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The Purpose of Submission

Galatians 2:19b-20

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When you hear the word, **submission**, what's your first response? Is it a word you have positive associations with, or is it a word that has a negative connotation? I suspect for many people, submission is a negative word. One definition of submission is *"the action or fact of accepting or yielding to a superior force or to the will or authority of another person."* We may think of one people conquering another people by force, "they were forced into submission." We may associate submission with surrender, capitulation, defeat, or weakness. For the mixed martial arts fans tuning in today, you know that submission is when an athlete taps out or verbally concedes the match due to pain, to avoid injury, to avoid being choked out or due to a desire to end the match. In all these ways submission sounds weak and powerless. It can even be humiliating. Some of you are already thinking, *"This doesn't sound appealing or desirable at all, but I have a sinking feeling Doug is going to spend 20 minutes or so telling me why it's good for me."* That's exactly what I'm going to do.

Listen to what the Apostle Paul says about submission in **Galatians 2:19b-20**, *"I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me."*

Submission is the freedom that comes from surrender. Paul surrendered his life to Christ who had surrendered his life to God. Paul said, *"I have been crucified with Christ,"* and as a result, the old Paul was dead, and it was Christ who lived in Paul from then on. The rest of Paul's life was lived by faith in Christ who loved him and surrendered his life for him. Paul lived with tremendous freedom, boldness, passion, courage, and conviction. No one would mistake Paul's surrendering his life to Christ and his submission to God's will as producing a person who was weak or defeated. **Submission is the freedom that comes from surrender.** While the words submission and surrender may be negative words for many of us, spiritually speaking, submission and surrender are not only positive, they're also essential. **The purpose of submission is to free us.**

Let's begin with the understanding that in our relationships **healthy submission is an act that's expressed mutually, voluntarily, humbly, and out of desire to serve, bless, and help others.** This is true in all Christian relationships. **Ephesians 5:21** (NLT) tells us to, "***submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.***" The discipline of submission frees us from self-centeredness and allows us to consider the desires of others. Submission has nothing to do with being weak. It allows us to be strong enough to open our hearts to others. **"The freedom that comes with submission *is the ability to lay down the terrible burden of always needing to get our own way.* The obsession to demand that things go the way we want them to go is one of the greatest bondages in human society"** (p. 111, Celebration of Discipline).

Submission or self-denial helps free us from the corrosive influence of pride, power, and self-pity. Most of the disagreements and struggles that occur in a family, school, work situation, church and politics have to do with people insisting on getting their own way. People will struggle, argue, get mad, lie, and occasionally leave a relationship because they don't get their way. This is not to say that followers of Jesus should never have different opinions that need to be rationally discussed, analyzed, pondered, and considered. However, we also need to learn to practice the discipline of submission. That's why **our tool for today is a file** because a file helps to smooth away sharp edges and helps pieces of wood to fit together better.

Richard Foster writes, "People will spend weeks, months, even years in a perpetual stew because some little thing did not go as they wished. They will fuss and fume. They will get mad about it. They will act as if their very life hangs on the issue. They may even get an ulcer over it. In the Discipline of submission, we are released to drop the matter, to forget it. Frankly, most things in life are not nearly as important as we think they are. Our lives will not come to an end if this or that does not happen.

"If you watch these things you will see that almost all church fights and splits occur because people do not have the freedom to give in to each other. We insist that a critical issue is at stake; we are fighting for a sacred principle. Perhaps this is the case. Usually it is not. **Often we cannot stand to give in simply because it means we will not get our own way.** Only in submission are we enabled to bring this spirit to a place

where it no longer controls us. **Only submission can free us sufficiently to enable us to distinguish between genuine issues and stubborn self-will.**¹

I like the old story of the captain of the ship who looked out one dark night and saw a faint light in the distance. Immediately he told the signalman to send the message, *“Alter your course ten degrees south.”* Promptly a return message was received, *“Alter your course ten degrees north.”* Angry that he hadn’t gotten his way and that his order was being ignored, the captain sent a second message, *“Alter your course ten degrees south – I am the Captain!”* Quickly the answer came back, *“Alter your course ten degrees north. I am a seaman third class.”* The captain fired off a third and final message, *“Alter your course 10 degrees south. I’m a battleship.”* The reply came back, *“Alter your course ten degrees north. I’m a lighthouse.”*

