

COVENANT KEEPERS

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Dealing With An Abusive Spouse

One of the greatest evils facing the American family today is the problem of physical and sexual abuse. According to the United States Department of Justice women are the victims of more than 4.5 million violent crimes per year including over 500,000 rapes or other sexual assaults (2001). A little-known fact is that sometimes wives are also abusive to their husbands. In one survey when couples were asked about their experience with domestic violence, 18% of men reported being hit by their wives (Nisonoff & Bitman 1979). These statistics clearly reveal that spousal abuse is a real problem in many homes today.

Is there physical or sexual abuse occurring right now in your home? Are you afraid to discuss this with anyone for fear of further abuse? Are you wondering how to handle this nightmare that seems like it will never end? Hopefully this article will give you some of the answers you are searching for.

What constitutes abuse?

Spousal abuse is defined in most states as an assaultive or abusive behavior that is caused by the reckless or intentional actions against a spouse, former spouse, cohabitant, or former cohabitant that results in bodily injury or that which places another person in reasonable apprehension of imminent serious bodily injury. If a person commits battery (any willful or violent act upon another), or assaults you (attempts to commit a violent injury coupled with a present ability to do so), rapes you, forcibly enters your home, or threatens you with a weapon, he or she has committed a crime which is designated a felony by most state laws (Californian Penal Code section 243 (e) (1) and section 273:5).

In addition, these physically assaultive behaviors usually begin with minor abusive acts such as: verbal threats, hitting walls, breaking items in the home, emotional manipulation, controlling behavior, or isolation to intimidate a spouse to do what the abuser wants. These actions should be a clear warning sign that you are in a very troubled marriage.

Why does someone abuse another?

1. They don't know Christ. When a person is abusive, threatening, or injures you, he or she is demonstrating that they have a total lack of understanding of Christ's command to love and care for others. Jesus attempted to prepare His disciples for the persecution ahead of them by explaining why the Jews would take such action against them. Jesus said, *"These things I have spoken to you, that you should not be made to stumble. They will put you out of the synagogues; yes, the time is coming that whoever kills you will think that he offers God service. And these things they will do to you because they have not known the Father nor Me"* (John 16:1-3.) Clearly, Jesus attributed their abusive behavior to a complete lack of a true knowledge of God.

In addition, Paul explained that he was *"formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and an insolent man; but I obtained mercy because I did it ignorantly in unbelief"* (1 Tim. 1:13). The word *insolent* in this verse refers to someone who is verbally or physically abusive to others. Notice *why* Paul acted in such a harsh manner. He did it because of his ignorance of and unbelief in God.

The apostle John also explained that the supreme proof that we truly know God is the fact that we love others. *"Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God"* (1 John 4:7).

Does this mean that anyone who has ever gotten into a physical altercation with his or her spouse is not a Christian? No, not in every case. But, at the very least, any form of physically abusive behavior reveals an obvious lack of maturity in a person's knowledge of the love of God. This person must also admit that he or she has a tremendous need to be filled with the Holy Spirit and learn what it means to have self-control (Gal. 5:22-23).

2. Insecurity and fear. King Saul is one of the best examples found in Scripture of what can cause abusive behavior. As you study the life of Saul it becomes obvious that he was a very insecure man throughout his reign as king. His insecurity was first seen when David returned to Jerusalem after he had killed Goliath. The women of the city came out to ascribe to David a greater position and ability than King Saul (1 Sam. 18:7-8). Saul

couldn't bear the fact that David received more praise and recognition from the people than he did. From this point forward Saul looked on David as his enemy and not his ally (1 Sam. 18:10-11).

Saul's insecurity was also coupled with the fear that David might take his position as King. Three times Scripture declared that *"Saul was afraid of David"* (1 Sam. 18:12; 15; 29). Saul's insecurity and fear blinded him to David's inherent goodness and his sincere desire to serve and support his king. Similarly, insecurity and fear will blind a husband or wife to the love and concern of their spouse.

