

Question: Does the Bible teach that wives should submit to their husbands? If so, then must she submit even if he abuses her?

The Bible does teach wives to submit to their husbands, but the submission taught in the Bible was never intended to force a woman to take physical, verbal or emotional abuse from her husband. To insist that a wife must remain in submission to a husband who abuses her is a misuse of what is taught. This one statement about the marriage relationship should not be isolated from the whole of God's teachings about marriage. God created marriage to be a sacred, loving and committed relationship in which the married partners work together with the highest respect for one another's safety and needs.

For example, the first time wives are told to "submit to your husbands" is in the context of a Christian marriage where both the husband and the wife are living in submission to Christ first. Thus, husbands are told to "love your wives just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her" and "each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself. After all, no one ever hated his own body, but feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the church" (Ephesians 5:21-33). In a fallen world, even Christian husbands have not fully become what they ought to be; but if they are seeking to grow in their submission to Christ, they will certainly never expect their wives to submit to abuse from them.

In a second passage, the apostle Peter instructed Christian wives about submission to unbelieving husbands (1 Peter 3:1-7). This statement is in the context that speaks of how Jesus suffered unjustly for our sakes. In the same way, Peter commented about women at that time who were facing persecution to get them to deny their Christian faith. This persecution was not only from unbelievers in the community but also from their unbelieving husbands. There was the possibility that these wives could influence their husbands to also believe in Christ by their godly behavior. However, this was very different from what some women are facing today. Meaningful suffering because of one's faith is different from taking abuse from someone who sees himself as having a right to do anything to his wife he pleases.

In addition, we need to see that there are always limitations placed upon any submission of one human

to another. The instruction for a wife to submit to her husband never means that she submit to any ungodly request. For example, she must never engage in stealing and/or lying even if her husband demands it of her. God has also taught us to be submissive to ruling authorities (1 Peter 2:13-17; Romans 13:1-7); but in numerous examples in the Bible, God blessed people who refused to obey men when to do so meant they would disobey God (Exodus 1:15-22; Daniel 3; Acts 5:17-32). In the same way, a wife's submission to Jesus Christ must come before submission to her husband.

The creation story teaches that both men and women were equally created "in the image of God" (Genesis 1:27). Also, husbands are told to "be considerate" as they live with their wives; for although the woman may be physically smaller or weaker than the husband, she is equally an heir with him of "the gracious gift of life" (1 Peter 3:7; cf. Galatians 3:28). Therefore, we should not see biblical submission as something a husband can demand of his wife; instead, submission is something a wife chooses to give. She submits to her husband as an equal with the power to give submission and not because she is in any way inferior and has no choice. The use of abusive force does not result in true submission but in resented slavery.

Jesus wants us to do all we can to maintain the commitment we made to our marriages (Matthew 19:4-6). No one should be seeking a reason to break his or her marriage vows for anything less than serious provocation. The Lord God stated, "I hate divorce;" but, in the next sentence he added, "I hate a man covering himself with violence" (Malachi 2:16). In view of these things, I would urge that a wife and husband together immediately seek a professionally-trained counselor at the first hint of abusive behavior. By beginning early, one may be able to prevent further abuse and build a healthy and lasting relationship that will bless both husband and wife. However, if the abuse continues and increases, God does not expect wives to submit to abuse that may endanger their lives and perhaps the lives of their children.

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