

Authority Issues

When It's Hard Being Told
What to Do

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My Platoon Sergeant did it—again! We were done with the day’s training at 1400. I thought we would go home early, but we had to stick around until the closeout formation at 1645 “just in case” something came up. Why do we have an alert roster? He could activate it so we could get all the information that was put out. With deployment coming up, it would really be nice to hang out a little before we go “over there” again.

Have you ever had a day like that? Or a time like the following:

He did it again! How does he expect me to make this work when he keeps changing his mind about what he wants? Last week he insisted that we complete this procedure in seven minutes. Today, he raked me over the coals in staff meeting because the procedure wasn’t thorough enough. He said he thought it was obvious that a seven-minute procedure wasn’t enough time to get the results we need. Once again, I’m made to look like an idiot for following his instructions!

Most of us have been there. It may not have been a seven-minute procedure or a late dismissal that was the issue, but we know what it’s like to be under authority that fails. It’s hard!

When we were kids, the authorities that failed were usually our parents or teachers. Now that we’ve grown up, it turns out that our boss (or drill sergeant or commanding officer or even our chaplain or pastor) seems to have taken lessons from the people we had to obey as kids. Did they

all go to the same leadership school or what? In addition to that, we have the little frustrations that pop up day-to-day. Yesterday the construction flag person made us wait ten minutes while she gave the right-of-way to traffic in the opposite direction. Even when there weren't any cars coming she stood there holding her stop sign and chatting with her buddies. Why can't she get a clue?!

There are many reasons not to submit to imperfect authority, aren't there?

- The authority is unreasonable.
- The authority is wrong.
- The authority doesn't understand.
- The leadership is inconsistent.
- Doing it the boss's way will lead to failure.
- Submitting will ruin my schedule.
- The authority doesn't practice what he preaches; he has no integrity.
- The authority is unqualified; I respect the rank, but not the person.
- The authority acts like a dictator.

This negative reasoning inevitably leads to actions like the following:

- Feeling sorry for myself
- Focusing on my "right" to be treated better
- Gossiping (sometimes in the guise of a prayer request)
- Complaining
- Getting others to agree with me, gaining a following
- Offering token submission—just enough to get by and avoid serious consequences

- Withdrawing
- Becoming bitter
- Just plain resisting
- Ignoring instructions
- Getting angry
- Arguing
- Getting even
- Doing it my way

It's easy to submit when our authority does what we like. When the Command Sergeant Major walks the Battalion and Company areas to make sure we are released on time for Family Day, we're fine. When we're the teacher's pet or the hand-picked successor, submission doesn't seem hard. When our boss gives us our second raise in six months, when our husband brings us flowers and takes over the kids' bedtime routine, when our pastor is in complete agreement about supporting the missionary we've suggested, and when the government lowers our taxes, life is good!

However, when an authority you applaud is replaced with an authority who does something you consider wrong, an authority who makes a decision you seriously question, or an authority who communicates in an unpleasant manner, suddenly it's not easy. When you work for an authority who requires an action that is inconvenient for you, who falsely accuses you, or who makes poor decisions, life gets hard. What happened?

The bottom-line answer to that question is that no human authority will ever be perfect. Since the time Adam and Eve chose not to trust God or submit to him in the

Garden of Eden, the world has been broken by sin. The problems sin causes show up everywhere, every day, including in our leaders.

But what if we were under perfect authority? Sadly, it's not just those in authority who are broken by sin; we are too. That means we would fail in the way we submitted even to authorities who never made a mistake. Don't think so? Consider Adam and Eve's situation: God was their Creator and Father. He had given them a perfect home, perfect bodies, a great job of being in charge of the whole creation, and just one little rule: "You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die" (Genesis 2:16–17). Despite a perfect life with perfect authority, Adam and Eve still disobeyed. It is easy to think we could solve our problems with authority if we could change those who are in authority, but the story of Adam and Eve shows us that our problems with authority go deeper than what others are doing. Our problem stems from what's in our hearts.

Adam and Eve needed help from outside themselves. Their failure to submit filled the world with brokenness, pain, and death, but God promised Adam and Eve that he would send Someone to save them. The Savior would submit perfectly and then give his life as a payment not just for Adam and Eve's sins, but the sins of all who come to him in faith. The Savior is Jesus, God's own Son. This minibook will explain God's view of submission, and how coming to him in faith will give you the power to submit wisely, even when it's hard or feels impossible.

