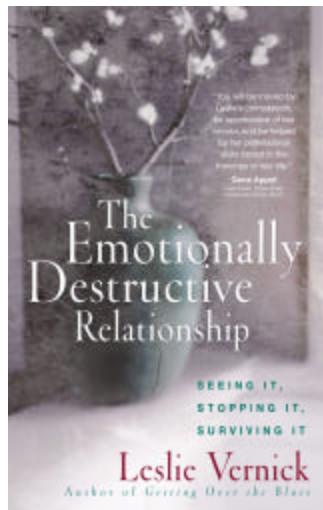


Understanding Biblical Authority, Headship, and Submission

By Leslie Vernick

Excerpted from Chapter 6 in *The Emotionally Destructive Relationship*



As I've worked with Christians in the midst of relationship difficulties, I've identified some specific mistruths and half truths that are sometimes taught as God's truth. Some individuals misuse God's Word and take it out of context to justify or excuse their own sin and brokenness. Some of the teaching that has most powerfully fueled may destructive relationships emerges from the topic of submission to authority whether it be in a marriage, church or government.

God's Word gives specific instructions to those in authority on how to handle that responsibility. Throughout the Old Testament, God often rebuked the leaders of Israel for their self-centered, deceitful, and abusive shepherding of God's flock. (See for example Deuteronomy 13, Jeremiah 23:1-4, and Ezekiel 34:2-4.)

Parents have authority over their children but, fathers (and mothers by implication) are warned by Paul not to misuse that authority by provoking their children or exasperating them. Paul says the hearts of mistreated children will be tempted with anger, discouragement, and bitterness (Ephesians 6:4; Colossians 3:21). In other words, parents don't have the right to mistreat, demean, or micromanage their children under the guise of biblical discipline.

Biblically, God put husbands as the head over their wives (Ephesians 5:23), but that does not put wives at the feet of their husbands. Women and wives are described in the Gospel as equal partners and persons to love, not objects to use or property to own. Biblical headship is modeled by Christ's gentle leadership and loving self-sacrifice. Husbands are cautioned not to be harsh with their wives and not to mistreat them, or their prayers will be hindered (Colossians 3:19; 1 Peter 3:7). No leader is entitled to making selfish demands, ordering people around, or hurting them when they fail.

Submission is a discipline of the heart for all believers to practice, not just wives or women. All Christians are called to submit to authority (1 Peter 2:13), to one another (Ephesians 5:21), and to God (James 4:7). Please don't misunderstand what submission is and what it is not. In the Greek, the word *submission* (*hupotasso*) describes a voluntary action or attitude. Biblical submission cannot be forced. It is a position we take when we are motivated by our love for Christ and our desire to please and obey him. Although God commands us to submit to him, obey him, and love him, he never forces anyone to comply with his commands. He gives us a free choice, including freedom to choose badly (like Adam and Eve did).

When a husband bullies his wife, his behavior does not describe biblical headship, nor is her forced “submission” characteristic of biblical submission.³ The correct terms are *coercion*, *manipulation*, *intimidation*, or *rape* and she is the victim. Let’s make sure we use the right words.

I am amazed in those instances when a man who believes so strongly in forcible submission is confronted with his own sin but is unwilling to submit himself to anyone else’s authority for help and accountability, including his own pastor. He is not open to correction, challenge, or change because he is always right. He manipulates the Scriptures to serve his purposes.

Jesus cautions those in positions of authority—parents, husbands, pastors, and elders—not to misuse those God-ordained positions for self-centered purposes. These roles are given to us by God to humbly serve the individuals or groups that have been entrusted to our care, not to have our egos stroked or to get our own way (Mark 10:42–45).

Sadly, some husbands have used their God-given position in their homes for selfish purposes, and often other Christians have unwittingly endorsed them. These husbands believe that they have license to do or demand anything they want, and that their wives are supposed to comply. This ought not to be.

If you are in a destructive relationship with a person who misuses his or her authority, whether it be your husband, parent, employer, pastor, or government, God gives us specific instructions on how to respond. The following are some things you can do to stop the destruction.

Respect the authority, if not the behavior

When Paul defended himself before the Sanhedrin, Ananias, the high priest, ordered Paul to be slapped across the mouth. Paul reacted to this by calling Ananias a hypocrite and telling

him that God would strike him. When Paul was informed that he had insulted the high priest, Paul immediately felt remorse, because he knew God said, “You must not speak evil of any of your rulers.” Paul continued to defend his position before the Sanhedrin, but he presented his point of view with an attitude of respect for Ananias’s position (Acts 23:1–9).

It is tempting to repay insult for insult, evil for evil. God tells us that that is not his way, and this approach will never stop the destruction (Luke 6:27–36; 1 Peter 3:9). Instead we must learn to speak the truth, always in love, without backing down. For specific ways on how to do this, see *The Emotionally Destructive Relationship*, specifically chapters 8 and 9,

Protect yourself

When David was being mistreated by King Saul, he didn’t submit to the mistreatment or wait around for Saul to kill him, he fled. Later, when David had opportunity to ambush and kill King Saul, he refused to, out of respect for Saul’s authority and position (1 Samuel 24, 26). It is never wrong or against God’s will to protect yourself by fleeing from those who misuse their power and authority.

An angel warned Joseph in a dream to take baby Jesus and flee to Nazareth (Matthew 2:19–21). Joseph did not hesitate, nor did he wait for Herod to kill Jesus. Paul was lowered in a basket over a city wall to get away from those who wanted to stone him (Acts 9:23–25). Proverbs tells us, “A prudent man sees danger and takes refuge” (Proverbs 22:3 NIV). If you are in a dangerous situation, get out.

Allow higher authorities to be your advocate

After preaching in Rome, the apostle Paul was mocked and threatened. The Roman commander ordered Paul arrested and beaten. Paul did not submit to this mistreatment. He

appealed his case and questioned whether it was lawful for them to flog a Roman citizen without a proper trial (Acts 22:22–29).

Whenever people ask me if they should call the police when someone, even a spouse, physically or sexually mistreats them, I say *yes!* It is biblical to rely on the governing authorities that God has put in place to protect you against abusive people or those who are misusing their positions of authority or disobeying the law (Romans 13:1–5).

If you are in a situation where you are experiencing sexual harassment or abuse in your workplace, report these practices to someone who has authority over the abusive person. People often act aggressively and abusively toward others primarily because they think they can get away with it. Don't let them. Don't feel guilty about holding someone who is sinning against you accountable to the law. It is not only good for you to do this; it is good for the sinner as well (James 5:19–20).

Leslie Vernick is a licensed counselor with over 25 years of experience helping individuals, couples, and families enrich the relationships that matter most! Leslie is the author of five books and a regular radio guest on Moody's Mid-Day Connection and the relationship expert columnist for Today's Christian Woman magazine.

To Invite Leslie to speak at your church on this topic or others, please contact her at www.leslievernick.com or call 1-877-837-7931