

A. A matter of respect.

In other words, not mere obedience. Not merely doing what you are told, begrudgingly, hesitatingly or half-heartedly. But with respect in your heart. And the Greek word is the word "fear." In other words, deep respect. Sincere honor, even reverence.

Ultimately, that means fear of God. We are called to submission as a matter of honor and reverence toward God. One commentator puts it this way, "It is the spirit of reverence toward [God] that induces respect and faithfulness to duty in the sphere of human relationships."

Submission is a matter of your willingness to honor God!
Even the submission of slaves to their masters.

Let me use another illustration. I will admit, and confess, that I don't always submit to the authority of the government with respect to highway speed limits as a matter of respect or honor. Submission, yes. Though, admittedly, not perfectly. Honor to authority, yes. But not always reverence for God. I obey, but perhaps not as a matter of respect. I just don't want to get a ticket.

Children, I expect you sometimes obey your parents because you don't want to get punished. And that's good, to obey. But God wants even more. God wants you to obey for a better reason, because you want to honor God! And teenagers, you who are able to think about why you will submit and why you will obey, this is crucial for you to consider. Not begrudging submission to your parents, but true, godly respect. A willingness on your part to submit, because of a willing choice that you make. It's about your heart.

That's what submission is all about. The desire to give honor to God, to respect God, to fear God.

And, therefore, to respect and honor and fear the authorities that he has established on the earth.

Let me remind you that submission, in its broadest context, applies to us all. There are specific examples that we identify, but most broadly, remember Paul's words in Ephesians 5 that we are to submit to one another. Let me read that whole passage,

Eph. 5:17 "Therefore do not be unwise, but understand what the will of the Lord is. 18 And do not be drunk with wine, in which is dissipation; but be filled with the Spirit, 19 speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord, 20 giving thanks always for all things to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, 21 submitting to one another in the fear of God."

Again the emphasis upon the fear of God. The ESV puts it, "submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ." And that is the point I am pressing this morning. Submission is not just a matter of your behavior, but it is a matter of your heart. It is a matter of respect. And in that context, it is,

B. A matter of conscience.

In other words, it is a matter of your relationship with God. It is a matter of morality, a matter of your moral responsibility as a Christian. A matter of moral goodness. This is not a matter of indifference. This is not a matter of choice. Not something you can ignore if you want. This is a vital element of godly Christianity. It is a matter of your standing before God. Notice,

v.19 "For this is commendable, if because of conscience toward God one endures grief, suffering wrongfully."

It is a matter of your conscience before God, and if you are wrestling with the lack of submission in your heart, then that is matter of primary importance that you must address today, right here and now. Nothing else should be allowed to come first. It is a matter of your relationship to God, a matter of your conscience in being able to stand before God. It is a matter of sin.

Are you headstrong? Strong-willed. Don't be misled by those seemingly innocuous labels. They define sin. If there is unconfessed rebelliousness in your heart, an unwillingness to submit in respect to the authorities God puts over you, then I urge you not to let another moment pass without confessing to God that sin, that he might then forgive you through the blood of the Lord Jesus. And pray for the grace to be able to put the sin to death.

As a matter of honor toward God, as a matter of your own conscience, God calls you to be be submissive,
v.21 "For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps."

Now, having said all of that, notice the motivation that Peter provides. This isn't a fatalistic sort of helplessness that leaves you without hope. Instead, Peter defines for us the blessing of submission. Namely, that,

II. SUBMISSION IS PRAISEWORTHY.

Here's the motivation. Here's the blessing. Here's the reward. Verse 19, "this is commendable." Likewise, verse 20, "this is commendable before God."

I like that translation. I think it gets at the very heart of the meaning of the Greek work. This is commendable. The NASB translates, "this finds favor." And that word for favor is the word

for grace. This finds grace, or as the ESV puts it, “this is a gracious thing.”

This is a good thing, in the sight of God! This is a thing which God commends! This is a thing which God judges to be favorable. This is praiseworthy! So God will praise you. God will commend you. You who exercise submission in your life.

And to make the point even stronger, note that Peter emphasizes submission to unjust suffering.

v.19

A. God commends us for enduring unjust suffering.

That’s the point! Submission, as you would consider your own heart, isn’t dependent upon the righteousness of the one to whom you submit. Even in the case of a servant, a slave, submission to a harsh master is commendable!

v.18

Peter makes an obvious point in verse 20, doesn’t he? If you get in trouble because you did something wrong, there is no virtue in that. If you are punished justly, well...you are just getting what you deserve. But verse 20 goes farther,

v.20

The commendation from God is, in fact, in the endurance of injustice.

Thankfully, God has given us a lot of protection from injustice with our civil government, which God established to be an agent of his own wrath. So this call to submission does not mean that you are forbidden to seek the protection of the civil government when necessary. To be specific, if a woman comes to me for counsel, as a victim of physical abuse or even in danger of

physical abuse, I will recommend a civil restraining order every time. Immediately. If a man threatens a woman, they he needs to be restrained by the civil authorities which God has instituted.

But there are times when suffering will nevertheless come. In God’s providence, what we might call his hard providence, sometimes that protection isn’t provided. Even physical protection. And sometimes we have no recourse. Sometimes the one exercising authority over us is harsh, and we suffer wrongfully. We weep with those who must suffer in that way. And we can give this encouragement, that God offers his own, specific, personal commendation. His own blessing. This finds favor, it is a gracious thing, “if because of conscience toward God one endures grief, suffering wrongfully.”

