

# Celebration of Discipline

The Path to Spiritual Growth

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## 8. The Discipline of Submission

A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.

—MARTIN LUTHER

Of all the Spiritual Disciplines none has been more abused than the Discipline of submission. Somehow the human species has an extraordinary knack for taking the best teaching and turning it to the worst ends. Nothing can put people into bondage like religion, and nothing in religion has done more to manipulate and destroy people than a deficient teaching on submission. Therefore, we must work our way through this Discipline with great care and discernment in order to ensure that we are the ministers of life, not death.

Every Discipline has its corresponding freedom. If I have schooled myself in the art of rhetoric, I am free to deliver a moving speech when the occasion requires it. Demosthenes was free to be an orator only because he had gone through the discipline of speaking above the ocean roar with pebbles in his mouth. The purpose of the Disciplines is freedom. Our aim is the freedom, not the Discipline. The moment we make the Discipline our central focus, we turn it into law and lose the corresponding freedom.

The Disciplines are for the purpose of realizing a greater good. In and of themselves they are of no value whatever. They have value only as a means of setting us before God so that he can give us the liberation we seek. The liberation is the end; the Disciplines are *merely* the means. They are not the answer; they only lead us to the Answer. We must clearly understand this limitation of the Disciplines if we are to avoid bondage.

Not only must we understand, but we need to underscore it to ourselves again and again so severe is our temptation to center on the Disciplines. Let us forever center on Christ and view the Spiritual Disciplines as a way of drawing us closer to his heart.

### The Freedom in Submission

I said that every Discipline has its corresponding freedom. What freedom corresponds to submission? It is the ability to lay down the terrible burden of always needing to get our own way. The obsession to demand that things go the way we want them to go is one of the greatest bondages in human society today. People will spend weeks, months, even years in a perpetual stew because some little thing did not go as they wished. They will fuss and fume. They will get mad about it. They will act as if their very life hangs on the issue. They may even get an ulcer over it.

In the Discipline of submission we are released to drop the matter, to forget it. Frankly, most things in life are not nearly as important as we think they are. Our lives will not come to an end if this or that does not happen.

If you will watch these things, you will see, for example, that almost all church fights and splits occur because people do not have the freedom to give in to each other. We insist that a critical issue is at stake; we are fighting for a sacred principle. Perhaps this is the case. Usually it is not. Often we cannot stand to give in simply because it means that we will not get our own way. Only in submission are we enabled to bring this spirit to a place where it no longer controls us. Only submission can free us sufficiently to enable us to distinguish between genuine issues and stubborn self-will.

If we could only come to see that most things in life are not major issues, then we could hold them lightly. We discover that they are no "big deal." So often we say, "Well, I don't care," when what we really mean (and what we convey to others) is

that we care a great deal. It is precisely here that silence fits in so well with all the other Disciplines. Usually the best way to handle most matters of submission is to say nothing. There is the need for an all-encompassing spirit of grace beyond any kind of language or action which sets others and ourselves free.

The biblical teaching on submission focuses primarily on the spirit with which we view other people. Scripture does not attempt to set forth a series of hierarchical relationships but to communicate to us an inner attitude of mutual subordination. Peter, for example, called upon the slaves of his day to live in submission to their masters (1 Pet. 2:18). The counsel seems unnecessary until we realize that it is quite possible for servants to obey their masters without living in a spirit of submission to them. Outwardly we can do what people ask and inwardly be in rebellion against them. This concern for a spirit of consideration toward others pervades the entire New Testament. The old covenant stipulated that we must not murder. Jesus, however, stressed that the real issue was the inner spirit of murder with which we view people. In the matter of submission the same is true; the real issue is the spirit of consideration and respect we have for each other.

In submission we are at last free to value other people. Their dreams and plans become important to us. We have entered into a new, wonderful, glorious freedom—the freedom to give up our own rights for the good of others. For the first time we can love people unconditionally. We have given up the right to demand that they return our love. No longer do we feel that we have to be treated in a certain way. We rejoice in their successes. We feel genuine sorrow in their failures. It is of little consequence that our plans are frustrated if their plans succeed. We discover that it is far better to serve our neighbor than to have our own way.

