

The book cover features a stylized illustration of a mountain range under a warm, orange and yellow sky. A dirt path leads from the foreground towards the mountains. A bicycle with two large panniers is parked on the path in the lower right. The text is overlaid on this scene in various fonts and colors.

**NATHAN FOSTER**

FOREWORD & REFLECTIONS  
BY RICHARD J. FOSTER

**THE MAKING  
OF AN ORDINARY  
SAINT**

MY JOURNEY  
FROM FRUSTRATION  
TO JOY WITH THE  
SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES

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## Understanding Submission

Submission is the spiritual discipline that frees us from the everlasting burden of always needing to get our own way. In submission we are learning to hold things lightly. We are also learning to diligently watch over the spirit in which we hold others—honoring them, preferring them, loving them.

Submission is not age or gender specific. We are all—men and women, girls and boys—learning to follow the wise counsel of the apostle Paul to “be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ.”<sup>1</sup> We—each and every one of us regardless of our position or station in life—are to engage in mutual subordination out of reverence for Christ.

The touchstone for the Christian understanding of submission is Jesus’s astonishing statement, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”<sup>2</sup> This call of Jesus to “self-denial” is simply a way of coming to understand that we do not have to have our own way. It has nothing to do with self-contempt or self-hatred. It does not mean the loss of our identity or our individuality. It means quite simply the freedom to give way to others. It means to hold the interests of others above our own. It means freedom from self-pity and self-absorption.

Indeed, self-denial is the only true path to self-fulfillment. To save our life is to lose it; to lose our life for Christ’s sake is to save it (see Mark 8:35). This strange paradox of discovering

fulfillment through self-denial is wonderfully expressed in the poetic words of George Matheson:

Make me a captive, Lord,  
And then I shall be free;  
Force me to render up my sword,  
And I shall conqueror be.  
I sink in life's alarms  
When by myself I stand;  
Imprison me within Thine arms,  
And strong shall be my hand.<sup>3</sup>

The foremost symbol of submission is the cross. "And being found in human form, [Jesus] humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross." Now, it was not just a "cross death" that Jesus experienced but a daily "cross life" of submission and service. And we are called to this constant, everyday "cross life" of submission and service.

All the spiritual disciplines have the potential to become destructive if misused, but submission is especially susceptible to this problem. As a result, we need to be clear regarding its limits. The limits of the discipline of submission are at the points at which it becomes destructive. It then becomes a denial of the law of love as taught by Jesus and is an affront to genuine Christian submission. These limits are not always easy to define. Often we are forced to deal with complicated issues simply because human relationships are complicated. But deal with them we must. And we have the assurance that the Holy Spirit will be with us to guide us through the discernment process.

Richard J. Foster

# 1

## Submission

### Submitting to the Will of Wind and Children

Upon having his monastery invaded by Chinese soldiers and a gun pointed in his face, the Tibetan monk remained calm, continuing his prayers. The soldier angrily shouted, "Don't you realize I have the power to kill you?" Undeterred in his prayers, the monk replied, "Don't you realize I have the power to let you?"

For two days I cut through twenty-mile-per-hour winds on a bicycle for two hundred twenty-four miles across rural Ohio. I can't believe I paid money to endure twenty hours of torture with three thousand other lunatics. Never again.

I won't belabor the details of the night before the ride and the five hours of sleep I had in a police parking lot while lightning and rain raged outside my minivan, or the frustration of the night after the first day of riding when I tried to sleep on a high school gym floor to the accompaniment of thirty chronic snorers, or the mystery of the gym lights surprisingly set ablaze at 5:00 a.m. What I want to talk about is simply the ride.

When I signed up for this adventure, my only expectation was to finish without excruciating pain. It was early spring, and my



winter legs were hardly prepared for a ride of this length. The idea that I would have to battle such wind never crossed my mind when I left home for this journey. After only thirty minutes of wrestling my invisible opponent, my unrelenting pride was the only thing that kept me from calling my wife and begging her to come rescue me!

I was completely spent. Mother Nature brooded from every direction, wobbling my flimsy cycle back and forth. The prospect of slugging through over a hundred miles of her frigid rage struck me with profound terror. My only hope lay in finding a group to ride with.

Drafting is when two or more cyclists ride inches behind each other, creating a sort of wind tunnel. It's as exhilarating as it is nerve-wracking riding just inches from a stranger's tire at twenty-plus mph. But some say that when you follow closely behind another rider, you can reduce your workload by up to 30 percent. On a ride like that day's, I was sure to encounter a multitude of herds huddled together, pedaling in unison in what is known as a paceline.

