

THE DISCIPLINE OF SUBMISSION

(From Richard Foster: Celebration of Discipline)

Introduction

- A. Of all the Spiritual Disciplines none has been more abused than the Discipline of submission
 - 1. Somehow the human species has an extraordinary knack for taking the best teaching and turning it to the worst ends.
 - 2. 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
- B. Every Discipline has its corresponding freedom; the aim of the Disciplines is freedom, not the Discipline.
 - 1. In and of themselves the Disciplines have no value whatever.
 - 2. They have value only as a means of setting us before God so that he can give us the liberation we seek.
 - 3. They are not the answer; they only lead to the Answer.
- C. 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

- A. The corresponding freedom to submission is the ability to lay down the terrible burden of always needing to get our own way.
 - 1. The obsession to demand that things go the way we want them to go is one of the greatest bondages in human society today.
 - 2. People will spend weeks, months, even years in a perpetual stew because some little thing did not go as they wished.
- B. In the Discipline of submission we are released to drop the matter, to forget it.
- C. If you 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.
 - 1. We insist that a critical issue is at stake; we are fighting for a sacred principle.
 - 2. Often we cannot stand to give in simply because it means that we will not get our own way.
 - 3. Only submission can free us sufficiently to enable us to distinguish between genuine issues and stubborn self-will.
- D. Silence goes closely with submission

1. Usually the best way to handle most matters of submission is to say nothing.
 2. There is the need for an all-encompassing spirit of grace beyond any kind of language or action that sets others and ourselves free.
- E. The biblical teaching on submission focuses primarily on the spirit with which we view other people.
1. Scripture does not attempt to set forth a series of hierarchical relationships but to communicate to us an inner attitude of mutual subordination.
 - a. Peter, for example, called upon the slaves of his day to live in submission to their masters (1 Pet. 1:28).
 - (A) 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.
 - (B) Outwardly we can do what people ask and inwardly live in rebellion against them.
 - (C) This concern for a spirit of consideration toward others pervades the entire New Testament.
 - b. The old covenant stipulated that we must not murder.
 - (A) Jesus, however, stressed that the real issue was the inner spirit of murder with which we view people.
 - (B) In the matter of submission the same is true; the real issue is the spirit of consideration and respect we have for each other.
 2. In submission we are at last free to value other people.
 - a. We have given up the right to demand that they return our love.
 - b. No longer do we feel that we have to be treated in a certain way.
 - c. We discover that it is far better to serve our neighbor than to have our own way.
 3. In submission, we are set free from the seething anger and bitterness we feel when someone doesn't act toward us the way we think they should.
 - a. We are free to obey Jesus' command, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matt. 5:44).
 - b. It means that for the first time we understand how it is possible to surrender the right to retaliate (Matt. 5:39).

A Touchstone

- A. You have noticed that Foster approached the matter of submission through the back door.
 1. He began by explaining what it does for us before defining what it is.
 2. 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.
 - a. To do the former leads to self-hatred.
 - b. To do the latter leads to self-glorification.
 - c. There is a third alternative.
- B. 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).
 1. We almost instinctively draw back from these words.
 2. We are much more comfortable with words like "self-fulfillment" and "self-actualization" than we are with the thought of "self-denial." Paradoxically, Jesus' teaching on self-denial is the only thing that will bring genuine self-fulfillment and self-actualization.
 - a. Self-denial conjures up in our minds all sorts of images of groveling and self-hatred.
 - b. We imagine that it most certainly means the rejection of our individuality and will probably lead to various forms of self-mortification.
 3. On the contrary, Jesus calls us to self-denial without self-hatred.
 - a. Self-denial is simply a way of coming to understand that we do not have to have our own way.
 - b. Our happiness is not dependent upon getting what we want.
 4. Self-denial does not mean the loss of our identity as some suppose.
 - a. Without our identity we could not even be subject to each other.
 - b. Did Jesus lose his identity when he set his face toward Calvary?
 5. Self-denial is not the same thing as self-contempt.
 - a. Self-contempt claims that we have no worth, and even if we do have worth, we should reject it.