Do you know the liberation that comes from giving up your rights? It means you are set free from the seething anger and bitterness you feel when someone doesn't act toward you the way you think they should. It means that at last you are able

to break that vicious law of commerce that says, "You scratch my back, I'll scratch your back; you bloody my nose, I'll bloody your nose." It means you are free to obey Jesus' command, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matt. 5:44). It means that for the first time you understand how it is possible to surrender the right to retaliate: "If any one strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also" (Matt. 5:39).

### A Touchstone

You may have noticed that I have been approaching the matter of submission through the back door. I began by explaining what it does for us before defining what it is. This has been done for a purpose. Most of us have been exposed to such a mutilated form of biblical submission that either we have embraced the deformity or we have rejected the Discipline altogether. To do the former leads to self-hatred; to do the latter leads to self-glorification. Before we become hung on the horns of this dilemma, let's consider a third alternative.

The touchstone for the biblical understanding of submission is Jesus' astonishing statement, "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (Mark 8:34). Almost instinctively we draw back from these words. We are much more comfortable with words like "self-fulfillment" and "self-actualization" than we are with the thought of "self-denial." (In reality, Jesus' teaching on self-denial is the only thing that will bring genuine self-fulfillment and self-actualization.) Self-denial conjures up in our minds all sorts of images of groveling and self-hatred. We imagine that it most certainly means the rejection of our individuality and will probably lead to various forms of self-mortification.

On the contrary, Jesus calls us to self-denial without self-hatred. Self-denial is simply a way of coming to understand that we do not have to have our own way. Our happiness is not dependent upon getting what we want.

Self-denial does not mean the loss of our identity as some suppose. Without our identity we could not even be subject to each other. Did Jesus lose his identity when he set his face toward Golgotha? Did Peter lose his identity when he responded to Jesus' cross-bearing command, "Follow me" (*John 21:19*)? Did Paul lose his identity when he committed himself to the One who had said, "I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name" (*Acts 9:16*)? Of course not. We know that the opposite was true. They found their identity in the act of self-denial.

Self-denial is not the same thing as self-contempt. Self-contempt claims that we have no worth, and even if we do have worth, we should reject it. Self-denial declares that we are of infinite worth and shows us how to realize it. Self-contempt denies the goodness of the creation; self-denial affirms that it is indeed good. Jesus made the ability to love ourselves the prerequisite for our reaching out to others (*Matt. 22:39*). Self-love and self-denial are not in conflict. More than once Jesus made it quite clear that self-denial is the only sure way to love ourselves. "He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for my sake will find it" (*Matt. 10:39*).

Again, we must underscore that self-denial means the freedom to give way to others. It means to hold others' interests above our interests. In this way self-denial releases us from self-pity. When we live outside of self-denial, we demand that things go our way. When they do not, we revert to self-pity—"Poor me!" Outwardly we may submit but we do so in a spirit of martyrdom. This spirit of self-pity, of martyrdom, is a sure sign that the Discipline of submission has gone to seed. This is why self-denial is the foundation for submission; it saves us from self-indulgence.

Modern men and women find it extremely difficult to read the great devotional masters because they make such lavish use of the language of self-denial. It is hard for us to be open to the words of Thomas à Kempis, "To have no opinion of ourselves, and to think always well and highly of others, is great

wisdom and perfection."<sup>1</sup> We struggle to listen to the words of Jesus, "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (*Mark 8:34*). Our difficulty is due primarily to the fact that we have failed to understand Jesus' teaching that the way to self-fulfillment is through self-denial. To save the life is to lose it; to lose it for Christ's sake is to save it (*Mark 8:35*). George Matheson set into the hymnody of the Church this wonderful paradox of fulfillment through self-denial:

Make me a captive, Lord,  
And then I shall be free;  
Force me to render up my sword,  
And I shall conqueror be.  
I sink in life's alarms  
When by myself I stand;  
Imprison me within Thine arms,  
And strong shall be my hand.<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps the air has been sufficiently cleared so that we can look upon self-denial as the liberation that it really is. We must be convinced of this for, as has been stated, self-denial is the touchstone for the Discipline of submission.

