



TIME OF GRACE®

Abuse: What Does God Say to the Church?

Study Notes

Summary

Statistically, whether we know it or not, all of us know and love someone who has been abused. In addition, all of us know and love someone who has been abusive. So how can we be a blessing to both? How can we comfort and confront and bring healing to our circle of influence? This message explores answers to those urgent questions.

Abuse is a _____ of behavior that uses _____ to maintain _____.

- **Isaiah 1:17:** Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed.
- _____ the abused with _____ and _____.
- **Micah 6:8:** And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.
- **Isaiah 1:17:** Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed. [a]
 - NIV Footnote [a] = _____ the _____.
- _____ the abuser with _____ and _____.
- **2 Timothy 3:16,17:** ¹⁶ All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, ¹⁷ so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.
- **Proverbs 15:5,10,31,32:** ⁵ A fool spurns a parent's discipline, but whoever heeds correction shows prudence. ¹⁰ Stern discipline awaits anyone who leaves the path; the one who hates correction will die. ³¹ Whoever heeds life-giving correction will be at home among the wise. ³² Those who disregard discipline despise themselves, but the one who heeds correction gains understanding.
- **Luke 15 10:** In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.

- **Romans 12:1,2,9-11,17,18.21:** ¹ Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. ² Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will. ⁹ Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. ¹⁰ Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves. ¹¹ Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. ¹⁷ Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. ¹⁸ If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. ²¹ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Points to Ponder

1. Have you ever tried to help someone who has been abused? If so, what did you do that worked? Having heard this message, is there anything you wish you would have done differently?
2. Have you ever tried to help someone who has been abusive? If so, what did you do that worked? Having heard this message, is there anything you wish you would have done differently?
3. Meditate on Isaiah 1:17-20. Find two to three other truths in this section that help prepare you to faithfully help the people whom God will place in your path in the day to come.

Homework for Next Week

Read Psalm 51:5; 82:3; 139:13; Luke 1:41; and 1 John 1:9.

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 Church
Isaiah 1:17-18
May 30, 2021

Pastor Mike Novotny

God calls his church, his sons and daughters, to give hope and to give healing; to open this sacred book and to bring the kind of truth that gets to the heart. So if we're not just going to turn a blind eye like many generations did in the past, but if we're actually going to jump into the deep end and love people, both who have been abused and who have been abusive, how should we do it?

Many years ago, a woman from my church came to my office with her children and she told me about the abuse. She confessed in a really hushed and meek tone what her husband and the children's father had been doing in their home. And it broke my heart to hear her story of abuse but it also raised another huge question in my mind because the man she was talking about was also a member of our church. That meant as a pastor, God was pushing me into this position of helping and loving and healing and ministering to both the abused and the abusive.

God calls his church, his sons and daughters, to give hope and to give healing, to open this sacred book and to bring the kind of truth that gets to the heart. So if we're not just going to turn a blind eye like many generations did in the past but if we're actually going to jump into the deep end and love people – both who have been abused and who have been abusive – how should we do it?

If you're anything like me, you didn't grow up with much abuse. Honestly, the more I study abuse and the more I look back at my past, I was spoiled and so insanely blessed and I had no idea. I mean, honestly, the worst part of my childhood was when my mom and dad refused to buy me a Nintendo 64 video game system the week that it came out. Yes, I know, poor me, right? So I had no idea what this looks like; I had no idea what to say or what to do so I had to learn. And I've got to say, over the past few years and especially the last few weeks, God has been giving me a lot of learning. And I've been able to absorb his truth and by the grace of God give it to the people who need it the most.

