



The Ten Commandments

(24) The Fifth Commandment

(4) The Abuse of Authority in Marriage

Exodus 20:12

Colossians 3:18-19

1 Corinthians 7:10-16

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We are studying the Fifth Commandment which is “Honor your father and your mother.” We are following the lead of the Reformed tradition in seeing this command as governing all authority relationships. In its treatment of the Fifth Commandment the Westminster Shorter Catechism says, “The fifth commandment requires us to respect and treat others, whether above, below, or equal to us, as their position or our relationship to them demands.” Romans 13 expresses this sentiment when it says in verse 7, “Pay to all what is owed them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed.” This is really the essence of what the Fifth Commandment requires of us. We are to respect and honor those to whom we owe respect and honor. What we have been doing so far in our sermons on this command is exploring the whole area authority in the Bible, both exercising it and submitting to it.

So in the first sermon we looked at the obvious application of the Fifth Commandment that children are to honor their parents and we saw that the commandment is aimed at adult children no less than it is aimed at younger children. In the second sermon we considered the fact that authority all comes from God and that he has given some authority to humans by creating them in his image and giving them the task of having dominion over the earth. In that sermon we looked at the nature of authority in general and saw that God’s intention is that it be

exercised in ways that nurture life and wellbeing. In the third sermon we began to trace the idea of some humans having authority over other humans in the Bible and we saw that the first place we see this is in the authority of husbands over their wives. So we traced that subject through the Scriptures. In that sermon I stressed the importance of accepting and living by this scriptural requirement in spite of how countercultural it is in our society with the rise and influence of individualism and feminism. I also stressed the biblical point that husbands are to love and lead their lives following the model of Christ's love and leadership for and over the church. This puts the whole authority/submission dynamic in the context of love and mutual service. And the overall context of these sermons on the Ten Commandments is the gospel which means that keeping them is not the way to salvation, but it is the way that saved people are blessed to begin to live.

However, all the way along in all of these sermons on the Fifth Commandments, what has always hovered in the background is the sad reality that authority in our fallen world is often abused. As I have been speaking, I have heard you thinking, "Yes but what about situations of abuse?" I did not actually hear you thinking, but I know that that is what many were thinking because we are all familiar with the terrible reality of abuse of authority and we have also heard stories of church leaders giving instruction to women in abusive relationships that has struck us as being heartless and wrong. I refer to the stories of church leaders who told women in abusive marriages simply to submit to their husbands and concentrate on keeping their husbands happy.

I don't know how often that that has actually happened. But clearly it has happened enough that quite a few people know of some poor woman who was given bad counsel by some well-meaning church leader.

The world does not hesitate to draw a connection between Christian teaching on headship and abuse in marriage. A recent article on the website of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation was given the following title: "'Submit to your husbands': Women told to endure domestic violence in the name of God." And in the body of the article we read, "In the past couple of years, concern has been growing

amongst those working with survivors of domestic violence about the role the Christian church of all denominations can either consciously or inadvertently play in allowing abusive men to continue abusing their wives.” (<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-07-18/domestic-violence-church-submit-to-husbands/8652028>)

Clearly this is an issue that needs to be dealt with in the context of the biblical teaching of the authority of men over their wives. I have already stressed what that authority is to look like, showing how the Bible stresses that the authority of husbands is to be modeled after the example of Christ who came not to be served but to serve and to give his life for his bride. But the reality is that no husband is a perfect imitation of Christ and some husbands misuse their authority in ways that can legitimately be called abuse.

There is a range from minor abuse of authority to major abuse of authority. At the minor end you have the fact that every husband is a sinner and has selfish tendencies and so we all to some degree at times exercise our authority in ways that are not truly for the benefit of our wives.

I think in most of our marriages, authority is not “in your face” but exercised quietly in a way that is so natural as to be hardly noticeable. I think in marriages where husbands truly want to give Christ-like leadership and wives truly want leadership from their husbands, the authority/submission dynamic will be so natural and subtle as to hardly be noticed. But even so, as sinners, we husbands will sometimes make decisions that are selfish and that do not truly bless our wives.

