

WHAT I WOULD PREACH TO THE MODERN-DAY PREACHERS (IF THEY WOULD LISTEN...)

Hi. This is Natalie Hoffman of FlyingFreeNow.com, and you're listening to the Flying Free Podcast, a support resource for women of faith looking for hope and healing from hidden emotional and spiritual abuse.

NATALIE: Welcome to Episode 131 of the Flying Free Podcast. I want to start by thanking every single one of you who has taken time to leave a rating and review on Apple Podcasts. I know it takes some effort to do that, and I don't take the time and effort that you put into that for granted. I wanted to read one that we got recently. This listener says, "The Flying Free Podcast is fantastic! Natalie is direct, has clear and comical analogies, and empowers rather than enforces. Her guest speakers are just as engaging and informative. I'm always amazed how much I gain from each podcast, even when the initial title episode does not seem to apply to my situation. I would highly recommend it to women of faith in need of healing from intimate relationship abuse. If you are not a woman of faith, there is still a great deal of valuable ideas to discover in this podcast." Thank you! I love that people feel comfortable here, that they can find empowerment from the things we talk about even if they aren't Christians, and that the topics may be different but that you can relate to every single one in some way. I am so honored to do this work and to have so many incredible, brave, resilient listeners. Some of you are survivors; some of you are faithful people-helpers; and some of you are both. So here's to you.

Today I'm going to tell you what I would preach to a stadium full of modern-day preachers if I had the opportunity to preach to them. (When I imagine this possibility, it's in Pixar because of course this will never happen. But a girl can dream, right?) I want to do this and share it with you because what I'm going to say matters. It matters because of the role that these men play in the lives of real people all around the world. It matters because of who they are claiming to be in alignment with—the Creator of the universe. It matters because of what many of them are doing to harm the Creator's creation, whether they are doing it by ignorance or by malicious intent. It should matter to them if they genuinely want to be in alignment with the heart of God for humanity. It should matter to us if we want to understand the unspeakable damage that has been done to us and to those we love in the name of our God. If you've been victimized by their religious institutions and systems, then it will matter to you because your experience will be validated and exposed for what it was—purely satanic abuse.

First, I want to see and understand the average pastor sitting in the stands. I think that most pastors are likely well-meaning men who believe they are doing the will of God. They want to help people and honor God. I know some amazing pastors. Many of them have experienced being mistreated by people in their church. They and their families have been gossiped about behind their backs. They've been used, taken advantage of at times (some of them many, many times), and they are tired. They sometimes wonder if it is worth it. They feel the pressure of having to live up to everyone else's standards for them, and that's a lot of standards. They feel like they must be perfect or they get criticized. It is emotionally exhausting. They don't have time to learn anything new because they are just trying to keep their heads above water putting out all the fires in their congregation. If a couple comes to them and it's complicated, this pastor is going to do his best, but will fail miserably because he doesn't know and he has no time to learn. Other pastors are looking for power or popularity. They want to be "the one" that people put on a pedestal. It gives them satisfaction to feel the adulation of a crowd of admirers, especially female ones. They like to control boards and groups. They like to be the one people come to for permission. They like to be the arbiter; it gives them a sense of power and control. They use the name of God to become great; but in reality, they are insecure, small, weaselly men on the inside. But they know most people will never see the truth about who they are—not behind their good looks and charisma. If a couple comes to this kind of pastor, he will likely not have time for them at all and will pawn them off on a volunteer who is ignorant and possibly similar in nature to his leader. Then there are still other pastors who are just pure evil. They exploit women and children sexually. They are predators. They are snakes. They will purposely isolate and then cut the hearts out of their congregants when given opportunity.

Let's go back to my Pixar movie where I get to preach to maybe 100,000 preachers in the Michigan stadium. (That's one of the largest stadiums in the world. It holds about 107,000 people.) I'm in Michigan stadium. There's over 100,000 preachers in my movie. I would guess that there are a few hundred purely evil men in that audience. Can you picture them in Pixar? I'm not going to preach to them. That would be like preaching to the devil—an exercise in futility. Not interested. They don't interest me. In my Pixar movie I would have an airplane swoop in and suck those guys up in a vacuum, and we'd all happily wave goodbye. So they are gone. What about the charismatic, shy, schmoozer preachers who just love themselves to pieces? Not interested in them either. They are too busy fawning all over themselves to pay any attention to what I have to say. Having a myopic character, they are the proverbial fool in Proverbs, and they cannot learn anything new. They already know everything. Since there are more of them than there were in the last group, let's say a big spaceship comes and sucks those guys up. No, wait! Two spaceships. I guess there were more than I thought. Now we are

left with the rest. The ones that might actually listen to a woman preaching. You know, the way Jesus listened to women. The way the disciples listened to women after they had been hanging out with their role model, Jesus, for a couple of years. The way Paul listened to women. If you don't know what I'm talking about, read your Bible because it's right there if you have eyes to see and ears to hear.

