



TIME OF GRACE®

Abuse: What Does God Say to the Abusive?

Study Notes

Summary

Should a church welcome those who have been abusive? If so, what should that welcome look like in order that all of God's children might feel safe as they gather together? How can we, like Jesus, be full of both grace and truth to both the abused and the abusive?

1. Look at _____.

- **Psalm 11:5:** The LORD examines the righteous, but the wicked, those who love violence, he hates with a passion.

2. Look at _____.

- **Matthew 10:2-4:** ² These are the names of the twelve apostles: first, Simon (who is called Peter) and his brother Andrew; James son of Zebedee, and his brother John; ³ Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; ⁴ Simon the Zealot and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him.
- **1 Timothy 1:13,14:** ¹³ Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. ¹⁴ The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.

3. Look at _____.

4. Look at _____.

- **2 Corinthians 7:11:** See what this godly sorrow has produced in you: what earnestness, what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what alarm, what longing, what concern, what readiness to see justice done. At every point you have proved yourselves to be innocent in this matter.

Points to Ponder

1. What happens when the church is too quick to “forgive and forget” the sin of abuse? What happens when the church has no place for repentant abusers among its members? What would you write about abusers if you were tasked with creating the church policy on addressing abuse?
2. **Agree/Disagree:** If Jesus was known for loving prostitutes, tax collectors, and the worst sinners of his day, faithful Christians should be known for loving the abusive, registered sex offenders, and the worst sinners of our day.
3. **Evaluate:** God wants our church to tell the abusive to repent/change, to offer them the free gift of God’s grace, and to have unwavering boundaries as a necessary consequence of their past behavior.

Homework for Next Week

Read Isaiah 1:17.

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 Abusive
Psalm 11: 5, Matthew 10:2-4, 1 Timothy 1:13-14, 2 Corinthians 7:11
May 23, 2021

Pastor Mike Novotny

You know, it's pretty popular for churches these days to put, "You belong here" on the big banner. "Everyone is welcome!" But how do you welcome everyone and keep everyone safe? If my friend gets out of prison some day and I see him walking through the parking lot, what should I do as your pastor and shepherd?

As we dive into this topic, we can't just speak to those who have been hurt but also to those who have hurt. What does God say to you? To us?

It kind of makes me think of this guy that I know who's in prison. A guy who saw us on TV and who's been writing me letters for quite a while now. So buddy, if you're watching out there, how's it going? Thanks for your letter; thanks for the gift you actually sent to my kids, to my daughters. This is a guy that I have gotten to know simply through the mail and I've come to know him as a man who loves Jesus, as a man who's trying to change his life, as a man who laments the parts of his past and a man who, if the legal systems allows him when he gets free, wants to come here and sit next to you and worship Jesus at your side.

That's what I want to talk about today. If my friend is watching, those of you who are incarcerated right now and you're looking for a church home when you're released, what would God say to you? And for those of you who are free and abuse is part of your past or maybe even in your present, what would God say to you? Well today, we're going to dive into the deep waters of that question and we're going to find the four things that God wants us all to look at; four things that make every Christian church the safe, gospel-centered, life-changing place that our Father always intended it to be. So whether or not you've committed the sin of abuse, grab a pen because here's the first thing I want you to look at.

First of all, I want you to look at you. And so, I want to ask you a whole list of questions and I want you, just in the quietness of your own conscious, to look at you.

All right, here are the questions: Do you seem to have a pattern of behavior where you end up furious or angry? Is your anger and your outbursts often connected to those moments when you lack control of a situation? When you feel out of control and angry, do you express that anger by insults, name calling, threatening looks, or physical acts? Have you ever punched the wall with your fists? Smashed dishes in the kitchen? You ever grab someone's wrist so they couldn't leave the room or block the way so they couldn't get past you? Have you ever kicked, hit, or thrown a pet? You ever raised a fist or behaved in such a physical way that people cowered in your presence? When you're angry, do people walk on eggshells around you? Do they change