That is not abuse in the sense of domestic abuse. But it is sin and so if we notice it we must repent of it and if our wives notice it and feel that it is worthwhile pursuing, they should confront us with it. But even here living together as sinners means that we do not confront one another with every single sin. Some sins fall under Peter’s instruction that “love covers a multitude of sins.” (1 Peter 4:8). So, there are some minor abuses of authority that wives can just choose to live with taking into account that marriage is two sinners living together and if it is something that is troubling the first thing to do would be to talk about it

in a loving way. A wife could say to her husband, “I didn’t feel the love in that decision.”

I bring this up because no husband is perfect and so all Christian wives have the challenge of submitting to husbands who may sometimes misuse their authority in relatively minor ways. The relationship is still good and if there is a little disruption, a little loving discussion can make things well again.

But there are other situations that are not so minor, and which must be called abuse or some term that conveys the serious nature of what is going on. The Bible does not use the term domestic abuse, but it does deal with some people treating other people badly and it does give us principles of how to deal with that situation when it happens. The Bible does address the abuse of authority in a number of ways.

The main way, of course, is to teach husbands to love their wives as Christ loved the church. Any exercise of authority that does not reflect the love of Christ for the church is a misuse of authority and so an abuse of authority. But there are other passages which speak to this issue both directly and indirectly. Colossians 3:18-19 speaks to it directly. “Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands love your wives, and do not be harsh with them.” The context here is the husband/wife relationship which includes wives submitting to their husbands, but the word to the husbands in this context is to love their wives and not to be harsh with them. That covers a lot of ground.

It is significant that Paul felt the need to tell husbands not to be harsh with their wives. Clearly that was something that sometimes happened in the society in which the early church lived. This is something that has always happened. There have always been some husbands who treated their wives harshly. Paul addressed this issue because it was something that he felt needed to be said.

I don’t know if this problem is worse than it has ever been, but it is something that we hear about often in our time. It has a name – domestic abuse or spousal abuse. And it is a terrible thing. There are advertisements telling wives what to do if they are facing abuse from their husbands. There are help-lines for them to call. There are

safehouses for them to go to. Clearly this is something that happens often. Paul addresses that reality when he tells Christian husbands to love their wives and not to be harsh with them.

Another way that the Bible deals with this is by telling elders in the church not to lord it over the church. This speaks indirectly to husbands abusing their authority by teaching about the abuse of authority in the church. In 1 Peter 5:3 Peter tells elders not to be “domineering over those in your charge.” Being domineering is an abuse of authority and we can rightly apply that prohibition to husband/wife relationship. Authority is never to be exercised in a domineering way.

Well, what does that look like? There are a number of ways that authority can be exercised in a domineering way. It is domineering when it is the dominant factor in the relationship. A domineering husband is always pulling rank. He is always giving commands and expecting to be obeyed. A domineering husband is controlling, regulating way too many details of the life of his wife. Another word for this phenomenon is authoritarianism which is defined as “enforcing strict obedience to authority, at the expense of personal freedom.” Some synonyms are autocratic, dictatorial, despotic and tyrannical. So a husband who abuses his authority is one who asserting his authority and requiring obedience to frequent commands which inordinately limits the freedom of his wife to make her own decisions.

Here is a description from the internet. This author describes the domineering husband as “the lion king authoritarian husband/head.” Here is the description, “This is the husband who makes it known who is the boss. He sits, as all lions do, waiting to be served. When he roars, everyone must move. His children respect him as head, but they are really afraid of him. His wife nervously honors his wishes so as not to cause him to become angry. Other words that can aptly describe this type of head as a ‘domineering’ and ‘military commander’ head.” Domineering authority is an abuse of authority.

There is a fourth way to get at the abuse of a husband’s authority from a biblical perspective. We can look at the kinds of behaviors that are forbidden in all relationships and apply them to the husband/wife relationship. Consider these verses from Ephesians 4. Verse 26 “Be

angry and do not sin, do not let the sun go down on your anger....” Verse 29, “Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear.” Verse 31, “Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice.”

Anger, bitterness, wrath and malice are often present when a husband is abusing his authority. So is talk that cuts down rather than builds up. When there is an abusive relationship, there is often a lot of anger and bitterness and hurtful and cutting words that put down the wife.

Clearly, the Bible deals with this matter of the abuse of authority and many other aspects of an abusive relationship. Authority exercised in love is a life-nurturing thing. The abuse of authority is condemned in Scripture in various ways and in no uncertain terms.