I usually avoid drafting; I don't care to exchange the scenery of a backcountry ride for a prolonged view of someone's spandex-clad buttocks. Besides, looking for a way to ease my effort seemed counter to the reason I signed up to ride 224 miles. However, today was an entirely different proposition. I was now willing to stare at anything to ease the brutality of the elements.

When you meet other cyclists wearing skintight polyester jerseys with zippers down to the belly button, Velcro shoes, and shorts that leave nothing to the imagination, you tend to find a sort of camaraderie that requires no introduction. I found the first paceline I could and joined right in.

As I nestled in the funnel, the flock of riders shielded me from the viciousness of the wind. The warmth and comfort given by these twenty strangers was glorious. Drafting is a perfect metaphor for [community](#). The gift of being carried by

others contrasted with the frustration of submitting my will to the leader who was setting the pace. The strong take turns at the front, fighting the tempest for the village. When we move together, we're always affected by the consequences of each other's actions. Like every community, trust is required. If one falls, we all fall.

In life and on the bike, I find communities outgrow me, and I them. And so I spent that first day in absolute misery, vacillating between the frustration of submitting to the pain of going it alone and the boredom of the paceline. I just wanted to go home.

It was 4:00 p.m. when I spotted the Ohio River on the Kentucky state border and wheeled across that day's finish line at an old high school whose gymnasium would provide our night's lodging. My riding partner for the last two hours informed me that his heart rate monitor estimated he burned eight thousand calories that day. We certainly ate enough food to validate his calculations.

After six hours of rest and gorging, I staggered off to bed. Out of the shadows of a barren hallway, a new arrival's raspy voice greeted me. He was stocky and at most four-foot-ten. His skin was a leathery olive brown, illuminating his Eskimo ancestry. Beyond his thick glasses resided a deep soul with a friendly smile. He wore clothing more akin to that of a homeless man than a cyclist. Of the three thousand people who participated in the day's 112-mile torture, he was among the first to start out and the last to finish. My new friend had apparently been riding for almost seventeen hours. According to Jesus's upside-down kingdom language, my new friend was actually first. I was well versed in the cutting-edge method he employed, as this was the way my father and I used to climb the giant mountains of Colorado: painfully slowly. I should have known I was standing in the presence of greatness, yet I almost overlooked what this vanguard would have to teach me.

"Did the wind die down?" I inquired.

“Not really. But the stars came out. I hardly needed my lights.”

“Were you really riding all day?”

“Yeah. It always takes me a while. I just take my time and enjoy the ride.”

“There was nothing to enjoy today. That wind was awful!”

“Just made the ride more interesting.”

“Interesting?” I snapped in disbelief.

“Oh, sure. It just creates a new set of challenges. If you think this was bad, you should have seen the weather a couple years ago. We had wind *and* rain. It took me even longer.”

“And you came back?”

“Sure. It doesn’t have to be bad. Did you see the new foliage in the mountain pass?”

“No, I didn’t see anything. That was about the worst ride ever. I hated every minute of it.”

He paused, lowered his glasses, and looked me over as if I’d just criticized his dog. “The wind’s okay. You just have to accept that the ride is going to take a little longer.” He slowed his words and spoke in a gentle whisper. “God’s power is on display, you know. Just submit to it and enjoy yourself. Find the freedom.”

“Enjoy it?” I started to smirk. “I’ll find freedom when I get to go home.”

He just smiled and asked where to lay his sleeping bag. I stumbled off to bed.

The next day was much of the same. The only changes were my sore legs, worn patience, and windburned cheeks. Eventually, the hours and miles passed with a blur of cyclists.

It must have been mile 60 when my pacer whizzed past the short-statured man I had met the night before and the clanging of his gadget-outfitted ride. Serious cyclists never attach a horn and cooler to their bikes. In fact, he was probably the only person out there who had a kickstand. I decided to leave the group and joined his five-mile-per-hour pace (my six-year-old son could have walked faster). He was smiling like a bewildered madman,

clearly happy to see me. Apparently, he had only slept a couple of hours and left at 2:00 in the morning. Eager for company, he informed me of the turtles in the nearby stream bobbing their heads and the hawk above riding the wind.

“Watch the hawk, brother. The wind is his friend!” he shouted through the howling gusts.

“The wind’s no friend of mine,” I said with a laugh.

“What a glorious day to be riding. I was thinking about an old quote from John Muir, ‘I only went out for a walk and finally concluded to stay out till sundown, for in going out, I found, was really going in.’ Looks like today I’ll be going for more than sundown.” His laughter was muted by the wind.

