

Authority Issues: The Over/Under of Authority  
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This is our third week into the message series about Authority Issues. We've been using an umbrella to help us get the correct image of God's authority. That God's authority, and the authorities that he has placed over us are not about domination, but are connected with protection and helping us live out the best possible versions of our life.

We've already talked about the way that God desires for us to keep our individual uniqueness and creativity - it's not about God wanting us to be cookie cutter, clone-like people. Rather, it's about living into the best possible versions of our lives by using our creativity under the protection and within the structure of God's authority. When we are out there doing our own thing, then we are the power of one. When we place our lives under the umbrella of authority, then God can coordinate our individual gifts and abilities with countless others and we become the power of millions who are part of his body, the church.

Today, we are going to talk about the dreaded word related to authority: Submission....ooooo. Not something we like to hear. We'd rather be, "I'm my own man! I'm my own woman! I'm my own boss! I don't submit to anyone!" But the truth is that God has placed authority over everyone - no matter who you are, there is an authority to which you are accountable. And the converse is true to. God has also placed you in roles of authority - no matter who you are, you are in authority or leadership over others. This is the over/under of submission. **We need to get under those things that God has placed over us so we can get over those things God has placed under us.**

So as we get started, please take out your outline and study guide...

We live about 1.5 blocks from the elementary school that our kids attend. Last year, our son, Andrew, was in Kindergarten, so I would walk the kids up to school everyday. I remember the first rainy day of that fall. We got the umbrellas out for the short walk, and Andrew really wanted to carry the umbrella. Caroline has her own, so it was Andrew and me and one umbrella. I thought, "Why not let him carry the umbrella. He really wants to and we can make it work." So here we are walking down the street. It must have been a sight. I'm all hunched over, walking like this. And you probably know a bit about 5 yr olds. Just imagine what creative things a distracted, fun-loving 5 yr old does with an umbrella. He's obviously not paying attention to his father's needs for protection! This was OK for awhile, but eventually I had to gain control of the umbrella and hold it so that we could both walk under its protection.

This is an image of over/under of submission. This is what it looks like to get under those things that God has placed over us so we can get over those things God has placed under us. The image is not quite complete until we picture the umbrella that is over me, and the umbrella that is above that one, all of which are under the umbrella of God's protection. There is a story in Matthew 8 of a Roman officer who comes to Jesus to ask for healing for his servant. He understands the over/under of submission. Jesus offers to go with him to heal his servant, but the officer says this: ***The centurion replied, "Lord, I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. But just say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one, 'Go,' and he goes; and that one, 'Come,' and he comes. I say to my servant, 'Do this,' and he does it." When Jesus heard this, he was astonished and said to those following him, "I tell you the truth, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith."*** Matthew 8:8-10 (New International Version)

The officer understood the over/under of submission. Just as he had the privilege of authority over others, he himself submitted to authority. This is the ideal that we're dealing with right now,

that God desires for all authority to be extensions of his protective authority. Realistically, we know that there are breakdowns. There is sin in these systems of power and authority, as there is wherever humans are, and we're going to deal with those issues just a little later. But for now, keep the image of this ideal in your mind. This is the over/under of submission. We are all in the over and under sides of submission. And we need to get a handle on both sides of this to live out the best possible version of our lives.

## **THE OVER SIDE OF SUBMISSION**

So let's deal with the over side of submission first! We are all in places of authority or influence over others. Whether that is authority over a company or a child, we are all in roles of authority. As we serve in these roles of authority, it is very important that we do not misuse our power. That is how sin corrupts God's design. Our authority is an extension of God's authority. Jesus once said that he would give us his power. In **Acts 1:8 (NIV)** Jesus says to his followers, **"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."** Jesus wants us to have his power in our life. His desire is that we would be courageous and bold and power-filled as we fearlessly take on his mission of building the Kingdom of God on this earth. And Paul encouraged boldness in his protégé, Timothy, when he wrote these words to him, **"For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline."** **2 Timothy 1:7 (NIV)**. And so for us to live into the best possible versions of our life, we need to understand and use power and authority as Jesus did. He is our ultimate model for both the over and under sides of submission. And his model is not at all like the model of power that his world knew.

The authority of Jesus was not based on power by rank position or privilege. The crowds came to Jesus because he taught with authority, yet he did not have an official position of authority as a teacher or leader or king. The passage from **Philippians 2:5-8 (NIV)** tells us a number of things about Jesus' understandings of power and authority:

**Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!**

This passage reflects in a few words the life and ministry of Jesus that we see in the Gospels. Jesus lived out power and authority in this way:

**Selfless** - *Made himself nothing.* His life and ministry was about something much greater than himself. He humbled himself to the mission of bringing God's salvation - grace and peace - to everyone.

**Servant based** - *Took on the nature of a servant.* Jesus once said that he did not come to be served (as people with power desire), but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for us.

