

Sword Words: Biblical Counseling & Verbal Abuse

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I. Introduction

A. What is verbal abuse?

1. **Proverbs 12:18** There is one who speaks rashly like the thrusts of a sword, But the tongue of the wise brings healing.
2. **Proverbs 11:9** With *his* mouth the godless man destroys his neighbor, But through knowledge the righteous will be delivered.
3. **Proverbs 18:21** Death and life are in the power of the tongue, And those who love it will eat its fruit.
4. **Proverbs 15:4** - A soothing tongue is a tree of life, But perversion in it crushes the spirit.
5. **Proverbs 16:27** - A worthless man digs up evil, While his words are like scorching fire.
6. Verbal abuse is chronic, sinful speech that hurts, demeans, and tears down others
7. There is a sense in which all forms of sinful speech are hurtful, demeaning and destructive to others. Sinful speech may take the form of:
 - a. Tearing down (Eph. 4:29)
 - b. Lying & deceit (Eph. 4:25)
 - c. Angry, bitter words (Eph. 4:31)
 - d. Gossip or slander (Prov. 11:13, 16:28)
 - e. Manipulation (Luke 10:40)

B. Characteristics – However, usually verbal abuse is:

1. Especially manipulative
2. Driven by a desire to control others (self-sovereignty)
3. Bullying or threatening
4. Angry & hateful
5. Characterized by blame-shifting
6. May include name-calling & mockery
7. Involves slander & criticism
8. Often dismissed by the offender as a joke or sarcasm
9. Reflective of deep bitterness & resentment
10. Chronic and ongoing

C. Effects – Over time, people subject to chronic, sinful speech:

1. Begin to question their own judgment
2. Often blame themselves for the problem
3. Don't realize the severity of the problem
4. Develop unhelpful or sinful responses
5. Become discouraged, depressed or despairing
6. Adopt of unbiblical view of themselves and the offender

II. The Bible and Verbal Abuse

A. Sinful speech is condemned in Scripture

1. Sinful speech is wicked, evil, and wrong (Prov. 6:16-17, 26:28, 10:31, Eph. 4:31)
2. Sinful speech is verbal murder and renders one guilty before God (Matt. 5:21-22)
3. Like all sin, sinful speech is *never* justified (James 2:10)
4. Those who practice sin are violating God's commands and will be held responsible by Him (Matt. 12:36, Rev. 21:8)

B. 2 categories of "hurt"

1. Physical hurt – physical pain or violence
2. Spiritual hurt – internal, "inner man" anguish, distress or pain
 - a. Biblical descriptions:
 - i. "broken spirit" (Job 17:1, Ps. 51:17, Prov. 15:13, 17:22, 18:14, Is. 65:14)
 - ii. "crushed spirit" (Ps. 34:18)
 - iii. "sad heart" (1 Sam. 1:8, Neh. 2:2, Prov. 15:13)
 - iv. "pain of heart" (Is. 65:14)
 - v. "broken heart" or "brokenhearted" (Ps. 34:18, 69:20, 147:3, Is. 61:1, Jer. 23:9)
 - vi. "affliction or anguish of heart" (2 Cor. 2:4)
 - b. Biblical words:
 - i. *Shabar* – "break, smash, shatter" used both literally and figuratively ("broken heart")
 - ii. *atsebet* – "pain" used of both physical pain and emotional sorrow ("sad heart")
 - iii. *Lupe* – "grieve, sorrow, affliction" used of "pain of mind or spirit"
 - iv. *Lupeo* – "to cause severe emotional or mental distress" or to "experience sadness, grief, distress, or sorrow"
 - Can be inflicted - "to cause severe emotional or mental distress" (*lupeo* – 2 Cor. 2:2, 5)
 - Can be injured by – "to experience sadness, sorrow, distress, or grief" (*lupeo* – Rom. 14:15)
3. Conclusion: the Bible is clear that some of the most painful human experiences come from spiritual hurt. Sinful speech that is characteristic of verbal abuse can cause this kind of pain.
4. Those receiving sinful speech from others are experiencing authentic suffering

C. Biblical terms and language

1. Biblical counselors strive to use biblical language as often as possible because:
 - a. Usually biblical vocabulary is less influenced by a secular, worldly counseling system (and thus is less prone to unbiblical viewpoints,

interpretations, theories, and assumptions). Remember, terminology is never neutral.

