God calls us to a life of obedience and submission. We can never be all that God wants us to be nor reach the fulness of the stature of Jesus Christ until we completely surrender to God (see Ephesians 4:13). God has more for us than we can begin to imagine (see 1 Corinthians 2:9-10). We can never receive all that God has until we “say no” to ourselves. The things that God has for His children are revealed to us only through the Spirit. Therefore, we must be in total communion and fellowship with Him to know His will and purposes for our lives. We will never be obedient to God until we have reached the point of submission to the Word, will and ways of God.

As we seek to become a more spiritual person, seeking a deeper spirituality it is essential that we take on the virtues of submission and obedience. We will never fully practice Christian servanthood until we submit to God. The road to a deeper spirituality travels through the land of submission and obedience.

The Meaning of Submission

Obedience means to comply with the orders or instructions of another person. Obedience has in its meaning submission. In the Greek New Testament the English word is expressed by the word *hupotasso*. It literally means “to be under, to arrange under, to subordinate, to subject oneself.”\(^1\) Therefore, to submit is to place oneself under another. Gene Getz remarked of submission, “In Scripture it appears in contexts describing servanthood, humility, respect, reverence, honor, teachableness, and openness. All these for one basic purpose—obedience to Jesus Christ.”\(^2\) As we
will see later in our study there are a whole range of relationships wherein we are called to submit to one another. It is the act of submission that marks us as obedient children of God.

**The Freedom in Submission**

In his classic book *Celebration of Discipline*, Richard Foster stated that every spiritual discipline has a corresponding freedom. He continued by saying that submission gives us “the ability to lay down the terrible burden of always needing to get our own way.” Many of us are in bondage to our wills and appetites. There is a virtual war for supremacy of our souls taking place within us. Like little children there is within many men and women the desire to have things absolutely their way. Foster went on to say how we will spend long periods of time, weeks or even months seething within because things did not go our way. We cannot seem to get beyond and pass our hurt and pain.

We can be so stuck on our position that we will not listen nor reason with any other ideas. It can get to a point wherein our health is affected by our inability to compromise. In spiritual relationships we are encouraged to consider the other person more highly than ourselves (see Romans 12:16). When we are submissive to the Holy Spirit’s influence we will not let disagreements get in the way of our relationships. Indeed as Foster has stated:

> 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.

The freedom to submit means that we can begin to live authentically before God and in community with other believers. We are creatures created in the image of God. Whenever we live outside of the biblical prescription for life we are
inauthentic representations of Jesus Christ. Inauthentic living is further evidenced when you and I seek to live without regard for the personhood of others. The inability to want to compromise our position means that we disrespect the other person. The need to be first causes confusion and chaos among God’s people. Churches have been embroiled in controversy because none of the members wanted to yield their positions to compromise. Families have broken up because no one wanted to compromise their position. God calls us to freedom. The apostle Paul in his letter to the church at Galatia wrote, “It is for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery” (Galatians 5:1).

**The Beginning of Christlikeness**

The goal of every Christian should be Christlikeness. We talk a lot about being like Jesus, but fall so very short on many occasions. What does it mean to be like Jesus? Christlikeness is being like Christ. It is acting like Christ. It is living like Christ. It is talking like Christ. It is giving like Christ. If you and I are going to become like Jesus, then we cannot avoid the very next question. What was Jesus Christ like? How did Jesus live? How did Jesus serve others?

The gospels are the record of the life of Jesus Christ. They provide us with an account of His deeds and teachings. In the gospels we see the Son of God living and preaching among the common people, reminding them that God loved them. The gospels teach us how to become like Jesus. You should spend some time reading and studying the gospels to learn about Jesus.

**Jesus Submitted Himself**

If we are to become what God desires us to be, then we must start with Jesus as our model. Jesus lived a life of complete surrender to the will of His Father. In the gospel of John, Jesus stated no less than six times His total submission to saying and
doing what the Father wanted (see John 5:19, 30; 6:38; 8:28; 12:49; 14:10). Jesus submitted His will to that of the Father. He wanted to be in complete harmony with God’s plan of salvation and redemption. Jesus was obedient to the point of yielding Himself for crucifixion (see Philippians 2:5-11). He did nothing that God did not instruct Him to do.

Submission for Jesus began with understanding the will of the Father. It was in the wilderness that Jesus removed all vestiges of royal divinity and became totally submitted to the will of the Father. In the wilderness the spirit of power, prestige and privilege were broken. Jesus was tempted three times by the devil. In Matthew 4:1-11 we can learn from Jesus how to become submissive to God.

