

Lifesaving Principle **1** **Understand Scriptural Truths**

*Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved,
a workman who does not need to be ashamed
and who correctly handles the word of truth.*

—2 Tim. 2:15

If you're navigating a difficult marriage, as a Christian you may struggle with how God feels about you. Do you sometimes wonder if He even cares about your struggles? Do you wonder if He's punishing you for marrying the wrong man? Is it too late to redeem your life? Does God even have a plan for you?

It's important for you to understand that in your quest to please God, even in the midst of a difficult marriage, it's not necessary to labor under common misconceptions about submission, marital rights, and your responsibilities.

God's Heart Toward You

The Israelites understood God's compassion toward them. They repeatedly turned their backs on Him by worshipping other gods. After long periods of suffering because God withheld blessings to them, they turned back to Him and prayed for forgiveness by reminding Him of His mercy: "You are a forgiving God, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love" (Neh. 9:17).

God forgives you for the mistakes you make. He cares about your problems and your pain. He's not punishing you, although you may be reaping the natural consequences of your choices. The love that led God to send Je-

sus to die on the Cross is the same love He has for you now. David tells us in Ps. 34:18, “The LORD is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.”

Even in your disappointment and sorrow, you can continue to trust in God’s unfailing love and sovereign purpose, even if you don’t understand why things have turned out the way they have. When you’re broken and hurting, God’s heart is soft and loving toward you.

Submission to Your Husband

Connie wants more than anything to obey God by submitting to her husband, Jeff. But Jeff wants to control everything—the money, the children, where she goes, who her friends are. He monitors what she watches on television and what she reads. He drops her off in front of the grocery store and waits in the car while she does the weekly shopping. Connie tells herself she’s obeying God by quietly submitting to Jeff and his demands. She believes it would be out of God’s will to demand that Jeff give her some space and the freedom to make decisions for herself.

Order in the Body

It’s true that God has established order within the Body: Christ is the head of the Church, and the husband is the head of his wife and family. The husband is the head of the family in a structural way. Someone has to be in charge when there are impasses; however, that doesn’t imply that the wife is not to be considered at all or that she’s not allowed to participate in decisions. It was never intended that the husband would rule like a maniacal boss or a dictator. In the cooperative partnership of marriage, both individuals are highly valued and will have input into important decisions. The wife submits to her husband by respecting him, loving him, and trusting his decisions as long as they don’t violate her conscience or God’s Word.

Submission

A healthy husband-wife relationship is based on love and mutual respect, not obedience. Obedience implies a parent-child relationship. A woman brings to the marriage all her insight, talents, and viewpoints in order to complete her husband—including her ability to say no. The passage on submission, Eph. 5:22-24, has been misinterpreted to mean that a wife should submit to her husband in everything and that not submitting is *always* the same as disobeying God. But submission is always voluntary and can be withheld.

The Husband's Responsibilities

The husband, as the head of the home, has additional responsibilities. Eph. 5:25-26, 28-29, immediately following the submission verses, goes on to say, “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy. . . . In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the church.”

Marriage is to be an example of Christ's relationship to the Church. The Church submits to Christ because He takes care of the Church and loves her. Therefore, submission by the wife goes hand in hand with her husband's responsibilities.

The assumption is that the husband will care for his wife in a loving way with her best interests in mind. One could also draw the assumption that the husband takes loving care of himself and his own body. In difficult marriages, these assumptions are likely false. Some husbands aren't capable of even loving themselves, which is demonstrated by destructive lifestyles. Can men who are alcoholics, workaholics, drug addicts, or women chasers be trusted to lead their families?

A man who loves his wife as Christ loved the Church will find his wife has no difficulty respecting him and placing herself under his authority. He can be trusted.

However, placing yourself under the authority of someone who does not love you or care for you can be dangerous. Col. 3:19 says, “Husbands, love your wives and do not be harsh with them.” 1 Pet. 3:7 says, “Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing will hinder your prayers.” This tells the husband to consider his wife’s needs, to adapt to her, and to treat her with respect. Women respond naturally to husbands who treat them this way. But women have great difficulty being vulnerable with men who do not act lovingly toward them.

