

Abuse— Family Crises #1

Almost all of us have families. And like it or not, those families are of the highest importance to us in shaping our lives, in defining our concept of self and in determining our happiness and well-being in life.

It's also true that all families have crises. There are no exclusions; there are no exceptions. Some families seem to go from one crisis to another, while others seem to pile their crises into a single year. There are some families whose crises include crimes, chemical dependency, incest and poverty. Others have less sensational but no less painful crises of disappointments, illnesses and deaths.

No family escapes crisis, although we may think they do. We may look at people we don't know very well and think they don't have any problems, but all that means is that we know very little about those people because every family has crises.

The purpose of this series is to begin to address some of these crises. At the very least I hope to communicate that crises are normal; we all face them. But even more, I hope to provide some of the resources that God has made available to us to help move us toward the resolution of some of these crises. In this series we will consider family crises that are related to money, to communication, to stress, and to perhaps the toughest topic of all, abuse, commonly referred to as domestic violence.

Abuse is a heartbreaking problem in our nation, and it's something about which the church has been embarrassingly quiet. Yet the problem is very much here. The walls of the church building have, in no way, been able to keep out the problems that afflict the rest of society. The truth is that in Christian homes there are fathers who molest their daughters, husbands who beat their wives, mothers who brutalize their children and adult children who abuse their elderly parents.

Most of us never guess that in our Sunday school classes and congregations there are the abused and the abuser. The reason he is so quiet on Sunday morning is because of what he went through on Saturday night. The reason she wears a long-sleeved dress in unusually hot weather is because she wants to cover up bruises that would be too difficult to explain. The darling "unspoken prayer request" is too painful to speak and too easy to forget during the prayer time.

Everyone is capable of being a victim of abuse; and every one of us is capable of being a victimizer. Exemptions are not granted because someone is a Christian or church member or a teacher or a pastor.

And it's so hard to talk about. No one is very likely to tell a congregation in a sharing time about being abused

or about abusing someone else. Few even have the courage to confess to a pastor or a close friend. And if someone does come to us with accounts of abuse, we often don't know what to say or do, which may even add to the problem and the pain.

Let us consider candidly and personally the matter of abuse among families in both the church and the community, and let's begin with some background understanding, thinking in terms of three types of abuse. Starting that list is abuse of the elderly.

Let me share with you a paragraph from a report issued by the Select Committee on Aging from the House of Representatives entitled "Elder Abuse: A National Disgrace". This report, based largely on case histories, says:

The abused elder is likely to be an elderly female who is dependent on the services and assistance of another for one or more necessities of daily living. The abuser, on the other hand, was most likely the son or son-in-law suffering from alcohol, drug or emotional problems, or experiencing great stress due to the financial strain associated with caring for an aged relative with a protracted illness.

The cases reported in this federal document are sad, and there is a multitude of them. I select only two, and have purposely chosen two of the less sensational ones because I fear that we will be prone to say, "Well, I could never do that. That's far too extreme to ever happen in my family or in my circle of acquaintances."

One example is that of a 78-year old Ohio woman who was hospitalized with a fractured thigh and with numerous bruises. Her son, with whom she lived, inflicted the injuries. As in many of the cases, she refused medical treatment and would not make any complaint, no doubt because of the embarrassment and the

shame attached to what had happened.

Another is the example of a woman from Nevada who related the abuse of her mother by her sister, the woman's own daughter. When the abuses were reported to the legally appointed guardian, a good friend of the sister, they were ignored. The mother was beaten. When she was incontinent, feces were rubbed in her face as punishment. The abusive daughter would not allow a visiting nurse to clean or examine her and she suffered from bedsores. The mother was taken to the hospital where she died from complications and the abusive treatment of her daughter who by this time had depleted the estate of the mother.

According to population extrapolations for this na-

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tion, we can look forward to a huge elderly population in the future. Percentage-wise, the fastest growing population group is those who are 85 and older. And when the baby-boomers, those born between 1946 and 1964, reach their 100th birthday it is estimated that we will have over one million 100-year olds in the United States. This is a far greater number than has ever been experienced in this nation in the past.

