

The Gift of Submission
Sunday, November 10, 2019
First Baptist Church, Jefferson City, MO
Rev. Melissa Hatfield
Scripture: Matthew 11:28-30

WATCH/LISTEN: <https://www.fbcjc.org/sermon/the-gift-of-submission/>

About a year and a half ago, I was on a camping trip with two friends in northwest Arkansas.

On one of the days we went on a long hike that took us downhill a few miles to some gorgeous waterfalls. You know the problem with a downhill hike though, right? What goes down, must come up.

After a late lunch, we began the trek back up to the campsite. It was hard and painful and humbling. We were crisscrossing, doing switch backs and taking breaks and thinking through evacuation options if we didn't make it. About halfway up the hill, we caught up to a Boy Scout troop of about 15 kids and their leaders. They had heavy packs on and had obviously been out for a couple days. We exchanged pleasantries and sympathies as they stepped out of the way to let us pass. We did our best to pretend like the climb was no big deal and went on up the hill. But eventually our legs and lungs demanded a break. The troop caught up to us. They hadn't taken a break ... they were slowly and methodically climbing the hill in what we later learned was called a caterpillar formation.

The first person in the line leads at a steady a pace. After a short distance, they step off to the side and the rest of the group keeps going. When the last person passes by, the person who was leading and now had a short break, steps back into the formation as the last person. They keep repeating this over and over until they finish their climb.

When they caught up to us, they - being good Boy Scouts - invited us to join them. I had ZERO entrance in doing this, but before I could politely decline, my two friends enthusiastically agreed. I shot them evil looks, but what could I do?

So, we merged into the caterpillar and made our way up the hill. I finally made it to leader of that line and kept the pace. But I didn't stop. I just kept going and I didn't look back. Finally, the Boy Scout behind me gently called out, "We need to take a break." I stopped and looked back. The caterpillar was broken and gasping for air. Mind you - I was too, but my pride was screaming louder than my leg muscles. My determination not to submit to others broke the beauty and rhythm of a group (of mostly children!) accomplishing something better together than they could on their own.

Now, not only was my body in pain but my spirit was as well. I still felt anger at being forced to walk with the group, forced to match my steps and rhythm to theirs – even though their plan was infinitely better than ours. But now I also felt anger at myself for being a schmuck. We

eventually made our way to the top, said our thanks and our goodbyes, and went our separate ways.

To the Boy Scout troop hiking at White Elephant Rock Mountain in Arkansas in May 2018, I apologize and say thank you.

Submitting is difficult for me, like really difficult, and I imagine many of you feel the same way. We all face similar struggles with yielding to others ... whether we are talking about submitting to other people or to God or a healthy living plan from a doctor or a group of Boy Scouts.

To submit is to accept or yield to a superior force or to the authority or will of another person.

Does anyone like to do this? We are wired to not submit. It is our default setting to be self-oriented and self-focused, self-protective? Do you need proof of this? Think about the time you've taken a group picture with some of your friends. After the photo is taken and the picture is shown to your group, who is the first person you look at? Right? Yourself. And you judge the entire quality of that photo based on how you look. The rest of your friends could have their eyes closed or mouths open, but if you look great, that is the photo your posting!!

Not only are we wired to be self-focused, we live in a self-help, self-fulfillment, self-empowerment, self-promotion age. That is the message of our culture - in advertising, books, entertainment, social media.

1. You can do it and you don't need anyone, including God.
2. You can't trust anyone but yourself.
3. You don't want to owe anything to anyone.
4. Avoid vulnerability at all costs.

These are the messages we hear, and these are the messages that reinforce the lies we tell ourselves.

The late musician Rich Mullins wrote the following lyrics in his song, "Hold Me Jesus":

Surrender don't come natural to me
 I'd rather fight you for something
 I don't really want
 Than to take what you give that I need

Surrender doesn't come natural for us. Submission is not intuitive for us.

Before we go any further, I want to pause and share a caution.

All spiritual disciplines have the potential to become destructive if misused, but submission is especially susceptible to this problem. In fact, the word itself may even be triggering for some

who have been in relationships where submission was abused. Church. Work. Romantic. Family. I want to acknowledge this and assure you that this abuse of submission is not what we are talking about nor condoning in any way. Submit is my word for 2019 but not before I went through a long personal debate because of the baggage related to submission.

It is important for us to be clear about the limits of submission.ⁱ The limits of this spiritual practice or discipline are at the points at which it becomes destructive, when it is not mutual, and when the love of God is not the foundation for nor the means by which submission is practiced. These limits aren't always easy to define because human relationships are complicated and messy, but we must proceed in trust that the Holy Spirit will guide us in those relationships and surround ourselves with people we trust who will help us discern when submission is unhealthy.

But healthy submission is something that God calls us to live out, so let's talk about the gift of submission.