### Revolutionary Subordination as Taught by Jesus\*

The most radical social teaching of Jesus was his total reversal of the contemporary notion of greatness. Leadership is found in becoming the servant of all. Power is discovered in submission. The foremost symbol of this radical servanthood is the cross. "He [Jesus] humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross" (*Phil. 2:8*). But note this: Christ not only died a "cross-death," he lived a "cross-life." The way of the cross, the way of a suffering servant was essential to his

<sup>1</sup>I am indebted to John Howard Yoder for this term and for several of the ideas listed under it. His book, *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1972), contains an excellent chapter on Revolutionary Subordination.

ministry. Jesus lived the cross-life in submission to all human beings. He was the servant of all. He flatly rejected the cultural givens of position and power when he said, "You are not to be called rabbi. . . . Neither be called masters . . ." (Matt. 23:8-10). Jesus shattered the customs of his day when he lived out the cross-life by taking women seriously and by being willing to meet with children. He lived the cross-life when he took a towel and washed the feet of his disciples. This Jesus who easily could have called down a legion of angels to his aid chose instead the cross-death of Calvary. Jesus' life was the cross-life of submission and service. Jesus' death was the cross-death of conquest by suffering.

It is impossible to overstate the revolutionary character of Jesus' life and teaching at this point. It did away with all the claims to privileged position and status. It called into being a whole new order of leadership. The cross-life of Jesus undermined all social orders based on power and self-interest.\*

As I noted earlier, Jesus called his followers to live the cross-life. "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (Mark 8:34). He flatly told his disciples, "If any one would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all" (Mark 9:35). When Jesus immortalized the principle of the cross-life by washing the disciples' feet, he added, "I have given you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you" (John 13:15). The cross-life is the life of voluntary submission. The cross-life is the life of freely accepted servanthood.

\*The Church today has failed to understand or, if it understands, has failed to obey the implications of the cross-life for human society. Guy Hershberger courageously explores some of these implications in his book, *The Way of the Cross in Human Relations* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1958). He discusses how the way of servanthood should affect such issues as war, capitalism, trade unions, labor unions, materialism, employer-employee relations, race relations, and others. I am indebted to Hershberger for the term "cross-life."

### Revolutionary Subordination as Taught in the Epistles

Jesus' example and call to follow the way of the cross in all human relationships form the basis for the teaching of the Epistles on submission. The apostle Paul grounds the imperative to the Church to "count others better than yourselves" in the submission and self-denial of the Lord for our salvation. "He . . . emptied himself, taking the form of a servant" (Phil. 2:4-7). The apostle Peter, in the middle of his instructions on submission, directly appeals to the example of Jesus as the reason for submission. "For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. . . . When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he trusted to him who judges justly" (1 Pet. 2:21-23). As a preface to the Ephesian *Haustafel*\* we read, "Be subject to one another *out of reverence for Christ*" (Eph. 5:21, [italics added]). The call for Christians to live the cross-life is rooted in the cross-life of Jesus himself.

The Discipline of submission has been terribly misconstrued and abused from failure to see this wider context. Submission is an ethical theme that runs the gamut of the New Testament. It is a posture obligatory upon *all* Christians: men as well as women, fathers as well as children, masters as well as slaves. We are commanded to live a life of submission because Jesus lived a life of submission, not because we are in a particular place or station in life. Self-denial is a posture fitting for all those who follow the crucified Lord. Everywhere in the *Haustafel* the one and only compelling reason for submission is the example of Jesus.

