

Ephesians: What's God Saying to You? What are You Going to Do About It?

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I. Introduction

Why is it so difficult for wives to obey God's command to submit to their husbands? Why does this even have to be a thing; why can't the husband and wife be seen as equals, with equal power and say in the marriage? What would be so wrong with a marriage that's 50/50? And doesn't submission oppress the woman, doesn't it rob her of her true potential?

II. Ephesians: What is God Saying to You and What are You Going to Do About It?

Chapter 5

Are you having a hard time with the words "submit" and "authority"? Do these words rub you the wrong way? Whenever Ephesians 5:22-24 is taught, do you find yourself struggling to accept the fact that you have to submit to your husband in everything? You're not alone; we *all* hate authority.

Why is it so hard to submit to my husband?

First, there's something about someone having authority over us, being able to tell us what to do that we hate. Why is every human being like this? In fact, ever notice how parents never have to teach their children to say "NO!"? It comes naturally; children have a streak of rebellion built right into them. Where did this come from? We learned to hate authority from the first individual who rebelled against God: Satan. Satan was not content with being the #1 angel, the most handsome, the wisest, the one privileged to guard God's throne. This wasn't enough for him; he wanted to be in charge and one day he rebelled against God's authority and said, "I will be like the Most High" (Isaiah 14:13-14 cf. Ezekiel 28:11-19). Having done this to God, he taught us to do the same thing (Genesis 3:1-7). What was Satan's temptation to us? He told us that we could be like the Most High (Genesis 3:5). He convinced us that we didn't have to submit to God's authority; we could be our own authority. This is why there's a streak of rebellion against authority in every one of us. So now, we all hate to be told what to do. This is who we are at our core; we're just like our forefather Adam. We have his rebellious nature (Romans 5:12-14, 19) and that rebellious nature hates God's authority (Romans 8:7).

Second, in the beginning when we refused to submit to God's authority, when we rebelled against Him as Satan did, we suffered the consequence. One of God's disciplines for this rebellion is that He made submission to each other much more difficult. Now the wife will want to dominate her husband and the husband will in turn respond with domination of his own (Genesis 3:16). This is why some women "wear the pants" as they say. By the way, husbands, if this is your wife, you have failed to lead and protect her, just as Adam did in the Garden. And wives, if you're "wearing the pants" in the family, give them back to your husband. This will not end well for you or for him; you'll be frustrated and if it gets bad enough, you'll despise your husband, you won't respect him. Now, this doesn't mean that all women will dominate their husbands but it does mean that the potential is there and, if left unchecked, then a wife will dominate her husband.

Third, something that makes it very, very difficult for wives to submit to their husbands is a weak husband. That is, when the husband is weak and refuses to take the lead and authority in his family, then his wife will step in to fill this void. Someone has to and will lead the marriage and if the man refuses to take responsibility for his God-given role, then his wife will. But when this happens, it has terrible consequences on both of them (and their children) (Genesis 3:1-6; 16:1-12; 1 Kings 16:29-21:1-26—this devastating example involves Jezebel and Ahab—notice who’s acting like the king and who’s acting like the queen [1 Kings 19:1-2]. Notice how their relationship is at times more like mother and son [1 Kings 21:1-7] rather than husband and wife). Side note: Anytime a marriage fails, God holds the husband responsible because he’s the leader and authority (Genesis 3:9; Romans 5:12-19; 1 Timothy 2:13-14).

Now you may be thinking, “But if I don’t step in and take over, nothing will ever get done!” To the contrary, when you force him to take responsibility, one of two things will happen: he will either repent and take his God-given responsibility when things get so bad (whether it’s important family decisions, finances, or anything else) that he has to step in because he realizes that the gravy train is over and his wife isn’t going to play mommy for him anymore, or he will refuse to take responsibility, in which case, you inform him that you’re calling an elder (or another trusted member of the church) because he’s refusing to obey God in his marriage.

One way or another, God will correct his behavior; his sinful behavior is subject to Christ, Ephesians 5:24. And seeking help from an elder (or other trusted church member) is not “telling on him” or embarrassing him or disrespecting him. It is you being his helpmate, i.e., you’re helping him address his sin against you, your kids, and God. Sometimes God uses very tough love to get His children to comply (1 Corinthians 5:1-5) and if you’re thinking it doesn’t work, it does (2 Corinthians 2:5-11). But if you keep taking up his slack, then he will never grow up and God won’t get a chance to correct him. (By the way, this is why the church family needs to be tight, so tight that they know when one of their brothers or sisters has gone astray, 1 Corinthians 12:26; Galatians 6:1).

Fourth, there’s another type of husband that also makes it very, very difficult for a wife to submit: a tyrannical husband. Sometimes a husband will exhibit the worst of male behavior; he’ll be rude, selfish, tyrannical, and a bully. His idea of manhood is the stereotypical macho idiot. This type thinks that being the head of his family means that he’s always right and has permission to be harsh and dictatorial. He can say and do whatever he wants regardless of his wife and kids. This obviously makes it very, very hard for a wife to submit. But even this behavior is not beyond God’s power to correct. In this instance, you keep respecting him (1 Peter 3:1) unless it’s sin, illegal, abusive or dangerous. If your silent submission doesn’t reach him, then you take the appropriate steps to reach out to your church family for help. Don’t ever let Satan convince you that anyone is beyond God’s help.

