

Living Such Good Lives - Submission

By Louisa Pfitzner.

What is your mental picture of a submissive person? I immediately think of a stereotypical 50s housewife, a stereotype lampooned in movies such as 'The Stepford Wives'. These women are depicted as doll-like women. They are incredibly attractive but also passive and docile. And it seems all part of some plot by their husbands to reverse the advances of feminism.

This stereotype is obviously a very narrow picture of what submission is like but more importantly a very narrow picture of whom the idea of submission applies to. In fact submission is called upon from every human being, angel and power in the universe. In order to substantiate this claim we are going to take a look at the book of 1 Peter.

The letter 1 Peter is all about God's people standing firm and doing good in the face of opposition, knowing all that God has done and will do for them in Christ [Caroline Spencer, unpublished].

Peter writes to Christian people living throughout Northwest Asia Minor which roughly corresponds to the country of Turkey today. He writes to 'God's elect, strangers in the world, scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Asia and Bithynia,' [1 Peter 1:1]. He is writing to them as though they are New Testament exiles. Just as during the Babylonian and Assyrian exiles, the Israelites lived scattered among the nations, rather than as a sovereign nation, so also Christian people live scattered among the nations. Peter is writing to equip these Christian people for life lived among pagan people, looking forward to their restoration as a nation in heaven. Life lived as an exile has certain pressures and hostilities and Peter is encouraging the Christians to persevere as they look forward to heaven.

Peter spends the first part of the book 1:3-2:10 looks at their identity as God's chosen people. The second part of the book 2:11 to the end looks at how the people of God interact with the world. The verses that summarise this section are 1 Peter 2:11-12.

Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul. 12Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us [1 Peter 2:11-12].

The rest of the book illustrates just how they are to live good lives in a hostile environment. And I think you'd agree that it's surprising that one of the most significant ways that they can do this is through submission in a variety of contexts.

Take the time now to open your Bible and have a skim through the book of 1 Peter and see if you can find all the contexts in which God commands his people to submit.

- **Submit yourselves** for the Lord's sake to every authority instituted among men: whether to the king, as the supreme authority, or to governors... [1Peter 2:13-14a]
- Slaves, **submit yourselves** to your masters with all respect, not only to those who are good and considerate, but also to those who are harsh [1Peter 2:18].
- Wives, in the same way **be submissive** to your husbands so that, if any of them do not believe the word, they may be won over without words by the behaviour of their wives, when they see the purity and reverence of your lives [1Peter 3:1-2].
- It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at God's right hand—with angels, authorities and powers **in submission to him** [1Peter 3:21-22].
- Young men, in the same way **be submissive** to those who are older [1Peter 5:5].

We are going to focus on four of the characteristics of submission which are discernable from these references. These characteristics will also help us see just how it is that submission is such an important part of living good lives among the pagans.

1) Submission has a **Voluntary** nature

Grammatically, the command in 1 Peter 2:13 governs all the subsequent commands which follow. This means that as the first one is 'submit yourselves' then it would be better if all the other commands regarding submission took the same form. Thus, the 'be submissive' of 3:1 and 5:5 would be better rendered as 'submit yourselves'.

This is significant because one of the features of a biblical understanding of submission is that it is a reflexive thing – it's something you do to yourself. You submit yourself to another. It's not something which is demanded of you or forced by the other. Rather submission is a voluntary and willing decision on the part of the one who is called upon by God to submit. It is commanded by God, but not by the other person or authority.

Any Biblical understanding of submission will include this reflexive nature and is tied to the responsibility of the one who is being submitted to. A good definition which reflects the Biblical material on the subject is: Submission is the voluntary and willing acceptance of the leadership and responsibility of another [Claire Smith, unpublished]. This willing acceptance means that our attitude really counts. This is what separates submission from obedience. A grumbling or grudging obedience that has been coerced does not reflect what is on view. Rather, submission is a voluntary commitment to accepting another's leadership.

2) Submission is **uniVersal**

Submission is universal in that everyone has to submit in one context or another. God's creation is an ordered one. God has designated for some to be responsible for exercising authority, others

are to accept that authority willingly. Just as ‘too many cooks spoil the broth’, this world does not work when everyone is in charge. In fact, every Christian is called upon to submit in one context or another. This is not a topic restricted to married women.

As we saw when we investigated 1 Peter there are a number of ordered relationships on view with a special command to the one who has the task of submitting. These relationships can be illustrated as follows in Table 1.

