

In our desire to understand our union with Christ Jesus and all of its ramifications, Paul now moves us into some very practical aspects: the family and the workplace. Our identity, as those united to Jesus by faith, already accepted by God in Him, already bound to Him in His death and resurrection, alters the way that we relate to others.

The apostle is explaining that these relationships, where there are power differentials, those relationships where there is a legitimate authority and a legitimate submitter, are particular relationships where we can reflect the very character of the God to whom we belong. This is not to diminish the opportunities to glorify God in other relationships. Some of you will never be married, like your Savior, but you will be called into relationships of authority and submission in other relationships, temporary and changeable though they may be. However, family and work relationships inherently involve relationships of authority and submission, as God has designed, and both of these roles are primary relationships in which our newness of life, our rest in Christ, enables us to love and serve others in the family likeness of our Father.

So, what I wanted to do today was to take a big-picture look at the concepts of authority and submission before we focus in on the marital roles of each as prescribed here in Colossians 3, kind of a 30,000 foot view of these two functional roles in relationships. And, I have thrown a curve-ball to Rich, who is scheduled to preach on the parental relationship next week, so we will have to backtrack a bit on the 12th and return to marriage, but that's OK, because the apostle's teaching still stands, even if our order of presentation is altered a bit.

So, let's take a look at God's revelation of authority and submission as functions which reflect His character.

The nature of authority has its source in the essential nature of God. What we value in authority is derivative from the very nature of His eternal being. What I mean is that God has always been relating *to Himself* with authority. Before anything was created, God exercised authority. The Father's inter-Trinitarian relationships to the Son and the Spirit has always had a functional hierarchy. As an aspect of God's perfection, this

authority can best be described as “using one’s power for the honor of those under one’s authority.” Thus, God has eternally worked for God to be glorified constantly revealing Himself for the fullness of His joy. In like manner, and derived from this, when a human who exercises rightful authority does so with the intention of honoring those in subjection to him, pouring out his efforts and power and resources for their flourishing in holiness and joy, he is imaging God rightly.

However, it is equally true that the nature of submission, then, also has its source in the essential nature of God. This feels less true, because we tie authority to an inequality of power, which is incorrect, but I hope to show that it is true. First, what is submission in God? Well, it is very similar to authority: “exercising one’s power to honor the one to whom one submits.” In other words, what we see in the essential nature of God is the simple expression of *mutually interdependent honoring of the other*. That is, to seek the other’s good and honor with all my strength. When a person who subjects himself to authority does so with the intention of honoring his authority, pouring out his efforts and power and resources for it, he is imaging God rightly.

How is this? Well, Paul expresses it in 1 Corinthians 10:31-33 as “I imitate Christ...not seeking my own benefit, but rather seeking the benefit of others.” Later, in chapter 11, speaking particularly of God’s design of male and female roles of authority and self-subjection, he calls it “glory” and “honoring” one another.

Now, here in Colossians we have the same foundational icon of God, his image-bearing display. These three image-bearing reflections are: Two-Gendered marriage, the parent/child relationship, and the Master/Servant relationship. The image of God is the reflection of the God who honors the other who honors the other who honors the other in authoritative and submissive roles. The family unit itself has roles of authority and submission, as indicated in the Scriptures, between husband and wife, and parent and child. These roles reflect God bilaterally. Remember: God exists in an eternity of mutual inter-glorification. The Father glorifies the Son by authority to send Him. The Son glorifies the Father by submitting to His will. The Spirit glorifies the Son by revealing His honor and its implications, etc. The relationship is further extrapolated in the image of Christ and His Church. The Christ honors the Bride by laying down His

life for her, and the Bride honors the Christ by subjecting herself to His authority – so that each might be honored in mutual flourishing and renown to the glory of God the Father. This is what it means to be united to Christ.

Therefore, in the life and function of the Church, authority and submission are intended to flourish in the image-bearing reflection of mutually interdependent other-glorification as each is practiced for the purpose of bringing honor to the other to the ultimate glorification of God. It is godly to submit to legitimate authorities in all things which are not directly opposed to the revelation of God. I say “legitimate”, because some sinful people would try and deceive us into believing that someone has authority when God has not assigned it to them. There is also a hierarchy of authorities, the parental authority over children, the husband’s authority over the household, government’s authority over its citizens, etc., with the only absolute authority being God Himself, and when such authorities come into conflict, the final appeal which must be obeyed is to God alone. Any authority which calls us to disobey God must be disobeyed, not submitted to, for God is the only absolute authority.