Paul’s admonitions to the Church focused on what was culturally relevant at the time. Women were expected to submit to their husbands with respect. Men treated their wives as property; hence the emphasis on loving them, which was a radical concept in those days. Nowhere in these verses on love and submission does it say that men will never be required to submit and that women will never need to love.

Both husbands and wives are to cooperate and yield their rights and personal desires in order to preserve unity in the body and in their marriages.

Slaves and Slave Owners

In 1 Pet. 2:18, slaves are told to obey their masters: “Slaves, submit yourselves to your masters with all respect, not only to those who are good and considerate, but also to those who are harsh.” Some have surmised that this example of submission to an unjust man implies that a wife should submit to her husband even if he is extremely harsh. There are several faults in that comparison. Peter is talking about a different relationship between slave and

slave owner; the husband's responsibilities to his wife are much more comprehensive than those of the slave owner to the slave. We recognize that slavery is no longer morally acceptable—even though it was during Paul's time. We don't even condone the mistreatment of employees by their employers. In fact, in Eph. 6:5-9, Paul admonishes both the slaves and their masters to realize that they are "slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart. Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not men" (vv. 6-7). These verses clearly highlight a reciprocal responsibility to do what's right and treat each other with respect.

Exceptions to Submission

We're also told to submit to authorities in government (Rom. 13:1-7), but with exceptions. When the government's order goes against God's commands, we do not obey. Peter was told by the authorities not to preach Christ, and he refused to obey, stating, "We must obey God rather than men!" (Acts 5:29). The apostle Paul was thrown into jail several times for disobeying the law by preaching. Hebrew midwives refused the Pharaoh's command to kill the baby boys, because they feared God. God blessed them for it (Exod. 1:15-21). Following righteousness always comes before submission.

What if your husband asks you to put your family at risk or cause your children harm? Of course, you wouldn't do that. But what if he asks you to participate in activities that violate your conscience? Col. 3:18 says, "Wives, submit to your husbands, *as is fitting in the Lord*" (emphasis added).

Scripture clearly establishes that when a ruler or leader asks you to do something that goes against God's command, you're to disobey. When a husband's request is wrong, you can say no. This seems clear when we consider the "big things." If your husband asks you to murder his friend, you'll easily refuse. It gets more difficult when he asks you to sign for a loan you know you can't afford to re-

pay. Here are some practical examples of times when it's acceptable for you to withhold submission:

- You know you need counseling to help your marriage, so you go to a counselor, even when your husband says not to.
- You refuse to watch pornographic movies.
- You do not give in to his demand to give up all activities, interests, and friends outside the marriage.
- You refuse to ride with him or to allow your children to ride in the car with him when he is driving while intoxicated.
- You refuse to allow illegal drugs in the house.

These are just a few examples. If you are being asked to submit in ways that you feel are wrong or that make you feel uncomfortable, pray, asking God for His wisdom.

Old Testament Examples

The Old Testament contains examples of women who did not obey their husbands. In the Book of Esther, Queen Vashti refused King Xerxes' request for her to come to his drunken feast to be looked at and admired by men. She no doubt knew he was drunk and didn't want to put herself in that position. She was willing to stand up for what was right at a great risk. In his anger and revenge, King Xerxes issued a royal decree deposing her as queen. Queen Esther dared several times to enter the king's presence without being summoned, which could have resulted in her being put to death if he had not extended his gold scepter to signal his approval. She risked her life by speaking against his top official, Haman, and the king's edict to kill the Jews. She was willing to disobey the king, her husband, for the higher good of saving her people from death. Abigail chose to disobey her husband to save lives by bringing David and his men the provisions Nabal had refused them (1 Sam. 25). God showed his approval of Abigail's actions by answering her prayer to punish Nabal.