“What?” I asked.

He just smiled with a knowing that challenged my soul.

I looked to the hawk as he practiced his dance. Low on the horizon, aiming his head toward the sun, he powerfully thrust his feathered body upward. Soon his labors brought him to an invisible peak. Quickly adjusting his angle, he succumbed to the force of the wind, gently gliding left, then right, down and up again. This majestic creature was playing. The man was right; it was beautiful. The hawk’s example of effort and grace would soon become my metaphor for the spiritual disciplines.

We rode together in silence until I could take no more of his pace. A sign for espresso gave me an out. “A cup of joe awaits me up ahead,” I shouted as I waved good-bye.

“Good-bye friend, good-bye . . .” Our grand companion, the wind, quickly stole his voice.

Sometimes when I read the Bible I find myself tempted to imitate Thomas Jefferson and take scissors to the parts that don’t suit me. One of the first passages to hit the blade would be Paul’s words to slaves. In his letter to the people of Ephesus, he has the gall to suggest that slaves should serve their masters with respect and fear. I like to think that Jesus had started a revolution, that justice was to reign as he ushered in his kingdom on

earth. Few evils in our world parallel the institution of slavery. I believe God would like to see slavery in all forms abolished. So I want Paul to denounce the social evil of slavery, not affirm it. I want hardcore restitution called out. I've been mining this verse for a couple of years now, and I wonder if Paul's call was really about setting the slaves free after all. I'm starting to think that maybe he was offering a key to internal freedom, the type of freedom that can never be stolen. Do our external circumstances always dictate the level of freedom we feel? Can we find freedom through submission?

A few miles down the road, something clicked. My slow, crazy friend's example began to make sense. It was clear that no matter how much I fought on this trip, I was not going to get my own way. Slowing my cadence, I pondered a new solution to my predicament.

What if I submitted to this pain? After all, submission is one of the disciplines.

What if I welcomed my invisible nemesis?

Could giving up be a spiritual practice?

Could I find freedom in my misery?

Within minutes of mustering a feeble attempt to embrace the wind, I noticed a shift.

Unconsciously, I had spent the entire trip tightly clenching my muscles in order to fight the wind, wasting priceless energy. For the next couple of miles I tried to loosen my body by methodically moving my neck and arms about. Something incredible happened. I suddenly became relaxed, and instead of perceiving the violently rushing air as my enemy, I began to imagine it as the presence of the Holy Spirit engulfing me.

I stopped staring at my speedometer and the gradually ticking miles. My pace slowed as I soaked in the dancing wheat fields and bending trees. For the remaining miles that day, I practiced the ancient discipline of submitting, and in her might, the wind  
sung the song of God's power and love, fierce yet freeing.

I'm sort of embarrassed to admit this, but it actually shocked me to see that my spiritual life could be practiced in the midst of that insanely awful trip. I didn't expect to find a way to actively practice a spiritual discipline in the windy, scorched Ohio farmland. For some reason I was under the illusion that spiritual activities and lessons had to come from books and speakers and that there were special ways that we practiced the disciplines, but they could not come from meeting a strange man riding his bike in rural Ohio, watching birds, and giving in to the wind.

That day on the bike, the anonymous sage showed me how to find freedom in the wind, but maybe more importantly, he showed me how to practice spiritual disciplines in the midst of life circumstances.

And by the time the man who drafted God finally finished his two-day trek, the staff of the bike tour had long since packed up and gone home. He finished with no fanfare, no roaring crowd, not even a volunteer to offer a drink when he pulled into downtown Columbus. Only his loyal friend, the wind, who had shepherded him the entire trip, was there rustling the trash in applause.

It seemed as if the discipline of submission had found me. Up until that point, all I had done for this project was begin thinking about practicing the disciplines, and all of a sudden the opportunity presented itself. Not to mention, it came as I was doing an activity I normally wouldn't have thought of as having any spiritual value. Could I break free from typical methods? Could I practice the disciplines in interesting and unusual ways? Maybe I could get creative with this project. The following week I decided to try.



When I told my family about the project, my daughter seemed really interested in what I was doing, which led me to a strange thought: What if I spent an entire day donating my complete



attention to my nine-year-old daughter and four-year-old son by submitting entirely to their will? I am a fairly engaged dad, but parenting is an area of my life where I almost always feel like a failure, particularly in spiritual matters. This exercise seemed like not only the perfect opportunity to give a little spiritual teaching to my kids but also a solid chance to learn more about my chronic desire to have my own way.