♦ **Temptation number one, personal appetites.** In the first temptation the devil tried to get Jesus to surrender to His own appetites. After forty days and nights Jesus was hungry. The devil will always try to test your faith. He tried to tempt Jesus by asking Him to turn some stones into bread. Jesus responded by quoting Deuteronomy 8:3, “It is written, Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every Word that proceeds out of the mouth of God.” Jesus did not submit to His appetites and the deceptive lure of the devil. The devil wants to get you and me to fall prey to our appetites.

♦ **Temptation number two, the Spotlight.** In the second temptation the devil tried to get Jesus to stage a miracle to show people how much power with God He possessed. In verse 5, the devil took Jesus to the pinnacle of the Jerusalem temple. All Jesus had to do was to jump off the temple, the angels of God would catch Him and people would follow Him wherever He went. Jesus would have the spotlight on Him. Jesus told the devil that Deuteronomy 6:16 states, “It is written, You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.” You and I can never become the people of God thinking that God needs to respond to our every whim. The spotlight is on God, not you and me. We are to let our
lights shine so that people can see the reflection of God’s presence in our lives (see Matthew 5:14-16). Christians who have to be in limelight are receiving their reward now. When the spotlight is on us, people cannot see God. Jesus said, those who want to be seen already have their reward (see Matthew 6:5).

William Barclay remarked that there were two good reasons why Jesus could not yield to the devil’s request. “First, he who seeks to attract men to him by providing them with sensations has adopted a way in which there is literally no future. The reason is simple. To retain his power he must produce ever greater and greater sensations.” Eventually Jesus would never be able to produce enough spectacular miracles to satisfy the crowd. When a team wins the championship this year in very dramatic ways, the very next season, people expect more of the same. The second reason cited by Barclay is, “that is not the way to use the power of God.” You and I cannot expect God to rescue us when we have put ourselves in a life threatening situation.

Temptation number three, the Lure of Power. In the third temptation, the devil took Jesus to a very high mountain and showed Him all of the kingdoms of the world. He told Jesus that he would give Him these kingdoms if Jesus would bow down and worship him. The devil was going to give Jesus all of the world’s political power. The devil knows that men and women crave power. They will do anything to have it.

Jesus knew that all power rested with the Father. For Him to bow to the devil would be to compromise who He was and His mission. The world may still be lost in sin had Jesus yielded to the tempter.

The statement that the means justifies the end is not sufficient when it comes to the work of the kingdom. We cannot grow spiritually compromising with ourselves as to whether or not we will practice the spiritual disciplines. There are no shortcuts to sound spiritual growth.
God has given you the power of the Holy Spirit. In Acts 1:8 Jesus told His disciples, “But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth.” Your power is found in submitting to the gospel. Paul wrote in Romans 1:16, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to every one who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.”

Areas of Submission

We live in a world where man men and women do not like to be told what to do or how to act. Yet, if we are going to grow in our relationship with God, we must bring our bodies into subjection (see 1 Corinthians 9:27). In this section we want to take a look at those areas where we need to be submissive.

The First Area of Submission

First, we must submit to God. In 1 Peter 5:6 we read, “Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time.” When Peter wrote these words he was writing to a Christian community that was experiencing great persecution. In 1 Peter 4:19 he said, “Therefore, let those also who suffer according to the will of God entrust their souls to a faithful Creator in doing what is right.” The Christian community of Peter’s day was called upon to trust their situations completely to God.

When we submit to God we are saying “I humble myself before you Lord, I yield my life completely over to you.” Learn to submit to God’s will in every circumstance. I want you to understand that it is not God’s will for you to live in pain. Sometimes God takes what are uncomfortable and hurting situations to bring us to a higher spiritual level. God can allow your enemies to afflict you and then bring you
to a new spiritual plateau. We have to humble ourselves. We have to see ourselves as God sees us. Put away your pride and glorious self-estimation. As we humble ourselves before God we are really saying, “Lord, I don’t know what You have in mind, but I am ready.” As we present ourselves as living sacrifices, we show God our readiness for the work of the kingdom (see Romans 12:1-2). Submitting to God, equips us for spiritual warfare. As you and I submit to God we are equipped spiritually to overcome the works of the flesh (see Galatians 5:19-21). We are able to defeat the devil at every turn (see James 4:7).

How do we submit to God? Let me list five points that I believe are the key to submitting to God. First, we submit to God when we recognize our creatureliness. We will never submit to a person whom we feel is on the same level or below us. God is the Creator, and when we acknowledge that we can begin to see ourselves as the Psalmist saw himself (see Psalm 8).

