

The Biblical View of Headship - Part 3a - Headship in Marriage: Wives submitting to their husbands

Memory verse:

1 Corinthians 11:3 NKJV

But I want you to know that the head of every man is Christ, the head of woman is man, and the head of Christ is God.

“Head” in this context, means; the leader, the chief, the one in charge, or the top person. Headship has everything to do with authority or rank and its corresponding role. It doesn’t have anything to do with value or worth or essence or being. It’s like the different ranks in the army—the person with the lower rank takes orders from the person with the higher rank, however they all work together towards the same goal or purpose.

Why is headship important?

Where there is recognition of, and submission to, these roles, there is order, community, love, relationship, and harmony. We see this in the way Jesus related to the Father.

Revision: Jesus gives us the perfect example of meekness (power under control), and humility (not thinking about yourself) as He relates to the Father as a submissive, obedient, loving, and respectful Son. The motive for obedience is love, because if we love someone then we will naturally want to please them.

Part 3 - Headship in Marriage: The Role of the Wife

Outline:

1. **Setting the scene: The first marriage**
2. **All about Submission**
3. **Wives submit to your own husband**

1. Setting the scene: The First Marriage

If we are to know the purpose of marriage, then we need to know its origin, how God designed it to be from the beginning.

Genesis 2:7, 18-25 NKJV

⁷ And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being ...

¹⁸ And the Lord God said, “It is not good that man should be alone; **I will make him a helper comparable** [perfectly suited or corresponding] to him.

¹⁹ Out of the ground the Lord God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to Adam to see what he would call them. And whatever Adam called each living creature, that was its name. ²⁰ So Adam gave names to all cattle, to the birds of the air, and to every beast of the field. **But for Adam there was not found a helper comparable to him.**

²¹ And the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall on Adam, and he slept; and He took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh in its place. ²² Then the rib which the Lord God had taken from man He made into a woman, and He brought her to the man.

²³ And Adam said: "This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man."

²⁴ Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh [united into one].

²⁵ And they were both naked, the man and his wife, and were not ashamed.

Application: God made us to be in relationship with each other

v 18 **And the Lord God said, "It is not good that man should be alone:** This refers to marriage, but it can also be applied to humans generally. God is a God of love and love requires fellowship and friendship—meaning there must be at least two. Within the Trinity there is perfect fellowship and love between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

God made man in His own image, meaning that man also was created to enjoy love and fellowship with other people. God made marriage as a type or picture of the kind of deep intimacy that God desires to have with believers, the church (see Ephesians 5:22-33). However, marriage is not for all people (see Matthew 19:12). For these people, those who are not yet married, and also those who are widows etc, God has given us the body of Christ where we can nurture and enjoy trusting and fulfilling friendships.

One of the problems of today's society is that people are isolating themselves through social media, gaming, various addictions, worldliness, shallow or physical based relationships, and other forms of pleasure seeking, which are all basically just different forms of self-appeasement or self-love (another sign that we are in the end times, see 2 Timothy 3:1-2). As a result of this increased selfishness or pride, there has been a breakdown in society of the basic trust that is required for friendship and relationships in general. Man's greatest need is to be loved, but if we are not willing to show love (become selfless, humble and giving), then we will never receive love.

Proverbs 18:1 NKJV

A man who isolates himself seeks his own desire; he rages against all wise judgment.

Proverbs 18:24 NKJV

A man who has friends must himself be friendly, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.

Think about the believer's relationship with God; it is only limited by the believers willingness to let go of what they want and instead do what God wants. God is perfect and is absolutely selfless and loving towards us—He has selflessly sacrificed literally everything for us—there is nothing more God could give up for us. The problem isn't on His end—"Draw near to God and He will draw near to you" (James 4:8). Clearly, I am as close to God as I desire to be.