God's View of Submission

No one can escape submitting to authority! Each of us is required by God to submit to someone. Children are to obey parents (Ephesians 6:1–3). Wives are to submit to husbands (Ephesians 5:22; 1 Peter 3:1). Church members are to submit to pastors (1 Corinthians 16:15–16; Hebrews 13:17). Employees are to submit to employers (Ephesians 6:5; Colossians 3:22; 1 Peter 2:18). Everyone is to submit to the government (Romans 13:1–5; 1 Peter 2:13–14). All believers are to submit to each other (Ephesians 5:21; 1 Peter 5:5) and to God (Romans 6:13; James 4:7).

Biblical Submission

Submission is defined as voluntarily placing oneself under the authority of a leader. It is a military term describing the relationship of a soldier to an officer. Submission means to subordinate or subject oneself to the authority. Those who submit recognize and honor the authority held by the one placed over them.

Submission is a choice; it is an act of the will. Submission is not to be offered “reluctantly as the defeated general submits to his conqueror, but voluntarily as the patient on the operating table submits to the skilled hand of the surgeon as he wields his knife.”¹

Submission Is the Believer's Required Way of Life

Jesus modeled submission for us in his relationship to the Father. He said in John 6:38, “For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me.” In John 8:29, he said, “And he who sent me

is with me. He has not left me alone, for I always do the things that are pleasing to him.”

Since submission was the way of life for Christ, it is to be the way of life for all believers. Romans 8:28–29 teaches that all we experience in life is intended to make us more like Christ, which includes learning his kind of submission.

We need to learn more about Jesus’ submission to learn how it is possible for us to follow his example. Remember that since Adam and Eve lived we have all been broken by sin (Romans 3:23). If we were required to pay for our own sins, we would all be bound for death and an eternity in hell, separated from God forever (Romans 6:23). But God loves us so much that he sent Jesus to earth to live a perfect life for us and to then die in our place. Since Jesus never sinned, he did not need to die for his own sins. Thus, his death is acceptable to God as a substitute payment for our sins (John 3:16). All we need to do is personally accept that payment on our behalf (Romans 10:9–10).

God’s plan to save his people was based on Jesus voluntarily going to the cross. Jesus’ love for us is seen in his submission to his Father’s plan. This changed everything for us, including the context in which *we* submit to authority. Jesus defeated sin *in* us and *against* us. He enables us to do what is right and protects us from being defeated by evil. All this happens because he submitted to unjust human authority—*because* he submitted to the divine authority who was behind it and would overrule it. In short, Christ submitted to unjust authority *because* he was submitting to his Father. Human authorities did not have the last word; God did (John 19:11; Acts 2:23). Jesus’ death on our behalf is the proof and ultimate example of God’s ability

to work good through evil. That is the perspective we need as we face the authorities in our lives. Anyone who doubts that God can work good through evil only needs to look at the cross. God calls Christ's followers to allow him to work in our lives in similar ways. He calls us to trust and submit to him before we do the same with human authority.

Submission Is Required Even When Authority Fails

As we saw earlier, because of the curse of sin we can expect all authority to fail. What provision has God made when this failure is harsh or unjust or unreasonable or unpleasant? Are we excused from submission? Should we lead a mutiny? No, submission is required even to authority that fails in those ways.

For example, the husband referred to in 1 Peter is unsaved and does not obey God's Word, but submission is still required. "Likewise, wives, be subject to your own husbands, so that even if some do not obey the word, they may be won without a word by the conduct of their wives" (1 Peter 3:1). If the husband is saved but does not obey God's Word, the principle is the same.

The master also referred to in 1 Peter is harsh or unreasonable, but God still requires submission.² "Servants, be subject to your masters with all respect, not only to the good and gentle but also to the unjust" (1 Peter 2:18). The governing authority at the time Paul wrote Romans was Nero—an incredibly cruel emperor—but submission was still required.

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from

God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. (Romans 13:1–2)

According to Paul, resisting authority is dangerous because it is actually resisting God. When you criticize the authority, you are criticizing the God who placed that leadership over you. You are deliberately taking a dangerous position.

Having said this, it's important to note that no human authority is given all of God's authority. Each leader is given very limited authority, clearly defined by God in the Bible. No leader has the authority to ask another person to sin. Therefore, if you are asked to sin, you should respectfully refuse to submit.

In addition, no military leader is given unlimited authority, but is responsible to his or her superior officers for the way in which his duties are performed. If your leader is abusing authority, pursuing the matter through appropriate channels is a legitimate way to be submissive to the chain of command as a whole. Similarly, the leadership a husband exercises in the home should reflect his submission to his spiritual leaders. If he is abusive in the way he leads his wife and family, the family can legitimately ask for the help of the leaders of the church and, if needed, law enforcement.

How to Change the Way You Think

Those in authority often make life very difficult. What should you do when it seems that wrong or unjust deci-