Thus, there are times when refusing to submit to authorities is not only appropriate, but necessary. This is an important distinction to make, for we are not deceived. We do not live in a world without sin, nor are our relationships without the capabilities of dishonoring, shameful, harmful, atrocities, unlike the God to whom we belong. Therefore, there are limits to our authority and limits to our submission. There are times to reject authority and there are times to limit relational ties because of unrepentant sin and its effects. We must always submit to the highest authority, God, and sometimes that means not submitting to lower authorities. Yet, even in these acts of disobedience, we can still work for the sanctity and honor of sinful authorities.

For instance, when an authority over me is actively pursuing sin, or demanding or encouraging you to do so, then the honorable thing to do, to build them up, is to expose their deeds of darkness and bring it into the light. This is for their good, because they were not made for sin, but for holiness. Speak truth to power in love. Now, this has very significant ramifications in relationships where someone is abusing their authority or power, who is using their strength to denigrate, demean, or destroy others. You see,

it is not loving to cover that up, even with the best intentions of somehow saving them through your silence. Love exposes such deeds of darkness so that they may be brought to repentant submission to God and thus the fullness of joy. Yet, even when we must do so, it must be with respect towards those in authority over us.

In Acts 5 the civil authorities demanded that the apostles stop proclaiming that Jesus rose from the dead. They did not demean the authorities in response. They didn't rebel with violence. But, they didn't submit, either. They grieved the brokenness displayed in the command, and absorbed the unjust punishment from the authorities, rejoicing that they were chosen to suffer for the sake of His Name. Thus, their exposure of injustice, and their unjust suffering under unjust leadership was viewed as their honor which brought glory to the name of Christ Jesus, and that is what they rejoiced to do.

Now, there is also a time to run from such unjust suffering, as the early church often did, to escape the anguish of injustice. However, when they could not, they still did not refuse to show honor even to wicked men. This gives us pause when we face unjust suffering at the hands of those in authority over us...am I honoring them even if I say "no"? We will look at this more closely in the marital relationship in a couple of weeks, but the principle is laid out in a number of examples in the Scripture.

So, while we can see mutual glorification through authority and submission in the nature of the Triune God, a great struggle arises in our human relationships because we see some pretty heinous distortions of them both in the brokenness of sinful human relationships. Humans are not God. We see people destroyed through powerful abuses of authority, and we see people destroyed through distorted views of submission. However, simply because people have abused their roles does not imply that the roles themselves are to be jettisoned as impractical or immoral.

I think that we are tempted to do so for four simple reasons.

First, we live in culture which is digressively embracing the doctrine of radical sameness. Distinctions of any kind are now increasingly suspect. The interchangeability of everything is revered and becoming unquestioningly assumed, even to the point of rejecting biological realities. The great irony is that the words

“diversity” and “tolerance” have been absconded to entitle such a view. Now, those words have good purpose within their original definitions and bounded by their contextual referents, but ironically the same worldview which touts “diversity” also now claims that “all things are the same” and that we shouldn’t make distinctions between even such obvious realities like gender. Rather than value the differences in roles created by God in ordained authority and submission, there is an outright hatred of such distinction and a concentrated effort to not only eliminate the principle, but to eliminate its icons: of gender distinctions, parent/child distinctions, government/citizen distinctions, in a constant move towards an anarchistic world of self-autonomous individuals each seeking his own honor rather than the honor of the other.

And let’s be honest Americans, too. The very formation of our government was founded on the principle of the autonomy of the individual. This has logically led from the mere rejection of a government without representation to the rejection of a Church without administration and finally to a representation of the individual without the Church. Without such communal restraint, the result has proven to be what wisdom said it would be: the self-approbation of the individual psyche as the sole determiner of Truth: the idolatry of the Desiring Self. As self-autonomy usurped the throne of God, self-centeredness was fertilized, so that every man not only does what is right in his own eyes, but every man became a god in his own eyes and now demands that others honor and respect him for his own creation, fantasy though it may be. This has not led to fulfillment, security, or peace, however. Rather, it has destroyed community because there is no center which holds all members together. People do not feel safer or more secure. Two generations removed from Dr. Spock’s poultice of self-glorification has not created a generation of empowered grandchildren, but a generation of fatherless children who feel about as worthwhile as trash. What does it look like for a culture to become a land of 400 million kings? It is anarchy, not community. Radical sameness is a center which cannot hold, for the human heart has not the nobility capable of wielding the authority it presumes.