Sometimes insisting on our own way can be harmful and dangerous. Getting what our stubbornness demands, being able to do whatever we want, refusing to seek and submit to God’s good desire for us can shipwreck our lives. In **Psalm 81:11-12**, God laments, *“But my people did not listen to my voice; Israel **would not submit to me.** So I gave them over **to their stubborn hearts**, to follow **their own counsels.**”* God equates submission with listening to God’s voice and acting on what is heard. Sometimes individuals can look at the same situation and see it completely differently, with both parties believing they have or see the will of God. In such cases, prayerful discernment, listening, seeking God’s leading in scripture, and among a larger group of believers may be necessary, as well as an openness to submitting our previous view for a new and even unexpected one. This may mean we have to have the maturity and grace to say we were wrong about something or someone.

The result of not listening to God and failing to submit our will to God’s will is that God lets us have our own way and all the consequences that go with it. God lets us follow our own stubborn hearts and our counsel and ideas. But like a heart sick parent God cries out **Psalm 81:13**, *“O that my people would listen to me, that Israel would walk in my ways!”*

¹ Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, p. 111.

Most things in life are not what I call “kingdom issues.” They simply don’t matter. In a nation and world trying to overcome a global pandemic, violence, the lust for power, the erosion of truth, hunger, illness, hatred, greed, and injustice, how important do you think the little decisions that we can invest so much time, energy, and emotional capital in truly are in God’s eyes? Whether one is putting together a program, marking policy decisions on a team or a board, choosing colors or light fixtures for a home remodel, ultimately most of it just doesn’t matter. **How we treat one another is far more important.** However, for many people, our tendency is – at home, school, work, or church – whatever we care about, whatever we invest our time, energy, and passion in, we want everyone else to feel it’s just as important as we do. Then if someone doesn’t share our view, support our position, or if things don’t go our way we say, *“It’s okay, I don’t care, it doesn’t matter, whatever we do is fine.”* We may say that with our words, but our tone, expression and behavior often make it obvious that **we do care, it does matter**, and whatever we do is fine **only** if it is what **we think** should be done. We don’t want to alter our course by a single degree. Outwardly we may do what other people ask while inwardly we’re furious.

“The biblical teaching on submission focuses primarily on the spirit with which we view other people.”² We’re to view other people with consideration, thoughtfulness, and humility. Some of us need to work on doing this more; too many powerful people don’t seem to do it at all. There is too much arrogance, snideness, and plain old meanness in our culture; it is especially harmful and distasteful in people who claim to be Christ followers. Paul says in **Philippians 2.3-4** and **Romans 12.16-18**, *“Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in **humility** regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the **interests of others.**” “Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but **take thought for what is noble in the sight of all.** If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.”* We can only live this way if we’ve surrendered to Christ and are living in the freedom that comes with submission.

² Foster, 112.

Submission is an ethical theme that runs throughout the New Testament and it's expected of all Christians. Regrettably, some people have used passages about submission in a Christian household from Ephesians 5:21-6:9 or 1 Peter 3:1-9 to put women or children down or even to try and excuse abuse in a marriage or other relationship. There's no excuse for abuse under any circumstances. Period. Women, children, and slaves had few rights or privileges in Roman society, yet in Ephesians, Paul addresses them all as moral agents who could choose their attitude towards husbands, fathers, or masters. This was a radical statement to make at that time, as was telling men they needed to be subject to others out of reverence for Christ.

The reason we're commanded to live lives of mutual submission regardless of our place in life, is because **Jesus, who is our leader and our example, lived a life of submission.** Jesus issues a call to submission to all who would follow him in **Mark 8:34**, *"If any want to become my followers, **let them deny themselves** and take up their cross and follow me."* The self-denial involved in following Jesus means, in part, **we do not have to have our own way.** That's why we sang Adelaide Pollard's hymn, *Have Thine own way, Lord! Have Thine own way! Thou art the Potter, I am the clay. Mold me and make me **after Thy will**, While I am waiting, yielded and still.* Self-denial isn't the same thing as loss of self. The paradoxical truth is **the way to self-fulfillment is through self-denial. Self-denial is the freedom to give way to others.** Not only do submission and self-denial help us deal with issues of pride and power, they also free us from self-pity. Just as we may submit outwardly but inwardly be angry, as I said earlier, there is also the temptation to submit outwardly, but inwardly be filled with a sense of self-pity and martyrdom which is really a spirit of self-indulgence.