3. Prideful control of others. Saul began his ministry humble and *"little"* in his own eyes, but this attitude quickly changed after his early successes in battle (1 Sam. 15:17). The longer he was king the more arrogant and controlling he became, gaining more and more power and dictatorial rule over the people.

One example of Saul's prideful control was when he demanded a foolish oath from his soldiers that they would not eat until after a certain battle with the Philistines was concluded. Jonathan, Saul's son, didn't hear this decree by his father and ate some honey to gain strength. Saul foolishly sought to kill his own son thinking that it made no difference whether Jonathan knew of the decree or not. Saul would actually have killed him if Jonathan had not been rescued by the other soldiers (1 Sam. 14).

Saul also displayed this controlling behavior when he tried to lure David into a battle with the Philistines so they would kill him (1 Sam. 18:17). Saul even attempted to use his own daughter as a snare to David in his personal life (1 Sam. 18:20-21).

Near the end of Saul's life, he again turned abusive toward his own son when he realized that Jonathan refused to be controlled by his father's will and share his hatred for David. Saul violently attempted to kill Jonathan by throwing a spear at him (1 Sam. 20:27-33).

4. Refusal to hear instruction and receive correction. A person's abusive behavior also continues because their pride makes this individual unwilling to listen to others or to take correction. Scripture declares that this is a very foolish behavior. Solomon taught, *"Whoever loves instruction loves knowledge, but he who hates correction is stupid"* (Prov

"She is your companion and your wife by covenant" Mal. 2:14

12:1). In fact, Saul's prideful refusal to be corrected was a central reason why he went astray and became abusive. Solomon again warned, *"He who keeps instruction is in the way of life, but he who refuses correction goes astray"* (Prov. 10:17).

Notice how King Saul refused God's commands or correction. The King argued with Samuel and would not receive correction several times when he had failed to obey God's direction (1 Sam 13:11-13; 15:19-21). Saul refused David's pleading with him that there was no ill intent toward the king (1 Sam. 24:9-10; 26:18). Saul even refused correction from his son Jonathan when he encouraged his father that David was his loyal servant (1 Sam. 20:32-33). These failures to accept instruction and correction were central reasons why Saul did not change, but further spiraled downward into his abusive behavior.

5. Impulsive and rash decision-making. Another key ingredient to abusive behavior results from a person making decisions based on feelings and not from carefully thought-out truth. When a person is impulsive, he or she is also impatient which only further complicates their problems by making them more apt to get angry with their mate and explode in anger and abusive behavior.

Consider how Saul again fits this profile. Saul made an impulsive decision to not wait for Samuel as he was commanded and intruded into the office of the priest by offering a sacrifice (1 Sam. 13:5-14). Notice that Saul said that he *"felt compelled"* to this decision because he was afraid he was losing control of his army (1 Sam. 13:11-12). Therefore, Saul failed terribly because his feelings and not God's command are what ruled him. Similarly, abusive individuals don't think about God's commands or the consequences of their actions, but only the feelings of the moment and their desire to control others.

6. Uncontrolled anger and jealousy. Saul could angrily erupt into a rage of verbal or physical abuse at any time (1 Sam. 18:8; 1 Sam. 20:30). Saul's unwillingness to restrain his anger was a fundamental cause for his foolish and unreasonable decisions. In fact, David learned that whenever Saul would erupt with explosive anger, you could be sure that abusive behavior would follow. David warned Jonathan, *"If he (Saul) is very angry, then be sure that evil is determined by him"* (1 Sam. 20:7). David's warning proved true because Saul did explode in anger and continued to pursue David even killing those who protected him (1 Sam. 22:6-23).

Be clear on this point, that if anger coupled with jealous insecurity is allowed to rule in a person's life, cruel behavior will result. Solomon warned, *"Wrath is cruel and anger a torrent, but who is able to stand before jealousy"* (Prov. 27:4)?

