

SHOULD A CHRISTIAN WIFE SUBMIT TO AN ABUSIVE HUSBAND?

Hi. This is Natalie Hoffman of FlyingFreeNow.com, and you're listening to the Flying Free Podcast, a support resource for women of faith looking for hope and healing from hidden emotional and spiritual abuse.

NATALIE: Welcome to Episode 66 of the Flying Free Podcast! Today we are answering the question, *"What does the Bible mean when it tells Christian wives to "submit" to their husbands? Was this kind of submission only for that culture?"*

I'm not going to get into all the Greek and Hebrew and blah blah blah. There are a ton of books and blog articles out there that do all that. I'm going to make this really simple and common sense – straight from the Bible. We're going to look at what God teaches us in the WHOLE of Scripture rather than pulling out a single verse and making an entire theology around that verse.

So let's see what the Bible says about submission. In Ephesians 5:15-33 it talks about the difference between a foolish person and a believer who wants to walk with God and make the best use of his/her time on this earth. It then says that people like this are to "Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ."

So who is supposed to submit? Believers. And why? Because when we do this with one another, it shows we reverence our Savior who died for us, and we want to follow in His footsteps. This humble submission to one another is one of the ways we love each other well and show the world Who Jesus is. Ephesians calls this submission "wise" and "the will of the Lord." The opposite of this is called "foolish" and "not understanding what the will of the Lord is."

In Ephesians 6:1-9 Paul tells children to obey (submit) to their parents IN THE LORD – in other words, children were always to obey, but NOW, as believers, they are to do their obeying IN THE LORD. That was the new thing Paul was introducing to them. And some Christians today use this verse to justify abusing children – but that wasn't at all what Paul was communicating there. See how the enemy takes the truth and twists it to mean the opposite of what it really means?

Then Paul tells slaves to (submit) to their masters AS UNTO THE LORD. In other words, slaves were always to obey, but NOW, as believers, they are to do their obeying AS UNTO THE LORD. (And by the way, during the Civil War, Christians used this verse to justify owning slaves.) But you see that giving men the right to own slaves was not

Paul's point. Paul was speaking to a culture that already had slaves – and he was helping to create a shift in their hearts and their thinking in preparation for the day when slavery itself would be seen as in complete opposition to a Christian worldview that promotes freedom for all regardless of race, gender, or socioeconomic status.

And Ephesians 5:22 says wives should submit to their own husbands AS UNTO THE LORD. In other words, wives were expected to submit in that culture, but NOW, as believers, they are to do their submitting as unto the Lord. And today, Christians use this verse to justify controlling and abusing women. But that wasn't Paul's point. Paul was speaking to a culture that had a low view of women, and he was setting the stage to eradicate the subjugation of women by introducing mutual submission for all believers regardless of race or gender – as well as introducing the idea of women submitting as unto the Lord – not because her culture expected it of her. It's sad that this shift in the hearts of Christians has yet to take root and bear fruit.

There are other verses that talk about submission to God – and submission to human institutions that are there to protect people.

Do you hear about all these kinds of submission preached from the pulpit very often? I grew up in the church, and I did not. However, I did hear verse 22 preached quite often – the submission of women. And interestingly, the preachers were all men.

You see from this that certain kinds of submission are cultural. That is the kind of submission the conservative Christian religion promotes. Cultural submission. And by the way, I'm not referring to an authentic following of Jesus Christ when I call it the Christian religion. I'm talking about a religion that is just as pagan as any pagan religion with rules and regulations and sacrifices that are required to be accepted by the god of that religions' choice.

The New Testament leaders (including Jesus) did not overturn the power-over cultural norms overnight. They introduced brand new Christian concepts that would act like leaven, slowly spreading a truly Christ-like way of life (which is decidedly NOT power-grabbing and controlling) over time. When modern day Pharisees demand submission of half the human race rather than lifting up Christ's way of living in submission to one another, they continue the humanistic culture of power-over. It's easy to do. Rules that control part of the human race make things simple. Walking by faith in the living, breathing Spirit of Christ and respecting the boundaries and autonomous of other human lives is more complex and requires maturity, discernment, and a vibrant walk with Jesus. It's not so black and white.

The judgment in the garden of Eden that men would power-over women is exactly that. A judgment. It is not a blessing. Praise God – Jesus Christ overturned the judgments in the garden, and where you see the Holy Spirit at work, you will see the judgments being overturned. Where you see the spirit of the anti-Christ, you will see the promotion and carrying out of those judgments on the people of the earth.

Satan brings people into bondage. Jesus sets them free. Satan is the author of lies. Jesus brings truth. Satan brings fear. Jesus brings love.

