

Spouse Abuse

By David Feddes

Is anything worse than a man who abuses his wife? Well, at least one thing is worse: a man who abuses his wife and uses religion to justify it. It's bad enough to act like a monster, but it's even worse to claim you're acting like a monster because God wants you to. Sad to say, there are men who are leaders in their church and prominent in their community and yet beat their wives and think they have every right to do so.

A pastor beat his wife and then bound her to the bed with a dog chain. Three days later, her hands were getting numb, so the pastor loosened the chain a bit. When he left the house, the battered woman escaped. That's a true story, and I still haven't told you the craziest part. When the woman reported the incident and a court ordered the pastor to get into a program for abusers, he was indignant. "Here I was being kind to her by loosening the chain," he griped, "and she took advantage of it."

More than one man has the idea that a woman exists only to satisfy his every whim, and if she doesn't, he has every right to punish her. He can curse her, humiliate her, shout at her, threaten her, shake her, slap her, shove her, push her, punch her, pull her hair, and degrade her sexually. He can attack her emotionally or assault her physically any time she doesn't live up to his expectations. And his expectations are so picky or so bizarre that she can't possibly live up to them. It's far too common for husbands to abuse wives, and it's even more common for abuse to occur when men and women live together unmarried.

Some abusive men know deep down that what they're doing is awful. Some of them even say afterward that they're sorry and promise it won't happen again. But it does. Their apologies don't change their abusive behavior. Other men brutalize women without even a qualm of conscience. They see nothing wrong with it. They figure the woman has it coming. There are at least two kinds of abusers: apologetic abusers and arrogant abusers. Apologetic abusers are the ones who know it's wrong but can't seem to stop. Arrogant abusers are the ones who say the abuse is justified. Either way, abuse is harmful and evil, and no woman should put up with it.

Don't Take It Any More

If you're a woman who's being abused, don't take it anymore. If you're living with a man without being married, you shouldn't be together in the first place, even if no abuse is happening. God commands that a man and woman be committed to each other in marriage before they move in together. It's dangerous to go on living together with an abusive man, and it's just plain wrong. So if you're living with a boyfriend, move out, and ask God's help in starting over.

If you are married, the situation is different. You've made commitments to each other, and you may feel that you have to stay with your husband, even if he's abusive. But it's big mistake to just endure the abuse and do nothing to stop it. If you and your husband are part of a church, report the abuse to church leaders. Any church worth its salt will call on your husband to repent, and the church will support both of you in getting the help you need to heal your hurting marriage.

If the church won't intervene, or if your husband won't listen, take the next step. Give your husband a choice. Tell him that either he can report his problem to a counselor, or you will report him to the police. Tell him that either he can change his ways or he can change his address. Tell him that he can't live with you any longer unless he learns to treat you right. Don't just threaten. Be ready to act. If your husband won't change, report him to the authorities and get the help of the law to force him to leave. If the police and the courts won't force him to move out, then move out yourself if you possibly can. Make it clear to your husband that if he can't live with you without harming you, then he can't live with you.

I know that can be awfully hard to do. If you're like a lot of abused women, you don't feel you can take much more, but at the same you can't quite bring yourself to give your husband an ultimatum or carry it through. Maybe you still feel some love for him. Or maybe you don't see any way you could make it on your own financially. Or maybe you're just plain scared to stand up to your husband. Who knows how badly he might hurt you if you force the issue? But look at the other side: Who knows how badly he might hurt you if you *don't* force the issue? And if you have children, who knows how badly he might hurt them?

Abusing the Bible

But maybe there's something else that holds you back: your religion. If you know what the Bible says about forgiveness, you may wonder how you can demand that your husband either seek help or get out. Isn't that unforgiving and un-Christian? Also, the Bible says to submit to your husband, so how can you insist that he shape up or ship out? That doesn't sound very submissive. To top it all off, God says in the Bible, "I hate divorce." So how can you even consider the possibility of divorce?

If your husband is a churchgoer, he may keep reminding you of these things. He uses the Bible the same way he uses his voice and his fists: to control you and hurt you. But don't let him get away with it. Here's the fact of the matter: Your husband is wrong. He violates God's Word every time he violates you. And if he uses the Bible to control you, he's not just a wife abuser; he's a Bible abuser.

If you're married to an apologetic abuser, he may say he's sorry for the pain he's caused, but the real question is this: Is he sorry enough to seek help in changing his behavior? If not, beware. He's going to keep abusing you. If you insist that he get help, he may appeal to the Bible and say you're not being as trusting as you ought to be, that it's your duty just to forgive and forget and give him another chance. But don't you let him abuse the Bible that way. Forgiveness is important, but your relationship can't be restored or made healthy until your apologetic abuser takes responsibility for his sin and does whatever it takes to change.