Table1

	“Submitter”		“Submittee”
2:13-17	general population	submit yourselves to	every authority, king and governors
2:18-25	slaves	submit yourselves to	masters
3:1-7	wives	submit yourselves to	husbands
5:1-6	young men	submit yourselves to	elders
3:21b-22	angels, authorities & powers	submit yourselves to	Jesus Christ

Let’s think about what this table and these relationships of submission mean for us today.

It means that I need to have a willingness to accept the leadership and authority of the government of the country I reside in, my employer, my husband and my church leaders as those situations pertain to me. And as a Christian I certainly need to submit to God [James 4:7].

In terms of employment today, while the slave/master relationship is not quite the same as the employee/employer relationship (an employee has the freedom to leave and change her employment which a slave did not), there is still the principle which is to submit to those who have authority over you in your employment.

It is also important to know that there are several differences between what slavery was like in New Testament times and in America in the 18th century. Slavery in New Testament times was not related to race, was not necessarily permanent (most slaves were set free by the age of 30), could be used to pay off a debt, and was not necessarily menial. A slave could be an architect, an accountant or a philosopher [Rupprecht, 1993, 881]. So in this way, the master/slave relationship is closer to the employer/employee relationship than we might think.

You will also notice that young men are called upon to submit themselves to elders, in the context of the church family. Not all men are called upon to lead and exercise responsibility in the church. Some are given the particular responsibility of being overseers of God’s flock [1 Peter 5:2]. Those men who are not given that responsibility are called upon to accept the leadership of those who have. Similarly in Hebrews all Christians, and not just the young men, are called upon to ‘obey

your leaders and submit to their authority' [Hebrews 13:17].

I need to submit as a Christian and a citizen, I may also need to submit as a wife or an employee if that is relevant to my context. Submission is universal: it is for everyone.

3) Submission has an inherent **Vulnerability**

Inherent in accepting someone else's responsibility and leadership is that they might abuse that responsibility. There is a vulnerability that goes along with submission that can make it such a struggle. Authorities will sometimes get it wrong and at times abuse their power to a greater or lesser extent. This means that those who are submitting to these authorities are in an inherently vulnerable position.

The letter of 1 Peter was written in a hostile context so it is not as though Peter was unaware of the potential for that vulnerability to be exploited.

In the case of slaves and masters, slaves are to submit themselves "not only to [masters] who are good and considerate, but also to those who are harsh. For it is commendable if a man bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because he is conscious of God. But how is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it?" [1 Peter 2:18b-20]

Similarly when Peter comes to address wives, he specifically addresses wives who are married to unbelievers, men who surely do not have God and his priorities in mind. Thus it is not sufficient for women to say that they will submit as long as their husband is leading them in a considerate, godly way. Submission it seems, is not conditional on the performance or character of the person to whom submission is due. 'Wives, in the same way be submissive to your husbands so that, if any of them do not believe the word, they may be won over without words by the behaviour of their wives, when they see the purity and reverence of your lives' [1 Peter 3:1-2a].

The possible abuse inherent in a submissive context is a significant barrier in terms of obeying this command from God. And people have tried to rob these commands of their force by limiting their application to only those times when the authorities, masters, husbands and elders are in line with God's will and word. 'They argue that our submission is first and foremost to God and that any authority which contradicts Biblical teaching need not be followed. So then, when submission becomes inconvenient or difficult it's conveniently put to one side. But the Bible does not neatly qualify the extent of our submission to authority.' [Mary Kassian, 1990, 37-38]

So what do we do if we sincerely believe that we find ourselves in a situation where obedience to authority directly contradicts God's Word? How can we still give Peter's commands the weight they require, as commands given to Christians in a hostile environment, but still be obedient to God?

The first thing to do is to appeal to that authority. We are fortunate to live in a context where we can on the whole approach our governments, employers, husbands, and church leaders and at least register our difficulty with their decision or proposal, and possibly lobby or try and persuade

them to another course of action. Then we need to accept the consequences of whatever disobedience entails.

It is helpful to have a look at what Peter himself did on an occasion when obedience to an human authority would have meant disobedience to God. Open your Bible and read through Acts 5:17-42.

In summary: the apostles are in jail. An angel of the Lord frees them from the jail and commands them to preach the gospel in the temple courts. The Sanhedrin challenges the apostles for their disobedience, having commanded the apostles not to preach in Jesus' names. Peter and the apostles reply that they must obey God rather than men. The apostles are flogged and released. The apostles leave rejoicing because they have been counted worthy of suffering for Jesus' sake, but continue to proclaim the good news that Jesus is the Christ.