7. Blame-shifting and excusing. The ultimate reason Saul's abusive behavior contin-

ued throughout his life was the fact that he continually refused to take responsibility for his own actions. Saul blamed Samuel for his own disobedience when Samuel didn't come to Gilgal fast enough to suit him (1 Sam. 13:1-15). Saul also excused his own disobedience and blamed the people when the Lord told him to utterly destroy Amalek (1 Sam. 15:1-26).

However, Scripture teaches that if any man wants to prosper in life he must be honest concerning his faults and forsake them. Solomon warned, *"He who covers his sins will not prosper, but whoever confesses and forsakes them will have mercy"* (Proverbs 28:13).

8. Sadistic pleasure in hurting others. In rare instances some individuals have much more of a problem than just blame-shifting, anger or insecurity issues. Some people abuse their mate simply because they love to inflict pain upon others. Scripture teaches that certain people find, *"pleasure in unrighteousness"* (2 Thess. 2:12). These individuals are *"brutal"* to other people (2 Tim. 3:3). Usually, these individuals have been abused themselves as children and have never resolved their own hatred and resentment toward those who have abused them. The longer a person refuses to resolve this hatred and resentment the harder they will grow in their heart. The Bible teaches that only a person who forgives others will become *"tenderhearted"* (Eph. 4:32). Consequently, because of the unforgiveness this person will take out his or her hatred by brutalizing others. In addition, the abusers thinking will also become corrupt and they deceive themselves into believing that everyone else has got the problem and they always see themselves as the victim. This victim mentality is what gives the abuser the rational and justification for abusing others.

Each of the characteristics I have just listed I have personally observed in the lives of those who have abused their mates. You must also understand that listing these reasons for abusive behavior in no way justifies or excuses this behavior. Let me state emphatically, there is no justification that can excuse the physical or sexual abuse of another person. These behaviors are an extreme evil!

What steps should you take if you are being abused right now?

1. Admit there is a problem. So often when I speak to individuals about their spouse's abusive behavior, I find there is a reluctance to admit that there truly is a problem. Sometimes I have found myself attempting to convince an individual that the behavior they have described to me is wrong and unloving.

Ask yourself honestly if you believe that your mate's abusive behavior is wrong and should not continue.

If you need assurance from Scripture that abusive behavior is unloving and contrary to God's ways, consider the following thoughts:

a. A person who loves you will never force you to do things against your will. God loves you, but He did not force you into His kingdom, neither do we have to force Him to love us. God's love is freely given to all. The Lord declared: *"I will heal their backsliding, I will love them freely"* (Hos. 14:4). The word *freely* in this passage means voluntarily. In other words, God loves people voluntarily and not because anyone forces Him to do so. Likewise, anyone who loves you will give you that same freedom.

b. If your spouse truly has love and affection toward you, he or she will never force sex upon you without your consent (1 Cor. 7:3-5). The word *consent* in verse five means that sexual relations require a mutual agreement between marriage partners. Ask yourself, have sexual relations been forced on you or are you choosing to voluntarily show your love and affection?

c. If a person loves you he or she will not use fear and intimidation to control you. John declared that *"there is no fear in love"* (1 John 4:18). Are you fearful in your marital relationship?

d. If a person loves you, he or she will trust you. Paul declared, *"Love believes all things"* (1 Cor. 13:7). Freedom and trust always go together in any truly loving relationship. Do you sense the complete trust of your mate?

e. No one who loves you will ever beat or physically hurt you. Jesus taught that if someone beats another person He would consider them an unbeliever who would stand in judgment for this offense (Luke 12:45-46). Paul also said, *"Love does no harm to a neighbor"* (Rom. 13:10). You are your mate's closest and most important neighbor.

If any of these behaviors are present in your relationship, please acknowledge that you have a very troubled marriage and you need to seek help immediately.