their plans or change their mind just to appease you and talk you off that ledge? Are you in total control of the time and money that your significant other spends? Do you get jealous when she is with her friends? Do you get worried when he visits your pastor? Are you concerned that what happens in your home might be found out by other people? Does your husband, wife, boyfriend, or girlfriend have to ask you for every dollar and every cent because you control the finances? Have you ever used biblical words like “honor your parents,” “forgive your enemies,” “love one another,” or “submit to your husband” to get what you want? Have you ever threatened to hurt yourself if someone would call the cops or leave you? Have you ever tried to convince your significant other that to love and forgive means they can’t tell anyone what’s happening in your home? Friends, these are just some of the questions that are asked on the official websites that describe abuse.

And so if that’s your pattern of behavior, whether it seems normal or not, whether your mom or your dad did it or not, that is abuse. And I need you to see that because God hates that. Check out this passage from Psalm 11: “The Lord examines the righteous but the wicked, those who love violence, God hates with a passion.” If you have been abusive, your fear should not be ending up single. And your fear should not be losing custody of the kids. You should not be so much afraid of losing your reputation or ending up behind bars. What you should fear more than anything is ending up in hell. That for the sake of what you want right now, for having control in this relationship, forces God to hate you with a passion because there is not a single human being on planet earth who loves violence that God loves. If you so desperately want to maintain power and control that you are hitting and hurting one of God’s sons or daughters and if you refuse to change it, to confess it, to repent of it, to drag it into the light, you might get a few benefits in this life but zero in the life to come. And so, I beg you, before you are sad forever, before your tomorrow and the tomorrow after that and an eternity of tomorrows is just you weeping and gnashing your teeth without the presence of God, look at yourself and repent.

Secondly, look at him. It means there’s a chance for you, eternally, if you look at Jesus. And I brought the proof. These guys. I know it’s probably hard to see way in the back. This is my Jesus action figure that I keep in my office. And this is one of the 12 men that Jesus chose to be in his inner circle. When our Savior, the Son of God, came down from heaven, he picked his own small group, hand selected them, and there were only 12 and guess what this guy was? Let me show you from Matthew 10: “These are the names of the 12 apostles: First, Simon (who’s called Peter) and his brother Andrew, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, Philip and Bartholomew, Thomas and Matthew the tax collector, James son of Alphaeus and Thaddeus, Simon the Zealot, and Judas Iscariot who betrayed him.” Did you ever catch that before? Simon the Zealot. Do you know what a zealot was? The zealots, like the Pharisees and the Sadducees, were a group of people in the first century when Jesus lived. And the zealots, if I could define them this way, were a group of people who had a pattern of behavior of using fear and force to maintain power and control. The zealots hated the fact that the Roman government had control in Israel and so they used fear and force – they were first century terrorists – to get that control back. They were violent men; famous for hiding daggers in their cloaks and showing up in crowds of people and stabbing their enemies so there could be no witnesses and they could escape. And when Jesus had to pick a person to follow him, guess who he picked? That guy. Simon wasn’t too much of a threat to Jesus’ reputation. He wasn’t so dangerous that he wanted

to keep him away from Bartholomew and Thaddeus. Jesus looked at Simon the Zealot, a man with a history of violence, and he said, “Follow me.”

And if that’s not enough proof, read the Bible! Do you know the name of the guy who wrote half of the New Testament? Paul. Do you know one of the defining sins of Paul’s past? I’ll let Paul tell you. 1 Timothy 1, Paul said, “Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.”

I love this picture from one of my favorite Christian artists. He drew a picture of Jesus on the cross and I’m not sure if you can see but covering Jesus are the names of people so that Jesus Christ suffered the ugliest torture and punishment so that you for all eternity wouldn’t have to be hated by God but you could be loved by him, forgiven, and cherished. When you repent, when you confess of your sins and turn your eyes towards Jesus Christ, there still might be consequences to your behavior but there’s no condemnation. And whatever small power and control you lose in this life, you gain so much more in the life to come. And so I would say to you: There is hope. This church exists because of the grace of God and there’s forgiveness for you, too. So look at yourself and then look at Jesus and you will be safe because you will be saved.

