

Unraveling the Oft-Twisted Messages About Marital Submission

Hear the word “submission” and “marriage” in the same sentence, and you probably feel something visceral rising up inside your soul. Your heart may explode with anger, terror or guilt, or collapse in hopelessness and resignation. Surely that’s not what God meant when He used those words together in the New Testament. So what should submission in Christian marriage look like?

Yes, Paul wrote in at least two places, “Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands” (Col. 3:18; see also Eph. 5:22). And the enemy has twisted those words and used them to bring destruction to human beings and marriages for centuries.

Let me acknowledge the trauma caused by distortions of those words. Men have too often used them to dominate and control women, treating them as inferior, forcing sex on demand, and using them as justification for physical, emotional and spiritual violence. Women have given in, lived with guilt, failed to “grow up” emotionally and spiritually and experienced levels of violation that make God both weep and rise up in holy anger. Some women have rebelled, seeing no other way to survive.

A couple years ago, I became acquainted with a pastor’s family in my town where the wife daily cringed in fear and the children ran away from home as teenagers to escape the domination and control. There are thousands of others. Friends, this is wrong! To borrow James’ comment from another context, “These things ought not to be so” (James 3:10).

Enough of the dirty and twisted distortions. Let’s consider what God *does* mean by these directions related to submission

in Christian marriage.

A Brief Biblical Perspective

The primary passage this comes from is Ephesians 5:

... being submissive to one another in the fear of God. Wives, be submissive to your own husbands as unto the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, just as Christ is the head and Savior of the church, which is His body. But as the church submits to Christ, so also let the wives be to their own husbands in everything (Eph. 5:21-24).

Note these things:

1. The first direction is for all believers to mutually submit to one another. That leaves no place for manipulation, control, violence or domination by anyone, husbands and wives included. The posture of every believer is to seek to meet each other's needs, not to see any other human being as being there to meet your needs.
2. Christ is the example—for both husband and wife. How does Christ treat the church? Certainly not with violence or control, but with tenderness and sacrificial loving care. The same word “submit” is also used of Christ, as in how He is submitted to the Father. (See 1 Cor. 15:27-28) Certainly there is no hierarchical domination in the Godhead. Christ is here the example of how a wife should relate to her husband.
3. The husband is directed to love his wife as Christ loves the church (Eph. 5:25-29). In this chapter, Paul spends more time talking to husbands about their duties than he does talking to wives. Men are to treat their wives with the sacrificial love, tenderness and the kind of cherishing nourishing care that Christ has demonstrated. This is the ideal example of servant leadership.

Perhaps the greater number of words directing husbands how to love their wives was God's way of addressing the sinful tendency of many men to either twist their leadership role into one of domination and control, or to abdicate their leadership role entirely. And certainly, the repeated direction to wives to submit to their husbands speaks to a man's primary need for respect (Eph. 5:33).

What Healthy Submission Looks Like

So how does this translate into modern Christian marriages? What does submission in Christian marriage look like?

Remember that Christ is the example we are following. Take Christ submitting to His Father as the example of how a wife should submit to her husband. And take how Christ treats the church as the example of how a husband should relate to his wife.

For wives, healthy submission does *not* mean accepting bad behavior, allowing abuse or violence, giving in to sex on demand or making your husband responsible for your relationship with God. It *does* mean offering respect to your husband as a gift, building him up, honoring him, following his lead when possible, and allowing yourself to be the catalyst God uses in your husband's life. It means maximizing what you have to offer the bigger purpose God has for your marriage.

For husbands, healthy submission does not mean you force your wife to comply with your demands, or use violence or intimidation to pressure her into doing what you want. It *does* mean you step up with the kind of leadership Christ demonstrated, do the heavy lifting and shoulder the responsibility to take your wife and family into God's presence. It means you become the increasingly trustworthy and loving kind of person that enables your wife to want to submit. Like Christ, you give of yourself for your wife's

needs.

What if your spouse is not functioning like that? Based on the principles Paul outlines in 1 Corinthians 7:12-15 and Romans 12:18, you do your part to live in peace. (It never works to force or nag your spouse into changing anyway.) If there is serious abuse going on, get some help. Check your own spirit for anger, control or rebellion. Keep growing your own character before God and invite (not force) your spouse to come along.

As demonstrated by Christ and the Father, submission for the Christian is not about hierarchy or control. The opening statement to this passage, "being submissive to one another," puts it all in perspective. Follow Christ in doing that, and your marriage will thrive.

Your Turn: What distorted messages about submission have you been burdened with? Does seeing Christ's example in this way help you understand submission in Christian marriage? Leave a comment below. {eo}

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