

Shayla: May a Christian separate from an abusive spouse?

Meforshim:

Let's clarify first shall we? We are not discussing divorce and we are not discussing leaving one's spouse for another person. The first is covered by an entirely different topical study¹ and the second would be adultery.

So, let's say that a believer has a spouse who is abusive (whether physically or emotionally). Let's also say that they are not decided on the issue of divorce. Either they are not clear on whether they have adequate grounds or they are not emotionally prepared for such a major decision. However, they can no longer take the abuse.

You may not allow yourself to be abused

Having clarified the hypothetical situation, let's look at some biblical principles shall we? First, suicide is wrong. It is a sin. Self-damage is also disallowed to the talmidim for "you are not your own, you were bought at a price; therefore, glorify God in your body."² Further, you have only one Master and you may not allow yourself to become the slave of an abuser. Again, "he who is called by the Lord as a slave is the Lord's freedman. Likewise, he who is called as a free man is Christ's slave. You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of men."³ Unless you are sacrificially laying down your life in a heroic effort to save another person, you may not damage yourself or allow another to damage you that way.

There is nothing wrong with allowing natural consequences to occur

Law of Odd Symmetry

Further, if there is one thing on which the Bible is clear it is the issue of personal responsibility and the Law of Odd Symmetry. Briefly stated it is "*What goes around comes around!*" Those who lay traps tend to fall into them. Those who seek to crush have boulders roll over on them. God makes sure that what goes around comes around. Those who set traps fall victim to their own traps. Those who try to harm are themselves harmed.⁴

Law of Reciprocity

The Law of Odd Symmetry is part and parcel with another very important law – The Law of Reciprocity. Everybody loves the positive aspect⁵ of the "Golden Rule". Do to others as you would like them to do to you. Judge others the way you'd like them to judge you. If we draw near to God He draws near to us. However, few realize that there's a negative aspect⁶ to the law of Reciprocity. If we mock Wisdom, Wisdom mocks us in the day of our calamity. If we listen to God He tells us more but if we turn a deaf ear, He quits talking. Every action has an equal reaction.

Short-tempered, abusive people must pay their own penalty. Those who plant seeds of injustice will harvest disaster and their reign of terror will end. Their consciences tell them

¹ Divorce and Remarriage

² 1 Corinthians 6:19-20

³ 1 Corinthians 7:22-23

⁴ Proverbs 1:18-19; 5:22; 11:6, 24-27; 12:13; 13:8; 14:20; 18:12; 19:4, 19; 20:17; 21:7; 26:27; 28:10

⁵ ***Reciprocity's positive aspect (Golden Rule)***: Leviticus 19:18, 34; Numbers 24:9; 1 Samuel 2:30; 1 Chronicles 28:9; 2 Chronicles 15:2; Proverbs 8:17; 9:7-8a, 12; 10:16; 11:27a; 13:20a; 14:22b; 19:17; Jeremiah 24:7; Zechariah 1:3; Matthew 7:12; 25:31-46; Mark 4:24 (cp Luke 6:38); Luke 6:31; 10:27; Galatians 6:7-8; 2 Timothy 2:12

⁶ ***Reciprocity's negative aspect (Lex Talionis)***: Exodus 21:23-25; Leviticus 24:19-20; Numbers 14:43; 24:9; 32:23b; Deuteronomy 19:18-19, 21; Judges 15:11; 1 Samuel 2:30; 15:23; 1 Chronicles 28:9; 15:33; 2 Chronicles 12:5; 15:2; 24:20; Psalm 7:16; Proverbs 1:24-33; 6:12-15; 9:8b-9, 12; 10:16; 11:24-27; 13:20b; 14:22a; 17:13; 19:19; 21:13; 22:8, 22-23; 28:9; Jeremiah 50:15; Ezekiel 39:23; Matthew 10:33; 25:31-46; Mark 4:24 (cp Luke 6:38); Galatians 6:7-8; James 2:13; 2 Timothy 2:12

this. The Holy Spirit whispers it into their ears. If they rebel to the voice of God, then they shouldn't complain when their friends leave them, and their spouses can no longer bear to be around them.

- [Galatians 6:7 HCSB](#) Don't be deceived: God is not mocked. For whatever a man sows he will also reap,
- [Numbers 32:23 HCSB](#) But if you don't do this, you will certainly sin against the LORD; be sure your sin will catch up with you.

