



TIME OF GRACE®

Abuse: What Does God Say to the Abused?

Study Notes

Summary

Despite the shocking statistics, the topic of abuse is rarely touched in the Christian community. What does God say about abuse? What does God think about abuse? What does God say to a church filled with unspoken trauma and deep wounds?

- Abuse is a _____ of behavior that uses _____ to maintain _____.
- God _____ abuse.
 - **Genesis 6:13:** So God said to Noah, “I am going to put an end to all people, for the earth is filled with violence because of them.”
 - **Matthew 18:6:** If anyone causes one of these little ones—those who believe in me—to stumble, it would be better for them to have a large millstone hung around their neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea.
 - **Psalm 11:5:** The LORD examines the righteous, but the wicked, those who love violence, he hates with a passion.
- God _____ the abused.
 - **Luke 4:18:** The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free.
- God _____ abused.
 - **Isaiah 43:4,5:** ⁴ Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted. ⁵ But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed.

Points to Ponder

1. Why do you suppose the church has been so relatively silent on the topic of abuse? Based on what you heard in today's message, list at least three reasons why speaking on a taboo topic like this is necessary for God's people.
2. Think through the suffering that Jesus endured. In what specific ways can he relate to men and women who have been abused? How is Jesus' situation both our comfort in this life and our hope for the life to come?
3. Check out netgrace.org, which examines abuse from a Christian perspective. Let the articles and messages on the site open your eyes to both the reality of abuse and the answers that God provides in his Word and through his devoted people.

Homework for Next Week

Read 2 Corinthians 7:8-12.

Resources

Need Help?

1. *Time of Grace* television series *Abuse: What Does God Say?* Find it at timeofgrace.org.
2. Your Pastors—While your pastors are not trained/licensed counselors and should not replace a professional therapist, they are equipped to help you deal with the effects of sin on your soul, including those sins that have been committed against you. Their confidential, Christ-centered guidance can be one vital piece of your recovery and healing.
3. Christian Family Solutions (christianfamilysolutions.org)—CFS is a professional, Christian counseling organization that exists to help and heal people in need. CFS has many licensed counselors on staff who are trained to help individuals who have been abused. CFS clinicians can integrate an individual's Christian faith into therapy so that the healing power of the gospel is present during the treatment process. Appointments are available in person or through telehealth. Call 800.438.1772 for more information.

Websites

1. GRACE (Godly Response to Abuse in the Christian Environment; netgrace.org)—GRACE helps Christian ministries recognize, prevent, and respond to abuse in its various forms. I found this website to be a rich resource of videos and articles for anyone looking for biblical answers on sexual, emotional, verbal, and/or physical abuse.

2. Freedom for the Captives (freedomforcaptives.com)—This ministry was created to help protect children from abuse in addition to empowering abuse survivors. Filled with Scripture and free resources, Freedom for the Captives is a wonderful place for congregations to learn about how to make their churches safe places for every child to worship Jesus.

Books

1. *Rid of My Disgrace: Hope and Healing for Victims of Sexual Assault* by Justin and Lindsey Holcomb—This was the first book that I ever read on the topic of abuse and, nearly a decade later, continues to be one of my favorites. This work focuses on sexual abuse and guides the reader to the cleansing, purifying, and restoring work of Jesus.

2. *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* by Bessel van der Kolk—This book, recommended by Dr. Brandon Hayes of Christian Family Solutions, explores the connection between various types of trauma and our brains' ability to trust, practice self-control, and experience pleasure afterward. This pioneering work has become a *New York Times* best seller.

3. *On the Threshold of Hope: Opening the Door to Healing for Survivors of Sexual Abuse* by Diane Mandt Langberg, PhD—This book, recommended by Sheryl Cowling of Christian Family Solutions, is written for men and women who have been traumatized by sexual abuse and approaches healing from a Christian perspective. Cowling has 25 years' experience counseling children, teens, and adults. She is Board Certified as a professional Christian counselor, as an expert in traumatic stress, and in tele-mental health.

Time of Grace Ministry
Abuse: What Does God Say? To the Abused
Genesis 6:13, Matthew 18:6, Psalm 11:5, Luke 4:18
May 16, 2021

Pastor Mike Novotny

That's why today, I want to go on the record for what I think, what this church thinks, and most importantly, what the God of the universe thinks about abuse. I want to say it publicly, I want it to be reported and podcasted, filmed and broadcast so there is never ever a mistake about what we think and, most importantly, what he thinks about abuse.

