

Understanding Authority as a Subordinate



CAPACITY: LEADERSHIP

Baton Exchange

At some point in your life, you will work under someone else's authority. A supervisor, a pastor, a professor, a team leader, a project manager—someone will carry responsibility for direction while you carry responsibility for execution.

For many young professionals, authority can feel uncomfortable. You might worry about losing independence, suppressing creativity, or submitting to flawed leadership. But Scripture frames authority differently. Instead of seeing it primarily as restriction, the Bible presents authority as **a structure designed by God for order, growth, protection, and mission.**

Understanding how to live well under authority is a critical leadership skill. Ironically, the way you function as a subordinate often determines whether you will eventually be trusted with authority yourself. If you want to grow into influence and leadership, learning to live wisely under authority is one of the most important foundations you can build.

WHY Understanding Authority Matters

You may not always choose your leaders, but your response to authority shapes your character, reputation, and future opportunities.

1. Authority Forms Character

When you submit to leadership with humility and integrity, your character matures. Scripture repeatedly emphasizes humility as the pathway to growth: “Humble yourselves under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time.” (1 Peter 5:6) Learning to operate under authority teaches patience, discipline, and emotional maturity.

2. Authority Builds Trust

People who respect authority earn trust from leaders. That trust often leads to more responsibility, more influence, and eventually leadership opportunities. Jesus described this principle clearly: “Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much.” (Luke 16:10) Faithfulness in small roles becomes preparation for larger ones.

3. Authority Enables Mission

Organizations function well when authority is understood and respected. Without structure, chaos replaces mission. God is not a God of confusion (1 Corinthians 14:33). Healthy authority creates clarity so people can pursue meaningful work together.

4. Authority Protects You

Good leadership often protects you from mistakes you cannot yet see. Experience provides perspective. Proverbs reminds us: “Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisers they succeed.” (Proverbs 15:22) Wise authority can guide you around unnecessary failures.

BIBLICAL PRECEPTS About Authority

The Bible does not ignore the complexity of authority. Instead, it provides principles for living faithfully within it.

God Establishes Authority

Scripture teaches that authority ultimately originates from God: “There is no authority except that which God has established.” (Romans 13:1) This does not mean every leader is perfect. It means authority itself is part of God’s design for organizing human society. Recognizing this changes your mindset. Instead of viewing authority merely as human power, you begin to see it as **a structure through which God works**.

Respect is a Christian Posture

The Bible repeatedly calls believers to respect those placed in leadership: “Have confidence in your leaders and submit to their authority, because they keep watch over you.” (Hebrews 13:17) Respect does not mean blind obedience or suppressing wisdom. It means approaching authority with humility rather than hostility.

Authority is Also Accountable

Scripture balances authority with responsibility. Leaders will answer to God for how they exercise authority. James warns: “Not many of you should become teachers... because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly.” (James 3:1) Understanding this helps you avoid resentment. Leaders carry burdens you may not see.

BASIC PRINCIPLES for Living Well Under Authority

Living wisely under authority requires more than compliance. It requires maturity and intentionality.

1. Distinguish Position from Personality

Every leader has flaws. If you base your respect on personality alone, you will struggle under imperfect leadership. Instead, respect **the role** even when the person isn't perfect. David demonstrated this with King Saul. Saul was deeply flawed, yet David still honored the authority of the king (1 Samuel 24).

2. Seek Understanding Before Criticism

When decisions confuse you, your first instinct might be criticism. Instead, practice curiosity. This posture builds wisdom rather than resentment.

Ask questions like:

- What pressures might my leader be facing?
- What information do they have that I don't?
- What larger goals are influencing this decision?

3. Speak Honestly, but Respectfully

Submission does not mean silence. Healthy authority welcomes thoughtful feedback. But tone matters. Proverbs teaches: “A gentle answer turns away wrath.” (Proverbs 15:1) Approach disagreements with humility and respect rather than confrontation.

