

Family Shelter Service

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SCRIPTURE AND DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

The following information has been taken directly from the book “Keeping the Faith: Questions and Answers for the Abused Woman” written by Reverend Marie Fortune, an ordained minister in the United Church of Christ. The following is a selection of scriptures and her interpretation on a variety of issues that may be of importance to a woman: roles of husbands and wives, parenting, divorce, understanding true religious conversion and seeking shelter.

Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you? If any one destroys God’s temple, God will destroy him. For God’s temple is holy, and that temple you are. (1 Cor. 3:16-17)

You are valued in God’s eyes; your whole self is regarded by God as a temple, a sacred place. Just as God does not want a temple defiled by violence, neither does God want you to be harmed. God’s spirit dwells in you and makes you holy. You deserve to live without fear and without abuse.

The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly. (John 10:10)

Here, Jesus is saying that some people come among us to hurt and destroy others. Jesus came so that we might know fullness of life and feel safe and happy. When He promised abundant life, He was referring to spiritual abundance. Primary to this spiritual abundance is feeling safe and unafraid in your own home, knowing that you are loved and respected for who you are. This is God’s will for you and your children.

Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ. (Eph. 5:21)

This is the starting point for all our relationships as Christians, inside the family or outside. Here the words “be subject to” also means “accommodate to” or “give way to”. This means that we should all, including husbands and wives, seek to be flexible with each other and give way to each other. In subsequent verses we find further clarification:

Wives, be subject to your husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior.” (Eph. 5:22-23)

The husband’s headship suggested here does not mean a role of unquestioned authority to which you are to be blindly obedient. What is described here is a model based on Christ’s relationship to the church: Jesus was the servant of all who followed him and he gave himself up for them. Never did he order people around, threaten, hit or frighten them.

Almost all the rest of this passage from Ephesians spells out the instructions to the husband in his treatment of his wife: he is to be to her as Christ was to the church. This means he is to serve her needs and be willing to sacrifice himself for her if need be. This is what Jesus did for the church. He is to love his wife as himself, to nourish her and cherish her. Another passage is even more specific:

Husbands, love your wives, and do not be harsh with them. (Col. 3:19)

Clearly, the emphasis scripture places on instructing husbands to care for and respect their wives just as Christ did the church leaves no room for excusing a husband’s violent and abusive behavior toward his wife. Neither does your responsibility to accommodate to him and respect him mean that Jesus expects you to stay and tolerate his abuse. If he is not fulfilling his responsibility as a husband to you-- that is, treating you with respect-- you are not obligated to be a doormat for him. Your obligation is to provide for your safety and your children’s safety.

The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights and likewise, the wife to her husband. For the wife does not rule over her own body, but the husband does; likewise the husband does not rule over his own body, but the wife does. (1 Cor. 7:3-4)

This clearly lays out the mutual rights and responsibilities for husband and wife, and they are exactly the same. Both have a right to expect sexual activity with the other *and* both have a responsibility to respect the wishes of the other.

Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. "Honor your father and mother that it may be well for you and that you may live long on the earth." Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up on the discipline and instructions of the Lord. (Eph. 6:1-4)

Since this verse follows the reiteration of the commandment to honor father and mother, the writer must be concerned about the misuse of that commandment in ways that cause harm to children. The caution is appropriate. Anger at the injustice done to them is an appropriate response for an abused child. Parents are cautioned and told to "bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord." This means that parents should treat children as Jesus treated children. In no way can this verse be regarded as permission to abuse a child. The writer places proper discipline in the context of gospel values: love, respect, care and protection. Children are vulnerable due to their age, size, naiveté and dependence on adults. It is our task as Christians to protect them and to treat them with kindness and respect as we discipline them. You need to take seriously your role as parent in protecting your children if they are being harmed by your husband. They cannot protect themselves. They are dependent on you. You are accountable to God for them.

He who spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is diligent to discipline him. (Prov. 13:24)

"Spare the rod and spoil the child" is a statement that actually does not appear in scripture at all. The point of the actual proverb is to encourage parents to discipline children-- that is, to guide and direct them. The rod was most frequently used by the shepherd in biblical times to protect and guide the sheep or to pull them out of dangerous places, not to beat them, hence the reference in Psalm 23: "Thy rod and thy staff they *comfort* me".