When it's a matter of standing for what's good, standing against what's wrong, and protecting others and ourselves from harm, women need not submit to their husbands.

Abraham's wife, Sarah, leaves us with a conflicting example. "They were submissive to their own husbands, like Sarah, who obeyed Abraham and called him her master. You are her daughters if you do what is right and do not give way to fear" (1 Pet. 3:5-6). Sarah submitted to Abraham by moving from her home when God told Abraham to move from Haran to Canaan (Gen. 12:1-5). She agreed to lie twice when Abraham asked her to tell the Egyptian Pharaoh (Gen. 12:10-20) and King Abimelech (Gen. 20) that she was his sister. Abraham was afraid they would kill him in order to marry Sarah, since she was so beautiful. God inflicted diseases on Pharaoh's household and intervened by a dream with King Abimelech to prevent either of them from taking Sarah as his wife.

We're told to submit to our husbands as Sarah did but not to allow fear to rule us. Sarah let fear control her when she lied for Abraham. Abraham's motive for lying was his own fear and lack of trust in God. These lies would have brought about serious consequences if God had not miraculously intervened.

Sarah's submissive heart got out of hand. God intervened in Abraham's and Sarah's life, but He didn't have to. Sometimes He allows us to live with the consequences of our decisions.

Forfeiting of Headship

There's a difference between your husband's positional authority and his structural authority. Laurie Hall, in *An Affair of the Mind* (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers, 1996), says, "The husband has positional authority. He occupies the office of the head of the home. If, in that office, he is serving his family members by truly loving and caring for them, he will also have functional authority. His family

will naturally look to him to lead” (127). A man who behaves in a way that undermines his family, as in the case of addictions and abuse, forfeits his “functional authority to exercise his headship” (Ibid.).

What about men who use submission to demand their wives go along with them? Men can use the concept of submission to control, dominate, and manipulate their wives by saying things like “I’m the king of the castle. I will be treated special.” This communicates an inner attitude that’s self-serving rather than self-sacrificing. Paul Hegstrom in *Angry Men and the Women Who Love Them* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1999), writes, “A man who treats ‘his woman’ like a servant, makes all the big decisions, and acts like master of the castle is exerting a type of abuse known as male privilege” (41).

The Bible clearly requires a high standard for the man, directing him to love his wife as Christ loves the Church. Christ was a servant. He did not come to be served, even though He was the King of glory. Our husbands are not to act like tyrants, commanding servants to give in to their every desire.

Hegstrom also writes, “Words like ‘submission’ and ‘obey,’ as well as other spiritual language and scripture, when taken out of context, typify a man who is actually spiritually abusing his wife. He probably has high regard for the patriarchal system and may say things like ‘God gives me the right to do this. I’m the head of the family. I have all the rights in the world, and you have none’” (Ibid., 40). One of the common characteristics of an abuser is “He is a traditionalist believing in male supremacy and the stereotypical masculine sex role in the family. He feels he has the *right* to ‘teach her a lesson’” (Ibid., 43). One of the common characteristics of an abused woman is that “she is a traditionalist about the home; strongly believes in family unity and the prescribed feminine sex role stereotype”

(Ibid., 44). This does not mean that every man and woman who believes in traditional roles in the family will misconstrue them—only that the beliefs can be taken advantage of when they're misapplied.

Use Judgment

Submission is not a rigid edict that prevents you from exercising control over any area of your life. Jesus cautioned us to be “as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves” (Matt. 10:16). Much damage has been done to women by taking a simplistic view of submission. If you're trying to please God in your marriage, look at whether or not you're obeying Him in all things. If you think the full extent of your responsibility in your marriage is to submit to your husband, then you may be ignoring other areas that are just as important and may even supersede submission, including your responsibility to stand up for righteousness and against evil.

Where's the Fruit?

Christians are supposed to bear good fruit—the fruit of the Spirit as described in Gal. 5:22-25 and also the fruit of our godly lives. Paul told the Ephesians to “live as children of light (for the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth)” (Eph. 5:8-9).