This culture of increasing selfishness and pride is, I believe, the root cause of so much of the depression, anxiety, marriage failures, unfulfilled marriages, and also weak Christians who only have shallow relationships with God. True friendship and love requires selfless sacrifice. *A marriage or friendship will only be as deep as what the two are willing to give up for the other: Seeking what I want instead of seeking what is best for the other person is really just a way of isolating myself from them, with the result that I will not experience a fulfilling and satisfying relationship with them.*

Application: The purpose of the wife as God created her

v 18 **I will make him a helper comparable [perfectly suited or corresponding] to him:** There are several things we can learn from this verse.

- Man came first. For this reason he is the head of the wife. Other Scriptures also reiterate the significance of this fact when giving reasons for the different roles and responsibilities of males and females in the church.
For Adam was formed first, then Eve (2 Timothy 2:13 NKJV)
A man should not wear anything on his head when worshiping, for man is made in God's image and reflects God's glory. And woman reflects man's glory. ⁸ For the first man didn't come from woman, but the first woman came from man. ⁹ And man was not made for woman, but woman was made for man. (1 Corinthians 11:7-9 NLT)
- Because man was made first, God has given the husband the responsibility, and also the accountability that goes with it, to be the leader in the home.
- The woman has also been given a responsibility, to which she is also accountable before God, that of helping, assisting, or aiding the man.
- A marriage is two people working together as a team—it's all about working together to achieve a common goal or mission. "Not only was the woman to be a **helper**, but also she was made **comparable** to the man. She should be considered and honoured as such. A woman or wife cannot be regarded as a mere tool or worker, but as an equal partner in God's grace and an equal human being" (David Guzik).
- This all happened before the fall. This is God's perfect plan for marriage. Sin (the fall) has affected this perfect and harmonious relationship; it's only as we look to, rest in, or rely upon God that we will experience what God designed marriage to be.

v 21 **And He took one of his ribs:** Why a rib? There is a beautiful Jewish tradition saying God made woman, not out of man's foot to be under him, nor out of his head to be over him, but "She was taken from under his arm that he might protect her and from next to his heart that he might love her." (Barnhouse, quoted by David Guzik)

The world sees "helping" as a position of inferiority. In contrast, God sees humility and the willingness to serve others as one of the most desirable and important character traits. Even leaders are called to be servants.

Matthew 20:25–28 NLT paraphrase

But Jesus called them together and said, "You know that the rulers in this world lord it over their people, and officials flaunt their authority over those under them. ²⁶ But among you it will be different. Whoever wants to be a leader among you must be your servant, ²⁷ and whoever wants to be first among you must become your slave. ²⁸ For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve others and to give his life as a ransom for many."

The wife's role as the helper does not make her a doormat, but rather like the captain's chief or first mate on a commercial ship; she also has much responsibility, which we will cover later. One thing that the husband must realise is that he, just like Jesus, has been called to be a *servant* leader, a leader who leads by example, and seeks the benefit and wellbeing of those who he is leading. We'll come back to this when we talk about the role of the husband. For now the main point is that the wife must not look down on herself because of her different and subservient role when compared to her husband—Jesus didn't when He described His role as being subservient to the Father.

2. All about submission

General guidelines concerning submission: There are several principles or guidelines that we need to understand before we look at God's command for the wife to submit to her husband.

1. **Submission is a part of everyday life**

Slaves (employees) must submit to their masters (employers)—Ephesians 6:5-8

Citizens must submit to the government (e.g. police and teachers)—Romans 13:1-7

Children must submit to their parents—Ephesians 6:1-3

There is submission to the male leadership of the church—1 Timothy 2:12

Youth must submit to the elders—1 Peter 5:5

We are to submit to each other—1 Peter 5:5 (*Likewise you younger people, submit yourselves to your elders. Yes, all of you be submissive to one another, and be clothed with humility, for "God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble."*)

2. **We ought to obey God rather than men: moral limits of our submission to others**

The only person we must always, absolutely, and unconditionally submit to is God Himself: there is always a limit to our submission to other people or organisations—the limit being whether or not it violates God's moral law. It doesn't matter who it is, dad or mum, a teacher, a policeman, a politician, or even a husband; if someone tells us to do something and it goes against God's moral law, then we must say no. There are becoming more and more situations where we must take a stand against blatant immorality and other subtle moral compromises in the world around us.