2. Seek help from others. When physical or sexual abuse is occurring in a relationship usually the abuser attempts to isolate his or her spouse through fear and intimidation. The attempt to isolate you is natural for someone who is controlling and insecure. However, you can't allow this isolation to occur if you want to stop the abuse. You need outside help. Getting others involved can help you clarify your thoughts and enable you to receive the counsel needed for the difficult steps ahead.

When there has been minor abusive behavior in your marriage (defined in *What Constitutes Abuse section of this article*) the best person

to contact first is your pastor. This is the counsel Jesus gave concerning conflicts that are not resolved with others. Whenever someone refuses to hear you or to stop any sinful behavior, Jesus declared: *"If he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established." And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector"* (Matt. 18:16-17). Have you taken this action?

However, if the abuse has become physical the first call you should make is to the police. Why? Because physical or sexual abuse is a crime. Your spouse will most likely be arrested at this time. You are now probably thinking, *Do I have to go this far? Maybe it won't happen again.* Read on. I will answer these questions later in this article.

3. Get to a safe place. As a general rule, if there is no repentance coupled with a genuine willingness on the part of the abuser to seek help, you should definitely remove yourself from the home and find a safe place to live. Why? Because abuse will always get worse. The Bible clearly teaches that if a person's corrupt nature is not restrained sinful behavior will always increase into more and greater evil. Paul declared that as we move closer to the Second Coming of Christ that evil would only become *"worse and worse"* (2 Tim. 3:13). He also taught that sinful behavior if unrestrained would *"increase to more ungodliness"* (2 Tim. 2:16). If you don't want the abusive behavior to increase then you must take action to stop it.

But, you may be wondering, *Is leaving the home a biblical response?* In Genesis 16:6, Hagar fled from Sarah's cruel behavior. Hagar and Sarah's conflict is an interesting one because in their first conflict God had her return and reconcile, but when the conflict continued to grow worse, He removed her permanently from the home (Gen. 16:5-9; Gen. 21:10). In addition, we have already seen how David wisely fled from Saul when he tried to kill him (1 Sam. 19:10). Even Jesus protected Himself by refusing to walk openly among the Jews when they wanted to kill Him (John 11:53-54).

The bottom line is this: God wants you safe! The Lord promised the children of Israel that He was giving them the land of Israel so they could *"dwell in safety"* (Deut. 12:10). Notice what God promised those who were oppressed by others: *"For the oppression of the poor, for the sighing of the needy, Now I will arise," says the LORD; "I will set him in the safety for which he yearns"* (Ps. 12:5). Let the Lord set you in that safe place for which you yearn.

4. Examine yourself. If you have not removed yourself from an abusive situation for a lengthy period of time, you need to ask yourself why. Why have you allowed this behavior to continue toward you or your

children? Consider some of the following reasons:

a. Have you trusted in words alone? Have you accepted the regrets and apologies only to see your spouse abuse again? Scripture teaches that you should not trust in mere words, but in deeds. Paul explained that true repentance would bring a changed life. He taught that the Gentiles, *"should repent, turn to God, and do works befitting repentance"* (Acts 26:20). Therefore, you need to change your estimation of what true regret means and look for works that are worthy of the word repentance.

b. Does fear grip your heart? Have you failed to remove yourself because of fear of further abuse? Are you concerned that your abuser will hurt or steal the children? Do you fear that you won't be able to provide for yourself and your children alone? Or, are you afraid that your abuser will carry out some other threat that he or she has made in the past? Fear is the worst motivator for any decision because it is the opposite of faith and hinders obedience. God declared to His people over and over again, *"Do not fear"* (Gen. 26:24; Joshua 10:8; 1 Sam. 23:17; Luke 12:32). In fact, Jesus warned His disciples about the persecution they would receive and told them specifically that they were to fear Him more than any person: *"Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell"* (Matt. 10:28).

What does Jesus mean by this command? Are you more afraid of displeasing your abusive spouse or God? Let me be absolutely clear. Allowing this abuse to continue in secret definitely displeases the Lord. He most assuredly does not want you or your children hurt or abused in anyway. If you get outside help and good counsel there are many ways to protect and provide for yourself during the process of removing yourself from these abusive circumstances.