So what exactly IS submission? Submission is a voluntary act of respect and cooperation. It brings peace and harmony and love. And that's why it is important for Christians to do it. If we want to spread the love of Jesus on this earth, we do it through submission.

Matthew 22:36-40 says "Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. For the commandments, 'You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet,' and any other commandment, are summed up in this word: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore **love is the fulfilling of the law.**"
(Romans 13:8-10)

Submission, whether you are a wife, a husband, a child, a friend, or an employee is an attitude of love, respect, and cooperation. God will never tell you to do something hateful or destructive or unloving (although humans may manipulate you to believe it is so they can get what they want). You are safe to love, respect, and cooperate with Him under any and every circumstance.

But humans are a whole 'nother story. And thankfully, the Bible gives us some examples of people who didn't submit to their parents, husbands, masters, government, and fellow human beings because to do so would have meant not submitting to God. And God (along with REAL love) trumps everyone else. I write about these examples in my book "Is It Me? Making Sense of Your Confusing Marriage."

I think the reason submission is so unpalatable to people, especially women, is **because of all the "Christian" lies that swirl around it**. Here are some examples of how people take it, twist it into a lie, and fling it around like a weapon that can (and does) encourage and perpetuate abuse of women and children. In these examples, the person in "authority" is not asking the "underling" to disobey God or to sin, but they are using the concept of submission to manipulate women while catering to their own selfish desires.

A Hairy Armpit Loving Man

1. A man likes his women with hairy armpits and long fingernails painted pink. He tells his wife she must refrain from shaving while making sure to keep her nails long. And remember the pink. If she fails to do this, he has a fit and tells her she's a loser (and some other things).

The "Submit Lie" tells her she is a rebel practicing witchcraft (rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft, remember) if she doesn't do all her persnickety husband desires. As she paints her nails pink, she feels guilty, unloved, and unseen.

Is this man obeying the Word of God?

A Very Important and Concerned Pastor's Wife

2. A young woman blogs about why she does or doesn't let her kids watch Disney movies. (It doesn't really matter which way she goes on this one, the story is the same.) The pastor's wife sits down with her and tells her she shouldn't be blogging. She's too young to have any kind of influence on anyone. She might say something that dishonors their church, er, God. She might write about something that the pastor's wife disagrees with. "Basically, quit blogging. You are an insignificant blot on the face of the planet with nothing to say to anyone, unlike me, a Very Important Pastor Wife Person."

The Submit Lie tells her that since the Pastor Wife Person is older (automatically makes you wiser, duh), and also married to a Pastor Person, she is an automatic authority. Especially if the Pastor Person gave her orders to gag the Blogger Woman. Therefore it's a no-brainer. Time to close down the blog and take up rock painting. She feels a loss of joy and purpose.

"And Jesus called them to him and said to them, 'You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.'" (Mark 10:42-45)

Is this Pastor-Wife-Person exhibiting the love and grace of Jesus?

A Principal Who Always Believes the Best

3. A teen-aged girl goes to her private school's principal to report that she thinks one of the teachers might be sexually involved with one of the girls in her class. He firmly warns her about gossip and slander as well as dirty thinking. She has no proof. Only something she's heard that is now being denied and covered up. ***Is she trying to bring down an entire ministry to families in her community?*** To sully the good name of a godly teacher? He tells her she is to quit thinking—and most certainly talking—about such depraved things and focus on whatsoever things are pure and holy, as all nice girls who want to please God do.

The Submit Lie tells her she needs to go to class and shut up. She feels guilty and dirty, for some odd reason.

Is this principle demonstrating love and compassion for the young women attending his school?

What Submission is Not

Submission is not hiding the sins of others in authority. Submission is not catering to the selfish whims of selfish spouses. Submission is not doing everything any Very Important Person tells you to do. If that were the case, then yes, submission would definitely be a weak, spineless, disgusting, degrading, demeaning thing.

But it isn't submission. It's cowardice and confusion; the result of abuse and shaming.

Do you see that ***the only one being unsubmitive in the above examples is the authority figure?*** They are refusing to submit to God. But many women put in those situations would automatically feel like they were the sinful one.

What Submission Can Look Like

Let's look at those examples again and see how the women could relate to the fools and Pharisees in their lives while having a submissive attitude of cooperation and respect.

1. **The wife with the hairy-armpit, pink-fingernail loving man could say,** "Honey, I know you like those things, but I don't. I prefer to shave and keep my nails short so I can change diapers and mix meatloaf without getting poop and raw beef stuck in them. I trust you married me for me. Not for my hairy armpits and long nails. I so appreciate your understanding why I can't do that right now. I would be fine with painting my nails pink though whenever you'd like to plan a date night for us. How about that?"

