

HELP!

I WANT TO MODEL
SUBMISSION IN
MARRIAGE

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ISBN

Paper: 978-1-63342-060-1

ePub: 978-1-63342-061-8

Mobi: 978-1-63342-062-5

Published by **Shepherd Press**

P.O. Box 24

Wapwallopen, PA 18660

www.shepherdpress.com

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INTRODUCTION

As a counselor, in preparation for writing this mini-book, I surveyed over one hundred single women, wives, homemakers, and professional businesswomen to examine their definitions of submission. I think their replies are insightful and helpful so I have scattered them throughout to encourage your heart as we consider what it means to model biblical submission in marriage.¹

Submission is the privilege of living my life according to the Lord's plan and purpose for relationships. Its practice is an act of loving obedience to the Lord's commandments regarding our relationship with our spouses ... My honor to the Lord may be measured by the submission I show my husband. This act of submission does not mean that I am inferior to my husband in any way,

*intellectually or spiritually. I am simply
lining up under the authority ...*

(HD)

We'll explore this in more depth in the next chapter, but for now let's acknowledge that submission can be challenging at times.

"I can't do this any longer. Why do I have to submit to him?" The woman sitting across from me was broken and confused. In her marriage, she felt that her opinions didn't count, her ideas were made fun of, and she had to ask her husband for the smallest amount of money that she wanted to spend. It just didn't seem fair.

Other wives come to me sincerely wanting to understand the biblical command to submit to their husbands. They are often confused about what submission requires and ask, "Shouldn't he have to earn my respect and submission?" So, what is true biblical submission? How does a strong woman learn to submit?

Maybe you have come to the place in your marriage where you have lost all desire to submit to your husband. Others seem to be able to have a good attitude about it, so you ask, "Why can't my husband be like hers?"

My heart aches for you. When I married, I didn't have a clue what submission meant. I read

any and every book I could find or that anyone recommended on the subject in an effort to get along with this “difficult man.” From the looks of things today, we as a Christian culture are not doing a good job of preparing our young people for godly submission in marriage. If you entered your marriage prepared for godly submission, you are more the exception than the rule. Newlyweds are as confused and misguided now as I was when I married.

Unfortunately, the world’s idea of a submissive wife is distorted, humorous at best. You’ve seen the world’s image—daily newspaper under her arm, a cup of coffee in one hand and slippers in the other, approaching her man who is sitting in a soft leather chair with his feet propped up on a stool, shoes off, waiting for his slippers and paper so he can relax before dinner. All day long she has cleaned house, cooked dinner, supervised the children, driven them to and from their various activities, met with angry neighbors, shopped in crowded stores, and fought the battle at the bank. She too might enjoy sitting in a soft chair and resting before dinner!

Do you feel as if you fit into that picture?

Most wives have been challenged at one time or another with the issue of submitting to their own

husbands. Yes, it can be a struggle even for those who appear to have the perfect husband.

In our journey together we will look at how God's idea of submission works, define what it means and what it does not mean, consider its implications in marriage, dispel some lies, and end with some practical helps for application.

It is my prayer that as we ponder this topic we will begin to understand that it is God's plan for a husband to protect his wife and give her the freedom to be the special person she was created to be as she submits to his leadership. Through choosing to trust God, and submitting to his design for men and women, marriage can be joy unspeakable and full of glory.

*There is never peace in the home when
a contentious woman has placed herself
at the head of it. Peace and harmony,
both in the marriage relationship and
in the home, can only be achieved when
a wife surrenders to God and obeys his
command to submit to the authority of
her own husband.*

(MFA)

Me, Submit? To Him?

I was raised in a single-parent family in which independence was encouraged. As the firstborn, it was natural for me to assert the leadership role. The surprise came when I married and my husband wanted to be the leader in our home. The first time he said no to one of my plans, or suggested we do something a different way, I thought, “Who are you to tell me what to do? Submit? I don’t think so!”

It wasn’t long before my independence was causing my marriage to fall apart. I was hindering my husband from being the leader God created him to be. I didn’t have a clue what it meant to follow his lead, much less to submit. But as I grew to love the Lord with all my heart, mind, and soul, I learned to entrust him with my marriage. I joined a Titus 2 Bible study group² and learned from older women who had been where I was. I made a decision to submit to my husband and trust God.

This is not to say that trusting God with our

husband, or our marriage, is easy. It certainly is not! There are many difficult situations wives find themselves in, but God's truth gives us the guidance we need to navigate wisely and in a manner that honors the Lord.

