



How and When is an Abused Spouse Called to Suffer

This week one of my coaching clients shared that her counselor told her that her role as a godly wife was to submit to her husband's abuse and quietly suffer for Jesus. She was told that setting boundaries was unbiblical and asking her spouse to change specific behaviors for her to feel safe or rebuild trust was demanding. Is that true?

Does scripture encourage a spouse to patiently and quietly endure harsh and abusive treatment within her or his marriage?

The passage that we usually turn to support this thinking is found in 1 Peter 2:13-3:22 where Peter writes to believers who face mistreatment for their faith.

The entire book of 1 Peter has to do with suffering, but I want to focus on a few points from these verses to help us understand what Peter is teaching us about **how** we suffer in a godly way as well and **when** we should patiently endure suffering.

Peter anticipates that the new believers will be persecuted for their faith. Therefore instead of talking about the normal mutual household duty codes between slaves and their masters and husbands and wives that Paul already covered in Ephesians 5 and Colossians 3, Peter takes a different perspective and zeros in where the relationships are not mutual or reciprocal.

Peter wants Christians to know how to respond when the government or a slave owner misuses his power or is abusive, or when a husband is a non-believer and isn't following the mutual household duty codes that Paul spoke about, such as "husband's love your wives as Christ loved the church. To a non-believing husband those words would hold no weight.

First, let's look at **how** Peter tells us to handle ourselves in the presence of abusive people. Peter is clear that believers should be respectful of others regardless of how we are treated. Often in destructive marriages a spouse who is regularly verbally battered or emotionally neglected or abused starts to lob some verbal bombs of her own. Instead of learning to handle such mistreatment in a way that honors God, she dishonors herself, her husband, and God by her building resentment as well as her explosive or negative reactions and responses to his abuse.

Truthfully - It's painful to keep quiet in these circumstances. In fact, the psalmist talks about his struggle with keeping quiet in Psalm 39 when he says, "I will watch what I do and not sin in what I

say. I will hold my tongue when the ungodly are around me. But as I stood there in silence – not even speaking of good things – the turmoil within me grew worse. The more I thought about it, the hotter I got, igniting a fire of words.” (Psalm 39:1-3). Not using our words to hurt others once they have hurt us, may indeed cause some internal suffering. But when we choose this path, Peter tells us ...God is honored.

Second, Peter reminds us that **God sees our mistreatment and is pleased with us when we bear it without retaliating with our words or actions.** Peter encourages us not to pay back evil for evil by reminding us of Jesus, who, when he was reviled, did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who him who judges justly” (1 Peter 2:22,23).

Next, Peter explains **when** we should endure abusive treatment. He writes, “For what credit is it if, when you sin and are beaten for it, you endure? But if when you **do good** and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God.”

The **good** Peter is talking about here is a moral good, a doing the right thing kind of good. Although in this passage Peter specifically advises us to submit to authority, Peter himself was flogged after he refused to stop preaching about Christ even though he’d been ordered by those in authority to stop. Peter refused to submit because in doing so, he would have to stop doing good (Acts 4:19; 5:17-42).

In the same way **when a wife refuses to submit to her husband’s sinful behavior, or stands up for her children who are being mistreated, or refuses to sign a dishonest income tax report, or calls 911 when her husband is threatening to harm her or himself, she is doing good even if it doesn’t feel good to her spouse.**

Her behavior honors God, protects her children and does what is in the best interest of her spouse. (It is never in someone’s best interests to enable sin to flourish.)

A wife who does good in these ways will suffer because her husband will not view her actions as good. Instead he will get angry, defensive and likely retaliate against her for what she’s done. That’s exactly the kind of suffering Peter is talking about. He’s speaking about suffering for doing good instead of being passive or fearful or doing the wrong thing or nothing at all. **Peter is saying that when we do what is right and we get mistreated for it, God sees it and commends us.**

Lastly, Peter reminds wives that their unbelieving husbands who refuse to obey God’s word can be won by their respectful and pure conduct. But we must **keep in mind that a wife’s godly actions may include implementing tough consequences for repetitive and unrepentant sin in the hopes that those actions influence her husband to look at his destructive behaviors, repent and come to Christ.**

God used that approach with hard hearted Israel when they repeatedly refused to heed his verbal warnings. Paul encourages us to do likewise (i.e 2 Thessalonians 3:6, 13).

When a woman takes these brave steps she will suffer. She may suffer financially as her husband sits in jail because she called the police when he hit her. She may suffer the censure from her church when she separates from him because of his unrepentant use of pornography and verbal abuse. She

may suffer with loneliness, retaliation from her spouse, disapproval from her friends and family for the stance she's taken.

When we counsel a wife that God calls her to provide all the benefits of a good marriage regardless of how her husband treats her, provides for her, or violates their marital vows we're asking her to lie and pretend.

This is not good for her or her marriage. This counsel also reinforces the abusive person's delusions that he can do as he please with no consequences.

Hear me: **Marriage does not give someone a "get out of jail free" card that entitles one to lie, mistreat, ignore, be cruel, or crush his spouse's spirit with no consequences.** To believe otherwise is to not know the heart or wisdom of God.

If Peter meant that a wife should stay passive and quiet and do nothing to help her spouse see the damage he is causing his family, her behavior would not be doing him good. It would enable him to stay blind to his sin and colludes with his destructive ways, which is not good for him, for her, or for their family. That kind of passivity does not honor God.

Peter concludes his teaching about suffering with these words. "Let those who suffer according to God's will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator *while doing good.*" (1 Peter 4:19 ESV).

If you are a suffering spouse, if you're going to suffer, suffer for doing good rather than suffer for staying passive or pretending. There is a huge difference between the two.