There is one issue that I haven't yet touched. I haven't planned a whole sermon series about it; in fact, I don't think I've preached a single message on it. And that something is abuse. I was thinking back the other day why that would be? If our heart and my passion has always been to be real, why would I not have touched that topic in six plus years? And I think my answer to that question is that I'm not sure that I know how to. Here's what's been going through my head this week: I'm afraid that if I don't talk about abuse with our church, that people will be abused. That they'll walk into abusive relationships and they'll get hurt in tragic ways and I will have done nothing to stop it. My fear is that I'm just a pastor; a pastor who's tried to study the Bible and study the topic; who's tried to interview people and learn and soak this up like a sponge and pour it out in these sermons but I'm still a pastor and I'm not a counselor so I don't know. All of the ins and outs and all of the do's and don'ts and I'm worried if I try to walk this tightrope as a total novice, I'm going to fall off this side or that one and some people that I deeply care about will be hurt.

And so I just want to tell you upfront that I'm not sure if this is a good idea. I think so, I want to; I prayed more about this than I have about anything in a long time but I want you to know that if I mess up and more likely when I mess up, that my heart is to help our church; to help people avoid that and heal from this. And so, I just want to put it out there from the start that if I say something wrong or if the words don't come out just right, please, don't run; let me know. Text me after church, email me when this message is done, tell me your story, I'll keep it confidential because my goal at the end of these three messages is that you and I and we could be more whole and more healed than ever before.

The definition of abuse that I want to use with you today, if you're taking notes in your program, is this. According to the National Domestic Violence Hotline, abuse is quote, "A pattern of behavior," so not just something that happens once to you, it's a pattern of repeated behavior, "that uses fear or force." It might be physical force, physical strength, or it might just be psychological and verbal fear, "to maintain power and control." Abuse is the monster that can wear a thousand different masks.

One of my first personal experiences with abuse happened a few years ago at our church. There was a guy who came most Sundays - I remember, he used to sit just on this side of the sanctuary - and he loved our church and he loved our ministry and he just had this great connection with

me personally. And so one day, he came into my office and he confessed a sin. He confessed that he had been physically aggressive with his girlfriend. And he told me the details of what happened and I cringed as I listened. In fact, after our conversation was over, I called the cops and I asked them anonymously what I could do and how I could help keep this woman safe.

But in the midst of the conversation, I did what I think any good pastor should do to any person who's truly sorry for what they've done. And as this man confessed and as he wept and as he lamented this part of his past, what I did was open my Bible and give him Jesus. I told him that there would be consequences for his behavior but the reason that Jesus Christ lived for us and died for us and rose from the dead for us was so that there'd be no condemnation. So the one thing we'd never have to fear would be hell itself. In fact, after he left, I texted him the Bible passage that I had shared just so the shame and guilt wouldn't overwhelm his heart.

Which I thought - I thought in the moment - would be the right thing to do. But then a week or two later, his girlfriend called me and she came to the same office and she sat in the same chair that he did and she looked like a wreck. And she told me what had happened since my conversation with her boyfriend; that the abuse hadn't ended, the pattern of behavior hadn't been broken. In fact, do you know what this guy did? He took out his phone, he showed his girlfriend my text, and he said, "See? I told the pastor and he's on my side. I told the pastor exactly what I did and he said I can come back to the church. He said I'm forgiven; that God keeps no records of wrongs." And he went right back to his abuse.

I have felt a lot of things as a pastor but I have never felt so crushed and confused as that day when I saw abuse up close; when I saw how a person can manipulate the greatest thing in the history of the universe, the gospel of Jesus Christ, just to control, just to get his way. I realized just how ugly this sin was. That's why today, I want to go on the record for what I think, what this church thinks, and most importantly, what the God of the universe thinks about abuse. I want to say it publicly, I want it to be recorded and podcasted, filmed and broadcast so there is never ever a mistake about what we think and most importantly, what he thinks about abuse. It's the first of three things I want to share with you today if you're taking notes and it's this; that God hates abuse.

