



The Bible and our society see a lot of things differently, but among the most significant is the disparity between their views of submission. Americans tend to see submission through the lens of rights, especially “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” As long as I don’t infringe upon your rights, I can pursue my own happiness. The trouble comes when your pursuit of happiness gets in the way of my pursuit of happiness. That’s when we demand that the other person submit, because he or she is encroaching upon my rights.

By contrast, the Bible views submission through the lens of responsibility. As we learned the first week, Jesus models a life in which we exist not for ourselves, but to serve God and others. God gives us responsibilities for every sort of relationship, and in fulfilling those responsibilities our submission becomes faith, hope, and love in action.

In the context of marriage this difference leads to very different results. Our “modern” view of rights and submission finds an extraordinary parallel in the story of Hagar in Genesis 16:1-10. Abram and Sarai have been promised a child by God, but no child has arrived, so Sarai decides to take things into her own hands. In her own words “the Lord has kept her from having children,” so she decides to build her own family by using Hagar. In her own mind she has a right to children, and Hagar is her servant, so it makes sense. Even her husband, Abram, exists for her happiness. When it goes badly, Sarai tells Abram, “you are responsible for the wrong I am suffering.” Ironically, she is right, but she feels harmed only because of her unhappiness, not because she now recognizes her plan and Abram’s behavior as faithless and irresponsible.

As for Abram, he is just as responsible for the marital disaster as Sarai because he prioritizes the maxim “happy wife . . . happy life” over submission to God. He doesn’t trust that God will provide them with a son, so he submits to his wife’s wants in order to make life easier for himself in the short-term. And he doesn’t seem to learn, because when she complains about Hagar, instead of taking responsibility he tells Sarai to “do with her whatever you think best.” Ironically, it is the most abused person in the story, Hagar, who submits to God and to those in authority (16:9) in a tangible demonstration of her faith, hope, and love for God and her son Ishmael.

While Abram and Sarai’s pursuit of happiness creates familial dysfunction, Joseph and Mary’s story is a model of godly submission that brings life and blessing. Most of the little we know of Joseph comes from Matthew 1:18-25 where we find a righteous man trying to do the responsible thing. Mary is pregnant and he is undoubtedly disappointed and perhaps angry, but he still wants the best for her under the circumstances. When told the truth and given instructions, he submits and marries Mary, receiving and naming the child as his own from God. His responsibility to Mary and Jesus is no less than if they had conceived him together. He takes upon himself any potential shame of a child conceived before marriage, and he cares for and protects them by fleeing to Egypt and following God’s directions. Mary, for her part, clearly submits herself both to God (Lk 1:38) and to Joseph. As they prioritize their responsibilities to each other over any claims to rights, even through life’s inevitable troubles they experience God’s joy and blessing so that it overflows into the lives of others.

Discussion Questions

What in life tries to convince you that submission is unnecessary in your most important relationships, especially your marriage if you are married?

Society says that we should only submit to those who earn it and deserve it. What is the inevitable result if all of us, including our spouses, are sinful humans who seldom, if ever, deserve it?

How do I need to submit and accept the responsibilities God has given me within his created order? How will that demonstrate my love and faith for him in the context of my closest relationships?