If the husband proceeds to give her a black eye for that OR calls her names OR tells her she is a rebellious, unsubmitive woman wearing the pants of the family, then she needs to wonder if she is in an abusive relationship. He's obviously not doing his part to love her the way Christ loves the Church. If these kinds of behaviors are his habit, she needs to get help. Sometimes her church will help, and sometimes, incredibly, they'll side with the abuser and tell her the same things he's telling her. Now she's got an abusive husband AND an abusive church to deal with.

If we love one another, we will be truthful about sin instead of covering it up and pretending it isn't there.

2. **The blogger could say to the Concerned Pastor Person's Wife**, "I appreciate your concern about these things, but I've thought about this, and I've chosen to develop my writing skills in this way. I want to honor God by becoming all that God wants me to be in this area. If you find out that someone in our church is uncomfortable with something I've written, feel free to have them talk to me about it directly."

3. **The student could say**, "I realize how this appears on the outside, but I'm only trying to help both the teacher and this girl. I do not take pleasure in bringing this to your attention, and I would not have spoken up if I didn't believe there was something to what I heard and what I've observed in class between the two of them. I trust that you will take me seriously, but if you will not investigate this, I will involve other adults who will. I certainly hope I'm wrong about all of this, but please remember that if I'm right, and it comes out some other way while you had prior warning but refused to investigate, that will create even more problems for this ministry and this community."

Sometimes we need to be courageous and submit to God instead of humans. But in order to have courage, we have to be able to see the situation clearly from God's perspective. And we have to know that ***God is bigger than people.***

What if you are a wife, and your husband is not asking you to sin; he just doesn't agree with you on things? How do you come to a final decision on something when you've reached an impasse?

Common Sense and Mutuality

I want to first come at this from a common sense standpoint. Let's set aside the husband/wife thing for a minute and just pretend we are talking about two human beings. They can be two girls or two boys or a boy and a girl. They can be a variety of human colors. They can be roommates, siblings, co-workers, board members.

Let's say that the two humans don't agree, but a decision must be made. There are only two of them, so a majority vote cannot be taken. They are equals, so there is no "bigger or better" human that gets to make the decision. Oh. My. Word. There is no simplistic, clear-cut, quick answer to this. It is a conundrum. Is there a wringing of hands? Are we in a panic yet? What to do?!

A positive outcome is almost always a possibility when you have mutuality. Mutual respect. Mutual interest. Mutual goals. Mutual honor. Mutual concern. Will there be compromise? Most likely. Maybe after talking it out, thinking about it over time, and coming together to talk again, there will be a meeting of minds. But if not, compromises can be made, and things can move forward. Sometimes one party will defer to the other. But which party will that be? It won't be the same party every time. Why? Because of mutuality.

Here's a great definition of mutuality:

*"Mutuality is a way of being with another person which promotes the growth and well-being of one's self **and** the other person by means of clear communication and **empathetic understanding**."* Patricia Evans – "The Verbally Abusive Relationship"

In my opinion, that *should* (but sadly, doesn't) describe every single Christian marriage. If Christians can't get that right, who can? We've got the perfect model for this in the Triune, Relational God Who is unified in all decisions. God the Father doesn't override God the Son or God the Spirit. They are One.

In a similar way, a husband and wife are One Flesh. Heirs Together. The ideal situation is to discuss major decisions using "clear communication and empathetic understanding" and make them **together**. When one person takes on the burden of making all the decisions unilaterally, they miss out on opportunities to truly know and love another human life. To give and take. To capitalize on one another's strengths and knowledge and experience. To experience real intimacy and oneness.

Some Verses are Not More True than Other Verses

Verses about marriage do not trump the rest of the Word of God. **All the verses about relationships apply to marriage as well.** The verses on marriage ADD to the picture. They don't make a SEPARATE picture. So when you read this:

"If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself,' you are doing well. But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and

are convicted by the law as transgressors.” (James 2:8-9)

That doesn't just apply in all human relationships outside of marriage. It applies in marriage too. Partiality is a sin. Period. Or what about this one:

“Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom. But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice. But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.” (James 3:13-18)

I don't read any qualifiers here. It doesn't read, “*open to reason (unless you are a husband dealing with your wife), full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere.*” I could make this a very long podcast if I just read all the passages in the New Testament alone that spoke about human relationships. They far outnumber the ones that just focus on marriage.

A Christian couple will strive for mutual respect for the interests of one another. Neither one trying to change the other into their own image – but appreciating the differences. Respecting boundaries. Honoring the other person. Being one and also enjoying the uniqueness of one another.

Let's not neutralize half of the human race with Christian cliches. Instead, let's all rise to maturity in love so we can be the heart of Jesus Christ in a world that desperately needs to see something different than just another power-over religion.

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