If you're married to an arrogant abuser, he may keep telling you the abuse is your fault. Don't you believe it. Maybe he tells you that none of this would happen if you just worked harder to please him. But that's a lie. Even if you did disappoint him, that doesn't give him the right to hit you. He's not hitting you because you've failed him. He's hitting you because he can't control himself and so he's trying to control you. And, please, don't let your arrogant abuser tell you that you need to be more submissive. Whatever

the Lord says about submitting, it doesn't mean God wants you to be a punching bag for a man whom God commands to love and cherish you.

Give your husband the choice—either get help or get out—and you'll be doing the right thing. A violent marriage is no more pleasing to God than a broken marriage. You're not doing anything noble or honoring God if you simply stay with your husband and allow him to go on hurting you and perhaps your children as well. God hates violence just as much as he hates divorce, so you should be just as eager to stop the abuse as to prevent a divorce. Confront your husband and offer him a choice. If he won't change his ways, then he's the one who's chosen to destroy the marriage, not you.

Am I promoting divorce? Not at all. I think divorce is far too common these days. God wants marriage to be for life. But sometimes it isn't. Marriage is sharing a deep oneness, not just sharing the same address. The Bible says in Ephesians 5 that a man and wife become one flesh (v. 31). And so "husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it" (v. 28-29). A man who abuses his wife isn't treating her as his own body, as one flesh with him. He destroys the oneness with his wife, and that destroys the marriage. Divorce is simply a legal recognition of that fact.

So if you have to separate from an abusive man and end up getting divorced, don't think that you're the one who killed the marriage. Your abuser did that. He's the one who beat the marriage to death. You're just giving it a legal burial.

Giving Love a Chance

Meanwhile, though, the goal of standing up and telling your husband he will either have to change or leave isn't so much to bury a dead marriage as to give love one last chance. The aim is to save the marriage while there's still some life in it. Maybe you still have at least some love for each other, some sense of oneness in spite of all the cruelty. However, if he keeps abusing you and you keep letting it happen, any remaining sparks of love and oneness will eventually be snuffed out. You need to confront your husband with a choice as soon as possible, *before* your marriage dies completely.

The best thing you can do for your marriage and the most loving thing you can do for your husband is to make him face the consequences of his sin and violence. You're not helping anybody if you just allow the abuse to continue. You're endangering your own physical and mental health and perhaps your children's, and you're endangering your husband's spiritual health as well. You're not doing him any favors if you help him get away with his violence and make it easier for him to sink deeper and deeper into evil. He needs something to shake him up and wake him up. So for your own sake, for your children's sake, for your husband's sake, and for God's sake, don't put up with abuse. Don't let your husband abuse you, and don't let him abuse the Bible by twisting it to defend a situation that God detests.

So far, I've been talking mainly to abused women, but all of us need to pay attention. Some of us, especially church people, are so eager to maintain appearances, we're so in favor of marriage and opposed to divorce, that when an abusive situation comes to our attention, we urge the woman to keep hanging in there no matter what.

We tell the victim she has to stay in the torture chamber, and so we end up siding with her tormenter.

I'm as eager as anyone to support marriage, but we also need to support those for whom marriage is torture. We need to help abused spouses either to change the marriage or else escape from it. Instead of adding our condemnation to the abuse these women have already endured, we need to show them our love and share God's love with them.

Husbands Who Reflect Christ

God wants the love and gentleness of Jesus to be reflected in the way men treat their wives. Ephesians 5:25 says, "Husbands, love your wives just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her." This command comes right after one of the most misused passages in the Bible, the one that says, "Wives submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church" (Ephesians 5:22-23). Domineering husbands may like to club their wives with this passage about submission, but such men are abusing the Bible almost as badly as they're abusing their wives.

This whole section of Scripture begins by saying, "Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ" (v. 21). "Submit *to one another*." In a healthy Christian marriage, the wife submits to her husband in everything, and at the same time, the husband gives himself completely for the sake of his wife, just as Christ gave himself for the church. Did Jesus abuse his church? No, he died for her. And that's God's pattern for the way husbands are to treat their wives: Not dominating them but willing to die for them, if necessary.

But what about the statement that the husband is the head of the wife? Some men just love that. They quote it to themselves and to their wives and say, "See? The Bible says I'm the head. And that means I'm the boss. You have to take your orders from me. I'm in charge, we do things my way, and whenever we disagree on something, you have to give in."