A good Scriptural example is the apostle's refusal to obey the Jewish authorities when told to stop preaching the gospel.

*"And when they had brought them, they set them before the council. And the high priest asked them, ²⁸ saying, "Did we not strictly command you not to teach in this name? And look, you have filled Jerusalem with your doctrine [teaching], and intend to bring this Man's blood on us!"²⁹ But Peter and the other apostles answered and said: "**We ought to obey God rather than men.** ³⁰ The God of our fathers raised up Jesus whom you murdered by hanging on a tree. ³¹ Him God has exalted to His right hand to be Prince and Saviour, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. ³² And we are His witnesses to these things, and so also is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey Him. ³³ When they heard this, they were furious and plotted to kill them. ... and when they had called for the apostles and beaten them, they commanded that they should not speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. ⁴¹ So they departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name. ⁴² And daily in the temple, and in every house, they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ." (Acts 5:27-33, 40-42 NKJV)*

Notice that when commanded to not preach the gospel, the very next thing they did is immediately boldly preach the gospel to those in authority who had just told them not to! They were law abiding citizens, but were first submitted to God and what His will for them was. This resulted in them being beaten up by the temple guards, but they rejoiced because they were counted worthy to suffer shame for Jesus's name. As our nation and world continue their rapid moral decay, expect there to be many more opportunities to stand up for the truth and experience persecution.

3. **Submission glorifies God, even when it doesn't seem to make sense now**

Remember this—*all submission to others should be firstly an act of willing obedience to God, then it doesn't matter what the person is like who we have to submit to, because we are doing it out of love for God, not the other person.* This is important because, in a trying situation when I need to submit to a difficult person, it will always go one of two ways, all depending on whether I see myself submitting to God, or the other person.

—the self-focused, selfish and prideful way of thinking: This results when I see myself as submitting to the other person—I see them as in control and I start looking for ways to not be under their control. I have thoughts like, “this is unfair, this situation stinks, I’m scared, why should he have authority over me, get me out of this situation, I hate him, I want to quit, and I’m going to stand up for my rights”.

—the humble, others-focused, and meek way of thinking: This results when I see myself as first of all obeying God’s command to submit to the other person—I recognise that they only have the authority over me that God has allowed them to have (remember that all authority is given by God—*Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God* (Romans 13:1). Therefore, this difficult circumstance is God asking me to submit to them, testing me. I learn to think or reason, “I know that God loves me and He is in control of every circumstance, therefore, if God has allowed this situation where I must submit to this difficult person, I know that it’s the best thing for me”. I then pray, “I trust You God that You are going to use this trial to cause me to grow to become more like Christ who is meek and humble (see Romans 8:28-29, Matthew 11:28-30). Please God, for the sake of your honour and glory, please give me the humility and meekness I need to willingly submit in this difficult situation.”

I remember the true story of a Christian school teacher working in a muslim country who was persecuted by his muslim principal. She hated the fact that he was a Christian, and for years tried to get him to quit his job by making his life miserable while working at the school. However, he consistently had a good attitude and just continued to do what he was told to do (which was not morally wrong, just difficult for him). Finally, years later, she called him into her office and broke down crying, saying something to the effect of, “how can you continue to love me when I am so hurtful and harsh to you. Would you please forgive me. I want to be able to love and forgive like you.” And that day she converted from Islam to Christianity. You see, willing submission is only possible if we are submitted to and filled with the Spirit—it can’t be faked (for long). The principal saw Christ’s love demonstrated in the teacher. She saw gentleness, forgiveness, humility, and meekness, all working together to produce willing submission.