So Pixar me goes up to a microphone in the middle of the stadium, and here is what I say to this group of thousands of male preachers:

Dear pastors, what is your ultimate mission here on earth? What is your calling? What do you want your legacy to be when you are gone? "He had a big church. He single-handedly kept marriages together. He fixed everyone who came to him. He made obedient people. He controlled his family. He seemed holy. He read a lot of books and had a lot of knowledge. He was a great preacher, very articulate. He had a mighty faith. He sure knew how to sacrifice. He was a generous man." If you are shooting for any of those things, here's what will happen. First, you will never measure up. Your church will never be big enough. You'll never fix everyone, keep all the people in line, control all the members of your family, or be holy enough. You'll never know everything, have no doubts, preach home run sermons one hundred percent of the time, sacrifice enough, or give enough. That will leave you feeling defeated, weary, and shamed. When you feel defeated, weary, and shamed, you will project that on the people in your church. You'll create an environment of perfectionism, defeat, spiritual exhaustion, and shame. It's a vicious cycle.

What if your purpose and calling were a lot easier to accomplish? I mean, you are all familiar with Jesus's words: "Come to Me all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." Doesn't that sound lovely? Jesus didn't call you to control everyone, including your own wife and kids. He called you to love as He loved, to accept others where they are, to let people go if they want to go, and to welcome them home if they want to come home. He told lots of stories to get this through our heads. So why do we insist that it's more complicated than that? What if you could just let people be who they are and make their own decisions before God? Do you think you are supposed to be God's bully stick, created to keep the rebels in line? Did Jesus do that? When you make your calling about you, you make it about control because then your reputation is based on whether you are keeping all the people you believe you are leading in alignment with whatever your version of God and truth are. Speaking of versions, there are thousands of you out there, and you all have a different one. Even those of you who came with your pastor

buddy-different versions. Admit it. You won't agree on every single point of every single church issue with anyone in this stadium. I wonder which one of you is perfectly right? Raise your hand if you are the one.

(See? Nobody is raising their hand here because all those guys were sucked up by the spaceship.)

What if all that was on your headstone was this: "He loved. He listened. He wept with those who wept. He rejoiced with those who rejoiced. He never turned anyone away, but some walked away of their own free will, and he let them. He never forced anyone to do anything. He never told them God wanted them to do something specific. He trusted that the Holy Spirit could do His job all by Himself." Your job is simple. Love. "Love is patient. Love is kind. It does not envy. It does not boast. It is not proud. It does not dishonor others. It's not self-seeking. It's not easily angered. It keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails."

Now I want to talk about what is happening to the women and children in your churches right under your noses. Then we'll look at some possible approaches to the problem that align with the law of love instead of the law of your particular denomination. This is important because if you ignore these people, you are ignoring the God you say you are serving.

Let's say a woman comes to you and says her husband has been mistreating her and has been for their whole marriage. "Help!" she says. What does love do? Love listens. It doesn't dishonor her or get angry. It is kind and protective. If you are mistreating your wife, you are going to mistreat this woman as well. You will project your thoughts and feelings about your own marriage onto what this woman is telling you, and things will get messy. In other words, if you're not like Jesus in your marriage, what in God's name are you doing leading a church? You're a fraud. (Another spaceship is coming to pick up the frauds now.) Your job isn't to control your wife and your kids and your parishioners. You've got one person and one person only to control. Do you know who that is? It's you. Do that, and the rest will clean itself up.

Let's say the husband comes in now to defend himself, and he says, "No, no, no, no! She's got the story wrong. She's mistreating me." Oh, no! Who is telling the truth? Do you know that it's not your place to decide that? And it's not your place to fix their problems. Did you know that?

Survivors, I'm talking to you now. It's not your pastor's job to fix your marriage or to fix your husband or to fix you. If you look to a car mechanic to do brain surgery, you are going to end up with a lobotomy. Do you want that? Survivors, it is your job to fix not your marriage, not your husband, but to fix your own life. You are responsible only for one person too, and that is you.