4. Take Ownership of Your Role

Good subordinates don't wait to be micromanaged. They take initiative within their responsibilities. Paul writes: “Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord.” (Colossians 3:23) Your ultimate audience is not just your boss—it is God.

5. Protect Unity

Gossip, complaining, and subtle undermining damage organizations. You will occasionally disagree with leadership. But wise subordinates avoid creating division. Instead, they contribute to trust and cohesion.

6. Recognize Cultural and Generational Differences

Not everyone thinks about authority the same way. Culture, family background, and generational experiences often shape how people respond to leadership.

Some cultures emphasize **deference and hierarchy**, while others emphasize **independence and questioning authority**. Similarly, older generations may expect more formal respect toward leaders, while younger generations often prefer collaborative or informal leadership styles.

Understanding these differences can help you navigate authority with wisdom. What may feel normal to you may feel disrespectful—or overly rigid—to someone from another background. Scripture encourages believers to pursue wisdom and understanding in how we relate to others: “The wise in heart are called discerning.” (Proverbs 16:21)

Practicing discernment means paying attention to context. Ask questions, observe how people communicate, and adapt your approach in ways that show both **respect and relational intelligence**. You don’t have to abandon biblical principles. But you can apply them thoughtfully in different cultural or generational settings. Doing so helps build trust, reduces misunderstanding, and allows you to represent Christ well in diverse environments.

BEST PRACTICES for Navigating Authority

Practical habits can help you live out these principles.

Clarify Expectations

Many workplace frustrations come from unclear expectations. Clarity prevents misunderstandings.

Ask questions like:

- What does success look like in this role?
- What priorities matter most right now?
- How often should I communicate progress?

Communicate Proactively

Good leaders appreciate updates before problems escalate.

Send quick progress notes, ask clarifying questions early, and address concerns before they grow.

Communication builds confidence.

Learn from Leaders

Even flawed leaders can teach you something.

Pay attention to:

- how they make decisions
- how they handle pressure
- how they communicate

Some lessons will be positive. Others will show you what *not* to do when you lead someday.

Maintain Integrity

Authority does not excuse unethical behavior. If a leader asks you to violate biblical principles, your loyalty belongs to God first. In Acts 5:29, Peter declared: “We must obey God rather than human beings.” Faithfulness to God always remains the ultimate authority.

Authority as Preparation for Leadership

One of the most surprising truths about leadership is this: **the best leaders were once excellent followers**.

They learned:

- humility
- patience
- teamwork
- responsibility

Jesus Himself modeled submission while on earth.

Philippians 2 describes how Christ humbled Himself and became obedient—even to death on a cross. If the Son of God demonstrated humility under authority, none of us are above that posture. When you learn to live faithfully under authority, you are not limiting your potential. You are preparing for it.

Vignette: Marcus at the Design Firm

Marcus had been working at a small design firm for six months when his supervisor rejected a proposal he had spent two weeks preparing. His first reaction was frustration. The concept was creative, bold, and he believed it would impress the client. Instead of arguing, Marcus scheduled a short meeting.

“Can you help me understand what you saw that I missed?” he asked.

His supervisor explained the client’s long-term brand strategy—something Marcus hadn’t yet learned. The feedback stung, but it opened his eyes.

Over the next few months Marcus made a habit of asking questions before diving into projects. He also began sending brief progress updates to keep his supervisor informed.

Something unexpected happened. His boss started trusting him with bigger responsibilities. A year later, Marcus was leading small client presentations.

Looking back, Marcus realized something: learning to work well under authority had quietly prepared him for leadership.

Creative Connection

Think of a song, character, person from history, word picture, movie, or everyday object that represents this lesson.

One image that captures this idea is **an apprentice carpenter learning under a master builder**. The apprentice doesn’t begin by designing the house. Instead, they observe, practice, and learn from the master. Over time, the apprentice develops skill, wisdom, and judgment. Authority in this sense is not oppression—it is **formation**. What image came to your mind? Why?