I also recall a time when I was unjustly accused. I went the selfish route big time. I couldn’t sleep for two nights I was so angry. The broken record was playing over and over in my head—“that was so unfair, what are people going to think of me now, how can I defend myself and let people know that I wasn’t in the wrong, and I’m never going to talk to that back-stabber again.” However, after a couple of nights, I started to learn my lesson. I started to understand that it didn’t matter what people thought of me. I just needed to submit to the principals’s decision, and leave the rest in God’s hands. God was teaching me humility and meekness.

As usual, Jesus is the ultimate example. Consider Jesus's example when He, a perfect and innocent man, was about to be betrayed and arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane, and then be crucified. The situation from a human point of view was completely unfair, undeserved, unwarranted, unjustified, and uncalled for. Yet notice Jesus's reasoning for submitting himself to the mob of soldiers to be arrested and later to the Romans to be executed.

*But [Satan is coming and] **I do as the Father has commanded Me, so that the world may know (be convinced) that I love the Father and that I do only what the Father has instructed Me to do.** [I act in full agreement with His orders.] Rise, let us go away from here. (John 14:31 AMP)*

Notice that Jesus's motive for obeying the Father's command to willingly submit to Satan's evil plan (but the Father's good plan) was love; this made it possible for Him to willingly do something that was incredibly difficult—go to the cross and become the payment for the sins of all mankind.

Jesus also pointed out the result—that people would know He loved the Father, just like the Muslim woman came to the unmistakable conclusion that the teacher she was harassing also loved the Father. It was in this sense that Jesus wanted to draw people to Himself—*And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all peoples to Myself.*³³ *This He said, signifying by what death He would die (John 12:32-33).*

People will know how real or deep my relationship with God is by observing how I submit; am I willingly submitting to whatever God throws my way (accepting is as what is best for me), or am I resisting or refusing to submit? Will I draw people to God by humbly submitting to whatever God puts in my path, or discourage people from seeking God because I am selfish and resisting God's will.

Submission and walking in the light: depending on the power of the Holy Spirit to enable the desires of the new nature (light)

Understanding the context for the verses we will read next concerning wives and husbands in Ephesians is absolutely vital. In Ephesians 5:9 Paul says we should be walking in the light. He then goes on in the rest of Ephesians 5 and 6 to describe **what it means to walk in the light—it means to live a life of submission.** For example, slaves submitting to their masters, children submitting to their parents, citizens submitting to governments, believers submitting to each other, and also wives submitting to their husbands. This is going back to what it was like in the Garden of Eden when Adam and Eve were totally submitted to God—before they decided to become independent of God, trusting in themselves, and choosing their own way.

Ephesians 5:8-10, 18-21 NKJV

For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. **Walk as children of light [live according to the new nature]**⁹ (for the fruit of the Spirit is in all goodness, righteousness, and truth),¹⁰ finding out what is acceptable to the Lord. ...¹⁸ And do not be drunk with wine, in which is dissipation; but **be filled with the Spirit,**¹⁹ speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord,²⁰ giving thanks always for all things to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ,²¹ **submitting to one another in the fear of God.**

Walking in the light (the new nature): a fruit or product or effect of the Holy Spirit
Paul tells us very plainly that what he is going to command as essential Christian living in the next two chapters is impossible without us first being filled by and submitted to the Holy Spirit. First he says “***Walk as children of light (for the fruit of the Spirit is in all goodness, righteousness, and truth)***”. Second he says to “***be filled with the Spirit***”.

Paul is making it crystal clear that walking in the light means that we are filled with the Spirit so the Spirit can then produce His fruit in us. *Walking in the light (according to the desires of the new nature) is the same thing as living by the power of the Spirit; depending on God's power to do in the believer what He commands him to do.*

Remember, that for the believer, *God's commands are also God's promises*. But also remember that God's promises are like cheques; they must be cashed. If you never cash the cheque, then you'll never enjoy the benefits of the money it represents. We “cash” God's promises when we humbly ask God to do what He has already said He would do for us if we ask—this is what it looks like to depend on or rest in Christ—just ask God to do what He has already promised to do for you. It brings the Father so much joy when we come to Him like a little child, totally depending on and trusting in Him: “*Hey Daddy (Abba Father), I need help, I can't do what You asked me to do on my own, would You please give me the strength to obey You.*” Can you imagine God refusing to answer that prayer?