Now I present this as a husband abusing his authority because authority is our subject. There are endless variations. The element of authority may not be in the foreground. It can be a relationship where a husband is treating his wife badly without bringing authority into it. It can also be the other way around. The literature says that there are marriages where wives abuse their husbands. And if that is the case that is just as bad and sinful. But it is more common for the husband to be the abuser and we are looking at this from the perspective of the exercise of authority in the husband/wife relationship.

I bring this up because it should be discussed in connection with the subject of the authority of husbands over their wives as the Bible teaches it. And clearly all of this applies to the authority of the husband in the home generally. It is important that we maintain the biblical teaching in the face of how offensive it is to the people of the world, but it is also important that we face the reality that sometimes authority is abused also in Christian homes.

I have no evidence that this is happening in any of our homes, but it could be. Often when domestic abuse surfaces in the church, no one had a clue that it was going on. But even if it is not, it is something that needs to be discussed and thought about in the light of the biblical

teaching on male headship in the home. Sometimes it can go terribly wrong. But that is not what God had in mind when he gave the husband authority in his relationship with his wife.

And that raises the question of what submission looks like in such a situation. In some of the horror stories that you may have heard or read, church leaders tell women who reach out for help because they are in an abusive relationship to submit to their husbands and try to be better wives. Our gut reaction is that that is very wrong, but it's necessary to think it through from a biblical perspective. Our gut feelings about things are not our authority. The Bible is. And also in difficult situations we must seek to act in ways that are pleasing to God. So what happens to the command of wives to submit to their husbands in a situation where the husband is abusing his authority? What guidance does the Bible give on this matter? It is vital that the church gets this right as faithfulness to God, for the wellbeing of both the abused wife and the abusing husband and any children who may be involved and for the witness and reputation of the church in the world.

The key from a biblical perspective is that the abuse of authority is sin and it must be dealt with as sin. A related perspective is that God cares greatly about people who are suffering abuse at the hands of other people. Psalm 146:7 says that God "executes justice for the oppressed." The oppressed are those who are mistreated by others particularly the weak who are suffering at the hands of those who are stronger than they. A wife who is suffering because a husband is misusing his authority is in an intolerable situation from a biblical perspective and such a situation should not be allowed to continue.

And so an abused wife has recourse from a biblical perspective. She is not trapped in that situation by the command to submit to her husband. When a husband is abusing his authority that is sin and sin is to be dealt with by the people of God and also by the state if the sin is also a crime.

Now what often happens is that an abusive husband will tell his wife not to speak to anyone else about the abuse. If he does that he is demanding something that is wrong and sinful and goes against biblical teaching. The clearest Scripture that speaks to this is Matthew 18:15-17. This is the passage where Jesus tells us what to do if a brother sins

against us. An abusive husband is sinning against his wife and the wife is authorized by God to treat the sin as sin.

Now Matthew 18 assumes that the sinner is a professing believer, so we will first consider a scenario when an abusive husband is a believer.

Matthew 18:15-17 tells an abused wife what to do. First, confront her husband with his sin and call him to repentance. If he does not listen, take two or three with her and confront him again. And if he still does not listen “tell it to the church” – that is to the elders of the church. And if he does not listen to them, he is to be treated as a “Gentile and a tax collector” – that is an unbeliever.

Now I know that following Matthew 18 in an abusive situation is easier said than done. I can’t say that I have experience in this area, but the literature makes it clear that it is very difficult for wives who are being abused by their husbands to tell anyone outside the family what is going on. There are many reasons for that and it is clear that breaking silence is extremely difficult.

But God’s instruction about how to deal with sin applied to an abusive situation makes it clear that God does not want wives who are being abused to be trapped in that situation. It is most certainly true that the command to submit to her husband does not require her to obey her husband when obeying simply enables him to continue in sin. Then you have a situation where the wife must obey God rather than man and thus confront the sin as sin and get others involved if the husband does not repent.

That includes the state if crimes have been committed as they often are in abusive relationships. God has ordained the state to protect the weak and punish the wrongdoer. Romans 13:4 says that the governing authority “is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God’s wrath on the wrong doer.” The point is that the authority that God gives to husbands does not allow them to abuse their authority and when they do and do not repent that sin must be dealt with by both the church and also the state when the sin in question is a crime as it often is.