Judy³ had been married seventeen years when she came into my office. I recognized the symptoms of wife abuse immediately, but waited to hear her story. I have heard her type of story hundreds of times, but without fail I cry with each account. Her husband is a leader in their church and community. On the outside she is the epitome of the sweet submissive wife who stands beside her husband through thick and thin. When her husband found out she had gone to their pastor for help, he was furious and became more abusive—threatening her life if she ever embarrassed him like that again. He told her that if she thought he was abusive, it was her fault for not being more submissive. Judy had had enough. Although hesitant to talk, she came for help.

The counsel Judy needed was undoubtedly difficult for her to hear and follow. With the information given, this appeared to be a situation where there was risk of physical harm to Judy (and her children?). Especially in light of her husband's

position in the church, she was advised to return to her pastor, who would hopefully view this as a serious matter and begin working through the situation biblically with Judy and her husband. Perhaps Judy also needed to consider removing herself temporarily from this volatile situation with the goal of reconciling the marriage through counseling for both her and her husband.

Carol, a prominent Christian physician's wife, reported verbal abuse so demeaning that she had come to believe her husband's remarks that she was a horrible Christian, an unloving wife, and could do nothing right. She reminded me of a squashed potato bug: no substance left. She couldn't smile or lift her head to look me in the eye. Hesitantly, in broken sentences, she shared her story. Her husband blamed her for his outbursts, stating that they resulted from her lack of submission.

In Carol's situation, she would benefit from being discipled by an older woman in her church who could lead her to see, through the Scriptures, who she is in Christ. Her husband's lack of control over his anger is not her fault unless she is provoking the anger. Even if that is the case, they are each responsible before the Lord for

their own sin. Both should seek counseling. Carol needs counseling in order to come to a biblical understanding of what submission is, and her husband needs counseling in order to understand what loving leadership in the home is supposed to look like, and then work toward that goal.

Sue wanted to choose homeschooling for her four early-school-aged children. Why should she consult her non-Christian husband who seemed only vaguely interested in the children's schooling? When she asked him about any other matter, he always replied, "Do whatever you want." Therefore, didn't she have the freedom to make this decision?

Sue should not simply assume her husband will agree. Therefore, out of respect for her husband's leadership role in the family, she needed to consult with him about this significant decision. Perhaps he would agree with homeschooling the children. However, if he did not agree, she needed to follow his lead. Perhaps this would be an opportunity to win her husband without a word as he saw her respectful response to him (1 Peter 3:12).

Carrie doesn't like the instructions her father left for her mom to carry out. Standing in the hall

with her hands on her hips, she stamped her foot and states at a tone just below a scream, “Do you always agree with everything Daddy says?” As a mom, what is Carol to do?

This is an excellent teaching moment with Carrie’s daughter. She should answer her daughter’s question: “Of course I don’t always agree with everything Daddy says, but God has given him the leadership role in our family. He and I will discuss this privately. We usually are able to work through things until we are both in agreement. However, if we can’t, I choose to be obedient to God’s Word and it calls me to rest under Daddy’s leadership. It may not always be easy, but God’s way is always best.”

Karla has lost respect for her husband, who has become obese and harsh in his words about money, the children’s behavior, and her house-keeping and cooking. Basically the home feels like a “den of vipers” waiting to devour her at any turn. Recognizing that her yelling and critical retorts defending her place as wife, mother, and homemaker just infuriate him even more, she becomes quiet and withdrawn, developing migraines that send her to bed but give her solace and an escape from his explosions. The children choose to withdraw also, as

a means of finding peace at any cost.

In this case, Karla has swung the pendulum too far in the opposite direction. Instead of shutting down completely, she needs to become a student of her husband so she'll know the best time to approach him without yelling and engaging in critical retorts toward him. She also would benefit from meeting with an older woman to discover her contribution to her difficult situation, and to come to a correct understanding of biblical submission.

Submission means that I show honor and respect to my husband as he serves me in his God-ordained role as head of our family before the Lord. And that I prayerfully offer my input while trusting God to direct my husband in the way we should go.

(SS)

The above true accounts illustrate how sincerely challenging submission is for wives. Even in the best of marriages it is against our natural inclination as wives to submit. It is our frail, fragile, and depraved nature to want to control our lives and to be accountable to no one.

In Romans 14:12, the apostle Paul says we will

each one day give an account of ourselves to God. Husbands and wives. Singles. Sons and daughters. Everyone. It's not a pop quiz if we know it's coming! So, what does the Bible say about submission? How can I live my life in preparation for giving an account to God?