Are you producing fruit in your marriage? Are you producing the fruit of righteousness in your husband, your children, and yourself? Or is the result sin, envy, dissension, anger, and other evils? Does your husband continue in destructive behavior without consequences? Are you left feeling discouraged, angry, resentful, hurt, bitter, impatient, and discontented? Do you feel like a woman with dignity, or do you feel ashamed, beaten down, and broken? Are you taking action to expose sin and bring it to the light, or are you covering it up in the hope of keeping the peace for the time being?

In Gal. 5:19-21 Paul lists the acts of the sinful nature: “sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.” Then he goes on to list the fruit of the Spirit: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control” (Gal. 5:22-23).

Do you see your home in either of these lists? Passive tolerance of wrong in your difficult marriage will result in sin. It will produce anger, self-pity, careless words, worry, and unbelief. It can destroy physical health, dignity, and self-esteem. Children are provoked to anger and witness the poor handling of relationships—the only model of relationships they may ever see. Children in homes where the parents fight or have addictions are continually provoked to anger, and they carry that anger into their own marriages. If you’re covering up for your husband in the interest of keeping the peace, you may actually be contributing to his self-destruction, because he never has to face the consequences of his actions.

Eph. 5:11 says, “Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them.” Don’t cover up and make excuses for evil. Gal. 6:7-9 says, “Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life. Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.” When you step in and intervene in God’s law of reaping and sowing by not allowing your husband to face the consequences of his behaviors, you’re acting out of fear and insecurity instead of trust and faith.

Jane and Bob have a secret: Bob is addicted to pornography. He spends hours on the computer every night, and Jane knows what he's doing. But she doesn't say a word. She worries that the kids will find the pornography on the computer, but she doesn't confront Bob and take a stand against his addiction. Jane is just biding her time, believing that her perseverance will be rewarded—someday.

Loving your husband may mean setting strong boundaries that say no to sin in his life, in your life, in your marriage, your home, and in your children's lives. God doesn't just leave us alone in our sin. He goes after us. He convicts us. If we persist, He allows us to suffer consequences and pain, and He disciplines us with the purpose of bringing us to repentance. Are you willing to hold your husband accountable? True, you aren't responsible for his choices, and he will have to give an account to God for his life. But *you* will give an account for *yours*.

Remember that 1 Pet. 3:17 tells us that if it is God's will for us to suffer, it's better to suffer for doing good than for doing evil. Doing the right thing is often not the easiest thing to do, but it's better to suffer for doing the right thing, knowing that you've pleased God.

Respect

Respect is necessary in a good relationship, and it's evidenced by showing honor and esteem toward the people you value. God instructed children to respect their parents (Lev. 19:3), the Israelites to respect the elderly (Lev. 19:32), slaves to respect their masters (Eph. 6:5), wives to respect their husbands (Eph. 5:33), the Church to respect elders and pastors (1 Thess. 5:12), and husbands to respect their wives (1Pet. 3:7).

In *Love Must Be Tough* (Waco, Tex.: Word, 1983), James Dobson explains that respect is a necessary part of love. It's human nature to value people who demand respect and de-

value people who can be mistreated. He writes, “If there is hope for the dying marriages . . . then it is likely to be found in the reconstruction of *respect* between warring husbands and wives.” You communicate how you expect to be treated by the boundaries you set. If you accept poor treatment and there is nothing that is completely “out of bounds,” you may not get the respect you desire.

Unfortunately, there are men who believe that women are property that must be controlled. If your husband is such a man, it may be nearly impossible to gain his respect. However, even if your husband is a man who does not respect women, he may *value* you more if you set boundaries and demand that he abide by them.

Rights

You’ve been taught that as a Christian you must put your sinful nature to death, thereby dying to self and to sin. You die to self when you forgive, when you respond with gentleness to anger, when you choose right over wrong, when you stand for right even though you’re afraid. You die to self when you serve others. But dying to self does not mean allowing someone to mistreat you without standing up for what’s right.