What does walking in the light (the new nature) look like? Submission!

The effects of being filled with the Spirit will be seen in:

—How we talk to each other (v 19—wise, gentle and patient, or foolish, harsh and impatient),

—Our attitude towards the Father (v 20—either humble, thankful and grateful, or proud, ungrateful, and unthankful).

When we submit our lives to God, seeking to live by His power and not our own human effort, then we will have a good attitude, being thankful to God for every situation (*giving thanks always for all things to God the Father*). We will also be able to communicate in a gentle, loving and kind way with those who are hard to get along with. What do you get when you put these two things together? *Submission*.

As we saw previously, remembering that God loves me and is in control means that I can accept the circumstance as being what is best for me, even if it is uncomfortable or hurtful. Having this big picture, eternal, or heavenly perspective means that *I don't fear the other person*, and so I don't respond in a harsh, angry, and impatient way. Instead I can love them (perfect love drives out all fear—see 1 John 4:18) This is exactly what godly submission looks like.

A warning

We need to recognise that the *desire* to be humble and submit to others comes from our new or “light” nature. It is therefore only possible if we are actively depending on the Holy Spirit who empowers us to implement the desires of the new or “light” nature. We must remember to humble ourselves and ask for help. Otherwise, we'll be like Paul was in Romans 7, having the desire to obey God, but not the power. God invites us to come to His Throne of Grace, it's where we go to receive the help that we don't deserve—*Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need* (Hebrews 4:16 NKJV).

A practical definition of submission

To submit means that:

- You recognise someone has legitimate authority over you.
- You recognise that there is an order of authority, and that you are part of a unit, a team.
- You as an individual are not more important than the working of the unit or the team (always *sub* to the *mission*).

3. Wives submit to your own husbands

There is no better example of submission or “walking in the light,” than Jesus, always being in total submission to the Father. Paul now applies his teaching on submission in general to wives submitting to their husbands.

Ephesians 5:22-24 NKJV

²² Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. ²³ For the husband is head of the wife, as also Christ is head of the church; and He is the Saviour of the body. ²⁴ Therefore, just as the church is subject to Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in everything.

(the following is adapted from David Guzik’s commentary)

v 22 **Wives, submit:** Remember that to **submit** means that you recognise someone has legitimate authority over you. It means you recognise that there is an order of authority, and that you are part of a unit, a team. The goals of the team become more important than your own goals (like being in the army).

v 22 **To your own husbands:** This defines the *sphere* of a wife’s submission. The Bible never commands a *general* submission of women to men in society. This order applies in the home and in the church.

Application: What does it mean to submit, “as to the Lord?”

v 22 **As to the Lord:** It’s really important that we understand this correctly. I’ll cover the two incorrect views first.

1. The first wrong interpretation is the interpretation that favours the husband. It says that **as to the Lord** means that a wife should submit to her husband as if he were God himself. The idea is “you submit to God in absolutely everything without question, so you must submit to your husband in the same absolute way.”

Why is it wrong? In no place does the Scripture teach an unqualified, without exception, submission—except to God and God alone. To violate this is to commit the sin of idolatry. Think of the logical conclusion if this false understanding were true. If the husband told his wife to murder their baby by having an abortion, then she would have to comply, even though it would mean that she wasn’t submitting to God’s will, which is, “do not murder.” That’s why absolute submission to her husband is idolatry, because the husband’s will becomes more important than God’s will. God’s will must always take priority.