And if you do that, here’s the next thing I want you to do. Third, I want you to look at them. I want you to look at the people in our world, and especially our local community, who can help you change. Here’s the truth that many of you know: Change is hard. If you have a pattern of behavior, it’s hard to change. When you’re angry that you can’t control a relationship or a situation, you might have years, decades, of doing the same thing and it’s hard to change. And if you’re hurting people because you were hurt by other people, if this sin doesn’t just go back a few conversations but a few generations in your family tree, you will need help to change. There is hope but the truth is you need help. What many abusive people would love to do is keep this quiet. You know, maybe you can work it out with your girlfriend; maybe she can keep you accountable. Maybe your husband or your wife can make sure you stay on the right path but, friend, it doesn’t work that way. You need help. Not from inside of your home but from outside of it. And so, look at them. In your program today or if you’re watching online, there’s a list of great resources that we put together so that you could look at them. From your pastors to local non-profits, to national websites, to good books, there are people who can help you change. And reaching out and confessing this sin, it might be the hardest thing you’ve ever done but man, I hope you do it. I was thinking earlier today when I was getting ready for this message that some of you – some of you could be the first person in your family tree, in generations, to get help. Some of you, if you have the humility and the courage, you could break chains that have gone back to generations you never met or even remember. I mean, for some of you, this could be the moment. Like this message could be the time that you come out of the darkness and into the light and God changes your family for generations to come. You’re just doing what your dad did, what your mom did. They were doing what your grandparents did to them but you could be the first one to stop it, to change it, to chop down that rotten tree and start something beautiful and fruitful that will bless generations that you might not ever meet. And so man, I’m hoping

and I'm begging and I'm praying that you reach out for help. This could be the moment! Now, I've seen right here at this church, people who came from toxic, dysfunctional families and they confessed it and they got help and they got counseling and things changed and now they're amazing parents and relationships have healed and things are different. It can happen and it can happen for you. So come on; this is the moment. After church, when you get into the car, you open that up, you look for that website, you make that call, you text your pastor. This is your moment; it doesn't get easier than this. I'm throwing you a slow pitch. Look at them. There's hope but you need help so get help and you'll find hope.

Which brings us to the last thing I want to say to you today. Yes, look at you, yes, look at Jesus, yes, look at them. Here's the last thing I want you to write down: Brothers and sisters, look at me. I'll give you a second to write that down and then put down your pen and look at me. If you've committed the sin of abuse, I am so happy that you're here. I mean, last week when I said that God sent the flood and almost ended humanity because of abusive people, when I told you that Jesus said it'd be better to have a cinderblock zip-tied around your throat and pushed into the lake because of abuse, when I told you that God hates those who love violence with a passion, I know I made it difficult to come back today but if you're still here, if you're still watching, look at me. I'm so happy that you're here.

Our church, I think more than anything else, loves it when jacked up, messed up, crazy past kind of people step into this place and you are no exception. I'm happy that you're here. This is not a country club with some minimum morality requirement. We're not checking resumes at the door. This is a church, a Christian church, and sinners are welcome and so if that's you, we are happy that you're here! If that's you and you're looking to Jesus, the angels in heaven are throwing a party and we don't plan to be grumpy about it. We will rejoice with them. And so thank God that you're here. You know, some of us Christians, we love reading those stories where tax collectors and prostitutes and the worst of the first century people came to Jesus. Guess who are the worst people in our culture today? Abusers. Registered sex offenders. So how should we feel? Look at me: Happy. If someone is ready to own their sin and cling to Jesus, we love it when they walk through these doors. Complicated? Yes. Joyful? For sure. So look at me: I'm happy you're here. It took courage to come here, it takes courage to address this. So if you have been abusive and you're still here, thank you.