Well, that may be what some overbearing men would like to think, but it's not what the Bible says. The Bible doesn't say the man is the head of the wife as a dictator is the head of his subjects. It says the man is the head of the wife as Christ is head of the church. And that means the man must be the first to sacrifice, the first to look not to his own interests but to the interests of the other person. God isn't telling the husband to be a henpecked wimp. The headship of a Christ-like husband does involve strength and leadership and initiative, but these are always for the sake of building up the one you love.

The Bible's teaching of headship in no way encourages husbands to be insensitive and overbearing, and it certainly leaves no excuse for outright abuse. The husband is the head, not the fist. As the head, you have eyes to admire your wife and see her needs, you have ears to listen to her, lips to speak with her and kiss her, and a brain to understand her and think about what matters to her. So if you're the head, act like it! Don't act like a fist.

Ephesians 5 goes into detail about submission and headship and Christ-like sacrifice, about being one flesh and about the husband treating his wife as his own

body. A passage that's very similar in its basic message, but much shorter, is Colossians 3:18-19. "Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives and do not be harsh with them" (v. 18-19). Is there any simpler way to say it? "Husbands, love your wives *and do not be harsh with them.*" Don't be harsh in your words. Don't be harsh by making arbitrary decisions. And certainly, don't be harsh and abusive in any physical way.

Love is the very opposite of harshness. In 1 Corinthians 13:4-5, the Bible says this about love: "Love is patient, love is kind... It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs." That's God's kind of love, and it's the kind of love husbands should have for their wives. "Husbands, love your wives and do not be harsh with them."

Considerate and Respectful

Let's look at one more of the Bible's commands to husbands. This one comes from the apostle Peter in 1 Peter 3:7: "Husbands, ...be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing will hinder your prayers."

There are two basic commands here. The first is to *be considerate*. Consider your wife's ideas and feelings, her needs and desires. Do everything you can to understand her better. You may need to put down the newspaper, shut off the TV and spend more time paying attention to your wife. God says to be considerate, and nothing is more basic to consideration than conversation. So spend time talking together and listening to each other. Then the two of you can really begin to think as one. Before making any big decision, be sure to discuss it together. And when decisions need to be made, think of her before you think of yourself. If you must have an argument, argue about which of you can be first to grant the other's wishes. Be considerate as you live with your wife.

The second command Peter gives is to *treat your wife with respect*. Honor your wife. Admire the way God made her. Take note of her good points. Compliment more than you criticize. Never insult or mock your wife. Never belittle her or shame her. Never, ever, attack her physically, and don't attack her dignity, either. Encourage her. Praise her. Build her up. Treat her with respect.

Peter says to treat your wife with respect "as the weaker partner." Almost every wife is weaker than her husband. That doesn't make her less intelligent or less important, but it does mean the man almost always has greater physical strength. Should you respect your wife any less because you're stronger? That's crazy! A plastic bowl is less fragile than a lovely antique made of fine china, but which is more valuable? The very fact that the china is fragile means you treat it with even greater care and respect.

Most women are physically fragile compared men. If you're a man, you probably have enough sheer physical strength to hurt your wife, to bruise her, to break her bones, even to kill her. You also have great power to intimidate her emotionally. Even if you don't hit her, you can terrorize her if you're always losing your temper or yelling or throwing things, because she knows all too well that you have the physical power to crush her. This makes it all the more urgent that your wife sense your respect for her.

She needs to know that you appreciate and value her, that you will devote your strength to helping her, not hurting her. Physically, you're the giant in the marriage, but God commands you to be a gentle giant.

And remember, whatever the differences in physical strength, the two of you are just the same in the most important thing of all: your standing before God. You need to treat your wife with respect because she is just as much an heir of eternal life as you are. She is just as much a child of God as you are. Jesus died for her just as surely as he died for you. If Jesus loves your wife enough to die for her, he's not going to like it if you mistreat her. If you use your power not to help your wife but to hurt her, how can you expect Jesus to use his power to help you? If you won't listen to your wife and respond to her desires, how can you expect God to listen when you pray to him?

"Husbands, be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing will hinder your prayers." God calls you to be a gentle giant, not an ogre; to lead by loving, not shoving.

If you've been abusing or mistreating your wife in any way, you've got to stop. Stop making excuses, and repent right now. Confess your sin to God. Then confess your sin to your wife. Then confess your sin to a pastor or someone else who can hold you accountable. And if you still can't change, find a counselor who can help you identify and deal with the deadly forces that are driving you. I say on the authority of God himself: You have to change, and you must use every resource God provides to help you change. "Husbands, love your wives, and do not be harsh with them."

This message was originally prepared by David Feddes for Back to God Ministries. Used with permission.