And today, that's what I want to do with you. I want to open the Bible, primarily to one single passage and God is going to help us minister to both the abused and the abusive. So if you're ready to be a force for good in this broken world, let's open our Bibles to Isaiah 1 and we're going to play ourself in verse 17 today. Here's what our heavenly Father says: "Learn to do right. Seek justice, defend the oppressed." God wants you to learn to do right. You might not know right away the right thing to do so you have to learn. And what does he want you to learn? How to seek justice. That means how to deal with every single person who crosses a moral line so the guilty are punished and to protect every single innocent person from harm and damage and sin. And where does God go next? He says, for example, "defend the oppressed." Now my dictionary says the word oppressed can be defined as ill-treated, tyrannized, or – can you guess

it? Abused. So in this passage, God is saying bluntly, directly, seriously to his people, I want you to defend the abused. You know, when I hear that word, defend, I kind of think of an ancient city like Jerusalem where Isaiah would have spent much of his time. You know, here's this city, there's dangerous people out there so you build these thick walls where soldiers can walk around, strong towers with archers, and the goal of a city like that is to defend the people inside so the people outside can't hurt them. And to me, that's a lot like abuse. There are hurting, broken, mistreated, oppressed people that God wants us to huddle inside and keep them safe and it's your job and my job to stand on the top of the wall, to climb up to the top of the tower, and make sure that abusive people don't hurt them again. Defend the oppressed.

So how do we do that? It sounds good, I'm hoping as a Christian you agree with that, but what does that look like in practice? Well, let me make two points. First of all, we defend the oppressed with truth. Now just a couple weeks ago, a young woman from our church emailed me. She had just heard the first message that I had preached on abuse and she emailed and said, "Pastor, do you remember when we sat down for coffee a few years ago?" We had met at a local coffee shop and she started to tell me the problems she was having with her boyfriend. She was looking for my advice as her pastor what she should do and how she could be a better girlfriend, more loving, more humble, more Christlike. But when she told me about the dynamics of what was happening, my initial reaction to her – and forgive me if this is my lack of compassion – was "You should dump him." You know, she's kind of a quiet type so she didn't say much in the moment but in her email, she confessed that what she was thinking in the moment was my pastor's crazy! He doesn't get it. He doesn't understand the details. He's so black and white about this. No, there must be something that I can do. And it took her months, maybe even years, to see the truth that I saw: That this guy was not healthy and he was not good; he was not stable. That he was using and manipulating and controlling her. And this woman gave me some great advice; advice that she wanted me to share with you. That sometimes when you've been living surrounded by lies for so long, you think the truth is crazy. And so when you and I defend the oppressed with truth, we don't just say it once or twice and there; we fixed it. Sometimes, we have to say it again and again and then again and then again and then again and again and again and again until finally the light goes on and they see it for themselves.

And that's what I want to encourage you to do: Fill yourself up with truth. Say what you see. Open this book and repeat the truth of the Bible. Educate yourself on all the different types of abuse. That's what I had to do. I googled it, I looked for Christian books about it, I found local domestic abuse shelters and studied their websites. There's really great answers and they're really easy to find. So if you don't know what this looks like, just search. Take a step, seek justice, as Isaiah said, and you will learn to defend the oppressed, the truth.

But there's a second way we defend the oppressed. Yes, we do it according to Isaiah with truth, but we also do it, secondly, with grace. With love. With undeserved, persistent, patient, I'm not going to give up on you kind of love. You know, I realized how important that kind of grace and love is recently with another case of abuse. A woman who is kind of new to our church told me about the horrendous things that her husband had done. I mean, the physical violence was disturbing to her, to the children, there was hospitalizations. Thankfully, the police were called, legal action was taken, justice got involved, and the relationship ended. And then it didn't. She got back together with him; with a man that had beaten her. The man that had assaulted their

mutual children. And I want to be careful that I don't jump to conclusions because God can change people and I'm not sure, maybe this man has totally changed. Like the apostle Paul, his heart has 180'd and he used to be a violent man and he isn't anymore. But in the moment, all I thought was, "This is so complicated." When you're in a relationship, even if it's toxic and unhealthy, even if it gets violent, sometimes the relationship draws people back. When you have children together and you know the kids need not just a father but also a mother, not just a mother but also a father, it draws you back. When family ties or friendships or relational connections mean it's not so easy just to go your separate ways, you get drawn back. And when you look at that from the outside, it might seem like the most illogical thing in the world. This guy manipulated you, he insulted you, he called you names, he raised the back of his hand! She controlled you and belittled you and made you think that you couldn't live without her. Why don't you just leave? You should dump her. You should dump him. But fellow Christian, grace is willing to wait. Grace is, just like Jesus waits for me, I'm going to wait for you. And so I think you should go. I think you need to leave. But whatever you choose today, I'm here for you tomorrow. If you're going to stay in that relationship, I'm still here for you. If you need me to come to your place and pack up the stuff and move you out today, grace says, I'm here for you. If you decide to move back in with her even though I think it's the wrong idea, I'll help you because grace is here for you. If your son or your daughter runs back to that relationship, "I told you so" is not the thing to say. "I'm here for you," is.