The second reason that we struggle with authority and submission is that we *demand* righteousness before we will honor. This, of course, means that we struggle to treat someone whom we deem to be unworthy with actual dignity. It is not unusual for persons to submit to and support those whom they believe to be morally qualified. They will judge an incompetent person as less difficult to submit to a generally immoral one. Again, let's be frank: those in authority have not always had the best interests at heart or even in mind for those under their authority. When those in power and authority do not exercise it in godly fashion – seeking to honor those under their care to make them flourish – the result is the dilution and distortion of true life, the oppressive squeeze of potential rather than the freedom of joyful repose, disintegration and destruction of those under their care rather than mutually interdependent honor. Such times are when the limits of submission are exposed and when action must be taken to stop such abuse of power. This is not a problem with the nature of authority, however, but the manner in which it is exercised, failing to honor not only the other human, but God in whose image we have been created to reflect in mutual honor and love.

The third reason that we struggle with submission is that we *demand* competence. We hate failure, or even inefficiency, and following an incompetent leader frustratingly feels like both. Plus, it hurts. Poor leadership, not just immoral leadership, hurts people.

However, the propensity to compare and contrast our own competence with others is the bane of an idolatrous heart. This comparison of competencies sees far more of myself than of Christ and the grace of God towards me. It is self-operative and self-sufficient. And, even in the Church, it is often the standard by which we judge whether or not to follow leadership, or to submit to authority. Therefore, we only end up following people like us, and submitting to leadership very similar to ourselves. This is, again, a principle of removing distinctions is it not: the Peter Principle where those who point out our errors are to be avoided and those who agree with me are to be applauded?

The fourth reason has already been mentioned, but is worth pointing out again. We live in a sinful world, and we recognize that sinful authority can be devastating to

human flourishing. Therefore, we tend to distrust authority, at best, and to despise it, at worst. This reality that sin has damaged both authority and submission will be looked at more closely in the coming weeks.

Finally, all of these reasons that we struggle with submission to authority is the fifth: we overvalue authority and we undervalue submission. We value power too much and value humility too little. Even when we submit to good authority, we tend to place such leaders on a pedestal of elevated *value*. We see them as *better* persons, not merely helpful persons. We see moral and competent leadership as more worthy of honor than humble, faithful, submission. We're not sure we can get along without our leaders, but we don't think the same is true of our servants...and this is false.

For, God's very nature is not only sovereign authority, but also humble submitter, both equally valued as the honoring of the other. Therefore, if it is true that God is an eternal submitter as well as eternal authority, then the value and significance of authority and submission is rooted in the eternal nature of God. This means, then, that all relationships where authority and submission exists, *are there to reveal the nature of God*.

Slaves are to submit to their masters, "showing honor and not pilfering" Paul instructs his son in the faith, Timothy. And why are they to submit? "So that the name of God and the teaching will not be reviled [blasphemed]." This is "image-bearing" language. It can therefore be argued that our lack of honoring even incompetent authorities which God has ordained, is not merely an expression of our rights, but rather a blasphemy which brings derision upon His name.

Citizens are commanded to submit to Caesar, to honor the Emperor, to pay their taxes, etc. (1 Peter 2:13-17). Now consider the weight of this instruction to the persecuted church to whom Peter was writing, those who were undergoing fiery ordeals. Who was the Emperor of the Roman Empire at the time of Peter's writing? Nero! Peter recognized that the act of honoring a dishonorable King's authority was more significant than personal autonomy because people "may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation" (2:12), "that you might silence the ignorance of foolish people" (2:15) and "a gracious thing in the sight of God." (2:20) This

submission, however, is not to *every* law or dictate which the pagan ruler may impose (Acts 5), but rather to treat him or her with honor and faithfulness, with humility and truthfulness, in all laws which are not impositions against the will of God, and even when commanded to disobey God, to refuse to do so with utter humility and dignity and without spite, rancor, or rage, and to accept all punishments opposed upon you like unto Christ, lambs led to slaughter by an unjust judge whom God has ordained to such a position over us. God will avenge His people in due time.

Therefore, we recognize that submission does not mean silence regarding injustice. It is not without spoken objection. Submission speaks the truth boldly, openly, publically. In fact, we see Jesus speaking out against the unlawfulness of the abuse which he suffered at the hands of the Temple guards before He had been tried, by asking them a simple question concerning the injustice of their act: “If what I said is wrong, testify to the wrong; but if what I said is right, why do you strike me?” (John 18:23) In other words, you are striking me without justifiable cause! Prove my injustice, or stop hitting me! So, we can see in this event a model for submission when we are treated unjustly: we speak out against the injustice, we question the righteousness of the authority’s *actions*, and we submit to the right of that authority to rule over us as those whom God has ordained to the position to reflect His glory through my honoring of it.

