

Series: God & Man & Woman #830

Title: Genesis 2.24, Part 33

Thank you for joining me today from wherever you are and by however you listen as we meet together coast-to-coast here in the United States and all the way around the world! 2021! A brand New Year is upon us! We give thanks and praise to God for taking us through a tumultuous 2020 and bringing us, by His grace, into 2021. And I am glad we can spend these few moments together. I look forward to being with you weekdays throughout the coming year, Lord willing!

The reality for many families is that even though this is a new day in a new year, it's the same old thing at home. A wife is trying to handle her abusive husband, a husband is trying to get his abusive wife to calm down, and children are stuck in the middle. If you live in a home where there is domestic violence then holidays, like today, can be the worst because whomever is abusing you is not working, there is nowhere to go, and so you're all stuck together behind those closed doors where nobody outside of the family can see and knows what is really going on.

Abusive behavior often rages the most at Christmas and New Year's. And this is especially true when alcohol is added to the equation. A sober out of control temper, a sober domineering and controlling personality, a sober self-centered narcissist is one person but you add booze, and you have a perfect storm. If this describes what home this holiday is like for you, I'm praying for you and this is why I am answering this question: what should be done about abuse in marriages? We've been looking at this all week and we'll return here again on Monday.

And this week I have made the case, and supported this in the Bible, that the first thing an abused spouse must do is to separate from the abusive spouse. Pick up and leave, create physical distance and separation, at least for a season (a period of time). I do not want to repeat what has already been said. If you missed it, spend a little time this weekend getting caught up. All of the broadcasts are podcasts, available from godisministry.org (the website address is godisministry.o-r-g). At the center of the homepage you will find all of the content we've already covered. It's easy to listen to.

Today I want to respond to the person who will ask, "Separate for how long?" For exactly how long should I move out of my home and get away from my spouse? My simple answer to that is for however long it takes for your spouse to demonstrate genuine change in how you or you and your children are treated. How long? Forever however long it takes for there to be real change.

You want to avoid two extremes here: one is to live separately for so long that your marriage no longer has any meaning or purpose (you are then essentially divorced), but the other extreme is to return to your abusive spouse too quickly. At the first "I am sorry," or "I promise it will never happen again," you pack up your things and return home.

But if you do this, then your spouse has not had enough time to make sincere changes in how you will be treated. The purpose of the separation is to give you peace and safety, and to give the abusive spouse a firm boundary that says, "You change or else I am not coming back."

And let's talk about marital separation for a little bit. I want to give you a warning. And then talk about how a time of separation is to be used. (And not used.) What does one do during this time of separation?

First, here is the warning. Listen to me closely on this one: I am not recommending marital separation *unless there is proven abuse!* In general, being separated from our spouse for prolonged periods of time does more to damage the marriage than to heal it. Yes, there are sometimes good reasons for one spouse to be in one place and the other spouse to be elsewhere, even another country. Examples are: military service (a spouse goes to war) or you might be caring for an ailing, elderly parent and because of work obligations your spouse cannot up and leave and go with you. During the COVID pandemic some married couples find themselves separate for a season.

But, this is far less than ideal and should not last a moment longer than necessary! When this is prolonged individuals get used to living away from their spouse. And then the opportunity for the two to drift away from one another is there. Let me quote Dr. Jim Newheiser from his book *Marriage, Divorce and Remarriage*. He writes, quote, "Some couples live separate lives – with separate homes (or rooms),

separate vacations, separate finances, and separate friendships – without ever filing for legal separation or divorce. They are still failing to fulfill God’s design for marriage and are in breach of the covenant promises they made to each other when they entered into marriage. Their relationship is almost a de facto divorce (78% K).” Unquote. Newheiser is right.

I just want to cut off at the pass criticism that can go like this: “Now, Mark, if you open the door to say that married couples should be separated, then you’re going to have spouses exploiting the opening and reasoning that any mistreatment can be termed ‘abuse’ and he or she will be free to separate.” In other words, what I mean as an exception many of you may take as a rule. You may justify separation, claiming abuse where there truly is not abuse.

So, let me repeat: I am not recommending marital separation *unless there is proven abuse!* Or, I can say it this way: if you are married and there is not domestic violence, there is not spousal abuse, and it is not temporary separation (say for reasons I mentioned earlier) then I do not recommend living separated from your spouse for long. OK, that’s my warning!

Now let’s look at how a time of separation is to be used, if there is abuse that you are escaping from. Once you extract yourself, and your children, from the domestic environment where there is abuse, you are to use that time to proactively resolve how to move forward in your marriage. It is one thing to say, “Flee to safety,” but then the question can be asked, “and do what?” And if the separation lasts as long as it takes for the abusing spouse to change, well then the separation will almost always never be short.

Let me put this plainly: once you safely separate, that is, once you get out of your abusive home and into a safe place, you are to do everything you can to resolve your real problem.

Separation is not a time to lie in bed, to pull the covers up and over your head, to overeat, to drink, and to just wish your problems away. This is not a time for you to act on a plan of revenge or vengeance against your abusive spouse. Nor is this a time to say, “I think I’ll have some fun and get dressed up and go out and flirt a little with some stranger.” You should not use the separation to medicate your pain. Instead, you can use the separation – in safety – to receive the care, the wisdom, and the advice you require on how to respond to this man or this woman who has been abusing you.

Let me just give you a few practical examples of how to resolve what is happening to you. First, you will want to proactively get some help. If you belong to a church, seek out your pastor and spiritual leaders and ask them to help you. If you do not belong to a church, then visit some churches (online) and email or call or text that church’s pastor and explain your situation. Be honest about it and ask their help. If that does not work, seek the counsel of a reputable Christian counselor in your area. As you call around make sure you are matched to someone who understands domestic abuse and violence.

And if you cannot find a counselor who is a Christian at least get started visiting with one who is not hostile to Christians. And I say all of this to you even if you, yourself, do not consider yourself a Christian. The reason I am emphasizing someone who is both a competent resource and a believer in Jesus is because Jesus is the key to setting you free from your sin and the sin of your spouse in your marriage. Only Jesus can provide to you and your spouse the kind of genuine, lifetime healing and peace you need. Only Jesus can change an abusive person. And only Jesus can restore a broken marriage, putting it back together again and making it thrive.

Second, when you get connected to one who can assist you be honest with that person. Tell them *exactly* what is going on at home. Do not lie or cover for your abuser. Let it all out! And third, push whomever is giving you counsel to come up with a plan. What are you going to proactively do to address how you have been treated? For example, what are the practical ways you want your abusive spouse to change? List out those steps on paper. A kind of “I won’t come back to you until you do (the following).”

Or, are you going to go for legal separation as you wait to see if he or she changes? Are you going to move for divorce? What’s your plan for the children? What’s your plan for your finances? Housing? (And much more.) This is what I mean by having a *plan*.

Again, I stress, you do *not* have to do this alone. Do not attempt this in isolation. My friend, seek and receive wise counsel. This is where family and friends can be a big help to you if you will be willing to let them know the truth. I know you feel shame. I know your spouse has you convinced this is all *your* fault. And probably you feel guilty for leaving him or her.

But you are not alone! Many other people have gone through this and are willing to help you. The question is will you take advantage of the resources available to you? I hope you will. This is a New Year and new opportunity for change. Think about it and join me again on Monday for God Is!

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