

# The Right Way To Exercise Authority

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Now that we're looking at the exercise of authority, you may be saying to yourself, "It's about time. I think I like the idea of being top banana. In fact, I wouldn't say so outright but I think I was born to lead. I like calling the strokes, knowing that my word is law."

When I worked for Dawson Trotman, the first president of The Navigators, I thought it would be enjoyable to be the boss and make all the decisions. But then Daws died, and I became the boss-and I found out I had more bosses than I ever did before. Those who follow are servants, but I found out that those who lead are also servants. In fact, the measure of true leadership and the exercise of authority is determined not by how many people serve you, but by how many people you serve.

## **Authority is legitimate**

Authority and the exercise of authority are legitimate, and are even granted by God as a reward.

Especially in the 1960s there seemed to be widespread suspicion that all authority was somehow wrong. Child psychology books, for example, taught that children should not be repressed and limited because this might warp their personality. (We are instructed in Proverbs 22:15, however, that "folly is bound up in the heart of a child, but the rod of discipline will drive it far from him." Every child's personality has already been warped, and needs straightening out.)

The very fact that God has delegated authority makes it legitimate. That is enough. We live in an ordered universe that God set up, and it includes authority and submission to authority.

Luke 22:24–27 has sometimes been quoted to support the idea that authority, especially in spiritual matters, may not be good. The disciples were disputing among themselves in this passage about which of them was the greatest. Jesus then taught them that "the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves." But notice the reward he then promises to them in verses 28–30.

You are those who have stood by me in my trials. And I confer on you a kingdom, just as my Father conferred one on me, so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom and sit on thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.

Once he had dealt with their selfish ambition, he let them know that the reward for their faithfulness would be the exercise of great authority in his future kingdom. So authority in itself is not bad.

Notice also the parable in Luke 19:11–27 of the servants whose master gave them money to put to work while he was gone. When the master returned, the two servants who multiplied their master's money were rewarded with authority: To one the master said, "Take charge of ten cities," and to the other, "Take charge of five cities." This parable includes other lessons, but one important principle it contains is that authority is a reward for faithful service.

Why does God work this way? I believe it's because he's concerned about developing our character. Character is determined by choices and decisions we make, and, as we said earlier, authority is the

right to make decisions. If we make mature decisions, our growing character is rewarded with the opportunity to make even more decisions. In this way we grow in character step by step, becoming more and more like the Lord Jesus.

So the reward for the faithful discharge of authority is more authority, and more responsibility.

### **Authority brings an obligation**

Legitimate authority brings with it an obligation to act. Every right brings with it a responsibility. If you have the right to make decisions and take actions, then you must do so. You are obligated to do something. Whether its in your family, your business, your church, or wherever, you must take action.

You may remember a story that made the rounds years ago about the football team that was being demolished by their opponents. They were nearly ground into the turf each time they tried to carry the ball. So their coach yelled from the sideline, "Give LeRoy the ball!" On the next play, however, someone other than LeRoy carried it, and was quickly crushed by the opposing defense. The coach yelled again, "Give LeRoy the ball!" but once more someone else took it, and was immediately beaten down by the other team. The coach called out a third time for LeRoy to take the ball. This time the quarterback ran over to the sideline and said, "But Coach, LeRoy doesn't want that ball!" Understandably, LeRoy didn't want to get pounded down. But if he's going to play halfback on a football team he's got to take the ball.

The same is true if you have been given authority. You may get stomped and bruised, but you're obligated to carry the ball.

Let's take the matter of a father, for instance. In 1 Samuel 2 and 3 we read about the priest Eli and his two sons, who were so wicked that God eventually killed them. In 1 Samuel 2:12 we read that these two sons "had no regard for the Lord." Eli had failed to bring them up to know God, though this was his obligation-especially since he was a priest.

In 1 Samuel 3:13 God said this about Eli: "His sons made themselves contemptible, and he failed to restrain them." Eli knew what was going on, but he did not take the responsibility to discipline his sons.

Even worse is what God told him in 1 Samuel 2:29-"Why do you honor your sons more than me?" Eli gave greater respect to his wicked sons that he did to God.

A speaker once asked his audience what three words were the greatest thing a father could do for his children. His answer was "Love his wife." That's a good answer, but I believe three more important words are *honor the Lord*. This is the first principle in being a successful parent.

If you're going to lead, then lead. God gave you the job, so do it.

### **Our authority will be challenged**

Biblical authority must be exercised even though it is challenged-and it will be challenged. Anyone with authority will at some point be challenged.