ASK YOUR MENTOR

1. What helped you learn to work well under authority early in your career?
 2. Can you share a time when submitting to leadership was difficult but ultimately beneficial?
 3. What are signs that a leader is worth trusting?
 4. How do you respectfully challenge authority when you believe something is wrong?
 5. What mistakes do young professionals often make when responding to authority?
 6. How did your experiences under authority shape your leadership style today?
 7. What habits helped you earn trust from supervisors?
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PERSONAL INVENTORY

Use a 1–5 scale (1 = rarely true, 5 = consistently true).

Rate yourself:

- I show respect toward leaders even when I disagree.
 - I seek to understand decisions before criticizing them.
 - I communicate proactively with supervisors.
 - I take initiative within my assigned responsibilities.
 - I avoid gossip or undermining leadership.
 - I approach authority with humility.
 - I work as if serving God, not just human supervisors.
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Reflect & Journal

Take a few minutes to reflect on what you’ve learned about authority and your role under it.

Journal on these prompts:

- When have I struggled most with authority? Why?

- How do I usually respond when I disagree with a leader?
 - In what ways might pride or independence affect my response to authority?
 - What would it look like for me to approach authority with humility and trust in God?
 - How might my work, school, or church relationships change if I saw my work as ultimately serving God?
 - What kind of leader would I want to work under?
 - Am I developing the habits that would make me a trustworthy leader someday?
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Context & Alignment

Alignment

To what degree do these principles align with the worldview of where you were raised?

Context

Identify cultural expectations or values in your family, workplace, or community that may conflict with these principles.

Examples might include:

- distrust of authority
- hyper-independence
- workplace competition

How might you apply biblical principles anyway?

What cost might come with living them out?

Questions & Take-Aways

Lingering Questions

Were there any words or concepts you need clarified?

Do you have any remaining questions about authority or submission?

Take-Away

What is your biggest takeaway from this article?

What is one insight you want to carry into your workplace or leadership journey?

GO DO: Application & Action

Pause & Pray

Pause and ask God to shape your heart in how you relate to authority.

You might pray:

“Lord, help me see authority through Your eyes. Give me humility when my pride rises and wisdom when I face difficult leadership situations. Teach me to work faithfully as if I am serving You. Shape my character so I can be trusted with greater responsibility in the future. Amen.”

Action Step(s)

Choose **one specific action** to practice in the next 30 days.

Possible ideas:

- Ask your supervisor or leader: *“What does success look like in my role right now?”*
- Send a proactive update to a leader before being asked.
- Ask clarifying questions before assuming you understand a decision.
- Replace criticism with curiosity when you feel frustrated with leadership.
- Avoid gossip or complaining about authority figures.
- Complete one responsibility this week with exceptional care and excellence.
- Express appreciation to a leader who has invested in you.

Pick one action step—or create one of your own—that you will intentionally implement within the next 30 days.

Practice

If applicable to this lesson, take a moment to practice suggestions from this article with your mentor.

You might:

- Role-play how to respectfully ask a supervisor clarifying questions.
- Practice how to communicate disagreement with humility.
- Ask your mentor how they handled difficult authority situations early in their career.
- Identify a real-life situation where you can apply these principles this week.

Learning these habits with a mentor helps you practice them before real-world moments arise.

Sources & Resources

Articles

- [What Does the Bible Say About Authority? – GotQuestions](#)
- Submission and Authority in the Christian Life – Desiring God
- Working for the Lord – The Gospel Coalition

Additional Resources

YouTube

- Biblical Leadership and Authority – Tim Keller
- Servant Leadership Explained – John Maxwell

Books

- *Spiritual Leadership* by J. Oswald Sanders
- *The Servant* by James C. Hunter
- *Lead Like Jesus* by Ken Blanchard and Phil Hodges

These resources can deepen your understanding of leadership, authority, humility, and Christian discipleship in professional life.