Proverbs 19:19 warns the downtrodden spouse that if you rescue the abuser once, you'll have to do it again and again. At some point you have to let them start bearing the consequences of their sin. You have to quit enabling and empowering their sin.⁷ Even when you give to others, there is a principle that it should not be to your harm.⁸

Application

So, how do we apply these to the situation? How do we apply them in our attempt to change the abusive person's ways?

First, clearly state what behavior you are or are not willing to accept. Do this in a positive manner. Don't try to justify your position or apologize for "inconveniencing" them. If it's true, tell them that you want to continue the relationship, be reconciled to them, but that it must be done in a healthy manner. Clearly and emphatically state your boundaries, i.e. "I won't allow you to speak to me in an abusive manner. I won't accept baseless accusations. I won't allow you to strike me or pout, giving me the silent treatment", etc.

Remember,

- [Proverbs 17:27 HCSB](#) The intelligent person restrains his words, and one who keeps a cool head is a man of understanding.

Second, firmly enunciate the consequences of continued bad behavior. Disengage from them. After all, if "shunning" or "excommunication" is a valid disciplinary approach within the congregation, then it is equally valid in other relationships. Remove yourself from exposure to harm. Give time frames. For example "if you call me names again, I'll go live with my _____ for two weeks." Or, "If you begin yelling, screaming, or going over old accusations again, I'll end the conversation and walk away until you can be civilized." After all, as we've had categorically demonstrated to us by the Holy Spirit, a man reaps what he sows!

Third, enforce what you have said. Do not waffle. Do not bluff. Firmness and consistency is the **ONLY** way you are going to navigate your way out of this. If the abuser thinks you're bluffing, even if you fail to act on it once out of every ten times, that is enough for them to continue. Plan on being tested. They will push the boundary to determine if you're serious. Do not allow them to manipulate, control, or pressure you into going back to the old ways.

- [James 5:12 HCSB](#) Now above all, my brothers, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or with any other oath. Your "yes" must be "yes," and your "no" must be "no," so that you won't fall under judgment.

Fourth, don't negotiate. Abusers are masters at manipulation. They will not fight fairly. In fact, most of the time, what they say isn't even reasonable. They just keep saying it over and over and over, louder and louder until the victim succumbs out of sheer exhaustion! They will not respect your attempt to "talk things out". They will view it as a cop out and seek to wear you out! Simply state what you will or will not allow and then quietly and consistently enforce it. Let your words be few but meaningful.

- [Proverbs 10:19 HCSB](#) When there are many words, sin is unavoidable, but the one who controls his lips is wise.

⁷ Exodus 23:2 cp 2 John 1:10-11

⁸ 2 Corinthians 8:12-14

Fifth, don't react – respond. If you allow yourself to react to their misbehavior you are playing their game and you will always be one step behind. You will lose! Responding implies a pre-ordained action that has been planned as a consequence to an anticipated behavior.

This is going to require a certain degree of emotional detachment. That's hard for a spouse but you have to remember that abusers generally control their victims through their emotions. Even the worst physical abuse begins and is continuously based on emotional manipulation. Don't cry, beg, or explode in anger. Every time you react that way, you are feeding their sense of power.

- [Ecclesiastes 7:8-9 HCSB](#) The end of a matter is better than its beginning; a patient spirit is better than a proud spirit. (9) Don't let your spirit rush to be angry, for anger abides in the heart of fools.

Sixth, get yourself some help. You need allies and they need to be good, godly, wise folk. There is no need to go through this alone. You are caught up in the middle of the emotional battle and just as in any battle there is haze, dust, and confusion. You need someone who is standing outside of the haze, clear-eyed, who can help you keep some perspective.

- [Proverbs 19:20 HCSB](#) Listen to counsel and receive instruction so that you may be wise in later life.
- [Ecclesiastes 4:7-12 HCSB](#) (7) Again, I saw futility under the sun: (8) There is a person without a companion, without even a son or brother, and though there is no end to all his struggles, his eyes are still not content with riches. "So who am I struggling for," *he asks*, "and depriving myself from good?" This too is futile and a miserable task. (9) Two are better than one because they have a good reward for their efforts. (10) For if either falls, his companion can lift him up; but pity the one who falls without another to lift him up. (11) Also, if two lie down together, they can keep warm; but how can one person alone keep warm? (12) And if somebody overpowers one person, two can resist him. A cord of three strands is not easily broken.