After setting a budget and clarifying just how much candy and travel could be involved, I tried to explain to the kids the spiritual significance of submission, but they were so filled with Disney-like enthusiasm and excitement that I'm not really sure they heard anything I had to say. At least I tried, right?

In the following days they planned the schedule for our event, and my learning immediately began. I really struggled to avoid dropping manipulative suggestions as they decided to spend the day at an outdoor zoo during twenty-degree weather and a freak spring snowstorm. My unease continued as I heard rumor of potentially squeezing in a visit to Chuck E. Cheese's. This day would surely challenge my resolve.

As the snowy zoo, crowded pizza place day began, I was surprised to instantly feel an air of freedom in my submission. I didn't have to make decisions or be responsible for the outcomes. I didn't have to wrangle everyone to get out the door; if we were late, it didn't matter. The day wasn't about me. My only task was to give my undivided attention and to try to do so with a reasonably positive attitude. As a result, the usual anxiety that I tend to bring to family outings was pleasantly absent.

I've been noticing over the last few years that the things and circumstances I want often leave me unfulfilled and unhappy, while situations I don't want turn out to be not only good teachers but also sometimes even fun. In recent years I've been coming to the conclusion that I have very little idea what's going to be good for me. I think I know what I want, but historically, some of the best things for me I never would have chosen.

That day as we watched the freezing animals, I encountered a deep serenity from surrendering my desires and accepting life for what it is and not what I want it to be. I think this same peace comes when I accept people for who they are and not who I want them to be. Strangely, I found myself able to joyfully collapse my will into providence. When I let go, God shows up.

The frigid zoo wasn't too bad. As it turned out, we were the only people willing to visit the creatures on that cold day, so we had the place all to ourselves. And while Chuck E. Cheese's was filled to capacity and the sound decibel was at least that of a concert, I actually enjoyed the two-hour frenzy.

But on the drive home, I was left with the frightening realization that by surrendering my desire to have my own way, I was in fact giving my kids free rein to have their own way. What was good for my soul may have actually been bad parenting. I tried to salvage the situation by explaining to the kids all I had learned and the freedom we can experience by submitting to God. I think they were too sugared up to hear my teaching.

When the day was over, I began wondering about what happens when we're given the power to have our own way. One of the greatly ignored ironies of our day is the apparent consequences of attaining the cultural prize of wealth and fame. Few things stack the statistical cards in our favor for divorce, drug addiction, depression, and suicide like having wealth or notoriety. The misery of the rich and famous is well documented. With all the freedom money can buy, people so often live in bondage to themselves, their image, and the world we have created for them. In contrast, according to the biblical account of Matthew, Jesus gave a strange farming analogy about being yoked to him. (A yoke is a plowing device that binds two oxen together so that the stronger one can lead and train the weaker.) Essentially, Jesus was saying, "Chain yourself to me, and I'll teach you how to live as you were created to live." He said, "My yoke is easy and my burden is light." Jesus knew that as humans, we are by nature

slaves—slaves to power, slaves to approval, slaves to escapism. So instead of leaving us bound to our selfish desires, he calls us to chain ourselves to his rule of love. Freedom through submission. In a sense, that sums up the spiritual disciplines. On this day I learned that voluntarily letting go was one way to be free from my oppressive desire to have my own way.

Later that night my daughter reflected, “Dad, I think it’s really cool that you submitted to someone else for the day. I think I want to try that. What if I gave my whole day to my brother and just played with him all day long?”

Funny, for all the talking I did, it was my example that she ended up hearing.



## Submission

Saint Patrick (390–460)

Patrick, patron saint of Ireland, was actually British. At age sixteen, Patrick was kidnapped and forced into slavery in Ireland. After six years of slavery, through a precarious and providential series of events, Patrick escaped and returned home to England.

Once home, Patrick began having visions in which Irish voices called out to him, “We beg you to come and walk among us once more.” Clearly Patrick had no interest in returning to a land where he had been a slave, but the visions persisted, with Christ speaking to him in the vision, saying, “He who gave his life for you, he it is who speaks within you.” Eventually Patrick submitted to the dangerous call of returning to Ireland.

Stories of Patrick and his work among the people of Ireland abound. And while what is fact and what is myth is unclear, what is known is that his missional work altered the culture so drastically that he’s still celebrated some 1,500 years later. Some scholars even believe that had Patrick not introduced the teachings of Jesus to Ireland, the monasteries would not have been founded, and therefore much of the classical literature of the Greeks and Romans would have been lost during Europe’s dark ages.

Even today, the historic Celtic Christian communities have much to offer Western Christianity.