Elderly abuse is a common and growing phenomenon in our country. The elderly are often physically abused. Typically it includes beatings as punishment and grown sons slamming their fragile parents against the wall or throwing them onto the floor. But more often it's verbal abuse such as name-calling, speaking to elderly people in demeaning ways and threatening to put them in a nursing home if they don't conform to the expectations of the adult children. That is often a frightening threat to elderly people. Another form of abuse is manipulating the estates of older people so that they no longer have financial resources or no longer have control over them.

Many times the elderly are too frail, too frightened and too dependent to do anything to stop the abuse. They fear being put out, being cut off from family or friends or being humiliated. They need to be safe, to be cared for, to be loved.

How sad it is to conclude life as the victim of abuse at the hands of your own children. What a sin this is in light of I Timothy 5 where we read, "Do not rebuke an older man . . . honor widows who are real widows . . . for this is acceptable in the sight of God."

Many years ago Minnesota focused on the trial of Lois Jurgens who was convicted of the murder of her young son, Dennis. During the trial the Jurgens' home was described as neat and clean and quiet. The family was religious with frequent table and family prayers. And yet there was such abuse in that household that a happy, outgoing little boy was turned into a frightened, cowering, battered child.

His mother at mealtimes would tie him to the chair and force him to eat food that he didn't like. When he would vomit, she would make him eat that. She tied him spread-eagled to his crib so that he wouldn't play with his toys because that would mess up his room. She pushed him down stairs. She lifted him up by his ears. She wouldn't let him get his hands dirty or let him have candy or cookies. She hit him with rolling pins and spatulas. In his casket the 3Ω year old wore a crown of roses, but those who filed by could still see the bruises underneath.

What is as amazing as the abuse was horrible is the behavior of those who knew. Family, friends and neighbors all knew at least part of what was going on, but they said nothing. They told no one. They did not come to the defense of a helpless little boy.

When I read something like this I think that our society has not heard of the Parable of the Good Samaritan. Or have we become a people who are like the priests and the Levites in that parable who walked by on the other

side and don't want to get involved while children are being injured and need our help? Do we not know the words of Ephesians 4:32 that we should be kind to one another and tenderhearted?

In 1982 the National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect reported that 331,000 children were victims of physical abuse in the United States. And we all know that only a small fraction of all the child abuse that takes place in our country is reported. The statistics indicate that one in three female children and one in seven male children will be sexually abused before the age of eighteen. At least fifty percent of that abuse will take place in the family - - incest. That means that the odds are far greater that a child will be abused at home than at school or in the park or anywhere else. How tragic that the place that ought to be the safest is the most dangerous of places for a child to be!

The statistics show that younger children are at the greatest risk. Do you know that if a child is murdered in the United States, in all likelihood that child will be murdered before his or her third birthday? Most abuse takes place between a child's second and fourth birthdays.

Research indicates that traditional homes with strong religious values can be fertile soil for child abuse. It is covered up under the guise of "discipline" or "breaking the will of a strong willed child" - - - but the far better name for it is "sin".

More and more studies are being done. Some of the data is too new and incomplete to be sure, but some trends are appearing. Fathers are more likely to abuse their children than are mothers, although mothers are more severe and do more harm than fathers. Even those parents who would never physically abuse a child can cause deep psychological, spiritual and emotional harm with anger, name-calling and emotional battering. Tragically, many studies are showing a correlation between abusing and being abused. The parent may have been abused as a child and the person who is abused as a child may well grow up to abuse his or her children.

Wife beating is nothing new. It is actually more familiar territory than elderly abuse or even child abuse. And while there is increasing awareness of husband abuse, the overwhelming form of spouse abuse is against wives. TIME magazine reported that six million American women each year are abused by their husbands or their boyfriends, that 40% of women who are killed in the United States are murdered by their partners and that one in two women will be battered sometime in a their lifetime.