It is important that we understand what submission means, but equally important that we understand what it does not mean. Many women tend to believe that if they submit to their husband, it will mean that they are inferior to him, they are paying for Eve's sin, they may never express any ideas or opinions, or use their talents and abilities. Whatever it means, it definitely doesn't fit with the lifestyles of the five women mentioned. Nor does it reflect their desires for their future. In each of those cases a biblical understanding of what submission is, and is not, will clarify their situations. If you are in an abusive situation, I urge you to consult *HELP! Someone I Love Has Been Abused* for further help and resources. Pastor and counselor Jim Newheiser writes, "There is never an excuse for physical, verbal, emotional or sexual abuse."⁴

Even when submission is generally understood, Christian women learn very early that living in accord with the biblical teaching on submission

is a most unpopular thing to do among women today. Christian homes are to reflect an image that represents God's example of a marriage, yet statistics tell us that just as many Christian marriages end in divorce as do non-Christian marriages.⁵ How sad!

Submission Is ...

AN ATTITUDE BEFORE IT IS AN ACTION

It is a belief that it is God's best for the marriage. It is actively expressing faith in God's Word and his motives in giving us this command.

A COMMAND

Some wives think of only the Old Testament's instructions as commands. But in the New Testament, Jesus said much about obeying his commands out of love for Him:

*If you love Me, you will keep My
commandments.*

*(John 14:15;
see also John 14:21; 1 John 2:3-4)*

If a woman is not convinced that the principle of submission is God's command, she will be swayed

by the unscriptural advice the world has to offer. The world's advice changes almost daily, as soon as a new article or book is written.

Submission is God's command, and God is the one a woman obeys when she submits to her husband. That adds a whole new dimension. It promotes a proper attitude, and transforms obedience into submission. The wife, when obeying her husband, will say first to herself, "Yes, Lord," then "Yes, Dear."⁶

Submission is willingly, cheerfully, and respectfully coming under the umbrella of my husband's protective authority. Not demanding my own way, but discussing situations with my husband and allowing him to make the final decision. There can't be any begrudging or I-told-you-so attitude for it to be true submission, but a quiet, gentle, encouraging spirit. Recognizing that God has placed him as the head/leader of the home, and purposely trying not to usurp his power, but to be a helpmate or helper suitable for what my husband needs. Doing him good and not evil all the days of our lives.

(CD)

When a woman submits in this manner it gives her freedom to become all that she desires and dreams of, because first she is submitting to the Lord.

Submission Is Not ...

BEING A DOORMAT

God has not given men permission to be inconsiderate of their wives or in any way to abuse them. He has not told men to do things that will be hazardous to their wives' mental and emotional health. Remember, the command to wives to submit to their husbands is followed by the command to husbands to love their wives as Christ loved the church and gave his life for her (Ephesians 5:25).

Men and women are different. But not all women believe that is how God ordained it. Their thinking comes out of the teaching of the current women's liberation movement, which tells us that we have been sex-role socialized. It is taught in our secular universities that we have been programmed since childhood how to act and behave as women, thus creating a sense of inferiority. God says we are not inferior but equal in all ways. Equal but different! God has given men and women

different roles to play in marriage.

ABOUT WHO IS SUPERIOR

The title of “leader in the home” is not one for which we can compete, to see who is best. God said, “The husband is the head of the wife” (Ephesians 5:23). God knows our strengths and weaknesses, and he uses all for his glory.

If a husband is wise, he will seek his wife’s wisdom, knowledge, and opinions. But many husbands say that they cannot use their wife’s talents, efficiency, or intelligence because she tends to take over.

It is easy to recognize wives who are more gifted in some areas than their husbands. Some are naturally adept at finances, creative gardening, decorating, or organizing. But statements like, “I’m more gifted with administration so I lead our family,” may be extremely destructive for the husband who is trying to excel as leader in the home. However, I want to add that a man who is confident and secure in his role of leader in the home may recognize that his wife is gifted in such areas and may ask her to take those responsibilities. He will be proud of her help. Taking on these roles in this manner still constitutes submission.

BEING PASSIVE

Some women are naturally quiet and give their input very carefully, and by nature find it a challenge. If a wife, however, withholds her input because of fear or desiring peace at all costs, this is not submission. Yet there are times when a wife will choose to be quiet for a purpose—a bigger plan.

Jesus, God in the flesh, is our example in all things, and in Mark 15:3–5 he gives an example of being quiet with a purpose:

The chief priests began to accuse Him harshly. Then Pilate questioned Him again, saying, “Do You not answer? See how many charges they bring against You!” But Jesus made no further answer; so Pilate was amazed.

Christ was not afraid to say something. He was not afraid to defend himself. He was not terrified of what Pilate would do. He knew what Pilate could do and knew he didn't have to defend himself because God had a bigger plan. He was still in charge, but he didn't waste his words by defending himself. When a woman holds her voice for a season, it gives her the ability to gain

control of herself, to choose her words carefully, to pray and seek guidance, to journal her facts, thoughts, ideas, opinions, and intuitions, and to present all to her husband in an orderly fashion.