The church is to seek repentance on the part of an abusive husband and to seek restoration and reconciliation if that is possible. That is always the goal of discipline in the church. The gospel applies. Sinners are urged and commanded to repent and turn to Christ for forgiveness and broken relationships are to be restored whenever possible. The ministry of the church is to seek the repentance of abusive husbands and the healing of the marriage relationship. The good news of the gospel is that in Jesus Christ sinners can be forgiven and renewed and broken relationship restored.

Meanwhile the abused wife and any abused children must be protected. The church is to reflect God's love and care for people in trouble and provide safety and security and support where authority and also power are being abused. Now what that will look like depends on the situation. There are a vast range of situations, but whatever the situation there must be support and protection as the situation requires. We are called to care for one another and that would certainly apply to a woman who is being abused by her husband.

The point is that the requirement of women to submit to their husbands does not require them to endure the abuse of that authority. If the husband is sinning against the wife, the sin must be dealt with in the biblical way and the both husband and wife must be loved and supported in appropriate ways. And what is appropriate depends very much on the situation.

Now this raises the issue of whether abuse is legitimate grounds for divorce. The Bible gives two legitimate reasons for divorce, adultery and desertion by an unbelieving husband. If either of those two things happens, then the wife is not bound to the marriage.

Our Westminster Confession of Faith summarizes the biblical teaching on this matter. It says, "nothing but adultery, or such willful desertion as can no way be remedied by the church, or civil magistrate is cause sufficient of dissolving the bond of marriage." This statement seeks to reflect the biblical teaching that marriage is intended by God to be permanent and the Bible gives only adultery and desertion as legitimate ground for divorce.

Now in some situations the abuse is so serious that it can legitimately come under the heading of desertion by an unbeliever. 1 Corinthians 7:15 says “But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so. In such cases the brother or sister is not enslaved.” There are cases of abuse that are really a form of desertion or separation. When a husband beats his wife or abuses her psychologically, he has broken his marriage vows so seriously that he has in effect left the marriage. He has abandoned her even if he still lives in the same house as her. In such cases, Paul’s words in 1 Corinthians 7:15 apply. “If the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so.”

Here is how John Frame expresses this idea based on his understanding of 1 Corinthians 7:15, “Spousal abuse is inconsistent with marital fidelity. Not every inconsistency is ground for divorce, surely. But sometimes violation of marital vows becomes so severe that no real commitment remains. When the church judges that Jack no longer respects his marriage vows, it may declare that he has divorced Linda, and that she may consider the marriage ended. At that point, she may file divorce papers to make the termination official.”

Now this is an extremely difficult question to deal with because there is such a range of abuse and so many different factors and situations. Not every form of abuse is automatically grounds for divorce. But there are situations in which it is clear that an abusive husband has abandoned the marriage for all intents and purposes and so there are situations of abuse where 1 Corinthians 7:15 does apply. Certainly the church should seek repentance on the part of the abuser and if at all possible reconciliation, but there are situations in which an abuser has abandoned the marriage by his abuse and 1 Corinthians 7:15 says, “let it be so.” “In such cases the brother or sister is not enslaved.” A case of severe abuse is a form of abandonment and may be treated as such.

And it is vital in such situations that abused wives receive the support of the church. There are too many horror stories out there of abused wives who feel that church leaders or other members have not taken them seriously and have told them to stay with their husbands, even though they were being abused. Women who are in abusive situations should be supported and protected and their stories taken seriously by the

church. Again, not every situation is the same and so it is impossible to say ahead of time how every situation must be dealt with, but domestic abuse is a real and terrible reality and the church must reflect God's care and compassion for the vulnerable and the hurting even as it maintains the biblical teaching on the sanctity of the marriage bond.

We live in a sinful world. And so we may face the reality of the abuse of authority and husbands treating their wives in terribly bad ways. There is a time coming when justice will be done and there will be no more abuse, but in the meantime we are to be there and minister in appropriate ways for both the abused and the abuser.

The biblical context in the light of which these things happen is the reality of sin and the grace of God in the gospel and the mission of God in Christ to one day make all things new. I have surveyed some of the truths that apply in an abusive situation. The abuser must repent. The abused must be protected and supported. If the abuser repents and if possible the marriage should be saved, but the reality is that that is not always possible. There is forgiveness for abusers who repent. And the suffering of the abused must be taken seriously by the church, but the ultimate comfort for the victims of abuse who are trusting in Jesus is the compassion of God for his suffering people and his promise to sustain them in their suffering and in the end to wipe every tear from their eyes.