You must face the fact: the final age of this world is to be a time of troubles. (People) will love nothing but money and self; they will be arrogant, boastful and abusive; with no respect for parents, no gratitude, no piety, no natural affection; they will be implacable in their hatreds, scandal-mongers, intemperate and fierce, strangers to all goodness, traitors, adventurers, swollen with self-importance. They will be those who put pleasure in the place of God, those who preserve the outward form of religion, but are a standing denial of its reality. Keep clear of people like these. (2 Tim. 3:1-5)

If your partner has told you that he has been converted to Jesus, you should be somewhat cautious. If this is a true conversion, then he has only just begun on a very new road in his life. His conversion can be very helpful as he goes about the hard work of changing his abusive behavior and implementing his repentance for his battering. But he is fragile and needs guidance from a pastor who understands the task ahead of him and who understands his battering problem. His conversion is only the beginning, not the end. In other words, there are some persons who are abusive and hateful to others and yet who put on the facade of religion to cover up their true selves. God does not expect us to be gullible and to accept their religiosity at face value. If their actions in private are not consistent, if they are abusive at home but at church are zealous converts, then they are presenting the "outward form of religion" but are denying its reality. Their conversion is a fraud. Do not be deceived by it. In the Book of Acts, we read of Paul's purpose in his ministry-- to insure that those who had not received God's word would ***repent and turn to God and perform deeds worthy of their repentance. (Acts 26:20)***

If your partner has truly repented and been converted, has genuinely turned to God, then he should perform acts worthy of his repentance. You should wait and watch for those acts; wait for him to no longer be abusive and controlling toward anyone.

Take heed to yourselves; if your brother sins, rebuke him, if he repents, forgive him; and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, and says, "I repent", you must forgive him. (Luke 17:1-4)

First, Jesus says to take care of yourself. If someone abuses you (sins), rebuke him. In other words, somehow the abuser needs to hear that his behavior is wrong. This does not mean that you do it alone. It more likely means that you ask others to help you in that, perhaps the police or the pastor or other family members. Then, Jesus says, *if he repents, forgive him*. This is a big *if*. Repentance here means more than remorse. Remorse usually gets expressed during the "making up" period of the battering cycle. The remorse may even be very genuine, but it does not mean that he will not hit again. Repentance is much more significant. To repent, in both the Old and New Testaments, means to turn away from, to change, never to repeat again. True repentance on the part of the abuser means that he never hits again and that he learns to relate to you and/or other people in ways that are not controlling, demanding and dominating.

Forgiveness does not mean "forgiving and forgetting", implying that everything is fine now, pardoning the abuse or ignoring it. Forgiveness means putting that experience in perspective, putting it behind you and not allowing it to continue to victimize you. You can let go of it; you can remember it only when you need to. Forgiveness is for you, not for the abuser. His repentance, not your forgiveness, is what will finally bring about his healing.

What therefore God has joined together, let no man put asunder. (Matt. 19:6)

Any man who brings violence and abuse into his family life is putting asunder the marriage covenant that God has blessed. The violence is what breaks up the marriage, and the one responsible for that violence is the one responsible for the breakup. The actual divorce is in fact only the public acknowledgment of the private truth that a marriage covenant has been long since destroyed by abuse.

And this again you do. You cover the Lord's altar with tears, with weeping and groaning because (God) no longer regards the offering or accepts it with favor at your hand. You ask, "Why does (God) not?" Because the Lord was witness to the covenant between you and the wife of your youth, to whom you have been faithless, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant. Has not the one God made and sustained for us the spirit of life: And what does (God) desire? Godly offspring. So take heed to yourselves, and let none be faithless to the wife of his youth. "For I hate divorce." says the Lord the God of Israel, "and covering one's garment with violence" says the Lord of hosts. "So take heed to yourselves and do not be faithless". (Mal. 2:13-16)

We have always taught within the Christian tradition that the marriage covenant is broken by sexual unfaithfulness in marriage. The main reason that adultery is a problem is that it results in broken trust between husband and wife. But we should also realize that there are other kinds of unfaithfulness. Bringing violence into one's marriage is also unfaithfulness. Once violence has entered a relationship, trust is destroyed. If you can't trust your husband not to hit you, what can you trust? When God says in this passage that God hates divorce, God is acknowledging the pain that we all feel when a situation reaches the point where a divorce is necessary, when the brokenness is so great that it cannot be repaired. God does not say, "Thou shalt not divorce". But God grieves that unfaithfulness of any kind to the marriage covenant results in a divorce.

My heart is in anguish within me, the terrors of death have fallen upon me.

Fear and trembling come upon me, and horror overwhelms me.

And I say, "O that I had wings like a dove! I would fly away and be at rest.

Yea, I would wander afar, I would lodge in the wilderness.

I would haste to find me a shelter from the raging wind and tempest." (Ps. 55:4-8)

There are times when the wisest thing to do is to remove yourself from a dangerous situation. You should not have to live in fear in your own house. You have the right to be safe. But it takes courage to leave and to face the unknown. Fortunately, now there are safe places for you and your children to go. It will give you some time to think, sort out your feelings, and make decisions for you and your children.