Let's read and reflect on Jesus's words from his sermon to the crowds in Matthew 11:28-30.

"Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

Even though many of us do not live where yokes are present any longer, most of us know what a yoke is or have at least seen pictures of yoke. It is a heavy bar, made of wood or iron, that holds two horses or oxen together so that they can pull a load or plow a field in unison. We don't see these contraptions much today. Generally, we tend to think they are used to distribute the weight evenly between two oxen, but actually that was the opposite of what Jesus was communicating here.

This wooden crosspiece bound to the necks of a pair of oxen was also used as a way to train a younger ox. Thus the "learn from me" has connotations of the younger ox yoked to an older stronger ox to teach it to walk in pace, with every step in obedience, listening to the farmer's command.

The size of the hole for each ox was different. The older ox had a very tight constricting loop, snugly positioned to its neck to allow it to carry the brunt of the weight. While the novice ox enjoyed less constriction, had room to move, but not escape. And by design not actually able to bear much of the burden at all. The purpose of this training was simply for the younger ox learn to walk.ⁱⁱ

Jesus is saying, be yoked with me and learn to walk. I will carry the weight, I will teach you to walk in a way that brings life and rest to your weary spirit. We can do this together! Living under the yoke of Christ is by invitation, not imposition. The yoke is not a metaphor for hard

labor but a symbol for partnership where you don't have to pull your own weight. You can't pull your own weight.

This is beautiful, yes?

Then why do I still resist? Why do we decline the invitation to be yoked to Christ?

Submit is my word for the year (I do a word each year instead of resolutions) and it has been a pain in the rear. It has been an ongoing fight to surrender my plan or agenda for God's. It has been uncomfortable to experience the vulnerability of giving control of my life to another. I know in my mind that God is absolutely trustworthy but struggle to live that trust out - which is where it matters. It has been messy, full of missteps, and full of beautiful moments as well.

Why did I choose submit as my word for 2019? Because as sure as I know I hate to submit, I also know that on the other side of submission is the true freedom I seek, the freedom I'm desperate for.

Dallas Willard defines submission as "abandoning outcomes to God." According to author Bill Gaultiere, submission is "letting go of trying to ..."

- Make things happen (even with God)
- Get people to like you or think well of you
- Get people or God on board with your agenda
- Ensure that you are loved or that you matter

These are the very things I want freedom from in my life. I'm so tired of hustling for my worth. I'm exhausted trying to control outcomes. I'm done with the burden of living by the expectations of others and myself which I can never live up to. We make the worst masters – never pleased, never satisfied.

Do you also long for freedom? Are you tired of fear and scarcity being the theme of your life? Are you tired of the voice within us that shouts our failures and whispers a relentless theme of scarcity – you don't have enough, there isn't enough, you'll never be enough.

Change in life usually only comes when we are so dissatisfied with the now that we feel we have no choice but to move. Until we can no longer stand it, we'll put up with a lot and settle for less.

The promise of Christ is that being yoked to him, accepting the invitation to let Christ lead our lives, submitting and aligning our steps with his, will bring us the freedom and rest we so desperately desire.

So, how do we practice the spiritual discipline of submission?

The internal posture that has helped me the most relates to trust or faith. Faith – trust – is the key that unlocks our readiness to receive God’s sufficiency in our lives. Faith simply means to trust God.

Do I trust that God is who he says he is, and God will do what he says he will do?

I love to hammock. I may very well be in mine this afternoon before winter arrives tomorrow. The first time I tried a hammock was a perfect picture of my trust issues. My friend had been napping in it earlier and later invited me to give it a try.

Even seeing her in it for an hour or two with no issues, I struggled to trust that it would hold me or not flip me onto the ground. I backed into very slowly with most of my weight still on the ground and gently tested it at varying intervals. “Is it holding me now?” Etc. etc. I finally laid back into it fully, but my body was anything but relaxed. I was wrestling between, “I know it’s going to break.” And “It held my friend up.” And “I’m going to flip out” and “the ground is only 8 inches away. You won’t die.”

Now, I leap in and out of it without a second thought. It hasn’t failed me yet and I trust it like 95%.

Could it? Yes. That is where the hammock analogy falls short – no pun intended.

Learning to trust God is very similar to this. It is growing into trust. It is reminding ourselves of why God can be trusted. It is seeing God at work in others and knowing God is at work in us as well.

Can God be trusted? If I’m going to submit to Him, if I’m going to accept the invitation to be yoked to Christ, I need to ask and answer this question for myself. And I will need to remind myself of it when things get hard and fear rises up.

Can God be trusted?

I look back through Scripture and say, Yes.

I look back through my life and say, Yes.

I look at the lives of others and say, Yes.