Second, we submit to God when we humble ourselves. The apostle Peter wrote, “Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time” (1 Peter 5:6)” Paul saw humility as one of the virtues that would build unity and peace within the body of Christ (see Ephesians 4:2). Humility means that we have the right spiritual estimation of ourselves. “For through the grace given to me I say to every man among you not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think; but to think so as to have sound judgment, as God has allotted to each a measure of faith” (Romans 12:3).

Third, we submit to God when we give praise to Him. By praising and worshiping the God, we acknowledge His worthiness. Worship of God is our acknowledgment that He is the Creator. The Psalmist exclaimed, “Come, let us worship and bow down; let us kneel before the Lord our Maker. For He is our God, and we are the people of His pasture, and the sheep of His hand.” (Psalm 95:6-7).

Fourth, we submit to God when He is our number one love. God’s love is an
eternal and abundant (see John 3:16; Romans 5:8, 10). One day Jesus was asked which of the commandments is the greatest. He responded by saying, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and foremost commandment” (Matthew 22:37-38). Our love for God will lead us to love others.

**Fifth,** we submit to God when we learn to trust Him in all things. In Proverbs 3:5-6 we are told to trust God and not ourselves. “Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make your paths straight.”

**The Second Area of Submission**

**Second, we must submit to God’s Word.** One of the central affirmations of our faith is that the Bible is God’s Word. The Bible is a sacred and holy book that reveals to us the plan of God for human redemption and salvation. In the Bible we come to know how God was active in the lives of men and women. Through the Bible we come to know what God requires of all men and women (see Micah 6:8). God is revealed to us in His Word. The Psalmist declared that God’s Word was a lamp for him (see Psalm 119:105). It was the guiding light that illumined his daily activities.

The Word of God is important in the life of each believer. Why? Because the Word of God is the source of our faith. Faith comes as we hear God’s Word (Romans 10:17). It is in the preaching and teaching of the Word that we meet God. We are saved through the preaching of the Word (see Romans 1:16; 1 Corinthians 1:18). Paul wanted Timothy to make the Word the basis and foundation for his preaching and teaching ministry. In his final charge to his young comrade in the ministry, Paul wrote, “Preach the Word (2 Timothy 4:2a).” In an earlier chapter Paul reminded Timothy of the importance of remembering the things that he had learned from him.
Timothy had been taught the Scriptures from the earliest days of his life. Paul stated, “All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work (2 Timothy 3:16-17). The Scriptures are our spiritual tools for building a life of righteousness and sanctification.

How do we submit to God’s Word? **First,** we have to read and study it. **Second,** we have to begin to practice the teachings of Scripture. **Third,** do not allow your bad habits to get in the way. Now these three steps sound very simple, but in reality they are very difficult. Take for instance the teachings of Jesus in the “Sermon on the Mount” to love our enemies (Matthew 5:43-48). It is easy to say, “I will love my enemies,” but quite another thing to overcome ingrained distrust and hate. Yet God says, that is what He wants us to do. Now think back to what we have been talking about, obedience and submission. We all want to have our way. God wants us to live another way; submitted to Him. **It is imperative for your spiritual development** that you make God’s Word the centerpiece of your spiritual growth. As you read God’s Word, learn to meditate over it. Learn to take the time for it to saturate your mind and heart. Refer back to the lesson on meditation and Bible Study for more in-depth examination of those subjects. The Word is your sword (see Ephesians 6:17b).

Remember, Satan wants to strip the Word from your heart and mind. He wants you to have a hard heart and closed mind to what God wants to say and do in your life. In Luke 22:31 Jesus told Peter, “Simon, Simon, behold, Satan has demanded permission to sift you like wheat.” The devil wants to sift God’s Word out of our hearts and minds. Do not ever under estimate the power of Satan. He is your principal adversary. Peter wrote, “Be of sober spirit, be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls about like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour” (1 Peter 5:8). He wants to destroy the relationship with God that you are working so hard to
develop. If the devil can get you to reject the Word of God as the guiding principle for your life, he can defeat you spiritually. **Pause at this point and read Psalm 119.**

**The Third Area of Submission**

**Third, we must submit to one another.** Generally when we think about the word submission, many men want to think about Ephesians 5:22, “Wives be subject to your own husbands, as to the Lord.” They want to run their wives and children as though they were put here for their personal gratification. We cannot start at verse 22, we must begin at verse 21 which reads, “and be subject to one another in the fear of God.”

Submission is a spiritual relationship. It begins with the new birth. Our new relationship with God impacts all of our relationships. In Christ we are made subject to a new law of love. We are to be subject to one another out of our reverence for God. Our new relationship with Jesus changes our relationship with one another, regardless of what they had been before. Let’s look at some of the teachings of Scripture on how we are to relate to one another, which will help us to learn to be submissive.