Finally, the Church submits to one another in the fear of Christ. We are called to two different types of authority/submission, both again related to honor. We are called to submit to our overseers, those called and ordained by God to shepherd His flock, to feed His sheep, to watch the gate for wolves and false teachers (Acts 20:28; 1 Pet 5:3). We are called to give them “double-honor” when they labor hard at preaching and teaching, to “esteem” them (1 Thess 5:12-13), and to submit to them joyfully so that it may go well, as they have to give an accounting to the Lord as to how they honored Him and us (Heb 13:17). Are we “other-honoring”, even if we need to call our leaders to account, in our God-like mutual interdependence, or are we looking to justify our own honor?

Likewise, the Church is to submit to one another as an icon of the New Humanity, those united to Christ Jesus, who image God rightly in our mutual honor and

interdependence through the respective roles of authority and submission (1 Cor 5:1-2; Matt 18; Eph 5:21). It is the Church community which holds the authority to discipline those who claim to belong to Christ (1 Cor 5:1-12; Matt 18:15-20). It is the local Church which holds the keys of the kingdom of heaven, to announce the binding or loosing of those who claim to be in the faith (Matt 16:19). We are to subject ourselves to one another as part of one Family, with one Father, in one Spirit, with one Lord. Every family has both obligations to the other members and privileges of belonging to the other members, exercising both authority and self-subjection for the honor of the family name and the family members.

Each of these icons are examples of ontological equality and functional distinction. That is Trinitarian image-bearing. What this means is that whatever makes a person human and worthy of dignity is the same for every human, regardless of the distinctions. Men and Women, Slave or Master, Parent or Child, Citizen or King – all are equally human, equally God’s image-bearers, equally receivers of the inheritance of God in Christ (see Galatians 3:27-29), with equal rights as sons and with equal dignity as God’s image-bearers. Husbands are not more God’s heirs than wives, nor do they receive some kind of double-inheritance. Masters are not more heirs than slaves, or kings than citizens, or parents than children. Yet, we struggle to rule well or submit well in these relationships *because we fail to validate the dignity inherent within each of them.*

We must not ignore glory of each of these distinctions, either, for they are both reflections of the God in whose image they are to reveal. Our distinctions in these roles of authority and submission, through their respective forms, are vitally important to imaging God rightly. So, how do we do this? How do we reflect God’s glory through functional distinctions of authority and submission?

Well, we must compare our assumptions to Jesus, the Son of God. Look how He submitted and considered it honorable, pleasing to God, and for His flourishing and joy. First, He submitted Himself to damned sinners. Jesus told Pilate that “you would have no authority over me if it had not been given to you from above...” (John 19:11) Jesus submitted to pagan and cowardly Pilate, who eventually had to kill himself on orders of

Emperor Caligula, because He knew that Pilate's authority over him was not due to competence, morality, or equality with Himself, but rather to God who had ordained it, and that was only for a time. Though He did not entrust Himself to man (John 2:24) because he knew the hearts of men, He did entrust Himself to the Father (1 Pet 2:23) who judges rightly and then submitted to injustice on the part of the Roman authorities and the Jewish authorities. So, Jesus submitted to those less competent than Himself and who, frankly, didn't have his best interests at heart or in mind, nor were morally or existentially superior to Him, while also calling out their sin, foolishness, and error to repentance towards God. It did so publically, verbally, but always dignifying the rightful position of authority. You see the same in Paul, when he insulted Ananias the High Priest in Acts 23, then apologized because he didn't realize that he was the high priest, quoting Exodus 22, "You shall not speak evil of a ruler of the people." Then, humorously, he took a different tact.

Yet, it is this attitude, says the apostle, which we are to have in likeness to Him, to "count others as having authority over you...like Christ, who existing in the form of God did not regard equality with God something to be seized upon, but He emptied Himself and took on the form of a servant, being made in the likeness of man, and humbled himself...to the point of death on a cross...and God highly exalted Him and gave Him a name above every name..." (Phil 2:3-11)

So, how is it, then, that we are to embrace submission to authority, incompetent, immoral, or inconsequential? We are to see Jesus as our hope, and our union with Him as our honor. He trusted the Father to raise Him up and grant Him glory. He so trusted the Father with His honor, glory, and the eternal wheels of justice that He submitted Himself to distorted authority for the sake of His Father, entrusting Him to answer for justice, knowing that the Father would exalt Him in due time. He never sinned at such authority's command, nor in response to it, either. But, for the joy set before Him He endured the unjust cross and despised the shame. Do you see the honor and shame language here, too? His honor was ultimately in the hands of His Father. And if the Father ordained His death at the hands of unjust incompetent men, then Jesus would

surrender to their authority in the full knowledge that this chapter was not the final one.

