



THE REVOLUTIONARY DISCIPLE

Understanding Submission in the Five Spheres

A Study to Help You Understand God's Heart About Delegated Authority



UNDERSTANDING SUBMISSION IN THE FIVE SPHERES

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Complete this study as a group, one-on-one, or on your own.

In Chapter 2 of *The Revolutionary Disciple*, “Humble Discipleship,” we describe how disciples must be humble for discipleship to work. And humility involves our submitting to God’s delegated authorities. A delegated authority is someone God establishes to exercise his authority in a certain sphere of life. They are God’s *delegated* authority because he allocates his authority to their position on earth. Such a position holds a certain amount of authority in our lives, and that authority ultimately comes from God.

The New Testament clearly says we’re called to be characterized by humble submission: “Submit yourselves for the Lord’s sake to every authority instituted among men” (1 Pet. 2:13, NIV). God places seven types of authority over us in the Five Spheres of Discipleship. These are the main types of authority in Scripture to whom we must submit—with God himself at the top of the list.

For each type of authority listed below, we’ve included a key excerpt from a Scripture passage about that type of authority. In order to understand these excerpts, however, you must read each verse in its full context. At the end of this study, you should better understand God’s heart about submission and authority.

Once you’ve studied the seven passages, you’ll have the opportunity at the end of this study to reflect on your own life, write those reflections down, and plan your action steps. We’ve also included additional Scriptures and resources for further study.

God Himself

“Submit yourselves, then, to God.” — James 4:7

Read James 4:1–10, and then answer the following questions.

1. From this passage, what is the connection between quarrels, our desires that battle within us, and our pride?
2. God gives grace to the humble, which James offers as a motivation for us to submit ourselves to God. Why does James motivate us like that?
3. What does it mean in this context to submit ourselves to God?
4. How does this connect with spiritual warfare (see vv. 7b–10)?

Church Leaders

“Obey your leaders and submit to their authority.” — Hebrews 13:17

Read Hebrews 13:15–17, and then answer the following questions.

1. What is the connection between “sacrifice” (Heb. 13:15–16) and obeying our leaders?
2. How does verse seventeen’s instructions that Christians are to obey their leaders and submit to their authority strike you at first?
3. According to the rest of verse seventeen, what is one reason we’re called to obey our leaders?

Believers in General

“Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.” — Ephesians 5:21

Read Ephesians 5:21, scan over the commands in Ephesians 5:22–6:10, and then answer the following questions.

1. How can “submit to one another” in Ephesians 5:21 serve as a sort of header for the rest of what follows in Ephesians 5:22–6:10? Describe the different relationships Paul lists and how the instructions for each one come back to submission.
2. Why did Paul frame these instructions about submission in terms such as “reverence for Christ” and “Christ is the head of the church”?
3. Is there a connection between Ephesians 5:21, “Submit to one another” and the passage in Ephesians 6:10 that begins with, “Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power”? (If you have a hard time answering this question, come back to this question once you’ve finished Chapter 22 of *The Revolutionary Disciple*.)

Spouses

“Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. . . . Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.” — Ephesians 5:22, 25

Read Ephesians 5:22–33, and then answer the following questions.

1. Looking at the immediate context (vv. 23–24), what does Paul mean when he instructs wives to “submit to [their] husbands *as to the Lord*”?
2. How can a husband’s call to love his wife through service be considered a form of submission to his wife? (Look at Ephesians 5:25b, 28–30, 33 for your explanation.)
3. What other insights can you gather, now that you’ve read this section as a whole, when you reread Ephesians 5:33, a summary of this section?

Parents

“Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right.” — Ephesians 6:1

Read Ephesians 6:1–4, and then answer the following questions.

1. How might “submit to one another” in verse 5:22 be connected to “Children, obey your parents”?
2. Why do you think Paul added verse 6:3 about a promise?
3. How do Paul’s instructions to fathers—and by extension to mothers—about not exasperating their children connect to humility and submission?

Employers

“Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ. . . . Masters, treat your slaves in the same way.” — Ephesians 6:5, 9

Read Ephesians 6:5–9, and then answer the following questions.

1. Why does Paul include here instructions for slaves to obey their masters?
2. According to the context (Eph. 6:6–8), what was the heart-level challenge common to slaves at the time? Do you relate to those challenges as you think about authority and submission in your workplace?
3. Paul tells masters to treat their slaves “in the same way.” According to the immediate context, what does this mean?