This is true even for God himself, the source of all authority. He was challenged by Satan, and he has been continually challenged by mankind down through the centuries. But still today God is in charge, and he exercises authority over his universe.

All leaders are challenged. Moses was challenged. David was challenged. Jesus was challenged. Paul was challenged.

In your own areas of authority, you will be challenged as well. You can count on it, for example, as a parent. But when problems with your children arise, determine that you will take the responsibility God has given you, and realize that God will help you carry it out. Do it in God's way.

As many times as not when you have trouble with your children, you may need to examine yourself first. On more than one occasion when I thought some problem was due to my children and their bad attitude, I found out that I needed to change my own attitude, and then theirs changed as well.

### **Our authority must be exercised in a biblical way**

He who has been given authority must exercise it even though he is challenged, but he must do so in a biblical manner. Husbands are to love their wives and to avoid being harsh with them (Colossians 3:19); fathers are to avoid provoking their children (Ephesians 6:4) and making them bitter and discouraged (Colossians 3:21); governors are to rule justly in the fear of the Lord (2 Samuel 23:3); employers are to avoid making threats (Ephesians 6:9); and spiritual leaders are to serve as examples to the flock (1 Peter 5:3).

### **How God exercises authority**

As an example for us, in what manner does God exercise his authority? In Acts 17:31 we read that God "has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness." You may sense as I do that someday there must be a judgment. Whether or not we have learned about it in the Bible, we somehow sense that someday there has to be a straightening out of things. Justice must be done. And the Bible says that indeed God has appointed a day when he will judge the world with justice. That date is set. There's a circle around it on God's calendar, and it will come as surely as the sun rose this morning.

If you saw the motion picture *The Bible* you may remember a scene in which Abraham and his son Isaac were on their way to Mount Moriah, where Abraham was to sacrifice Isaac as God commanded. Along the way they passed through the ruins of Sodom and Gomorrah, which had been leveled by fire and brimstone from God. Isaac asked his father if God had killed everyone there, and Abraham said, "Yes, son." Then Isaac said, "And the little children?" Abraham again answered yes. Then the camera went to a serpent crawling out of a human skull, which I suppose was meant to show that Sodom and Gomorrah's judgment was because of sin.

I thought this was a vivid portrayal of the situation, but it didn't satisfy me. *What about all those little children?* I thought.

Later I was reading in the gospels, and a light dawned. As Jesus was singling out various cities of his own day and criticizing them for their unbelief, he said, "It *will* be more tolerable on the day of judgment for Sodom and Gomorrah" than for these other cities. And I thought, *Ah, the last chapter on Sodom and Gomorrah has not been written.* If there is anything to straighten out, there will yet come a

day of judgment for those cities. And as for the little children and whoever else is involved, God in his justice will straighten out all of it. He will judge the world in righteousness. I praise the Lord for that.

### **Accountability for authority**

Authority not only brings with it a responsibility to act and to act biblically, but it also brings accountability.

Jesus said, "From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked" (Luke 12:48). Are you a husband? Are you a parent? An employer? A civic official? A spiritual leader? Much will be demanded of you.

To whom are you accountable? You are accountable to the source of your authority, which means you have an intermediate responsibility to people, and an ultimate responsibility to God.

In my job, for example, I am accountable to the board of directors of The Navigators. They are a source of my authority. But another source are Navigator staff members who agree voluntarily to work on the staff under my leadership. Without their agreement to work in this way, I would not have authority over them. So I am also accountable to these staff members. That makes me a servant both ways-up and down.

In the same way, a husband is accountable to his wife because she agreed to marry him and to live under his leadership. She is part of the source of his authority.

What about parents-are they accountable to their children? Do our children have a right to expect certain things of us as parents? I think so. Do you have a good conscience toward your children right now? Have you wronged them in some way and not tried to make it right?

### **Our ultimate accountability is to God**

Our ultimate accountability, for both the way we exercise authority and the way we submit to the authority of others, is to God. Husbands are reminded to be considerate and respectful of their wives "so that nothing will hinder your prayers" (1 Peter 3:7). Wives are told to be submissive to their husbands "as is fitting in the Lord" (Colossians 3:18). Children are to obey their parents because "this pleases the Lord" (Colossians 3:20). Employers are to remember "that you also have a Master in heaven" (Colossians 4:1). Spiritual leaders are to be shepherds of the flock "as God wants you to be" (1 Peter 5:2).

May we be grateful that God's word is so clear and helpful in giving us these principles, and may he help us apply them in our lives.