Again, studies indicate that religious orientation may actually add to the problem, particularly when there is a non-Christian husband and a Christian wife. Some Christian women simply stop practicing their faith to avoid the consequences in their marriage. Christian views, such as traditional values, the high view of marriage, belief in submission, faith that God answers prayer or the conviction that Jesus Christ can change a husband, can make it

more difficult for a woman to get help.

Sobering stories are surfacing about homes where the husband is an elder in the church or a teacher or the pastor where there is great violence but it's hidden at church. So-called spiritual leaders are violently abusing their wives and getting away with it. The literature on this is still forming. Some think there are patterns or cycles of wife beating. It begins with minor assaults, but the wife doesn't tell. That gives him permission to be more violent, often requiring medical treatment. He's sacred and says he's sorry. There's a period of peace, but the whole cycle recurs. Often alcohol is involved which is used as an excuse to cover up otherwise inexcusable behavior.

There are two types of wife abusers: treatable and intractable. The treatable husband has genuine remorse and is open to treatment. The intractable husband believes he is right and she deserves it. He is unlikely ever to change. Tragically, there has been some history of clergy and other Christians blaming wives and telling them to behave better and to submit to their husbands.

How do we respond to all of this? It depends on whom we are talking to. Let's talk first to those who are abused. In Luke 4:18 Jesus said, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me . . . to set at liberty those who are oppressed." If you are abused then you are counted among those who are oppressed, and God doesn't want this to happen to you. Jesus Christ came to set you free from that kind of abuse and oppression. No one deserves to be abused! You do not have to keep taking it. You can get out of the home and get out of the family if necessary rather than be abused anymore.

It is not your fault! The parents who abuse children, the adult children who abuse their parents and the husbands who abuse their wives are the ones who are wrong. It is sin. There is never an excuse for anyone hurting those who are weaker and more vulnerable. There is no excuse – EVER – for abuse. And yet tragically those who are abused often take the blame upon themselves. They think it occurs because of what they said or did, and they feel that they are responsible. Understand that is not true. If you have been the victim of abuse, it is not your fault, and it is not God's will that you suffer in the hands of those who sin against you.

Fortunately, there are alternatives for those who are abused by others. So, get help! Don't take it any longer. If you are being abused, tell someone who can help you. Talk to a pastor. Contact a trusted Christian friend. Go to a counselor. Tell your teacher. Call the police. Getting help is best for you and it is best for the one who is abusing you.

While there are many different circumstances and while generalization can be dangerous, these principles are transferable to every situation: 1.) God doesn't want

you to be abused; 2.) It is not your fault; 3.) Get help.

Let's switch to talking to the abusers, and let's try to understand, spiritually speaking, why this happens. What actually takes place in abuse? I am convinced that all the types of abuses mentioned here are in the same category with abortions because they all show a lack of reverence for the sanctity of life. There is a lack of recognition that human life is created in the image of God and therefore it must be treated with dignity and respect. When an adult takes sexual advantage of a child it is an indignity against the image of God in that child. When adult children manipulatively take the money and the resources of their elderly parents, that is not honoring their parents nor is

that honoring the integrity of the image of God in that parent. The same thing is true when we call people names, when we yell

at one another or say things that are demeaning and derogatory. When we put other people down, when we humiliate children and others it is a sinful affront to the image of God.

Listen to some words from the book of Ephesians:

Ephesians 4:31-32: "Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you."

Ephesians 5:25: "Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her."

Ephesians 6:2: "Honor your father and your mother." (That is not just for children; that is a verse for all of life, including when the children are adults and the parents are older.)

Ephesians 6:4, "Fathers, (parents), do not provoke your children to anger."

If you are counted among those who have abused or will abuse, you must accept the responsibility. Don't make excuses. Don't say that it's because of what he did or what she said. Understand that there is NO EXCUSE for abusive behavior. As hard as it may be, admit that YOU are responsible and not the person you abused. Admit it to yourself and confess it to God.

Also, recognize that the problem won't just go away. If you're an abuser there is a good chance that you were abused yourself in childhood. Counselors report that relatively few people connect their adult problems with their childhood abuse. There are many reasons why people abuse other people. These include low self-esteem, the need to have power over others, feelings of life being out of control and a need to blame others. These deep-seated causes do not disappear because you are sorry for what you did. Sorrow seldom cures! So admit that what has happened in the past can happen again. It is part of becoming responsible.