This singular rationale for submission is staggering when we compare it to other first-century writings. In them there was a

\*A term coined by Martin Luther meaning literally "house-table," hence a table of rules for the Christian household. The *Haustafel* has come to be recognized as a particular literary form and can be found in Ephesians 5:21-6:9, Colossians 3:18-4:1, Titus 2:4-10, and 1 Peter 2:18-3:7.

constant appeal to submission because that was the way the gods had created things; it was one's station in life. Not a single New Testament writer appeals to submission on that basis. The teaching is revolutionary. They completely ignored all the contemporary customs of superordinate and subordinate and called everyone to "count others better than yourselves" (Phil. 2:3).

The Epistles first call to subordination those who, by virtue of the given culture, are already subordinate. "Wives, be subject to your husbands. . . . Children, obey your parents. . . . Slaves, obey in everything those who are your earthly masters . . ." (Col. 3:18-22 and parallels). The revolutionary thing about this teaching is that these people, to whom first-century culture afforded no choice at all, are addressed as free moral agents. Paul gave personal moral responsibility to those who had no legal or moral status in their culture. He made decision-makers of people who were forbidden to make decisions.

It is astonishing that Paul called them to subordination since they were already subordinate by virtue of their place in first-century culture. The only meaningful reason for such a command was the fact that by virtue of the gospel message they had come to see themselves as free from a subordinate status in society. The gospel had challenged all second-class citizenships, and they knew it. Paul urged voluntary subordination not because it was their station in life, but because it was "fitting in the Lord" (Col. 3:18).

This feature of addressing moral teaching to the cultural subordinates is also a radical contrast to the contemporary literature of the day. The Stoics, for example, addressed *only* the person on the top side of the social order, encouraging him to do a good job in the superordinate position he already saw as his place. But Paul spoke first to the people that his culture said should not even be addressed and called them to the cross-life of Jesus.

Next, the Epistles turned to the culturally dominant partner in the relationship and also called him to the cross-life of Jesus.

The imperative to subordination is reciprocal. "Husbands, love your wives. . . . Fathers, do not provoke your children. . . . Masters, treat your slaves justly and fairly . . ." (Col. 3:19-4:1 and parallels). Some most certainly will object that the command to the dominant partner does not use the language of submission. What we fail to see is how much submission those commands demanded of the dominant partner in his cultural setting. For a first-century husband, father, or master to obey Paul's injunction would make a dramatic difference in his behavior. The first-century wife, child, or slave would not need to change one whit to follow Paul's command. If anything, the sting of the teaching falls upon the dominant partner.<sup>3</sup>

Further, we need to see that these imperatives to husbands, fathers, and masters constitute another form of self-denial. They are just another set of words to convey the same truth, namely, that we can be set free from the need to have things our own way. If a husband loves his wife, he will live in consideration of her needs. He will be willing to give in to her. He will be free to regard her as more important than his own needs. He will be able to regard his children as more important than his own needs (Phil. 2:3).

In Ephesians Paul exhorts slaves to live in a spirit of joyful, voluntary, willing service to their earthly masters. Then he exhorts masters, "Do the same to them" (Eph. 6:9). Such a thought was incredible in first-century society. Slaves were chattel, not human beings. Yet Paul with divine authority counsels masters to give way to the needs of their slaves.

Perhaps the most perfect illustration of revolutionary subordination is found in Paul's tiny letter to Philemon. Onesimus, Philemon's runaway slave, had become a Christian. He was returning voluntarily to Philemon as part of what it meant for him to be a disciple of Christ. Paul urges Philemon to welcome Onesimus "no longer as a slave but more than a slave, as a beloved brother . . ." (Philem. 16). John Yoder remarks, "This amounts to Paul's instructing Philemon, in the kind of non-coercive instruction which is fitting for a Christian brother, . . .

that Onesimus is to be set free."<sup>4</sup> Onesimus was to be subordinate to Philemon by returning. Philemon was to be subordinate to Onesimus by setting him free. Both were to be mutually subordinate out of reverence for Christ (Eph. 5:21).