Although Jesus was silent, he was not passive. He was actively pursuing his goal. A woman may be in control of herself and waiting for the right moment to confront her husband with a concern. This is not being passive; this is demonstrating her strength. It may appear to an onlooker that she is passive, but in reality she is exercising intelligence, discernment, and Spirit-control by presenting her concern in private when both are calm and she is prepared.

On the other hand, a wife who chooses passivity is putting her mind in neutral—contributing nothing to the marriage relationship.

When a husband asks his wife, “What do you think about this?” he expects her to give input. She is his helpmate. She is specially created to help him become a better leader by giving her input, then submitting to his decision.

DETERMINED BY WHO IS RIGHT

Christians live within the parameters of scriptural principles and their own preferences. If Scripture has spoken on an issue, God expects

us to pay attention. But some things are what we may call “gray areas” and are subject to personal preferences. Many situations that come up in a family may not have a clear scriptural right or wrong. It is important to share our preferences, but we must remember that God works through our husbands for the good of the whole family *and* that our husband will answer to God for his choices. This puts a wife in the privileged position of loving her husband by praying that God will grant him great wisdom as he leads the family.

Submission is easy when we agree with our husband’s decisions. But the test comes, of course, when he chooses the opposite of what we want. This requires us to trust that God’s way is the best way, and to understand that he will care for us and that true happiness comes through trusting God. He has called *every* wife to submit to her own husband. First Peter 3:1–2 says,

In the same way, you wives, be submissive to your own husbands so that even if any of them are disobedient to the word, they may be won without a word by the behavior of their wives, as they observe your chaste and respectful behavior.

This was written to wives who were married to pagan men who not only were unbelievers, but were also actively participating in the worship rites of pagan gods.

By submitting to an unsaved husband, a wife hopes that he will be saved. However, salvation is God's job; ours as wives is to submit as unto the Lord.

Dan is an unsaved husband living with a transformed, godly wife. He witnessed with amazement his wife's dramatic change in her responses to his leadership after she became a Christian. One evening, while Dan and his wife were out with another couple for dinner, he became irritated and annoyed that his friend's wife was constantly belittling, correcting, and dictating to her husband on every subject. Fed up with the disruption in conversation, Dan said to his friend, "If your wife went to the church that my wife goes to, you would be the leader in your home." Dan is still not saved, but his godly wife continues to grow and experience the peace that comes because she knows she is obeying her Lord and Savior.

A BURDEN TO BE BORNE

Rather, submission is a God-given privilege and necessity in order that homes run smoothly. A

woman may take on the martyr-type stance. This wife becomes a complainer, a troublemaker, and she is very disruptive to her household. She has a “Poor me!” attitude and is a poor testimony for her Christian faith. This is not godly submission.

A TOOL TO USE WHEN A WIFE WANTS SOMETHING

Submission comes with no strings attached. It is a desire to please God and do what is best for the family. Most women desire the inner peace that comes from living in harmony with their husbands and obeying God.

As I write this, words of a hymn by Fanny J. Crosby play in my mind:

*Perfect submission, all is at rest,
I in my Savior am happy and blest;
Watching and waiting, looking above,
Filled with his goodness, lost in his love.
This is my story, this is my song;
Praising my Savior all the day long!⁷*

Christ is our example in all things. He submitted himself, in obedience to his Father, to die on the cross as the one and only acceptable sacrifice for our sins. In Matthew 27:27-50 we find the account of his betrayal, abuse, agony, and finally his death.

He endured God's wrath against sin and was raised to new life three days later. He did this for you and me, so that we could have abundant life.

In Hebrews 12:2 we are reminded to keep our eyes on Jesus. He endured the cross, despising the shame, and now is with his Father. If you do not know him, turn to him by faith today. It is Christ who gives us the strength to endure and the peace to enjoy.

If you do not know Christ as your Lord and Savior, it will be almost impossible to have an attitude of submission to your husband and to trust God to work in your marriage.

Ask your pastor or elder in your church to introduce you to this wonderful loving God, who loves you (Romans 5:6–10). He loves you so much that he gave his only Son to die on the cross—a miserable death—for you, and raised him from the dead so that you may have spiritual life and rest. Jesus says,

*Come to Me, all who are weary and
heavy-laden, and I will give you rest.*

(Matthew 11:28)

The blessed assurance that submission brings is a fruit of a Christian's faith.

In John 10:10, Christ says that he came to give “life ... abundantly”:

The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

The abundant life is not a problem-free life of continually happy circumstances; it is a life of overcoming temptations and trials with the wisdom and strength that Jesus gives. God wants his children to be full of the joy of Christ.

It is grievous when a woman reaches the place in her marriage where she feels that she absolutely cannot and will not submit to a harsh and thoughtless man—the one to whom she has given her heart and who promised to love and cherish her “till death do us part.” She may go so far as to see no way out until death separates them. This is not the abundant life Jesus brings. So, what happened?