What happens when the woman leads and the man follows?

First, why can't the woman lead the marriage? Why can't the man and woman at least be equal in power? The reason why God—not me, not your husband or any other man but God—the reason why He doesn't want wives to be the authority in the home is not because women aren't smart enough—some wives are smarter than their husbands—or because they're not capable enough—some wives are more capable than their husbands. It has nothing to do with intelligence or capability. At issue are the roles and who's supposed to play them and why.

The roles in the church and marriage are simple: there is someone in authority and there's someone in submission to that authority. And God plays the central figure in both. That is, in marriage, God is the husband, the leader, the authority, Ephesians 5:22-32. In the Church, God is likewise the Head, the leader, the authority, Ephesians 1:22-23; 5:23-24. When men and women do marriage or church, one of them will play the role of God and since God is male and never the one under submission but the one in authority, God demands that the male play His role. For example, when a pastor preaches God's Word from the pulpit, he stands in God's place; he is God's mouth piece to the church. Ultimately, it is not the pastor(s) flock; it is God's flock; God is the Pastor. Therefore, all pastors are God's overseers, but God is the actual Shepherd (Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 5:2-4). Thus, He demands that the male play His role.

Second, when God's roles for the man and woman are reversed, there are severe consequences: Genesis 3—Adam was supposed to be the leader, provider and protector. He was supposed to be the one in authority and Eve the one in submission to that authority. When these roles were reversed (Genesis 3:1-7, 17), it had devastating results not just on Adam and Eve, but on the entire human race. And God put the blame squarely on Adam (Genesis 3:9, 17; Romans 5:12-19; 1 Timothy 2:12-14).

Genesis 16:1-12—God had promised Abram and implicitly Sarai, since she was Abram's only wife, that they would have a son (Genesis 15:4). But they both had a lapse in faith and this happened because Abram (as Adam had done, Genesis 3:17) "heeded the voice" of his wife. The roles were reversed and Abram was now following Sarai. Sarai suggested having a child with her maidservant Hagar and Abram acquiesced. What was the result? Ishmael was born and from that moment on, Abram and Sarai and the nation of Israel that would later come from them would have no rest—the Arab nations who descended from Abraham and Ishmael are hostile to Israel to this day.

Wives who likewise reverse these roles and lead instead of follow their husbands can expect the same bad results. And the husbands who are made to follow their wives will react in several ways: they might shutdown and live in silent anger until there's a boiling point, they might become vocally angry and resentful which leads to constant fights, or they might become weak and respond more like a son than a husband. All of this will leave the husband feeling emasculated and weak; the wife may feel like she's any man's equal, but at the same time she will feel frustrated and resentful.

What submission looks like: yes, the wife must submit to her husband's authority, but this doesn't mean that she has no voice or vote. She is her husband's helpmate who is a key partner concerning God's two mandates, have children and conquer the world. This means that she will have input, advice, and wisdom for her husband and family. At times her input will be given without a word, as she waits on the Lord to give her words to speak or to change her husband, the way Sarah did with Abraham (1 Peter 3:1-6). Other times she must speak in order to prevent a disaster, but always with respect knowing that her husband has the final decision. (Genesis 16:1-6—even though Sarai had the right to discipline Hagar, she left the final decision with Abram. Genesis 21:8-13—Sarah wants Hagar and Ishmael gone but she leaves the decision to Abraham, 21:10-12.)

The Proverbs 31 Wife, a Case Study in Submission, when God tells us what an ideal wife looks like, it appears that she's not submissive at all because she's a strong, independent entrepreneur. Yet God holds her up as the model wife that all wives are to follow. Is she submissive? Does God want all women to focus on career first then family? How do we reconcile this with God's command to wives to submit to their own husbands?

The ideal wife is indeed strong, independent and a business woman; she's even dressed to the nines, 31:16, 22, 24. But what's her motto, what's her guiding principle? Submission: it doesn't look like she's submissive, but she is absolutely submissive, 31:11-12, 23, 31. She first submits to God's view of what a wife is, 31:30, then to her husband, 31:11-12, then to the needs of her family, 31:15, 21, 27, then to the needs of her servants, 31:15, she even submits to the needs of her community, 31:20. What is her central characteristic? Selflessness.

But doesn't all this oppress her? Doesn't her duty to her husband and family rob her of her true potential? First, she doesn't see what she does for her husband and family as duty; she loves being a wife, mother, and business woman. Notice how her husband feels about her: he loves her and trusts her implicitly. And he is fully confident and praises her for her abilities, 31:11, 28-29. Notice how she feels about him: she loves him implicitly and would never disrespect his authority, 31:12. And notice how her family feel about her: they love and honor her, 31:28. And what effect does all this have on her, does she feel oppressed or stressed out? No, she's not anxious about anything and she looks forward with joy to the future, 31:21, 25.

III. Conclusion

...submitting to one another in the fear of God.