Let me give you three passages to prove that. First from Genesis 6. "So God said to Noah, 'I am going to put an end to all people for the earth is filled with violence because of them.'" Show of hands, how many of you ever heard the story of Noah's ark? Yeah, lots of you. If you thought the story of Noah's ark was cute, if you thought the little ark was something to put up in a kid's bedroom with those little animals marching two by two, do you know what the story of Noah and the ark is really about? The God who hates abuse. God literally terminating the lives of every human being except eight people. Why? For the earth was filled with violence. Humanity's pattern of behavior was to use fear and force to maintain power and control and so God from heaven almost ended us because God hates abuse. And if you have some conception that that's just the Old Testament, you know, when God seemed a little bit more angry, Jesus felt the exact same way. Look at Matthew 18, the words of our Savior. Jesus said, "If anyone causes one of these little ones, those who believe in me, to stumble, it would be better for them to have a large millstone hung around their neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea." Whoa. Jesus said that. That if anyone causes a little kid to stumble - and I'm not sure relationally, psychologically,

spiritually if anything makes kids stumble like abuse - it would be better, Jesus said, for someone to zip tie a cinder block around your throat and to push you off the boat. What you would feel in that moment would not be equal - it would be better than what will happen when you stand before God having caused one of these precious little ones who believe in him to stumble. That's savage; that's Jesus. Because the God who walked in human flesh hated abuse.

And that's not even the worst passage. Look at Psalm 11 with me: "The Lord examines the righteous but the wicked, those who love violence, he," who's he? "God hates with a passion." You ever heard someone say, "God hates the sin but loves the sinner?" Not exactly. God hates not violence; he hates those who love violence. And God doesn't just regularly hate them; he hates them with a passion. Now if you have been abusive, I really need you to come back next week. I have a hunch you want to run for those doors as fast as you can. Please don't because God has so much more to say to you. But if you have been abused, I just need you to hear this: God hates it. And so you can hate it. You don't have to excuse it, you don't have to justify it, you don't have to make sense of it. You don't have to blame yourself for it: "If only I would have done this or if only I wouldn't have done that." You can hate with a passion abuse as much as God does. That you can hate it enough to call the cops. You can hate it enough to get a counselor. You can hate it enough to call the pastor. It's not your fault; it's not your fault. Did you hear me? It's not your fault. And God hates it every time it happens and he wants it to stop.

That's why in your programs when you came today, you found this. This little sheet of paper is a short list of resources of people who can help you hate abuse and find healing. From your pastors to local counselors, non-profits, good books that I've read, websites that I've studied in my research, you don't have to raise your hand and confess what you've been through today but if you want help and you want healing, I pray that you can take the next step. God hates abuse and he wants it to end. Among us and with you.

So that's the first thing God wants to share with us today. If you're taking notes, here's the second thing: God doesn't just hate abuse, God also loves the abused. Some of you have seen and will recognize one of my favorite things in the world: My 682 notecards. A couple of years ago, I read the entire New Testament, Matthew through Revelation, and I tried to count how many names God would call his people - Christian people, those who follow Jesus, repent of their sin, cling to the cross - what does God say? And some of those names, honestly, were pretty negative. You're weak, you're still sinful. Jesus once said to his believing friends, "You of little faith." Right, because we still have sinful hearts, not everything is perfect and pure. And yet, at the same time, do you know what else God said? A lot of good things. In fact, if I had to cut this deck of 680 names and figure out how many should go here in the bad pile and how many in the good pile, how many times God says to Christians, "You're weak," or "You don't have enough faith," compared to how many times he says, "You're loved," "You're perfect," "You're holy," "You're righteous," "You're blameless," "You're pure," some of you know where I should cut the deck, right? You think all the negative things go here? Nope. Do you think maybe 40/60? Nope. You think 50/50? Nope. You think 25/75? Nope. I actually have a little tab on my side - the deck, the New Testament, the word of God - looks like that. Oh, man! It is almost as if God knew. It's almost as if he knew the power of one voice saying the same thing again and again and again and again. That God would say to his people who have been abused, you're not damaged and you're not broken; you're not unworthy. God would say that you are in

Christ, you are a joy to him, you're glory to him. You're not in darkness anymore. You are God's field, God's people. You are an honor to Christ. You are bright and clean. You are purchased. You are victorious. You are worthy. How much time you got tonight? You are strong. You are blameless. Six hundred and ten times, God says in just the New Testament that his people are this. That's what Jesus came to do!