**Submissive to God.** *Became obedient.* He placed his life under his father's authority and strove to do as his father's will, not his own..

**Sacrificial** - *obedient to death.* Paradoxically, his ultimate display of power was when he surrendered his power in sacrifice. He said in John 10 that no one takes his life from him, but that he lays it down of his own accord. The symbol of shame and death became the symbol of power over sin and death through his sacrifice.

What kind of power do you use in your roles of authority? Is it the top-down power based on position. Or is it the power of authority modeled by Jesus. I can hear you out there...you're saying, "Mark you are not living in reality, dude!" Try it out here in the business world. Let me ask

you this? Are your employees or subordinates motivated by fear or criticism or are they sold out to your mission? Are they begrudgingly putting in the hours or are they willing to sacrifice selflessly - even go beyond expectations because they believe in you and your company's mission? Which word better describes the environment under your authority; fear or freedom? Duty or trust?

None of us are going to achieve our full potential unless we get this over/under of submission thing down. And the deal is this; in our places of authority, the way we deal with authority and power impacts the ability of others to live up to their full potential either positively or negatively. So please be attentive to how you live out the over side of submission, because this is not just about you. It's about getting under those things that God has placed over us so we can get over those things God has placed under us.

### **THE UNDER SIDE OF SUBMISSION**

Just as we are all in places on the over side of submission, we are also all in places of the under side of submission. Places where we are accountable to the authority of someone else. But that's the easy part, isn't it because submission to authority comes so naturally for us! You're thinking, "I don't know which planet he's on!"

Submission to authority is certainly easier when we trust and believe in the authority. But even then it's still difficult. To me there is no more trustworthy authority in my life than Jesus, but it's still not necessarily easy to place my life completely and totally under his authority.

So let's take a look at one of those New Testament passages that deals with submission.

***Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul. Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us. Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every authority instituted among men: whether to the king, as the supreme authority, or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right. For it is God's will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish men. Live as free men, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as servants of God. Show proper respect to everyone: Love the brotherhood of believers, fear God, honor the king. 1 Peter 2:11-17 (NIV)***

**Submission is a matter of witness-** as the early church was facing accusations that would lead to persecution, Peter's advice is to live in submission to Jesus will of grace, mercy, forgiveness, sacrifice, so that those who believe Christians to be in the wrong at least have to acknowledge the goodness and recognize that is beyond being simply good people. Our submission to Jesus should serve the same purpose – bear witness to his presence in our lives.

**Submission to authorities enables God's mission to flourish.** Peter tells his friends in this letter to submit to every authority instituted in the world. Why? Because Peter sees that rebellion against those authorities keeps them from accomplishing their primary mission – to share Jesus with the world. If they are respectful of and submissive to the established authorities, then that adds credibility to their faith in the eyes of the non-believer. The Christians then, don't have to overcome the hurdle being feared or trusted by the non-believers, which enables them to share their faith and fulfill their mission of bringing people to Christ.

There is a misconception about what it means to be submissive. This misconception can hinder us from living out the best possible versions of our lives, so we need to identify it.

**Submission is not Mindless.** We are not called to be lemmings who follow our leaders blindly and without thinking. Clearly, God has given us a mind and wants us to use it. God has built levels of authority so that there can be accountability when leaders make errors.

There is one very touchy passage in Ephesians about submission. Many women get freaked out when they read this submission stuff from Ephesians chapter 5. ***Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her... Ephesians 5:21-25 (NIV).***

Now if this is about mindless submission – slave like obedience - then I wouldn't blame women for freaking out over it. But if we remember that this passage was written in a very patriarchal society where women had no power or authority and we look at the context around this passage and not just the one verse, then we can see that this is a radically progressive statement about the marriage relationship. The first line is a bridge between talking about how the people in the church should treat each other and how husbands and wives should treat each other. What does it say, "Submit to one another". This is a mutual relationship, not a patriarchal relationship.

I believe this passage really should rattle the cages of men more than it does women. Look at the burden of responsibility placed upon the husband. Husbands are to love their wives just as Christ loves the church! Do you know how Jesus loves the church? Perfectly! Selflessly! Sacrificially! You talk about a challenge! I know that some of you guys are pretty amazing people, but that's a pretty tall order for any man...to love our wives perfectly! Selflessly? Sacrificially? So women, don't get all freaked out about this passage. If your man is striving to love you perfectly, selflessly, and sacrificially, would you have any problems walking under his protection?

Now this passage is never going to be lifted up as inspiration in the modern feminist handbook. But I find it very inspirational because it is not at all about mindless submission. It is about mutual respect and sacrifice.

