



## Is Emotional Abuse Ever Grounds for Biblical Separation?

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People like to categorize things into black and white, right and wrong, good and bad, and biblical and unbiblical, but I think some things aren't always so clear. There is no perfect marriage or perfect spouse. All marriages will experience hurt and heartache. But there are marriages that are more than disappointing or difficult—they are damaging and destructive.

Among conservative Christians, there seems to be some allowance for separation if a husband is beating his wife with his fists, or she fears for her safety, but consistently little support if her husband is crushing her spirit, or twisting her thinking with his words. One woman recently wrote me and said, "My pastor said emotional abuse is too fuzzy to allow for separation. Physical abuse would be clear, but emotional abuse isn't."

Yet, God's word clearly has much to say in support of victims of verbal and emotional cruelty (See my video on "[What is Emotional Abuse](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dAb9vBzaV9Q)" <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dAb9vBzaV9Q> for Bible verses that support God's care for the emotionally abused person.)

Research on those who have suffered with chronic emotional abuse, show that it can be far more harmful to their long term health than physical abuse can be. In a 2011 study funded by the National Institute of Mental Health, and by the National Institute on Drug Abuse, researchers found that our brain processes physical pain and intense social rejection in exactly the same way. The primary difference is that physical injuries usually heal. Wounds to one's soul and spirit are longer lasting, and often more damaging.

Therefore, why would we advise a woman or man who is being emotionally abused that he or she must stay in their marriage, because being pummeled by words is not serious enough to justify a biblical separation? If this same person were being regularly pummeled by fists or stabbed by their spouse, most pastors and church leaders would not only allow for biblical separation, they'd advise it.

God's word says it best: "Reckless words pierce like a sword" (Proverbs 12:18), and "Who can bear a crushed spirit?" (Proverbs 18:14). When someone is stabbed with a sword or knife, it leads to grave and often fatal injuries. The Bible says the impact of

reckless words is like being stabbed, and is just as injurious as physical abuse. Proverbs warns, "Life and death are in the power of the tongue" (Proverbs 18:21).

But when is the line crossed? When are emotionally abusive behaviors biblical grounds for separation, or even divorce? Most people would support chronic infidelity as biblical grounds for divorce, yet not all marriages that suffer infidelity should end in divorce.

When there has been repentance sought and forgiveness granted, I have seen marriages healed and restored. Just because one has biblical grounds does not mean one should pursue separation or divorce.

Every person's story is unique. Each person who has been grievously sinned against will need to wrestle with whether their spouse is repentant, as well as the impact the abuse is having on his or her body, soul, and spirit, as well as on their children.

Therefore, as ministry leaders, invite an abused spouse to ask God two crucial questions:

1. Is it best for me and my children to leave or to stay? God calls people to be good stewards of their physical, emotional, mental, spiritual, sexual and financial health. Therefore, evaluating what toll staying in this marriage is taking on her and her children is a legitimate concern. Sometimes, staying at all costs is too high a price to pay.

2. Is it best for my unrepentant and/or foolish spouse for me to leave or to stay? What is her spouse's greatest need right now, and how can she meet it? Is it best for him to remain blind to his sin, unrepentant, and unwilling to repair the damage he's done? Or is it more loving to leave, (or to enact church discipline or tell someone) letting him or her know that she will no longer keep secrets or enable his sin against her to continue without consequence.

Oswald Chambers writes: "To choose to suffer means there is something wrong; to choose God's will even if it means suffering is a very different thing. No healthy saint ever chooses suffering; he chooses God's will, as Jesus did, whether it means suffering or not."

Whether she stays or leaves, there will be more suffering and grief ahead. Her decision will bring challenges and criticism for those who think she is making the wrong choice. Her choice will also bring opportunities for growth, as well as temptations to sin. Knowing that these stumbling blocks and stepping stones are ahead of her, she must keep her eyes open so that she can be more vigilant over her heart and mind.