Now hear me out on this. I am not saying that a church shouldn't help victims. They should absolutely help victims. They should help them get out if the victim says they want help to get out. The church should help them get therapy if the victim says they would like some therapy. The church should help them with their physical needs if that victim has physical needs. They might get legal help depending on the situation and what is going on. The church should listen and believe her and act in her best interest. But what should the church do with the abuser? Should the church try to reform him? Control him? Change him? No, no, no. That is not the church's job. Remember, the church is not the Holy Spirit. That guy gets to do and be exactly who he wants to be. He's an adult. If he asks for help the way the woman is asking for help, then the church can help him with him and his personal life. But most of the time the man, and even the survivor, will ask the pastor or the church to change their spouse because they think that if their spouse changes, then everything will be all good and everyone can go on their merry way.

But that is dangerous water right there. If the spouse is not asking for help for himself, should the church manipulate him to change so that he can transform into this amazeballs husband? Does manipulation create genuine lasting change? If we give someone just enough hoops to go through, they may go through the hoops if we threaten them, but do people change when they are threatened? People change their outward behaviors to avoid pain, but they don't fundamentally change. That is not the motivation for change. What about the victim? The church should not become that woman's new authority figure unless the church wants to be parenting a bunch of children in adult bodies instead of helping to raise up autonomous adults, who have agency and choice, into the fullness of who God created them to be.

Here is the problem. If the pastor or church has a belief that women are underlings who merely exist as servants, sex objects, housekeepers, or childcare workers, that they must be taught to obey their authority figures, then they are going to treat women that way. Many women who have been programmed from childhood to buy into that thinking because it has been spiritualized or spun in a spiritual way, they will voluntarily and happily remain under that kind of oppression. They will never grow up to be the adult woman that God created them to be. I have a hunch that a lot of pastors and churches

kind of like the idea of people depending on them because you can control dependence and you can't control autonomous adults. Adults get to control themselves. But guess what? If we're doing the work of Jesus, we don't need to control anyone.

Survivors, I'm going to talk to you for a second. Until we learn the skill of managing our own minds and emotions, if we've been programmed to think like children who are under authority figures and need to obey human beings instead of growing up and looking to God for our instructions and taking responsibility for our own adult choices, then we will continue to remain in a cage with an open door. I know these are hard words, but Jesus isn't like men. He doesn't try to control anyone. He gives all of us, abusers and victims alike, free choice. He loves you if you are in that cage, and He loves you if you get out. Either way, He is one hundred and fifty percent for you. He is on the bathroom floor, and He is on the dance floor. You can't get away from Him. He loves you. He loves you! He loves you. That brings me back to the pastors.

I wonder what would happen if you all decided to leave your ego at the door and step into love? You know, like that Jesus you preach? Would you continue to muzzle women and keep them from their God given calling to preach if you were like Jesus? Would you disrespect and dishonor and view women merely as your assistants in your agenda if you were like Jesus? Would you yourself refuse to be an assistant to a woman if you were like Jesus? Would you be afraid of what people might do if you were like Jesus? Would you be so afraid of what God might do if you were like Jesus? Would you support abusers while kicking desperate women, who were forced to file for divorce in order to secure peace and safety, out of your churches if you were like Jesus? Would you decide who was in and who was out if you were like Jesus? What is your bottom line? That all your beliefs are lined up in a nice, neat row or faith in a God that you can't comprehend, but who is one hundred percent pure love? When you muzzle, disrespect, dishonor, and mistreat other humans, you are not like Jesus. You are the anti-Jesus in those moments. When you must control other people because you are either full of yourself or full of fear (two sides of the same coin), you show that you have no faith in the God you preach. You are faithless in that moment. When you decide who gets to come to your church and who doesn't based on your manmade rules, you show that you have no wisdom. You are a fool who is wise in his own eyes in that moment. Those of you who want to preach Jesus, be like Jesus! Take a stand. Lay down your pride, your rules, and your burdens and drop into love. The rest of you go home and pick a different gig because we see you now—and this gig is up.

That, my friends, is what I would say to 100,000 preachers. After which time I would probably be stoned to death, so I'm glad this is just in Pixar. I know I'm not talking to a bunch of preachers. I'm talking to a bunch of survivors and people helpers. But what I want you to see is your opportunity to be different and to make a change. Maybe the religious institutions of our day will never change. I kind of think they are self-imploding right now and that they will eventually die away, as I believe they should. Jesus didn't come to set up another world religion. People did that and used Him like a mascot in their quest for power. Maybe God is doing a new thing. Maybe He's making a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.

If you would like to deprogram from abusive religion, why not join us in that work inside the Flying Free Sisterhood program. It's just one of the many things that we deconstruct so that we can then build on a stable foundation that is pure love the way Jesus meant it to be. You can learn more at joinflyingfree.com. That's all I have for you for today. Thank you so much for listening. Until next time, fly free!