You may also be questioning, *Are there any circumstances when I should not remove myself and stay in the home?* Yes. When the abusive behavior is minor followed by genuine repentance and a willingness of your mate to seek help. Or, when a violent act is not directed at you personally (the person hits the walls or breaks things). If your spouse will seek help because he or she acknowledges personal responsibility, then you should stay.

c. Do you believe you deserve this mistreatment? Some people think that because they failed to perform some required action or responsibility, they deserved the abuse they received. Nothing could be further from the truth. No one deserves to be hit, punched, or threatened for failing to fulfill some request. If God condemns the abuse of animals in Scripture, how much more should you be treated with respect (Prov. 12:10). Jesus said, *"Look at the birds of the air, for they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns; yet your*

heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?" (Matt. 6:26). If God commands husbands and wives to love each other, then you deserve to be loved, not abused (Eph. 5:25; Titus 2:4).

5. Involve the police. First, you must understand that the police or any governing authority has been ordained by God to help you when anyone is doing or threatening to do you evil (Rom. 13:1-4). Even Paul the apostle appealed to the commander of the Roman garrison for justice when he learned that the Jews were determined to kill him (Acts 23:12-35). Also, when Paul realized that he wasn't getting a fair trial he appealed to a higher authority, Caesar (Acts 25:1-12). The civil authority is called, *"God's minister to you for good"* (Rom. 13:4). Therefore, don't hesitate when it is necessary to call those whom God has ordained to help you.

How do you know when it is necessary? You need to use a combination of common sense and the advice given to you by your pastor or whoever is counseling you. As a general rule, when there is minor verbal, emotional, or physically abusive behavior (yelling, harsh words, isolation, or physical contact that does not result in injury), you need to tell your mate that these actions will not be tolerated. Promise your spouse that if he or she takes any actions that result in physical harm to you or your children, or any forced sexual contact, that this is a crime and you will report it to the police. If your spouse doesn't heed your warning, keep your promise and call the police.

Let me explain why you should call the police and why it is important for your spouse to get arrested. Beginning in 1984 with the *United States Attorney General's Task Force on Family Violence* and numerous studies since, such as the "Minneapolis Experiment," it has been proven that the arrest of an abusive spouse is far more effective in curtailing repeat offenses than counseling or simply separating. Studies in Detroit and Kansas City done by Breedlove, Sandler, Kennish, and Sawtell looked for any relationship between domestic disturbances and subsequent homicides or aggravated assaults. They found that for every homicide or aggravated assault reported, the police had already been to that same address in 85% of the cases and had been called to that home at least five times in 50% of the cases. These statistics have changed the arrest policies in police departments all across the country and moved many states to pass laws requiring a mandatory arrest when domestic abuse occurs. Please, don't wait until you or your child is severely injured or someone dies before you take action.

6. Seek reconciliation. If an abuser exhibits true repentance, you should seek reconciliation. This repentance will be revealed by your spouse taking personal responsibility for his or her actions, you observe the sincere fruits of righteousness and the fruit of the Spirit,

and when the requirements of his or her counselor have been fully completed. However, sometimes it is not possible to reconcile because of the unwillingness of the abuser to honestly deal with the issues that have caused the abuse in the first place. Paul said, *"If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men"* (Rom. 12:18). Since Paul qualified his command to live peaceably with others with this phrase, *"If it is possible,"* obviously, he realized that sometimes it is just not possible. Why? Because some people refuse to live peaceably with you.

Can an abuser change?

Yes, anyone can change from any behavior because all things are possible with God. But it requires a true born-again relationship with God and the complete transformation of the abuser's life (John 3:3-16). Paul is the best example of the possibility of this happening. Paul explained that he was *"formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and an insolent man; but I obtained mercy because I did it ignorantly in unbelief"* (1 Tim. 1:13). People act in this manner because they simply don't know Christ or have a superficial relationship with Him. To believe that true change has occurred you must be convinced that the abuser has not only surrendered to Christ but understands what has caused this abusive behavior (review the causes of abuse in this article). But, understanding the causes of abusive behavior is only a part of the process of change. Do you also see radical changes in your spouse by the way he or she treats you and is this change continuing to improve? Let me explain why you must see this growth.