There is no excuse – EVER – for abuse.

Get help! For your sake, for your family's sake, for Jesus' sake – get the help you need to change your life and behavior. Counselors, support groups, special programs are all increasing. As hard as it is to do, seek out the help you need to change.

Let's review what we just covered: 1.) Abusive behavior is a sin against God and against the person you abuse; 2.) You must accept responsibility for your behavior; 3.) The problem won't just go away; 4.) Get help!

But, what should be the response of those Christians who are neither the abused nor the abusers? If we take seriously Jesus' command to "love our neighbors as ourselves" we cannot ignore the problem. We need to respond lovingly and actively, and that may also be incredibly difficult. How do we do that? A place to begin is simply by being sensitive to those who may be the victims of abuse. It may be simply talking about it in a group setting as a beginning.

Let me list for you some of the signs of abuse. This list comes from a publication from the Task Force on Physical and Sexual Abuse, published by what was then the LCA, Minnesota Synod. It applies specifically to child abuse, but most of it also applies to other types of abuse:

- 1.) Withdrawal from social activities, from school problems, runaways.
- 2.) Loss of self-esteem or low self-esteem.
- 3.) Anxiety, stress, feelings of guilt.
- 4.) Physical signs: bruises, cuts, stiffness, broken bones.
- 5.) Inaccurate self-image.
- 6.) Thinks of suicide or has a history of suicide attempts.
- 7.) History of family violence.
- 8.) Abuse of alcohol and drugs.
- 9.) They themselves use force or violence to resolve conflicts.
- 10.) Excessive restrictions on social life.
- 11.) Strongly believes in sex-role stereotypes.
- 12.) Nightmares, phobias, self-mutilation.

Let's be sensitive to these signs and provide inclusive social structures. Because of the mobility in our society, we're becoming increasingly disassociated with extended family. In the past people had extended family living nearby to model appropriate behavior under difficult circumstances as well as to set up fences for behavior. Now circumstances have changed. We don't have much family around to give us those guidelines. There aren't the models; there aren't the fences.

Pueblo Indians have little if any domestic violence. One reason for that is that they have very little social isolation. Close community is a preventative to domestic violence. If it can't be provided in the family and society, where can it better be provided than in the church? The church needs to be a place where we can include people, be their families, give them "a place to belong, a place to become", where we can be their extended family.

You may not feel a need to be part of a congregation or growth-group, but maybe you should be in order to help others and thereby save a family and maybe a life!

Believe the person who tells you about abuse. Senior citizen, wife, husband, child - - - believe that person. Set aside all skepticism. Become that person's advocate. The last thing anyone who is abused needs is a doubter or someone who condemns.

Help them get help. If it's a chronic problem without immediate danger, help them through your prayers, friendship and direction to counseling. If it is an urgent problem where physical danger is involved, call the police. If it is a child, contact the authorities even if the risks to you are high. Don't take a chance!

Provide ongoing support. Give non-judgmental love, understanding and concern. Be available. Be a friend. Or consider greater availability. Perhaps consider opening your home to a battered wife.

Suppose you were to learn this week of a wife whose husband is beating her and her children. She's frightened but she has no money and she has nowhere to go. Would you be willing to have her and her children come and stay in your house for a few days or a week until something else can be worked out? Would you take the initiative to tell a pastor that your home is always available - - - even if it's three o'clock in the morning or Christmas Eve? That would be getting involved. That would be a wonderful response.

Will you pray for those who are abused? Pray for the elderly who are frightened and dependent? Pray for the child who is scared and confused and in such great jeopardy. Pray for the wife who has taken it far beyond what she should. Ask God to give her courage to act. Pray for the abusers - - - men and women who harm others with their power and anger and problems. Ask God to convict them of sin and push them toward repentance and the help they need. Pray for yourself - - - that you may be God's instrument to help families in the crises of abuse.

Faith Matters® is the Broadcast Ministry of
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