Now if you're not a Christian here, if you're at home and you don't believe in Jesus, I would say this is what he's offering. He won't make life perfect, you'll still struggle with sin, but he's offering you a new name and a new identity that can be yours in this moment through faith in him. I love how Jesus Christ himself put this. Check out the gospel of Luke 4. Jesus said, "The spirit of the Lord is on me because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free."

And you can grab your pen because there's one last thing I want to share with you today. It's this; that God was abused. When you think of the story of Christianity, when you see a guy like me who has a cross for a tattoo, does it ever cross your mind that our Savior Jesus was abused? Think about it: Were there people who used fear or force to maintain power and control over Jesus? Stripped of his clothes on the cross, publicly ashamed, mocked and ridiculed, save yourself, they said. Spitting in his face, slapping him with the back of their hands, tying him up, forcing his body to the cross, absolutely Jesus knows about abuse. That great prophecy in Isaiah 53 said this: "Surely, Jesus took up our pain and bore our suffering yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities. The punishment that brought us peace was on him and by his wounds, we are healed."

And that's why I want to end today's message with a song. You know, when I was growing up there was an old school hymn that for some reason quickly became my favorite. Its minor key and haunting tune stuck with me but the words of this hymn reminded me that there was a God who knew my sin, the ugliness and the depth of it, and yet, loved me anyway. That there was a Savior who didn't just stay far away in heaven where everything was happy and joyful but he came into the mess and he felt the pain, he understood me, and even better than that, he saved me. It's an old hymn that some of you know called "Stricken, Smitten and Afflicted." And today as we process all the things that we've heard, we turn our eyes to Jesus, we see him dying on the tree, and we realize that because he did, he gets it, he knows it, and one day he will free us entirely from it.

So our band is going to sing the first stanza of that famous hymn and then I'd love for you to join them. Unburden your heart as you sing out to Jesus and envision him on that cross and find the kind of healing that only our Savior can give. Let's first listen and then sing, "Stricken, Smitten and Afflicted."

Stricken, Smitten and Afflicted

So last year, I saw her. Sunny day, farmer's market downtown Appleton, walking hand-in-hand with my bride and who comes walking down the street, but her; the woman who had been

abused, the boyfriend with the phone. And she looked really good. I hadn't seen her since that conversation, I was sheepish and embarrassed, but she smiled and said, "Pastor, I'm better." She had taken a step, found the courage, escaped her abuser, and even more, in our conversation she brought up the name of Jesus. She had found a refuge, a place that she could run to. She found hope and she found salvation despite everything that he said, the way that he had twisted the gospel, she had seen the truth that she was still loved; she was loved by God.

And so today, no matter what your story, no matter what your scars - whether you're in it, whether you've escaped it - I want you to know that Jesus is the place where we can all go to. He is our refuge, he is our tower, he is our safe place, he is our strength. He is the great physician and healer of our souls and so today we call out to him, we cry upon the name of Jesus, and we know because he loves people, all people, that he can't wait to answer. Let's sing the last stanza of this hymn together.

Stricken, Smitten and Afflicted

Let's pray.

Dear Jesus, thank you for being the place where we can always come to. There's not a single person here who is too broken, who's been through too much, that you can't reach them, you can't save them, and you can't overwhelm them with their identity in you. Jesus, 2,000 years ago you could have stayed safe, you could have come down from heaven to give us good advice, but you didn't. You came down and you went through the worst of it so that we could have the best of it; a place in our Father's family, a God who we pray to and he listens. A Father, who for many of us, is so different than the father we grew up with. We could call Jesus our brother; a perfectly safe brother. We could call him the husband to the church, a husband who only gave up his own wants and desires, so that we could find hope and healing.

I thank you today, God, for being you. I thank you that we can be a church where we don't have to have it all together. We can come with all the mess and all the baggage and there you are, face shining, and your favor beaming down upon us. Thank you, God, for the gospel. I pray in the days to come you will heal people; that people who have been traumatized will end it once and for all in their family trees. That people who've been running to all the wrong places to escape the pain of their past would come forward in honest confession and find what this world simply can't offer: A whole new identity, solid and secure, by the blood of Jesus Christ.

God, we want to be that church that gets down into the ditch to help people who are stuck and lost. Let me be that kind of leader, let us be that kind of people. We pray for your glory and the good of us all and we ask it in Jesus' name, Amen.