♦ **Galatians 5:13.** “For you were called to freedom, brethren; only do not turn your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.”

♦ **Ephesians 5:22.** “Wives, be subject to your own husbands, as to the Lord.”

♦ **Ephesians 5:24.** “But as the church is subject to Christ, so also the wives ought to be to their husbands in everything.”

♦ **Philippians 2:3-4.** “Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind let each of you regard one another as more important than himself. Do not look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others.”
Hebrews 13:17. “Obey your leaders, and submit to them; for they keep watch over your souls, as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you.”

James 4:7. “Submit therefore to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you.”

1 Peter 5:5. “You younger men, likewise, be subject to your elders; and all of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, for God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble.”

It is obvious from these scriptural passages that submission covers a whole range of relationships in the church and home. When we become serious about spiritual growth we will seek to become submissive, first to God and then in our other relationships. This is a whole new standard of relational conduct. Wives will not have to worry about submitting to the leadership of their husband, when husbands are fully submitted to God. A husband will love his wife unconditionally when he is submitted to God.

As you and I humble ourselves before God’s Word, as we take on the character of Christ, we will see a change in our attitudes toward others. We will love others without regard for race, economic status, education, or any of the other standards we erect to separate people. It will be absolutely impossible to maintain tense relationships with other people and be submitted to God.

Let me remind you again, on your own it is totally impossible to live above the world’s standards. We will want to hold grudges. We will want to keep our feelings from healing. We will live like our worlds have come to an end because of the way we have been treated. In instances where we have been hurt, we must submit our feelings to the Word of God. He is our Avenger (see Romans 12:14-21). We are peace makers in all situations.
Gene Getz wrote that within the church, submission begins with the leaders. Leaders are to be models of submission to the congregation. There must be a cordial and cooperative attitude among the leaders of the congregation. Within the church, the pastor must be viewed as the leader of leaders. He not only leads the congregation, but also other leaders. More will be said about this in the following section. As you and I learn the Word’s teaching on submission and respect for others, we will see our responsibility to be submissive.

**The Fourth Area of Submission**

**Fourth, we must submit to spiritual leaders.** In this form of submission we are face to face with a major stumbling block for some Christians. We live at a time when there is very little respect for authority and authority figures. This may help explain why many young people have no respect for authority. Daily revelations of alleged misconduct from the highest levels of government leaves us feeling angry and betrayed by our leaders. There is a real cynicism toward leaders in government and leaders in general. Even in the church there is an anti-leader sentiment at times. Yet, God calls us to bring our lives into a state of cooperation under the leadership of His called leader.

In Romans 13:1-7 there is a general summons to obey those in authority. Essentially, all authority is ordained by God. When we disobey authority, we are disobeying God. Once while preparing to conduct a leadership training seminar, I asked the pastor if he had any particular concerns that he thought I should address with his leaders. He responded that the leaders of the congregation needed to understand what “spiritual authority” is and how it works. I felt a little uneasy talking about a subject that should really be a part of his teaching agenda.

We must obey our spiritual leaders. Why? The Bible makes it clear as to why. “They keep watch over your soul” (Hebrews 13:17b). Your spiritual leader is your
shepherd whom God has called to assist you in reaching maturity. Spiritual leaders help us to grow in grace through their teaching and preaching. Spiritual leaders guard the flock against false teachers and doctrinal error (see Acts 20:28f). They help us to reach our full potential in Christ. Spiritual leaders provide us with examples on how to live and serve God (see 1 Peter 5:3b).

How do we submit to our spiritual leaders? You may be a person who has a real problem following spiritual leaders. In many churches lay leaders have such a real disdain for clergy that they cannot not and will not follow them at all. In these churches there is an adversarial relationship not a submissive one. Alexander Strauch makes a very important point regarding submitting to spiritual leaders in the church.

It is tremendously important that Christians understand God’s will regarding submission and obedience to their spiritual guides. More than any other New Testament passage, Hebrews 13:17 addresses the believer’s duty to obey the church shepherds. By using two imperative verbs, “obey” and “submit,” the inspired writer intensifies his exhortation. His charge is of utmost importance. Although it is difficult to distinguish the precise differences in meaning between these two verbs, “submit” is the stronger and broader of the two. Christians are not only to “obey” their leaders (peitho, meaning “obey,” “to listen to,” “follow”) but are to “submit” to them (hypeiko, meaning “yield,” “give way,” “defer to”). This means Christians are to be responsive to their leaders, yield to their authority, and subordinate themselves to them even when they have a difference of opinion.