The language of submission and self-denial is so absent from modern life that the words of great Christians sound to us like some thing from an alien of another world. In *The Imitation of Christ*, Thomas a Kempis wrote, ***"To have no opinion of ourselves, and to think always well and highly of others is great wisdom and perfection."*** Ultimately, submission is about surrender.

One of the co-founders of Alcoholics Anonymous, Bill Wilson, published his correspondence with the great psychiatrist Carl Jung. He thanked Jung for his

contribution to AA. He said, “You have no idea the important role you played in the forging of the famous twelve steps of Alcoholics Anonymous. You were treating a man named Roland H., and you said, *‘Roland, you’re a hopeless alcoholic, there nothing more I can do for you except take your money, and I don’t want to do that.’* Roland asked you, *‘Is there anything I can do?’* and you said, *‘Yes, there is something you can do. Have a religious conversion. Have a religious experience.’*” And Roland H. did have a religious experience and he became sober and a recovering alcoholic.

Wilson continues, “At the time I was reading William James’s *A Variety of Religious Experience*, and I noticed at the bottom of every religious experience **was that turning your life over to God, that surrender to God**. So I went home, and I said, *‘God, I don’t know if I even believe in you. But if you’re there, if you’re there, God, will you help me please?’* In that moment, I knew I was healed. In that moment I knew that the addiction was broken, that I was a **free man, maybe for the first time in my whole life.**”

The peace and strength of God we all long to experience can be ours, but at the price of surrender. **Submission is the freedom that comes from surrender.** Why did God listen to and answer the prayers of Jesus? **Hebrews 5:7** tells us, *“In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission.”*

“To applaud the will of God, to do the will of God, even to fight for the will of God is not difficult until comes at cross purposes with our will. Then the lines are drawn.”³ That’s when we find out if we are willing to submit to God, when we no longer have to get our own way. That’s why Paul says in 1 Corinthians 13, that love *“does not insist on its own way.”* Love is willing to yield.

In his book, *With Christ in the School of Obedience*, Andrew Murray writes, “The true pupil of some great musician or painter, **yields his master a wholehearted and unhesitating submission**. In practicing his scales or mixing his colors, in the slow and

³ Richard Foster, *Christian Reader*, volume 31.

patient study of the elements of his art, he knows that it is **wisdom to simply and fully obey. It is this wholehearted surrender** to His guidance, this **implicit submission to His authority, which Christ asks**. We come to him asking Him to teach us **the lost art of obeying God as He did...** The only way of learning to do a thing is to do it. The only way of learning obedience from Christ is **to give up your will to Him and to make the doing of His will the one desire and delight of your heart.**"

May that be true of each of us.

Prayer: "Father, I abandon myself into your hands, do with me what you will.

Whatever you may do, I thank you: I am ready for all, I accept all.

Let only your will be done in me, and in all your creatures –

I wish no more than this, O Lord." Charles De Foucauld

Blessing: 1 Peter 3:8, *"Finally, all of you, have unity of spirit, sympathy, love for one another, a tender heart, and a humble mind."*

Questions for Discussion or Reflection

1. "Submission is the freedom that comes from surrender." How can surrendering our life to God and giving up the need to get our own way lead to freedom?
2. How do you typically respond when you don't get your way?
3. How does submission or self-denial help free us from the corrosive influence of pride, power, and self-pity?
4. Foster writes, "In submission we are at last free to value other people." What does he mean by that? What is it about submission that allows this to happen?
5. Discuss or reflect on the quote by Andrew Murray from *With Christ in the School of Obedience*, from the final page of the sermon. When do you find it easy to obey and when do you find it difficult? What accounts for your different responses?

6. Have you truly surrendered your life to God? What do you think it would mean to be in submission to the ways of God in all aspects of your life? What is one step you can take to be more submitted to God's will for your life?

Additional Scriptures about Submission

Mark 8:34, *"He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.'"*

John 12:24-26, *"24 Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. 25 Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. 26 Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor."*

James 4:7-12 Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. 8 Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. 9 Lament and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned into mourning and your joy into dejection. 10 Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.

11 Do not speak evil against one another, brothers and sisters. Whoever speaks evil against another or judges another, speaks evil against the law and judges the law; but if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge. 12 There is one lawgiver and judge who is able to save and to destroy. So who, then, are you to judge your neighbor?

Hebrews 13:17, *"Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls and will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with sighing—for that would be harmful to you."*