If you allow your husband to mistreat you, how does that testify to your faith? If you endure mistreatment, are you promoting the gospel to your friends and family? If your husband is also a Christian, isn’t his mistreatment of you hypocritical in your children’s eyes? Taking a stand against sin even when there are negative consequences such as disapproval, risking the loss of your marriage, financial loss, or your husband’s anger can be seen as a testimony to your faith.

Governments guarantee rights to their citizens. Paul reminded the Roman authorities twice that his rights as a Roman citizen were being violated (Acts 16:37; 22:25). The

United States was founded on the belief that her citizens have inalienable rights given by God—to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. We consider ourselves entitled to the right to be considered innocent until proven guilty, to own property, to free speech, to freely assemble and worship. It is not inconsistent with Scripture to take a stand for what's just and right. Neither is it wrong for you to take a stand for your rights in your marriage.

Turn the Other Cheek

In Matt. 5:38-39 Jesus said, "You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also." This scripture does not condone physical abuse or the tolerance of mistreatment. Jesus used this example to explain the differences between the Old Covenant and the New Covenant. Old Covenant law required an eye for an eye as punishment. Jesus explained that God cares about the heart more than superficial actions. He wants us to have an attitude of grace and forgiveness rather than an attitude of revenge.

Jesus went on to tell the disciples that they were to love not only their neighbors but their enemies (those who mistreated them) as well. 1 Pet. 3:9 says, "Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult, but with blessing." Even if your husband treats you like an enemy, you can love him and treat him with courtesy and kindness while at the same time setting firm boundaries. Try to let go of any desire for revenge you might be harboring while still confronting the sin of evil attitudes and actions.

Christian Character Traits

"Sometimes I got tripped up by my own Christianity," Jessica told me. "I remember listening to sermons about being long-suffering and persevering through trials. But it

seemed to me that the more ‘Christian’ I was—trying to love my husband, being gentle, submitting, persevering—the more emotionally and verbally abusive he became. When I finally started answering him back, I started getting his respect. I’m learning how to stand up for myself the right way.”

What do long-suffering, forgiveness, gentleness, meekness, peace, and perseverance really mean in a difficult marriage?

Long-suffering

Long-suffering means not running out at the first hint of trouble. It means hanging in there even when you encounter problems in marriage. It doesn’t mean giving up and accepting anything that comes your way—it means continuing to fight for what you know is right.

Perseverance

If you’re going to contend for your marriage, do it in the right way, and refuse to passively accept anything and everything that happens. Always desire righteousness in your life.

Peace

It’s tempting to keep the peace in your home by going along with your husband and walking on eggshells to keep from upsetting him. Rom. 12:18 tells us, “If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.” We’re to do everything we can to have good relationships with the people in our lives. Doormats and physically and emotionally abused women do not have good relationships.

A Gentle and Quiet Spirit

Jesus described himself in Matt. 11:29 as gentle and humble in heart. Even in the midst of a difficult marriage, you can exhibit gentleness in your spirit, realizing that God is in control, rather than manifesting turmoil and rebellion.

Quietness refers to an inner peace and strength where you can confidently rest, trusting God. Being quiet in your spirit doesn't preclude you from speaking the truth or confronting and resisting evil.

Forgiveness

Don't confuse forgiveness with passive tolerance, thinking it means acceptance of everything without boundaries. Forgiveness has nothing to do with willingly tolerating mistreatment or withholding consequences. It means we give up our right to take revenge.

A New Foundation

If unquestioned submission always resulted in godliness, I would say, "By all means, submit." But passive acceptance of mistreatment and sin leads to brokenness, pain, disrespect, difficulties for your children, physical health problems, wasted lives, and emotional damage. And in the long run, it often results in divorce anyway. Understanding and applying the lifesaving principles described in this book can help you take a stand for righteousness by obeying God and submitting to Him above all else.