- b. Biblical vocabulary connects life problems with actual biblical solutions anchored in a biblical worldview (example: “adultery” vs. “affair”)
2. So biblical counselors try to use biblical phrases such as “broken spirit” or “pain of heart,” or categories like “spiritual hurt” that reflect biblical anthropology. Biblical counselors try to avoid phrases like “emotional pain” and “hurt feelings” that are misleading and sometimes inaccurate
3. Words like “abuse” should be clearly defined and explained using biblical concepts since the term is loaded with assumptions and implications (some of these are consistent with Scripture, some come from a more worldly perspective)

D. God and the brokenhearted

1. God is near to the brokenhearted (Ps. 34:18)
2. God is able to spiritually “heal” the brokenhearted (Ps. 147:3)
3. God’s healing comes through the Person and work of Jesus (Is. 61:1-3)

E. Jesus and verbal abuse

1. Jesus is the Man of Sorrows (Is. 53:3)
2. Jesus sympathizes with us and was “tempted in all things as we are” (Heb. 4:15)
3. Jesus was reviled and suffered greatly (1 Pet. 3:22)
4. Jesus was the recipient of verbal abuse (Matt. 27:39, Mark 15:29, Luke 23:39)

F. Resources for protection

1. Civil authorities (law enforcement, protective orders, child-protective services) – Romans 13
2. Local church (pastor/elders, godly friends, church discipline) – 1 Pet. 5:1-3, Matt. 18:15-17

G. The one sinned against must be careful

1. The one receiving the verbal abuse is never responsible for the abuse itself (Rom. 14:12, Ex. 21)
2. But God holds all people responsible for how they respond when sinned against (Rom. 12:17-21, 1 Pet. 2:21-23)
3. She must be careful to not:
 - a. Deny what is actually happening (“It’s not that bad.” “It’s not abuse”)
 - b. Engage in unhelpful responses:
 - i. Trying to be good enough to avoid the abuse (“If I was a better wife, he wouldn’t treat me like this.”)
 - ii. Defending the offender (“He was having a bad day.” “He’s stressed because of work.”)
 - iii. Minimizing the situation (“All couples fight.” “Other people have it a lot worse than me.”)
 - c. Fall into the “victimization” trap

- i. Demonize the abuser (“My husband is an abuser. He will always be an abuser”)
- ii. Focus only on the sins of the abuser and ignore legitimate ways she may be sinning
- iii. Adopt “assertiveness” doctrine (responding to “control” with “control” & self-protection)
- iv. Turn to self and trust in self instead of Christ
- v. Justify foolish decisions and ungodly behavior because “I’m an abuse victim”
- vi. Be influenced by worldly and ungodly counsel from well-meaning friends, family & organizations who have adopted “victim”
- d. Respond in self-pity, anger or bitterness (Eph. 4:31, Jonah 4, James 4:6)
- e. Respond in anger toward God (Job, Jonah)
- f. Respond in other sinful ways (addictions, cutting, eating disorders, excessive exercise, despairing, “retail” therapy, entertainment, overworking, etc.)

H. Contemporary abuse victimization teaching can be a false refuge

- 1. Promotes an unbiblical identity: “abuse victim”
- 2. Promotes an unbiblical view of appropriate action
- 3. Promotes an unbiblical view of offender
- 4. Promotes an unbiblical view of help
- 5. Promotes an unbiblical view of responsibility

III. Counseling procedure

A. 3 main realms of care

- 1. Helping her to deal with her own heart & hurt
- 2. Helping her to deal with the offender
- 3. Helping her deal with the broader situation (precipitating factors, children, living situation, etc.)

B. Data gathering

- 1. Nature of abuse (specific examples, frequency)
- 2. Current situation (living with abuser, past abuse, present abuse?)
- 3. Others involved (children, grandchildren, siblings, elderly)
- 4. If possible, get information from others (family, friends)
- 5. How is she responding?
- 6. Where are the specific areas of struggle?

C. Initial needs

- 1. Safety – What changes need to be made? (Church discipline, civil authority involvement – Prov. 22:3, 27:12)
- 2. Hope – Jesus knows, cares and can help (Heb. 4:12-16)
- 3. Reporting – Required by law? (Rom. 13). Wise and helpful?
- 4. Intervention – the offender, others involved

5. Ministry plan
 - a. Biblical counseling
 - b. Small groups, Titus 2 mentor
 - c. Pastor/elder
 - d. Civil authorities
 - e. Practical needs

D. Building a relationship of trust

1. Abusers are often close family or loved ones. A solid, trust-based relationship is needed in counseling in order to be effective in speaking the truth in love to those who have been hurt (Prov. 27:6, 9)
2. Trust is built by:
 - a. Demonstrating the fruit of the Spirit to the counselee (Gal. 5:22-23)
 - b. Demonstrating ministry-character (2 Tim. 2:24-26, 1 Thes. 5:14)
 - c. Demonstrating biblical love (Prov. 17:17, 1 Cor. 13:4-8)
 - d. Demonstrating care in practical ways (James 2:15-16)
 - e. Demonstrating wisdom in counseling strategy (Prov. 15:22, 24:6)
 - f. Demonstrating what it means to be the body of Christ (Eph. 4:11-16, Rom. 12)

E. Help her deal with her own heart and hurt

1. Actively pursuing God in Scripture and prayer (Psalms)
2. Identity in Christ versus abuse (Rom. 6, Gal. 2:22)
3. Taking thoughts captive (2 Cor. 10:5)