And while you're looking at me, please know that as we welcome you with open arms, we do so with wisdom. That if I find out that abuse is part of your story, how we love you and include you here at our church, might be a little bit different. And actually, if you think about it, that makes a ton of sense, doesn't it? If a woman who is two days sober walked into our church and called on the name of Jesus, would we be happy? Yes. Would we give her the church credit card and tell her to buy wine for communion? We would not. If a guy came in and had 20 years of a gambling addiction in his past and he confessed his greed and looked to Jesus, would we be happy? Yes. Would he be the next church treasurer? He would not. Because we hate him? No. Because we welcome people with wisdom.

This is biblical, by the way. In 2 Corinthians 7, the apostle Paul said this. He said, "See what this godly sorrow has produced in you: what earnestness, what eagerness to clear yourselves,

what indignation, what alarm, what longing, what concern, what readiness to see justice done?” Paul said if you’re really sorry, like godly sorrow, not just I’m sorry I got caught, then deep in your heart, you will be ready, humbled. You’ll be eager and earnest to clear yourselves to prove to everyone around you did it and you don’t want to do it again so help me. I would love to pastor a church full of abusive people who have godly sorrow in their heart. And so, look at me: Be sorrowful in God’s way and we will welcome you with open arms.

It kind of makes me think of this guy that I met in jail a few years ago. One of our members was doing some Bible studies in jail and he told me about this man and we met in like the bowels of the prison; no windows, just dark concrete walls. And when he was released, he tried to go back to his old church and they said, “Not going to happen.” And so he knocked on the doors of this church and he asked could it happen? Some of you were here when we wrestled with that decision. We knew that his sin was serious, it involved underage people, and our church was filled with underage people. And I can’t remember in my six years if there’s been any decision that we have made where we prayed more and discussed more, when agenda after agenda of the church council, where we reached out to national experts and contacts and lawyers and police officers and parole officers and in the end, we said you can be welcome at our church if...It was my job to bring the decision of our church to this man. We asked him to humble himself publicly, to confess his sin in front of our entire congregation, to be absolutely accountable so everyone knew what he had done. And when I showed him the list, do you know what he said? “I’d love to. Pastor, it keeps me accountable and it’s better for the church.”

That was four or five years ago. Do you know where that guy is now? Here. And last Sunday, he showed up for the sermon on abuse and afterwards, we talked and laughed and exchanged jokes and faith. I saw a man who’s different, changed, a man who’s discipling his son in the Christian faith because there’s hope – for me, for you, for him, for us. So if abuse is part of your story, look at yourself and repent, look to Jesus and find forgiveness, look at them and get help, and look at me. We’re happy you’re here. Humble yourself under God’s mighty hand and under our church’s leadership and we will lift you up in the name of Jesus.

Let’s pray.

Father in Heaven, thank you that you forgive things that this world doesn’t. There’s certain sins that some of us have committed that if our neighbors do, they wouldn’t give us a second chance. And God, you didn’t give us a second chance, you gave us your one and only son. I thank you today that grace is truly unconditional love. I thank you that we are saved, not by the works that we do or the lives that we live but as a free gift at the cross of Jesus Christ. I pray right now, heavenly Father, for wisdom as a leader in this church and for all the people who lead in this church. I pray for every pastor, ministry leader that’s watching that we would not do the easy thing and give abusers an automatic no or an automatic yes but we would do the hard work of welcoming them with love so everyone can be safe and if for the message of the gospel, more and more people can be saved.

I especially pray right now, heavenly Father, for my brothers who are listening to this, watching this, in prison. Many of them write to me, God, and only you can change their hearts. Humble

them and help them find something way greater than power and control in the fact that they are your sons through faith in Jesus Christ.

Holy Spirit, produce in them gentleness, kindness, patience, self-control, and love; that the statistics can start to change in some small way among us and in our families. Once again, Father, for those who are carrying the wounds of abuse, I pray that this message would give them more hope to know that they can continue to find healing here as we take this sin so seriously and we take your love seriously, too. Thank you, God, for this moment. I pray that in some small or miraculously big way, that you would change people through it. I ask it all in Jesus' name and all God's people said amen.