The Epistles did not consecrate the existing hierarchical social structure. By making the command to subordination universal they relativized and undercut it. They called for Christians to live as citizens of a new order, and the most fundamental feature of this new order is universal subordination.

### The Limits of Submission

The limits of the Discipline of submission are at the points at which it becomes destructive. It then becomes a denial of the law of love as taught by Jesus and is an affront to genuine biblical submission (Matt. 5, 6, and 7 and especially 22:37-39).

Peter calls Christians to radical submission to the State when he writes, "Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be the emperor as supreme, or to governors . . ." (1 Pet. 2:13, 14). Yet when the properly authorized government of his day commanded the infant Church to stop proclaiming Christ, it was Peter who answered, "Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge; for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard" (Acts 4:19, 20). Upon a similar occasion Peter stated simply, "We must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29).

Understanding the cross-life of Jesus, Paul says, "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities" (Rom. 13:1). When Paul, however, saw that the State was failing to fulfill its God-ordained function of providing justice for all, he called it to account and insisted that the wrong be righted (Acts 16:37).

Were these men in opposition to their own principle of self-denial and submission? No. They simply understood that submission reaches the end of its tether when it becomes destructive. In fact, they illustrated revolutionary subordination by meekly refusing a destructive command and being willing to suffer the consequences. The German thinker Johannes Hamel

says that subordination includes "the possibility of a spirit-driven resistance, of an appropriate disavowal and a refusal ready to accept suffering at this or that particular point."<sup>5</sup>

Sometimes the limits of submission are easy to determine. A wife is asked to punish her child unreasonably. A child is asked to aid an adult in an unlawful practice. A citizen is asked to violate the dictates of Scripture and conscience for the sake of the State. In each case the disciple refuses, not arrogantly, but in a spirit of meekness and submission.

Often the limits of submission are extremely hard to define. What about the marriage partner who feels stifled and kept from personal fulfillment because of the spouse's professional career? Is this a legitimate form of self-denial or is it destructive? What about the teacher who unjustly grades a student? Does the student submit or resist? What about the employer who promotes his employees on the basis of favoritism and vested interests? What does the deprived employee do, especially if the raise is needed for the good of his or her family?

These are extremely complicated questions simply because human relationships are complicated. They are questions that do not yield to simplistic answers. There is no such thing as a law of submission that will cover every situation. We must become highly skeptical of all laws that purport to handle every circumstance. Casuistic ethics always fail.

It is not an evasion of the issue to say that in defining the limits of submission we are catapulted into a deep dependence upon the Holy Spirit. After all, if we had a book of rules to cover every circumstance in life, we would not need dependence. The Spirit is an accurate discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart, both yours and mine. He will be to us a present Teacher and Prophet, instructing us in what to do in every situation.

### The Acts of Submission

Submission and service function concurrently. Hence, much of the practical outflow of submission will come in the next



chapter. There are, however, seven acts of submission that I would like to mention briefly.

The first act of submission is to the Triune God. At the beginning of the day we wait, in the words of the hymn writer, "yielded and still" before Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The first words of our day form the prayer of Thomas à Kempis, "As thou wilt; what thou wilt; when thou wilt."<sup>6</sup> We yield our body, mind, and spirit for his purposes. Likewise, the day is lived in deeds of submission interspersed with constant ejaculations of inward surrender. As the first words of the morning are of submission, so are the last words of the night. We surrender our body, mind, and spirit into the hands of God to do with us as he pleases through the long darkness.

The second act of submission is to the Scripture. As we submit ourselves to the Word of God living (Jesus), so we submit ourselves to the Word of God written (Scripture). We yield ourselves first to hear the Word, second to receive the Word, and third to obey the Word. We look to the Spirit who inspired the Scriptures to interpret and apply them to our condition. The word of Scripture, animated by the Holy Spirit, lives with us throughout the day.