I don't believe God's expectation for us when we are under authority is to be mindlessly submissive to an authority figure. Hopefully, people in authority over you are accountable to a higher mission and purpose and even though their methods are not always perfect, their motives are not to be purposefully harmful. I believe that is the case most of the time, but what about those times when we are pressured by a person with power over us to do something immoral, illegal, or against God's word? Is a child supposed to submit to an abusive parent? Is an employee supposed to submit to an unwanted sexual advance by a superior? Obviously, it would not be God's will that anyone should submit to these kinds of things.

The ministries of prophets of the Old Testament and of Jesus have very strong themes of justice. In the case of those who cannot protect themselves, the prophets and Jesus call the community to be part of the solution of providing protection and justice for children and the powerless people of society. So in the case of any abuse against people who cannot speak up or protect themselves, it is the role of the community to intervene and provide shelter for the victim and accountability to the higher authority of law for the abuser.

But what is the response of an employee to their authority. You already ought to know what to do if it's illegal, you report the illegal activity to a higher authority in the business or to legal authority. But let's just say that you are asked to do something against your convictions. What if your boss tells you that you have to take the clients out to the gentlemen's clubs, or lie about the product, or look the other way when a co-worker does something that is unethical, or fudge on your billing...

What do you do then? First, pray for your boss or manager that God would change their heart and fill them with integrity. Next, you confront them and explain your personal/moral convictions. Try this, “Boss, you are baseless scum with the moral fiber of cotton candy and you’re going to hell!” That should get some kind of result! Maybe not what you were looking for. You do need to have a meeting and respectfully, honestly and without condemnation tell them about your issue. Then, present a creative alternative. Instead of the gentlemen’s club, maybe it’s a round of golf or a nice restaurant.

Think of it this way. The ultimate authority for a Christian is Jesus. Next it would be the laws of the land. All other authorities are under those. So when you have to choose going outside of the umbrella of your boss to stay under the umbrella of Jesus, then you have a risk/reward situation. The reward goes back to the witness of submission. Your meeting with your boss is itself a witness and may lead to greater opportunities to shine your light. The risk side of this is connected to several warnings from Jesus. One of these warnings is in the beatitude section of Matthew 5. Jesus says that we are blessed when we are persecuted for his sake...meaning that there is risk when we take a stand, especially against authority, when our stance is based soundly on our desire to stay under the umbrella of Jesus. You may get fired, or have to quit and take a job with less pay. It’s not that God desires for that to happen to you, but that is the risk we sign up for when we give our lives to Christ and promise to help shine his light and build his kingdom. And we may have a hard time seeing it, but God will redeem that hardship. Jesus promised that we would be blessed when we take the opportunity to suffer hardship for his sake.

One of those places we may encounter hardship would be when we participate in an appropriate rebellion. Rebellion! We Americans are in love with the whole rebel mystique. We were founded by a bunch of rebels. Our culture gravitates to rebellious figures. Our favorite movie characters have strong rebellious streaks. We live in a culture that promotes rebellion to such a point that we all want to rebel against something...even to rebel against nothing – to be a rebel for the sake of being rebellious.

I’m not talking about trivial rebellion – cutting your hair as an act of rebellion. I’m talking about when we choose to step out from under the authority over us because that authority is so broken, so corrupt, that we can no longer tolerate living under it. This is a pretty rare thing. I don’t ever remember being in any situation that came close to resembling, “Give me liberty or give me death”. There are costs to rebelling, so if we’re ever faced with fighting the powers that be, we better be sure that our motives are correct and be willing to make the sacrifice.

When I think of appropriate rebelling against authority, I think of the civil rights movement. And when I look at that, it helps me define what an appropriate rebellion looks like.

First, it challenges injustice – in civil rights, the oppression and dehumanization of African-Americans.

Next, it appeals to a greater authority – in civil rights, appealed to ideal of human equality that was woven into the constitution.

Next, it exposes sin and wrongdoing – non-violently. Martin Luther King, Jr, choose the method of non-violent protest because it would expose the evil of racism and segregation. It would not allow the citizens of this country to turn a blind eye to it anymore.

Finally, it leads to reform. The outcomes of rebellion should be to the benefit of people.

Many years ago, I placed my life under the authority of the one who made the ultimate sacrifice for me. I choose then to walk under the umbrella of Jesus’ authority. And I have never regretted that decision. But I’m far from perfect about that. As I thought about the story of me and Andrew walking to school with the umbrella that one rain day, it occurred to me that I am just like Andrew. I want to hold the umbrella. And when I grab it, I am taking it away from Jesus. I’ve done that a lot, and I have regretted it every time.

The good news, however, is that Jesus is willing to start over with us, time after time after time. All we have to do is make the decision to let him be our Lord, and stop trying to be god of our own little universe.

Understanding the over/under of submission is key to getting under the things that God has put over us so we can get over the things God has placed under us. Living this well – reflecting the way Jesus used power and claimed authority – will go along way toward helping us live the best possible versions of our life.