

The Discipline of Submission



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“Jesus’ life was the cross-life of submission and service. Jesus’ death was the cross-death of conquest by suffering.” -Richard Foster, Celebration of Discipline

What is the Discipline of Submission?

At the most basic level, the Discipline of Submission involves choosing to value others above ourselves (see **Philippians 2:3**). It is closely related to the ideas of humility, self-denial, and selflessness.

When Paul described the ideal expression of agape love in **1 Corinthians 13**, he said love isn’t “self-seeking.” That’s the spirit of submission. We submit to the wants, needs, and desires of others, rather than insisting on getting our own way.

Richard Foster argues that the opposite of submission—selfishness, entitlement, or always needing to get our own way— is “one of the greatest bondages in human society,” (*Celebration of Discipline*, 111). Submission is a way to break free from that oppression, because when we learn to live in submission rather than entitlement, we’re able to “lay down the terrible burden of always needing to get our own way,” (Foster, 111).

Jesus Models the Discipline of Submission.

Jesus understood the importance of valuing others and putting their needs first. If there was anyone who deserved to be served and honored, it was Jesus. But he consistently chose to serve others instead of being served.

Consider these examples of sacrifice and service from Jesus’ life:

- When Jesus washed his disciples feet.
- When he welcomed sinners to the table.
- When he ministered to the crowds instead of demanding some quiet time to rest and grieve.
- When he prayed for the soldiers who were crucifying him.
- When he prayed in the garden, “Not my will, but yours be done.”
- When he resisted the people’s efforts to crown him as an earthly king.

This example of self-sacrifice was not lost on Jesus’ followers.

When Paul taught the Philippians church to stop living only for themselves and to consider the needs of the broader community, he pointed to Jesus as the prime example to follow (**Philippians 2:5-11**).

- Jesus had every privilege imaginable, but did not insist on using those privileges for his own advantage.
- Jesus emptied himself so we could be filled with God’s blessings.
- God took the form of a servant so we could be adopted as God’s children.
- Jesus died on a cross so that we could live with him in Heaven.

THE ATTITUDE OF A SERVANT

PHILIPPIANS 2:5-11

When Peter called upon the church to be willing to submit to the government and suffer for the sake of the Gospel (**1 Peter 2:13-21**), he also pointed to Jesus as the example to follow: *“To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps,”* (**1 Peter 2:21**).

The Apostles knew that a key part of Jesus’ legacy was submission: an inner attitude and an outward lifestyle that valued others above himself.

Jesus Teaches us About Humility, Greatness, and Submission

Jesus frequently emphasized the need follow in his footsteps in this manner—to live from a place of humility and submission.

Deny Yourselfes

In **Luke 9:21-27**, Jesus teaches his disciples to *“deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me,”* follow by *“whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it.”* And it’s worth mentioning that he says this immediately after predicting he would be rejected, killed, and raised back to life. These were not empty words that could be interpreted in a variety of ways —there was a clear context of sacrificing for the good of others that Jesus had in mind.

Achieving Greatness Through Humility

In **Matthew 20:25-28**, Jesus teaches his disciples to think differently about leadership, authority, and greatness:

25 Jesus called them together and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. 26 Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, 27 and whoever wants to be first must be your slave— 28 just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

Jesus tells us that we should stop thinking about greatness and leadership from a human point of view. It’s not about getting our needs (and wants) met; it’s about using whatever influence we have so that others can be blessed.

Do you want to be great? Learn to be a *servant* to all. **Do you want to be first in line?** Become a *slave* to everyone. And don’t just listen to what Jesus says, look at what he’s done. He didn’t come to be served; *he came to serve others and give his life as a ransom to set them free.*

Jesus says something similar in **Matthew 23:8-12**:

8 *“But you are not to be called ‘Rabbi,’ for you have one Teacher, and you are all brothers.*
 9 *And do not call anyone on earth ‘father,’ for you have one Father, and he is in heaven.* 10 *Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one Instructor, the Messiah.* 11 *The greatest among you will be your servant.* 12 *For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.*

Jesus teaches us to reject artificial titles of authority that puff us up instead of build others up. He repeats his earlier teaching about achieving greatness through humility (**Matthew 23:26-27**) when he says that only those who humble themselves will be exalted, while everyone who exalts themselves will be humbled by God.