An abusive individual may experience a moment of enlightenment as to the causes of his or her behavior, and even joyfully receive Christ or recommit their life to Him. But this is no guarantee that they will continue to grow and change. Remember, the warning Jesus gave concerning those individuals in the Parable of the Sower (Matt. 13:18-23). He or she must also continue to pursue the Lord, or it is very possible that this person may return to their old habits. To keep this from happening they must understand and apply the principles taught in Romans chapters 6-8, which will help them to learn what it means to put off the old man and how to daily walk in the Spirit (Gal. 5:16). For further insights into these truths see our studies at our web site www.covenantkeepers.org - select the "Bible Studies" icon then "New Testament" and read the expositions of Romans 6-8.

Further evidence that abusive people can change is seen in the life of the Apostle John. James and John were called the Sons of Thunder because of their harsh character and behavior (Mark 3:17). We read in Scripture that these two wanted to call down fire from heaven upon a town that had rejected Jesus

(Luke 9:54). However, God radically changed John. This man became known as the Apostle of love because of his emphasis upon loving others (1 John 4:7).

God also changed one of the most abusive Kings of Israel, Manasseh. He burned his own children in the fire to a false god and caused the entire nation of Israel to follow his example (2 Chron. 33:6). But God sent this king into captivity until he cried out for mercy. God graciously forgave him and allowed him to return to his kingdom a changed man (2 Chron. 33:11-13).

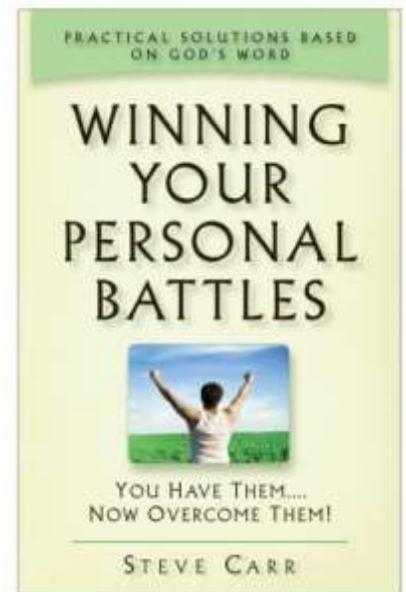
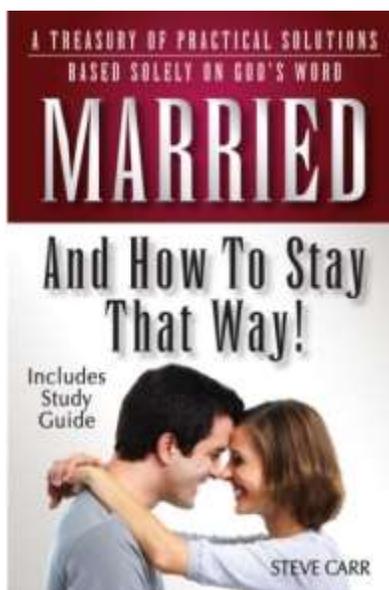
However, there are many examples in Scripture of abusive individuals that never changed. The Pharisees refused to change because they wouldn't admit their envy of Jesus, and their cruel behavior continued until they finally killed Him (Matt. 27:18).

Don't be foolish. Don't ignore signs that your spouse is unwilling to address the real issues in his or her life. Trust the counsel of those that God has placed in your life to help you and wait to see those fundamental changes take place in the behavior of your spouse.

Finally, be assured that if you cry out to God for wisdom, He will guide you in this very difficult time in your life. Remember, *"If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him"* (James 1:5).

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