Governmental Authorities

“Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities.” — Romans 13:1

Read Romans 12:19–13:7, and then answer the following questions.

1. According to Romans 13:1, what reason does Paul give for saying *we must submit* ourselves to the governing authorities?
2. Based on Paul’s specific language in this section, does God call us to submit to every person in authority, or to their position of authority? What’s the difference?
3. Read Romans 13:4–5 again. What are the reasons we’re called to submit to governing authorities?
4. How does Romans 12:19–21 potentially set the stage for submitting to governing authorities? How does this passage connect with Romans 13:4–5?
5. What does this passage *not say* that people have twisted to say in your experience?

TAKE ACTION

Now that you've studied these Scriptures about submission to God's delegated authorities, take time to reflect on your life: How are you doing with submission to God? Are you submissive to God's delegated authorities? Take stock and ask yourself with regard to each type of authority: *Am I resisting any of these authorities either actively or passively? If so, how exactly am I acting rebelliously?*

Honestly asking these questions might feel daunting, and seeking true answers about where you are might feel overwhelming—perhaps you will identify several areas of rebellion under each type. That's common, especially if this concept of submission is new to you. So take heart and ask God for help to make progress on your discipleship journey.

As you write your responses below, treat any notions about rebellion in your life as possible proddings from God.

1. God Himself

2. Church Leaders

3. Believers in General

4. Spouse

5. Parents

6. Employer

7. Governmental Authorities

In order to focus on taking your next step, identify just one change for today: How can you better submit to the leaders God has placed in your life? Are you willing to humble yourself and change in this way? Describe your plan in writing (or discuss it with your group), and then ask for God's help.

ADDITIONAL SCRIPTURES ON SUBMISSION AND AUTHORITY

We've listed additional passages below for more support of what we've been describing in this PDF. These passages can help you develop a richer biblical theology of submission and authority and a more holistic understanding of humility. This is not an exhaustive list, but it does provide additional direction as you explore God's heart about this topic.

Old Testament Passages

- Exodus 3:16: Even though God commissioned Moses to lead the Exodus from Egypt, he asked him to first approach the elders of Israel.
- 1 Samuel 26: David refused to kill Saul in that cave at En Gedi because he was “the Lord's anointed.”
- Ezekiel 34: The elders were responsible for carrying out God's shepherding as his delegated authorities, even though they failed to do so at that time.

New Testament Passages

- Acts 20:17–35: The Holy Spirit makes elders the overseers of his people.
- Titus 3:1: We're commanded to be subject to rulers and authorities in general and to be obedient.
- Matthew 18:15–20: We can see the authority of the church, of the elders, and even of Jesus himself in how we are called to confront sin in one another.
- 2 Peter 2:10: Giving in to the flesh is connected to “despising” authority.
- Jude 8: Part of what makes false teachers bad is that they reject authority.
- 1 Timothy 5:19–20: Paul offers instructions on how to think about accusations toward elders, which includes treading carefully.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES ON SUBMISSION AND AUTHORITY

To study deeper the dynamics of submission and authority beyond what's contained in *The Revolutionary Disciple*, consider reading one of these resources.

Chad Harrington, *Your Spiritual Formation Plan*

The content in this PDF download was adapted from Chapter 14, “Submission,” in *Your Spiritual Formation Plan: A Devotional Workbook to Guide Your Next Steps with God* by Chad Harrington. This short workbook helps disciples create a basic spiritual formation plan for each of the core disciplines for disciples of Jesus. Order this book at himpublications.com/product/your-spiritual-formation-plan.

Gene Edwards, *The Tale of Three Kings: A Study in Brokenness*

This short book of historical fiction retells the story of Saul, David, and Absalom from Scripture in an engaging way. Edwards explores the journey of David and reveals how much David valued submitting to God’s delegated authorities—especially in regard to King Saul. The narrative includes the pain, heartache, and temptations to rebel during David’s journey, not to mention the important role of submission to God’s authority. It’s anchored in Scripture but packaged as a screenplay. We recommend this book for everyone, but especially for those who feel weighed down or discouraged with regard to authority. You can [find this book on Amazon here](#).

Watchman Nee, *Spiritual Authority*

Watchman Nee was a Chinese Christian who made a powerful impact during his lifetime. Much of what’s contained in this book was purportedly collected and recorded by his students from his private lectures. Nee was an Eastern Christian who brought a unique perspective for Western believers in Jesus. You can [find this book on Amazon here](#).