And He cried out to the Father in the process. He did not submit in the quiet stoicism of futility, but in the warm-hearted affectionate sorrows of a Son crying out to His Father! He cried out in the garden! He cried out when Lazarus died! He cried out in the wilderness, time and time again, that the Father would grant Him the resources of His faithful promised Word so that He could answer His enemies and their authority with humility, truth, and love. He prayed often! He spoke courageously! He pulled in brothers and sisters to pray and weep and hope with Him.

He fully grasped that to submit Himself to the legitimate authorities which the Father had placed over Him (civil, familial, communal) was actually entrusting Himself to the Father in the very same act, and that was His comfort and His joy. He cries with the Psalmist, “Into your hands I commit my spirit; you have redeemed me, O LORD, faithful God. I hate those who pay regard to worthless idols, but I trust in the LORD. I will rejoice and be glad in your steadfast love, because you have seen my affliction, you have known the distress of my soul.” (Ps 31:5-7)

The fact remains that God did not call His Son to be strong. He called Him to be faithful. It is the same for us: God does not need you to be strong. He calls you to be faithful. And faithfulness to His Word and image-bearing call is to exercise your authority in a godlike manner: seeking the honor and holiness of those under your authority. And faithfulness is to exercise your submission in a godlike manner: seeking the honor and holiness of those over you in authority, so that God is all in all.

We reflect God’s glory **by remembering the Cross of Christ**, whereby the God of all Creation, expressed His glorious nature of laying down liberty for the sake of honoring the other. In one act of submission to His Father and authority over His creation, the Son of God revealed what means to be both submitter and authority – it is to work, to labor, to sacrifice, in order to bring honor to the other. As submitter, He labored to honor the Father through submitting to His will, “Let this cup pass from me. Yet, not my will, but yours be done.” As authority, the eternal King and only rightful heir to God’s glory did not seize His rights, but laid them down to die in our place. In the place

of unjust people who should have submitted to Him, but didn't. Who didn't follow Him, but crucified Him. He did so that we might gain the honor of sonship, of inclusion in the glory of God. That we might be honored and made holy. The Psalmist says this about Christ and His relationship to His people, "Behold, the LORD has proclaimed to the end of the earth: Say to the daughter of Zion, "Behold, your salvation comes; behold, his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. And they shall be called The Holy People, The Redeemed of the LORD; and you shall be called Sought Out, A City Not Forsaken." (Isa. 62:11-12) THEY are His honor and His reward – the Redeemed people, the city not forsaken.

You are the city not forsaken because Christ Jesus was forsaken for you. You are honored by God because Christ Jesus was shamed and excluded. You belong because he was cast out. And because you are united to Him, you have also been raised up with Him to this newness of life, this reception of all which His honor and beauty and brilliance and courage and obedience and holiness have earned Him from His Father. As He is accepted, so are you in Him. As He is beloved, so are you in Him. As He is secure, so are you in Him. Rest in His works. Rest in His love. Rest in His honor, and do not entrust yourself to any man, but entrust yourself fully to your Jesus.

Therefore, rather than pursuing our own honor and insisting on our freedoms, let us instead seek to edify one another. If you are part of the Body of Christ, you are to submit yourselves to your leadership as Christ submits to the Father, entrusting yourselves to Him. If you have authority, you are overseeing sheep which do not belong to you, but to your Master who purchased them with His own blood. Therefore, serve them to serve Him. Seek to bring them holiness. Submit to Christ as the Chief Shepherd to whom you will give an accounting, and honor them, entrusting yourselves to Him. Do not complain about them. Do not gossip about them. Do not wish them away. Love them. Cherish them. Work with all the power and gifting which the Spirit of God has granted you for their sake. To edify them, to glorify them, to make their name great, not yours.

You belong to Him, a people redeemed by Him for His own possession, and to one another both by nature and by choice. You are responsible for your part in the life of

this church. You are family, you are fellows, you are members of one another as those united to Christ Jesus and sanctified by His Holy Spirit to proclaim the greatness and glory of God and to flourish in the life which He has placed within you, the life like Christ Jesus, bearing the fruit of the Spirit of God.

When we all properly exercise such mutually-edifying, other-honoring authority and submission, we reflect the glory of the Triune God and express His manifold wisdom to all the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places to the praise of His glorious grace. This is what it means to be human. Amen.