- b. Self-denial declares that we are of infinite worth and shows us how to realize it.
 - (A) Jesus made the ability to love ourselves the prerequisite for our reaching out to others (Matt. 22:39).
 - (B) More than once, Jesus made it quite clear that self-denial is the only sure way to love ourselves (Matt. 10:39)
- 6. Again, we must underscore that self-denial means the freedom to give way to others.
 - a. When we live outside of self-denial, we demand that things go our way.
 - b. When they do not, we revert to self-pity—"Poor me!"
 - c. Outwardly we may submit but we do so in a spirit of martyrdom.
- 7. True self-denial isn't thinking bad of oneself—and certainly not inordinately good of oneself. It is not thinking of oneself at all.

Revolutionary Subordination as Taught by Jesus

- A. The most radical social teaching of Jesus was his total reversal of the contemporary notion of greatness.
 - 1. Leadership is found in becoming the servant of all.
 - 2. Power is discovered in submission.
- B. The foremost symbol of this radical servanthood is the cross (Phil. 2:8).
 - 1. Christ not only died a "cross-death," he lived a "cross-life."
 - 2. The way of the cross, the way of a suffering servant was essential to his ministry.
 - a. Jesus lived the cross-life in submission to all human beings.
 - b. He was the servant of all.
- C. It is impossible to overstate the revolutionary character of Jesus' life and teaching at this point.
 - 1. It did away with all the claims to privileged position and status.
 - 2. It called into being a whole new order of leadership.
 - 3. The cross-life of Jesus undermined all social orders based on power and self-interest.
- D. The cross-life is the life of voluntary submission; the cross-life is the life of freely accepted servanthood.

Revolutionary Subordination as Taught in the Epistles

- A. 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.
 - 1. Notice the connection between the kenosis and the teaching to "count others better than yourselves" in Paul's teaching (Phil. 2:4-7).
 - 2. Peter, in the middle of his instructions on submission, directly appeals to the example of Jesus as the reason for submission (1 Pet. 2:21-23).
 - 3. As a preface to the Ephesian *haustafel*, Paul emphasizes mutual submission (Eph. 5:21).
- B. The Discipline of submission has been terribly misconstrued and abused from failure to see it in light of the wider context of Jesus' cross-life.
 - 1. Submission is an ethical theme that runs the gamut of the New Testament.
 - 2. It is a posture obligatory upon all Christians: men as well as women, fathers as well as children, masters as well as slaves.
- C. 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.
 - 1. Self-denial is a posture fitting for all those who follow the crucified Lord.
 - 2. Everywhere in the *Haustafel* the one and only compelling reason for submission is the example of Jesus.
- D. The Epistles first call to subordination those who, by virtue of the given culture, are already subordinate.
 - 1. Wives, children, slaves (cf. Col. 3:18-22 and parallels).
 - 2. The revolutionary thing about this teaching is that Paul made decision-makers of people who were forbidden to make decisions.
 - a. It is astonishing that Paul called them to subordination since they were already subordinate by virtue of their place in first century culture.
 - b. The only meaningful reason for such a command was the fact that by virtue of the gospel message they had come to see themselves a free from a subordinate status in society.
 - (A) The gospel has challenged all second-class citizenships, and they knew it.
 - (B) Paul urged voluntary subordination not because it was their station in life, but because it was "fitting in the Lord" (Col. 3:18).

3. Next, the Epistles turned to the culturally dominant partner in the relationship and also called him to the cross-life of Jesus.
 - a. The imperative to subordination is reciprocal.
 - b. For a first century husband, father, or master to obey Paul's injunction would make a dramatic difference in his behavior.
 - (A) The first-century wife, child, or slave would not need to change one whit to follow Paul's command.
 - (B) If anything, the sting of the teaching falls upon the dominant partner.
 - c. For the dominant partner to love his wife is another way of indicating submissive servanthood (cf. John 13:1-5; 34-35).
 - d. Compare Paul's words to Philemon regarding his returned slave, Onesimus (Philemon 16)