When Jesus washed the feet of his disciples in **John 13**, he was showing us what it looks like to put this principle into practice. He explicitly said that part of his reason for doing this act of love and service was to provide an ongoing example for us to follow: **“I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you,”** (John 13:15).

The Household Codes Emphasize *Mutual* Submission

Ephesians 5:21 summarizes the the New Testament’s view on submission within Christian households: *“Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.”*

The various “household codes” in the New Testament letters provide a uniquely Christian twist on the traditional set of rules that society expected men, women, children, and slaves to live by (e.g., **Ephesians 5:22-6:9, Colossians 3:18-24, and 1 Peter 2:13-3:7**). The cultural household codes were very generous towards men at the expense of women, children, and slaves. Men were expected to be the head of the house, while all others were expected to submit to their authority. This was very much a one-way street.

For example, the Greek philosopher Aristotle wrote that women, children and slaves were “by nature” inferior to men. This idea was more or less an accepted fact of life for households in the first century. Even Jewish writers like Philo of Alexandria and Josephus argued that women were by nature inferior to men. Josephus says that since a woman *“is in all things inferior to the man,”* she needs to submit to her husband so she may be *“directed.”*

Because of this prevailing attitude regarding men and women, the *mutual* submission emphasized in the Biblical household codes would have really stood out to the first century believers.

Rachel Held Evans explains:

“The Christians in the churches at Ephesus, Colosse, and Asia Minor who first heard these letters read aloud would. instantly recognize Peter and Paul’s version of the household codes as a sort of radical Christian remix of familiar Greco-Roman philosophy regarding household structure... The consensus in these ancient writings is that a man is justified in ruling over his household because his wives, slaves, and children are by nature his inferiors. The purpose of the codes was to reinforce the goodness and importance of this hierarchal familial structure which held together the very fabric of society.”

The Biblical household codes emphasize the need for mutual, voluntary submission to one another out of our love and reverence for Christ (see **Ephesians 5:21**, quoted above). Listen for the *mutuality* emphasized in these household codes:

- “Wives, in the same way submit yourselves to your own husbands... Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect...” (**1 Peter 3:1, 7**)
- “Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.” (**Ephesians 5:22, 25**).
- “18 Wives, submit yourselves to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. 19 Husbands, love your wives and do not be harsh with them.” (**Colossians 3:18-19**).

In each case, wives are called upon to submit to their husbands. Likewise, Paul calls upon men to “love” their wives in the same way Jesus loved the church (i.e. **Philippians 2:5-11**), while Peter calls on them to “be considerate” and “treat them with respect.” The Biblical view of love routinely emphasizes self-sacrifice, self-denial, and working for the good of others above ourselves. When you consider the cultural backdrop of male dominance, the mutual submission emphasized in the New Testament household codes is simply stunning.



Richard Foster's Seven Acts of Submission

1. **Submit to the Triune God.** Every day we seek God's will above our own; we live with his plan and purpose in mind; we pray as Jesus taught us, "your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven," (**Matthew 6:10**)
2. **Submit to Scripture.** We submit to the living Word (Jesus) and the written Word (Scripture). We resolve to hear it, receive it, and obey it.
3. **Submit to our Family.** We practice Paul's teaching in **Philippians 2:4** and **1 Corinthians 10:24**—seeking the good of others above ourselves. We recognize that a primary place to practice this is within our homes.
4. **Submit to our Neighbors.** We follow the example of the Good Samaritan, who stopped to help his neighbor in need. We serve others, seek the good of our community, and use our resources to bless others.
5. **Submit to the Believing Community.** We seek to live the "Cross-Life" of submission and service in our local church. We serve graciously and volunteer regularly.
6. **Submit to the Broken and Despised.** We follow Jesus' example of ministering to the "least of these."
7. **Submit to the World.** We recognize the image of God in all people and reject calls to focus exclusively on "us."

The Limits of Submission

Both Paul and Peter teach us to submit or be subject to the governing authorities (**Romans 13:1-7** and **1 Peter 2:13-14**, respectively). But neither one of them intended this as a universal principle of unconditional submission to immoral authorities. When the governing authorities commanded Peter to stop preaching the Gospel, he boldly declared "*We must obey God rather than human beings!*" (**Acts 5:29**).

And when Paul was mistreated by the authorities, he was not afraid to call them out and demand justice (**Acts 16:37**).

The New Testament calls us to submit to the greatest extent possible up until that submission becomes destructive to the Gospel mission or our basic human dignity.