I sit with my gut and all the things I know to be true and the answer is clear to me – YES. God is trustworthy. God is faithful. God is good.

Here is the beautiful thing, my friends. If you want to believe, then you have what you need to believe more. Only some ounce of trust – even as small as a mustard seed – would lead you to ask God to help you trust. God can work with that. It’s okay to slowly sink your rear into trusting God. It’s a start and God can grow it from there. One day we will find ourselves leaping into

the hammock of faith, resting in a faith of God's sufficiency. "If you can believe, all things are possible to him that believes." Mark 9:23

This is why we thank God for trials in our lives. Because they, more than anything, have taught us that God is trustworthy. It is what Dallas Willard calls a faith of desperation. When you're betrayed, abandoned, lied about, and scandalized; when you are sick with a fatal disease; when your finances are going down the drain; when you see your loved one walk through the doorway of hell; that is the moment of trust. When you have nowhere else to turn except to God, and you turn to him, your faith of desperation will meet the fullness of God, and you will taste the life without lack as you discover the depths of the faith of sufficiency.

So, trust helps us yoke ourselves to God and submit our wills to His will.

An important part of submission is death to self.

St Francis of Assisi said, "Above all the grace and the gifts that Christ gives to his beloved is that of overcoming self."

It is important to note the difference between death to self and death of self. God isn't calling us to get rid of ourselves. God formed you with unique gifts and personalities and the world needs you to show up with all of that. God gave you desires which are needed and great motivators, but they simply make terrible masters.

To live in the flesh, as Paul writes, is simply a matter of putting our desires in the ultimate position in our lives. What we want goes. It is a matter of trust ... we trust ourselves more than we trust God. This is the basic nature of sin.

We are invited to die to self and put God in the ultimate position in our lives.

Galatians 2:20 says "I have been crucified with Christ, and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me." I've been crucified with Christ – not I have crucified myself, but that I've been crucified. Dallas Willard writes, "Crucifixion is an interesting thing. It is hard to do by yourself. In fact, it is impossible. You might be able to nail one hand to the cross, but what are you going to do when you get to the next hand? The crucifixion of the self is a cooperative affair between us and the Lord. We cannot die to self without the help of God's grace, for only God can satisfy our ultimate desire, and only God can convince our hearts that, when we die to self, he will raise us up."

Our responsibility is to understand what death to self is and to understand we cannot live in the sufficiency of God until we have accepted it, recognized it, and said, "Lord, give this gift to me." And then, practice it.

When was the last time you gave up control of something? It doesn't count if someone took control from you. I mean, willingly gave it up.

When was the last time you gave up something that was your right so that someone else might benefit?

I think about this when I drive into the parking lot at work almost every day. I believe it is the Spirit giving me opportunities to practice the discipline of submission which I asked her to do this year. Do I park in the spot closest to my door or do I park elsewhere allowing others to be closer? It is an opportunity for me to die to self, and it is an opportunity I say yes to maybe 50% of the time.

It isn't easy. Sometimes I just pull into the spot, shrug my shoulders and say, not today, God. Sometimes I don't park in the spot and say to God, "Fine. Are you happy?" Not the attitude He is looking for, I know. I'm clearly a work in progress.

But when I do submit with the right heart, I receive the blessing that comes with knowing I don't have to have my own way. I receive the blessing of knowing I don't have to be enslaved to my wants or desires.

When we give up the smaller, everyday things we are training for times when greater sacrifice is required.

Trusting God and dying to self are important ways to live out the spiritual practice of submission, of abandoning outcomes to God. This practice will help us set our minds on things above so that God can do the work of transforming us and setting us free in Christ.

- **What is a current control issue in your life?**
- **What keeps you from trusting God?**
- **How can you practice healthy submission in your ordinary life to help God grow you in the spiritual practice of submission?**

Benedictionⁱⁱⁱ

*May all of your expectations be frustrated,
May all of your plans be thwarted,
May all of your desires be withered into nothingness,
That you may experience the powerlessness and poverty of a child,
and can sing and dance in the love of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
Amen.*

ⁱ Foster, Nathan. *The Making of an Ordinary Saint: My Journey from Frustration to Joy with the Spiritual Disciplines*. Baker Publishing Group. Retrieved from <https://renovare.org/articles/understanding-submission>.

ⁱⁱ Jennifer Lacey, "When Jesus Yoke Doesn't Feel Light," Superfruitful.com (Blog), Accessed on October 1, 2019, <https://superfruitful.com/when-jesus-yoke-does-not-feel-light/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Larry Hine, Brennan Manning's spiritual director - the benediction/prayer given at Brennan Manning's ordination

Other Resources:

Willard, D. (1999) *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives*. San Francisco, California: HarperOne.

Willard, D. (2019) *Life Without Lack: Living in the Fullness of Psalm 23*. Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson Publishing.