The third act of submission is to our family. The dictum for the household should be "Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others" (*Phil. 2:4*). Freely and graciously the members of the family make allowance for each other. The primary deed of submission is a commitment to listen to the other family members. Its corollary is a willingness to share, which is itself a work of submission.

The fourth act of submission is to our neighbors and those we meet in the course of our daily lives. The life of simple goodness is lived before them. If they are in need, we help them. We perform small acts of kindness and ordinary neighborliness: sharing our food, baby-sitting their children, mowing their lawn, visiting over important and unimportant matters, sharing our tools. No task is too small, too trifling, for each one is an opportunity to live in submission.

The fifth act of submission is to the believing community, the body of Christ. If there are jobs to be done and tasks to be accomplished, we look at them closely to see if they are God's invitation to the cross-life. We cannot do everything, but we can do some things. Sometimes these are matters of an organizational nature, but most frequently they are spontaneous opportunities for little tasks of service. At times calls to serve the Church universal may come, and if the ministry is confirmed in our hearts, we can submit to it with assurance and reverence.

The sixth act of submission is to the broken and despised. In every culture there are the "widows and orphans"; that is, the helpless, the undefended (*James 1:27*). Our first responsibility is to be among them. Like St. Francis in the thirteenth century and Kagawa in the twentieth, we must discover ways to identify genuinely with the downtrodden, the rejected. There we must live the cross-life.

The seventh act of submission is to the world. We live in an interdependent, international community. We cannot live in isolation. Our environmental responsibility, or the lack of it, affects not only the people around the world but generations yet to be born. Starving peoples affect us. Our act of submission is a determination to live as a responsible member of an increasingly irresponsible world.

#### A Final Note

In our day there has arisen a special problem about submission as it relates to authority. The phenomenon that I am about to describe is something I have observed repeatedly. When people begin to move into the spiritual realm, they see that Jesus is teaching a concept of authority that runs completely counter to the thinking of the systems of this world. They come to perceive that authority does not reside in positions or degrees or titles or tenure or *any* outward symbol. The way of Christ is in another direction altogether—the way of spiritual



authority. Spiritual authority is God-ordained and God-sustained. Human institutions may acknowledge this authority or they may not; it makes no difference. The person with spiritual authority may have an outward position of authority or may not; again, it makes no difference. Spiritual authority is marked by both compassion and power. Those who walk in the Spirit can identify it immediately. They know without question that submission is due the word that has been given in spiritual authority.

But, and here is the difficulty, what about people who are in "positions of authority" but who do not possess spiritual authority? Since Jesus made it clear that the position does not give the authority, should this person be obeyed? Can we not rather disregard all humanly ordained authority and only look for and submit to spiritual authority? These are the kinds of questions raised by persons who sincerely want to walk in the way of the Spirit. The questions are legitimate and deserve a careful answer.

The answer is not simple, but neither is it impossible. *Revolutionary subordination commands us to live in submission to human authority until it becomes destructive.\** Both Peter and Paul called for obedience to the pagan State because they understood the great good that resulted from this human institution. I have found that human "authorities" often have a great deal of wisdom that we neglect only at our own peril.

To this I shall add another reason of my own why we should submit to persons in positions of authority who do not know spiritual authority. We should do so out of common courtesy and out of compassion for the person in that difficult predicament. I have a deep empathy for people in that plight for I have been there myself more than once. To be in a position of authority and to know that your roots are not deep enough into the divine life to command spiritual authority is a frustrating, almost desperate, quagmire. I know the frantic feeling

\*See the section on "The Limits of Submission."

that makes a person strut and puff and devise clever gimmicks to manipulate people into obedience. Some may find it easy to laugh at these people and disregard their "authority." I do not. I weep for them because I know the inward pain and suffering that must be endured to live in such a contradiction.

Further, we may pray for such people that they will be filled with new power and authority. We may also become their friend and help in every way we can. If we will live out the cross-life before them, very soon we may discover that they are increasing in spiritual power, and so are we.