Grace, like all biblical love, is patient. It's kind. And it always protects, it always hopes, it always perseveres. Grace and love never fails. And while you're there for them, grace does the best thing of all: It gives the gospel. You can say to an abused person, whether they're stuck in the abuse or trying to escape it, do you know how much God loves you? Do you know because of Jesus the kind of things that God says about you? You're not worthless. You're not useless. You're not dirty. You're not broken. You're not damaged goods. God loves you. God likes you. The Bible says that God delights in you. Jesus so completely forgave you that when God thinks of you, his face shines upon you and he looks upon you with favor. Remember the blessing that we say in church? That's God! If you think anything else, that's a lie that you've been told because here's the truth: Jesus made you new and he loves you like a perfect husband.

Our Father in heaven is not like some fathers on earth; he loves and protects and cares about his children and that will never change. Grace gives the truth; the truth of the gospel. So when we put those two things together – truth and grace; here's what it is and here's how much I love you – most importantly, here's how much God loves you. That friends, is the primary way that we defend the oppressed.

Ah, but our lives aren't just filled with people who have been hurt. God might just bring into your path someone who has done the hurting. So what do we do then? Well, this passage from Isaiah is really curious. In my Bible right here, in Isaiah 1:17, it says, "Learn to do right, seek justice, defend the oppressed," and then there's a tiny little letter "a." And if you open your Bible or even your digital Bible, you'll see the exact same thing. And that little letter "a" means that the original Hebrew that Isaiah used might be translated in a different way. And way on the bottom here, you'll find the different way that it could be translated. It says that this might not mean "defend the oppressed" but "correct the oppressor." I know that's kind of confusing and translating languages can be but Isaiah might be saying what we find actually throughout the

Bible; that God doesn't just want us to care about these people, but also those people. Yes, God, says defend them but also correct them.

So what would that look like? If God gives you an opportunity to minister to an abuser, what do you do and what do you say? You know, when I think about that question, my mind goes back to that man. Remember my story about the wife and the mother and the kids who came to see me? Well, a few days later, I got to meet with the father; the husband. We were in the same church, in the same office; I actually sat in the very same chair. And I remember that conversation because I said something then that I don't think I've ever said in all my other years of ministry. I said, "You're lying." You see, the man was weeping, crying, absolutely denying. "I didn't do this, Pastor. None of it!" "None of it," I asked? "No, I have no idea why my kids said that, why my wife said that. I've never ever, ever, ever done it." And God, forgive me if I was wrong, but I said, "You're lying."

You see, the primary way we correct an abuser is actually the same way that we defend the abused – with truth. Since abuse thrives in a culture of lies, this is going to be the hardest thing in the world for the abuser to hear; the truth. The truth is, this is your fault. This evil behavior that God hates? That he despises? This is you. This isn't on them; don't blame it on the beer, on the wine, on the mixed drinks. You chose to drink; you didn't have to. And lots of people drink and a lot of people drink too much but not everyone says what you said, not everyone does what you did. Not everyone smashes the wall or insults or say vile things to their spouse. Not everyone pushes their children, intimidates, touches; you did that and you have to own that.

You're stressed? Lots of people are stressed. Not everyone hurts other people when they are. The kids are crazy? Listen, everybody's kids are crazy. It doesn't mean you get to say that or call them that or do that. Here's the truth: You did it. You're abusive. Back in the Garden of Eden, Adam tried to deny it; he tried to finger point and blame and God wasn't having it. You've got to own it, Adam. Confess it, repent of it; that's the truth. And you and I will have to say the same thing. You need to change. You need help. I love you. I'm not going to run away from you because you've been abusive but you have been and you need help. And guess what else we get to give? Grace. The uniquely, powerfully, evangelically, amazing thing that Christians get to do for abusers is give them grace. To preach to them that there is a God and he doesn't just love to save some people, he loves to save all people. That there's a Jesus, who on the cross, said to his heavenly Father, "Forgive my abusers; they don't know what they're doing."