And to go even one step further, to do so patiently. The blessing is not just to the one who suffers, the blessing of God is not simply for enduring suffering, but again, to address the deepest matters of the heart, the blessing is for the one who remains steadfast in patience.

B. God commends us for patience in unjust suffering.

Again, not just mere endurance. But patience. Can I read for you,

James 1:2 “My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, 3 knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. 4 But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing.”

So God uses unjust suffering as a testing of your faith, to build and strengthen your faith, “you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing.” Surely that is his blessing, his commendation, and the favor he bestows upon those who endure suffering with patience.

People of God, submission is an attitude of your heart. And submission is praiseworthy. And then, thirdly,

III. SUBMISSION IN PRACTICE.

Peter's specific example.

A. Submission to the authority of masters.

It is definitely worth noting that, in writing Scripture under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Peter doesn't call for the abolition of slavery. He is not here addressing the realm of political influence and government. Which is not to say that Christians ought not to be engaged in the pursuit of governmental reform. There is nothing here to forbid Christian citizens of earthly kingdoms to pursue the exercise of righteousness within the political workings of those kingdoms. Such an endeavor is proper and profitable. We are to be salt and light.

But the call of the gospel is something very different and distinct from the call to political reform. Thus the call to the Christian slave is,

A. Submission to the authority of masters.

Just consider what Paul writes to his Christian brother Philemon about his other Christian brother, the Philemon's slave Onesimus.

Philemon 10 "I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten while in my chains, 11 who once was unprofitable to you, but now is profitable to you and to me. 12 I am sending him back. You therefore receive him, that is, my own heart, 13 whom I wished to keep with me, that on your behalf he might minister to me in my chains for the gospel. 14 But without your consent I wanted to do nothing, that your good deed might not be by compulsion, as it were, but voluntary. 15 For perhaps he

departed for a while for this purpose, that you might receive him forever, 16 no longer as a slave but more than a slave--a beloved brother, especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord. 17 If then you count me as a partner, receive him as you would me. 18 But if he has wronged you or owes anything, put that on my account. 19 I, Paul, am writing with my own hand. I will repay--not to mention to you that you owe me even your own self besides. 20 Yes, brother, let me have joy from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in the Lord. 21 Having confidence in your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say."

Paul sends Onesimus back. Submission to the authority of masters.

Similarly,

Eph. 6:5 "Bondservants, be obedient to those who are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in sincerity of heart, as to Christ; 6 not with eyeservice, as men-pleasers, but as bondservants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart, 7 with goodwill doing service, as to the Lord, and not to men, 8 knowing that whatever good anyone does, he will receive the same from the Lord, whether he is a slave or free."

That's our Christian duty. And let me emphasize, while offering no moral justification for the institution of slavery as we historically identify it, there are additional forms of slavery that continue today. Military service requires a form of slavery. You enlist, you are commissioned in the military, and you are duty bound to fulfill your commitment, upon threat of punishment. Even imprisonment. Military preparedness requires such an arrangement.

Similarly, those to a lesser degree, your employment

contracts. If you sign a contract, you are bound to honor it! Fulfill it. It's really that simple. If you are employed without a written contract, still you are obliged to fulfill the duties of your employment, as a matter of conscience! As a matter of the heart.

Surely, most jobs permit you to resign and allow you to leave, but nonetheless, as long as you are an employee, your employer does occupy the position of master. As a Christian, for conscience sake, you are to submit to their authority, even in the context of injustice.

B. Submission in the context of injustice.

I don't say those words lightly. There is nothing flippant at all in them. Rather, the reality can be very grievous. Indeed, many of our brothers and sisters in Christ are called upon to exercise such patience unto death. There is suffering in many countries of our world today, suffering imposed unjustly upon Christians for the sake of Christ. And we in this country are beginning to feel just a tiny little bit of that danger. We may very well feel more of it in the years to come.

And here is the necessary encouragement, that God commends those who suffer unjustly, and who endure it patiently. And I believe this is the chief theme of this whole letter of 1 Peter. We read Peter's own summary in,

1 Peter 4:12 "Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you; 13 but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ's sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy. 14 If you are reproached for the name of Christ, blessed are you, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. On their part He is blasphemed, but on your part He is glorified. 15 But let none of you suffer as a murderer, a thief, an evildoer, or as a busybody in other people's matters. 16 Yet if

anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in this matter."

It is Jesus who said,

Mat. 5:10 "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, For theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 11 "Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. 12 "Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you."

With that thought of our Lord Jesus, let me return this morning to the focus upon the heart of submission. The call of the gospel to a demonstrate the gentle and quiet spirit of a godly heart willing to be submissive with all fear and reverence, willing to honor and respect the exercise of authority in their life which God has ordained. Even when that submission includes the circumstance of suffering unjustly.

To this you were called, as we will study next week in verse 21. With such great encouragement and hope,

v.21 "For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps: 22 "Who committed no sin, Nor was deceit found in His mouth."

So here is what really matters. Not whether or not you suffer unjustly, but that you remember and believe that when Jesus suffered unjustly, he fulfilled God's purpose in the promise of the gospel for our salvation. So the next time you must suffer unjustly, let this promise of the gospel be your encouragement and your hope, the promise Peter is quoting from Isaiah 53,

Is. 53:4 "Surely He has borne our griefs And carried our sorrows; Yet we esteemed Him stricken, Smitten by God, and

afflicted. 5 But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was
bruised for our iniquities; The chastisement for our peace was
upon Him, And by His stripes we are healed. 6 All we like sheep
have gone astray; We have turned, every one, to his own way;
And the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all.”