2. The second wrong interpretation of **as to the Lord** favours the wife. Basically, the wife says that **as to the Lord** means “**I’ll submit to him as long as he does what the Lord wants.**”

This is wrong. Why? Because the wife then thinks it is her job to decide what the Lord wants. It really becomes a case of “I’ll submit to my husband when I agree with him. I’ll submit to him when he makes the right decisions and carries them out the right way. But, when he makes a wrong decision, he isn’t in the Lord, so I shouldn’t submit to him then.” What’s the logical conclusion of this wrong thinking? Here is an example: The husband believes that the family should move to another town. The wife doesn’t want to because she likes living in the town where she is. She can’t see that it’s God’s will, so she refuses to submit and won’t agree to move to another town.

Again, this is wrong because this is not submission at all. Except for those who are extremely argumentative, everyone submits to others when they are in agreement, when they are getting what they want. Remember that **It’s only when there is a disagreement that submission is tested.**

So what is the correct understanding or interpretation and application of **as to the Lord**? It’s very simple. It defines the *motive* of a wife’s submission. Here’s a quote from D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones:

“It means: ‘Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands because it is a part of your duty to the Lord, because it is an expression of your submission to the Lord.’ ...In other words, you are not doing it only for the husband, you are doing it primarily for the Lord Himself ... You are doing it for Christ’s sake, you are doing it because you know that He (Christ) exhorts you to do it, because it is well-pleasing in Christ’s sight that you should be doing it. It is part of your Christian behaviour, it is a part of your discipleship.”

Summary: **As to the Lord** means ...

- A wife’s submission to her husband is part of her Christian life and obedience.
- When a wife doesn’t obey this word to **submit to your own husband, as to the Lord**, she isn’t only falling short as a wife. She is falling short as a follower of Jesus Christ.
- This is completely out of the realm of the wife’s *nature* or *personality*.
- This has nothing to do with a husband’s intelligence, giftedness, or capability. It has to do with *the wife* honouring the Lord Jesus Christ.
- This has nothing to do with whether or not the husband is right on a particular issue. It has to do with Jesus being right.
- This means that a woman should take great care in how she *chooses* her husband. Instead of looking for an attractive man, instead of looking for a wealthy man, instead of looking for a romantic man, a woman should first look for a man she can *respect*.
- Wives, if you want to please Jesus, if you want to honour Him, then **submit to your own husband as to the Lord**.

Conclusion and summary

1. To submit means that:
 - You recognise someone has legitimate authority over you.
 - You recognise that there is an order of authority, and that you are part of a unit, a team.
 - You as an individual are not more important than the working of the unit or the team (always *sub* to the *mission*).
2. It is not good to be alone. Selfishness, pride, and wanting our own way causes isolation. In contrast, humility and meekness result in strong relationships.
3. The woman was made as a helper comparable to the man, meaning equal, but having a different role.
4. Submission is a part of everyday life, and not just limited to wives submitting to their own husbands
5. Submission in any human relationship has moral limits—obey God first.
6. Godly submission glorifies God as people see direct evidence of the love and power of God working in your life.
7. We must remember that we first submit to God, who loves us and is in control. We then understand that God is doing what is best for us (usually teaching us humility and meekness—“learn from Me, for I am gentle [meek] and lowly [humble] in heart—Matthew 11:29).
8. When we are first submitted to God we are no longer fearing the other person—we understand that any authority they have over us was given to them by God. We can love them instead of fearing them.
9. Submission is a key characteristic of walking in the light, of living according to the new nature. It’s how Adam and Eve related to God before the fall.
10. Submission is the result of us always praising the Father for everything, as well as speaking godly words to those around us (both are desires of the new or “light” nature).
11. We must live in dependence on the Holy Spirit if we are to implement the desires of the new or “light” nature (otherwise we will, by default, implement the desires of the old or “dark” nature). Thus we cannot submit to others if we are not first fully submitted to God, living in complete dependence on God.

Those who are dominated by the sinful nature think about sinful things, but those who are controlled by the Holy Spirit think about things that please the Spirit. ⁶ So letting your sinful nature control your mind leads to death. But letting the Spirit control your mind leads to life and peace.

(Romans 8:5-6 NLT paraphrase)