And I've got to tell you, one of the things that has made me so proud of my church recently is that they insisted that I say that. Before sharing these messages, I sent out a survey to our church and 159 people sent back a response. The top response that I got about the topic of abuse was that my church wanted me to remember that abuse isn't just physical; it very often happens in different ways. But the second thing that they put on their list, what kept coming up in survey after survey after survey, without being prompted was, "Pastor, don't let us become pharisees and don't let the abusers become tax collectors. Please do not let this become a church where we get rid of people like that who cause so many problems. You make sure to tell them that if they come to Jesus, repentant, humble and broken, that there is hope and there is healing for them, too. Oh, and I'm so proud of my church for saying that. I'm so proud of you for so many who

realized that, too. Yes, abuse is serious. Yes, we need to protect and defend the oppressed. And yes, we even want abusers here with us to change and to find grace in Jesus.

But that's not my idea; that's actually what Isaiah said. Isaiah 1:17 says, "Defend the oppressed or correct the oppressor," and then in verse 18, the very next verse, he says this: "Come now, let's settle the matter," says the Lord. "Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow. Though they are as red as crimson, they shall be like wool. If you are willing, if you are obedient, you will eat the good things of the land. The mouth of the Lord has spoken."

Isn't that amazing? Isaiah doesn't take 50 chapters to get to grace; it's the very next verse. "Come now." Have you been an oppressor? Come, let's reason together. Let's settle this matter. Your sins are like scarlet. We shouldn't have to wear a scarlet letter "A" for the abusive sins of our past but God says they can be as white as snow. Yes, there might be consequences but Jesus came and he lived and he died and he rose from the dead so there would be no condemnation, even for you. So that people who have committed the sin of abuse can join us here in the house of God as part of the family of God, humble themselves before the word of God, and be lifted up as the children of God. We get to give grace.

So friends, I know it's complicated, I know every situation is different, I know these simple fill in the blanks don't solve every problem quickly but grace and truth are always the answer. Bring truth and bring grace to the abused and to the abusive and we can be exactly the kind of church that God desires.

I want to leave you today with one last thing. As I scrolled through and read those 159 surveys that came back from the church, there was one quote that jumped off the screen at me. A woman in a rather long message shared the heartbreaking things that she had been through in her life. But despite the triggers and despite the trauma, she was so happy that we were having this conversation. And I actually wrote down one of the lines that she said to me and I want to share it with you today. She said, "If you can save just one person from the situation they're in, you have done a wonderful thing." Just one. I would love it if you and I could fix all the abuse in the world; we probably can't. But just one is wonderful. Jesus says that when just one person repents, the angels rejoice. When you, just one person, believed, were baptized, and were saved, the angels threw a party. And if you and I can do the same thing – just one – with grace and truth, just one person defended, just one person corrected, in the eyes of God himself, that is a wonderful thing.

Let's pray.

Oh, Gracious Lord, please give us wisdom. You've said in your word that if we lack wisdom, if we just don't know what to do in a situation, we could ask you in faith and you would give it. I thank you for the wisdom you've already given. Lord, I think I've gotten 20 responses from people who have stepped forward and thanked our church and thanked this ministry for talking about this subject. God, that's wonderful. Just one would be wonderful; 20 is beyond wonderful.

But God, humbly, I want to ask you for more; not just through me but through us.

Let these words from Isaiah be that seed in our heart that you water and grow so that we can become the kind of people that correct and protect; the people who address and defend. Father, you know the statistics. In fact, you know better than the statistics. Our world, our culture, needs help. Help us be the helpers who serve in your name.

Thank you, Jesus, for your love, for your presence, for sending your Spirit, and for the power that we have in him to do the right thing at the right time that your people, your church, and this world could be blessed. We pray all these things with faith in you, Jesus, Amen.