In particular their experience teaches us because: Thanks to the angel of the Lord, Peter and the apostles had a clear mandate from God for what they were doing. We of course, have God's word, the Scriptures.

Peter and the apostles appealed to the high priest and the Sanhedrin saying 'we must obey God rather than men... we are witnesses of these things.' Obedience to God always trumps obedience to other authorities, when there is a clash.

The apostles accept the consequences for their disobedience. They rejoice in their flogging, as they were able to suffer because of their obedience to Jesus Christ. Sometimes the consequences of disobedience to human authorities have seen Christians killed or incarcerated.

We have to remember that even angels, authorities and powers (3:21-22) are in submission to the risen Lord Jesus, at God's right hand. And any earthly rulers are caretaker rulers until Jesus' return. Their rule is temporary. They will only rule until Jesus returns. And it is in their best interests that their rule closely follows the rule that is to come. They'll have to answer for the exercise of their leadership and responsibility.

We may need to submit in a variety of contexts. As the vulnerable party in these situations we need to entrust ourselves to God for ultimate vindication. In cases where we are forced to disobey the authorities that are over us because of our obedience to Jesus Christ, we need to be prepared to accept the consequences.

If you are suffering in a situation of domestic violence or some significantly abusive situation then you need to act to protect yourself and your children, and it is best also for your husband's spiritual good for him to repent. These tragic situations are never straightforward and there are no easy answers. But I encourage you to seek the pastoral wisdom of a mature Christian woman or your pastor, and if necessary, get professional help and intervention, working towards forgiveness with a view to reconciliation if that is appropriate.

4) Submission has an inherent **Value**

Peter does not simply give us the command to submit ourselves to various authorities. He also gives us the rationale for doing so. There are a number of consequences that mean our submission has inherent value.

a) It brings God glory

The overarching purpose of the second half of Peter's letter was to instruct the Christians how to live in a hostile environment. The rationale for doing so was that the Christians would 'live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us' [1 Peter 2:12]. God will ultimately be glorified by the good lives of his people, and particularly as they entrust themselves to his care and vindication. God's people demonstrate their trust in him in the midst of vulnerability that comes from willingly accepting the leadership and responsibility of the authorities over them.

b) It is commendable before God

Peter in his word to slaves focuses particularly on submitting to a harsh master. He is well aware of the vulnerability, that the slave will have to bare the pain of unjust suffering. But he also highlights the value: that this is commendable before God.

For it is commendable if a man bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because he is conscious of God. But how is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it? But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God. To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps' [1 Peter 2:19-21].

In fact not only is this commendable before God, but it is also to what we have been called. Jesus' suffering and death, is the example of the truly innocent one in the hands of corrupt mankind. He is the ultimate example of suffering for doing good and enduring it. He bore the insults and the beatings at the hands of the Jews and the Romans, without retaliation or threats. His suffering is significantly different from ours in that it won us our salvation 'by his wounds you have been healed' [1 Peter 2:24]. However he left us the example, that we should follow in his steps. As our Lord suffered unjustly, so we his followers are called to no less.

The vulnerability that our submission entails may lead to unjust suffering. This is what our Lord endured and left for our example. And our endurance in unjust suffering is commended by God.

c) It can win over without words husbands who do not believe the Word

'Wives, in the same way be submissive to your husbands so that, if any of them do not believe the word, they may be won over without words by the behaviour of their wives, when they see the purity and reverence of your lives' [1 Peter 3:1-2].

The submission of a wife although counter-cultural has the potential to commend the gospel to her unbelieving husband. This is surely what the wife would most desire. Her husband, who is

otherwise destined for punishment, may be won over through her submission. It does not mean that the wife cannot share the gospel with her husband. Rather if he has heard the word and has not believed it, a wife need not despair but can continue to live the message. Ultimately the purity and reverence of her life is likely to speak more loudly than nagging her husband about it. A willing acceptance of the leadership of her husband seems a smaller sacrifice in the scheme of things.

Winning over your husband without words through your behaviour. That kind of submission is valuable indeed.

Submission is a godly attitude that is often maligned by Christian and non-Christian people alike. Yet it is an attitude that is essential for all Christians in one context or another. It is not an easy attitude to cultivate because it has an inherent vulnerability that can be abused in this fallen world. Yet it has great value in bringing glory to God and the potential to be part of winning over unbelieving people to Jesus Christ. When you think submission don't think 'Stepford Wife', think Voluntary, uniVersal, Vulnerability and Valuable in God's sight.

Sources

The Stepford Wives. A 2004 Paramount Film directed by Frank Oz.

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