“You deserve this because you are a horrible wife.”	“We all deserve God’s judgment because of sin, but Jesus offers forgiveness which removes God’s condemnation” (Eph. 2:3-10)
“You must be perfect. I wouldn’t have to treat you like this if you were better.”	“God requires perfection (Matt. 5:48) but we all fall short (Rom. 3:23). Thankfully, Jesus is our perfect substitute who lived and died in our place such that God declares us “righteous” when we trust Him” (2 Cor. 5:21)
“God must be punishing me”	“God never condones sinful behavior or the mistreatment of others. But I am thankful that He is good, wise & sovereign. He will redeem this trial for my good” (Rom. 8:28-29)
“God is not good”	“He is good!” (Ex. 34:6, Lam. 3:22-25)
“God is not in control”	“He is sovereign and working in all things. He does not always tell me everything” (Ps. 103:19, Lam. 3:37-38, Rom. 8:28-29, Deut. 29:29)
“God does not know or care”	“God knows everything about me and the circumstance (Ps. 139) and cares deeply about me and is for me” (Ps 56)

4. Dwelling on what is true (Phil. 4:8)
5. Returning good for evil (Rom 12:17-21)
6. Loving enemies by doing good, praying for, and blessing them (Luke 6:27-28, Rom. 12:14)
7. Learning to live by faith, not fear in the midst of suffering (Hebrews 11)
8. God redeems suffering for good (Rom. 8:28-29, Gen. 50:20, Ps. 119:71)
9. Leaning on the body of Christ (Gal. 6:2, Ecc. 4:9-12, Rom. 12:15)
10. Help her deal with her own sins (Matt. 7:3-5)
11. Address heart issues:
 - a. Fear
 - b. Anxiety/worry
 - c. Hopelessness
 - d. Addictions
 - e. Harmful behaviors (cutting, suicidal thoughts, self-medicating, etc.)

F. Help her deal with the offender

1. How does Scripture call me to respond?
 - a. My words (Eph. 4:15, 25, 29)
 - b. My actions (Rom. 12:17-19)
 - c. To protect my children (Eph. 6:4)
 - d. To flee danger (Prov. 22:3, 27:12, Ps. 82:4)
2. Do civil authorities need to get involved? (Rom. 13)
3. How to inform church leadership (Heb. 13:17, 1 Pet. 5:1-3)
4. How to be a peacemaker (see Ken Sande, *The Peacemaker*)
5. How to answer foolishness with wisdom (Prov. 26:4-5)

G. Help her deal with the situation

1. Living situation
2. Understanding the biblical teaching regarding divorce (Matt. 19, 1 Cor. 7)
3. Dealing with unbiblical counsel from others
4. Parenting issues: How to help my children to know how to respond when dad is angry and verbally hurtful (Deut. 6:6-9, Proverbs, Eph. 6:1-4)

H. Potential homework

1. Read one selected Psalm each day (Psalm 56, 73, 121, 139, etc). Write down
 - 1) how you can personally connect with the Psalm
 - 2) what you learn about God
 - 3) what you learn that helps you (encouragement, think differently, respond)
2. Using your prayer journal, spend at least 15 minutes each day talking to God in prayer. Write down specific prayer requests.
3. Memorize Psalm 46:1 and be ready to recite next time
4. Read chapter 14: “God’s Provision: Resources for the Wife’s Protection,” in Martha Peace, *The Excellent Wife* (Focus). Take notes and be ready to discuss next time

5. Create a “taking thoughts captive” document. Review it each day and pray that God would help you to believe what is true. Add to it as you discover new lies.
6. Read Jay Adams, *How to Overcome Evil* (P&R). Write 10 specific ways you can respond to your husband with good instead of evil. Practice them when he responds sinfully.
7. Teaching your children the 4 rules of communication. Help them to practice them.
8. If your husband does not respond to your verbal appeal (when he is verbally assaulting you), practice your respond plan (leave, go to friend’s house, etc.)

I. Hope for abusers

1. Those sinning with their words and hurting others need ministry also (James 5:19-20)
2. There is hope for abusers:
 - a. The thief on cross (Matt. 27:44 -> Luke 23:39-43)
 - b. The apostle Paul (Acts 7:58-8:3, 9:1-22)
3. The church must attempt to help

IV. Resources

- A. Jim Newheiser, “Overcoming Abusive Speech” (IBCD.org)
- B. Laura Hendrickson, “Seeing the Father’s Hand: Hope for the Abused” (IBCD.org)
- C. Steve Viars, *Putting Your Past in Its Place* (Harvest House)
- D. Debra Gentry, “Healing for Hidden Wounds from Verbal Abuse,” in *Women Counseling Women*, Elyse Fitzpatrick, Ed. (Harvest House)
- E. Chris Moles, *The Heart of Domestic Abuse* (Focus)
- F. Paul Tripp, *War of Words* (P&R)
- G. Lou Priolo, *Manipulation* (P&R)
- H. David Powlison, *Why Me? Comfort for the Victimized* (P&R)
- I. Jay Adams, *How to Overcome Evil* (P&R)
- J. Martha Peace, *The Excellent Wife* (Focus)