A spirit of obedience and submission to authority is fundamental to Christian living (Rom. 16:19; 2 Cor. 2:9; Phil. 2:12; Philem. 21; 1 Peter 1:2, 14). Submission is the fruit of genuine humility and faith. It is a mark of the Spirit-filled life (Eph 5:18-6:9). The Bible says, first and foremost, “submit therefore to God....” (James 4:7a). True submission to God naturally expresses itself in obedience and submission to earthly authority. Thus genuine submission to God and His Word expresses itself in obedience and
submission in the home, in marriage, at work, in society, and in the local assembly of believers.\textsuperscript{10}

Who are spiritual leaders? We must always keep in mind that the church has key biblical offices, the pastor, deacons, and deaconesses. Spiritual leaders are anyone who leads in the church of the Lord Jesus Christ. They may be elected to serve as leaders of a group or appointed to lead a committee. The church should always take care to ensure that only those persons who are spiritually qualified are set apart to lead. When we submit to God and His Word, we will want to submit to spiritual leaders.

**How Far Do We Go?**

There might be someone asking, “okay, what you are saying about being submissive is fine and dandy. However how do I know when submission turns into abuse?” How do I know how far to go? There are some instances when the line between right and wrong is clearly defined. During the civil rights struggles of the late 50s and 60s it was clear that some laws were unjust and immoral. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and those whom he led, adopted a strategy called civil disobedience. It was the wilful disobedience to all civil laws that promoted and supported segregation and discrimination. In these cases it is clear what we should do. If Dr. King and African Americans had continued to obey laws that demeaned and humiliated an entire race of people, we would have been denying the moral law of God’s Word. “God is no respecter or persons” (Acts 10:34).

The same thing happened to Peter and John when they were ordered by the Sanhedrin Court not to preach or talk about Jesus. In Acts 5:29 we read their response when they were arrested a second time for preaching. “Then Peter and the other apostles answered and said, We ought to obey God rather than men.” For the apostles their first responsibility was to God

Each believer must have an in-depth understanding of the Word of God. The
Word helps us to distinguish what is morally right from what is morally wrong. Sometimes the lines between right and wrong cannot be easily defined. How do you handle covert discrimination on your job? What do you do when you are involved in an abusive relationship? How do we handle dishonesty on the job, when we know other employees may be stealing? You and I may not like paying income taxes, but we have to pay them nonetheless. We may not like to drive 30 miles per hour on some roads, but we are obligated just the same. Peter the apostle wrote, “Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord’s sake: whether it be to the king, as supreme: Or unto governors, as unto them that are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers, and for the praise of them that do well. For so is the will of God, that with well doing ye may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men: As free, and not using your liberty for a cloak of maliciousness, but as the servants of God” (1 Peter 2:15-16, KJV).

For Further Study


_________________________________________________________________

What are two things that we can learn from Jesus about submitting to the will of God?
_________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________

2. Read Ephesians 5:21; Galatians 5:13; Philippians 2:3. How is submission to be demonstrated among believers?

_________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________

Why is it so difficult to practice these teachings from the New Testament regarding submission?
_________________________________________________________________
3. Read Philippians 2:6-9; 2 Corinthians 8:9. What do we learn about the attitude of Jesus toward submission to God?

__________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________

4. Read Mark 8:34-39. What did Jesus teach about admission into the ranks of His disciples?

__________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________

5. Read Romans 13:1-8. What is the believer’s responsibility in the area of spiritual and secular authority?

__________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________

6. What are areas of your life that you must submit to God?

__________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________

7. Look up the word obedience, obey, submit, submission in your Bible concordance and see how they are used and the various scriptural context in which they appear.

For Personal Spiritual Growth

1. Read the gospel beginning with Mark, Matthew, Luke and then John.
2. Read the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5-7, what did Jesus teach about relating to other people?
3. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus used the metaphors of “light” and “salt.” What does it mean to be light and salt as Jesus used those terms?
For Further Reading


End Notes


4. Ibid.

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid.


8. Ibid.


The study of the Bible is absolutely necessary to the development of the Christian life. This study, by J. W. McGarvey, was designed to afford suggestion and assistance to those who desire a fuller and more accurate knowledge of the Bible. Question: “According to the Bible, to whom are we to be submissive, and why?”. Answer: Submission is a concept that seems to go against the grain of human nature, and yet we all see the need for it in certain aspects of life. Without submission, things quickly fall into chaos as everyone strives to be in charge. Even though it is sometimes mocked as a sign of weakness, submission is really one of the strongest pillars of a stable society. What does the Bible say about the parameters of submission? First of all, we need a proper understanding of submission. The English word submit com