

WHEN ABUSE AND OUR FAITH ARE TANGLED UP TOGETHER

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 50 of the Flying Free Podcast! You guys, this is kind of a milestone. I started this podcast one year ago at the very beginning of 2019, and here it is, 2020, and we've hit fifty episodes. So like I mentioned last time, we're going to be starting something new. Once a month we're going to be doing a featured testimonial of a survivor who got out. And once a month it's just going to be you and me and I'm going to give you a lesson, and the lesson will come either from the Flying Free Sisterhood group, I'll pull something out of there, or it might be something like a refurbished blog article that I wrote from a while ago, or it might be something brand new.

So that's what today is. We're going to do a lesson. And today's lesson is actually kind of a combination. It's coming from a session that I'm preparing for the Reclaim Conference which is through... Bob and Polly Hamp have a counseling center down in Hurst, Texas. And they have a Reclaim Conference at the end of January, and they've invited me to come and speak at that conference. I'm going to be presenting four sessions there. Two of them are going to be on the subject of reclaiming our faith. And so I'm going to pull a little bit from one of those sessions today, and actually, what I'm using to create those sessions actually comes out of the Flying Free membership group.

So I have a couple of courses within that group where we really dive into our faith and we dive into the topic of spiritual abuse and just recovering from all of that. Many of us have basically had our faith decimated and torn down to the ground, and I believe we are rebuilders and that's our job as survivors — to rebuild what has been destroyed. And so anyway, we're going to talk about that today.

Now, our faith has often been used as a weapon of control against us, and I believe that because of abuse, either through our church and also through... Hopefully not through our church, but unfortunately, many of us have been abused through our churches as well, but mainly through our spouse, possibly through our family of origin, our faith got hijacked from its rightful place in our life. Faith is supposed to be a source of safety and love and connection with our Creator and our Abba Father.

And I really believe that this is actually the greatest damage that abuse causes in the

lives of victims, and “victims” meaning women and children. You guys, this is exactly what the enemy wants. He wants us to believe that first of all, God is not good, and secondly, God's not powerful, and thirdly, God is not present. And so he weaves our faith together with the abuse so that it becomes very difficult and confusing to tell those two things apart. And I have heard literally hundreds of stories of women and children who have walked away from God at least for a time because they see Him as an abuser God. I just recently posted an article on my website, flyingfreenow.com. I can't remember what it's called, but it's something about, “our God is not an abuser God.”

So our opportunity and our challenge, then, is to do a spiritual surgery on ourselves so that we can remove the shrapnel of abuse from our hearts of faith. So we need to separate those two things so that our hearts can beat again with a strong and healthy beat that's in harmony with our Savior. And that's what we're going to talk about. Now, this process can sometimes take years, so we're just going to get started on it today, and we're only going to be able to open up and look at and identify maybe a few pieces of the shrapnel that are embedded in our hearts.

Your job is going to be to walk away from here and begin the hard and precise work of extracting these things from your heart. This is the kind of work that we do in the Flying Free Sisterhood group. And so you need to be gentle and you need to be patient with yourself. This isn't something that you just stomp out of yourself. It's not something that you shake out of yourself. This is something that takes a lot of work and a lot of time.

Now, one of the biggest things that kept me stuck in my emotionally abusive relationship was what other people had taught me about God. I learned from a very young age that God loved me but also that I needed to make sure that I lived a holy life in order to bring Him glory. And that sounds really good, doesn't it? But the problem is that after that, I was then taught all of the specific black and white ways that I needed to live that holy life. And the rules would change depending on who my authority was at the time.

Now, do you see what the problem is with this? Rather than learning how to grow up into my own relationship with a living God, the Holy Spirit living inside of me, living by faith according to the law of Love, I learned how to stay in a child-like state, relying on the rules that other people made for me. And the rules would change depending on who that authority was in my life.

So my authority — first my parents and then my husband and church leaders — they

spoke to me on behalf of God. This is what I believed. They would interpret scripture for me. They told me what pleased them, and my job was to be a good girl and to obey without question. Now, every time that I did question what I was told because I wanted more information or I didn't understand something or I maybe even disagreed with it, I was shamed. I was told that to ask questions, to wonder about things, or to even disagree with something was not glorifying to God — that I was actually disobeying God when I did that.

Now, all I wanted deep down inside in the whole wide world was to love God and to know He loved me, but I equated the love of other people with the love of God. So if they were happy with me, then I felt that God must be happy with me. And if they were disappointed with me, I felt that God was also disappointed with me. Now, do you believe these things? I think a lot of us do. These are lies. You guys, these are lies from the pit of hell.

Satan doesn't want us to focus on Jesus Christ and the law of Love. He wants us focused on ourselves and other people and he wants us controlled by rules and regulations, because when that happens, we are actually rendered powerless. We live and walk in fear rather than in freedom. And the more of our lives we live as powerless ghosts, the more chaos and destruction is going to reign in our lives and in the lives of everyone around us.

And this is not what God wants for any of His children. So I had to learn the hard way that God was not people and people were not God. I had to learn that Jesus Christ died and rose to dismantle power-over relationships and systems and laws and set up a "new law," and I put that in quotes, that is written on the hearts of His children through the Holy Spirit.

You guys, this is the law of Love, and it trumps the law. Your only authority is Jesus Christ now, and the only law that you live by as a follower of Jesus is the law of Love. So how do we know what this law is and how to live it? Well, Jesus lived out that law perfectly. And you know what? If you read the gospels, you will discover that Jesus Christ made a lot of people very, very angry. He didn't make a lot of people happy. He made them mad. And do you know what this means? If you decide to follow in His footsteps and live by the law of Love instead of the law, you are going to make all the law-lovers angry as well, but your faith and your life is going to have a butterfly effect on the world.

Have you ever heard of that? The butterfly effect? This is the theory that, and I'm taking this from Wikipedia, "The theory that even the smallest step that you take in your life

can change the course of your life immensely. The name of this theory came about when a Chaos Theory stated, 'It has been said that something as small as the flutter of a butterfly's wing can ultimately cause a typhoon halfway around the world.'"

I love that. I love it, too, because of course we use the butterfly as a metaphor in our group so much, and I just think it's amazing that God wants us to transform from caterpillars to butterflies. And even just one flap of your butterfly wing can make a difference in eternity, not just for your life, but in the lives of hundreds of thousands of people that will live after us.

The Apostle Paul wrote, "It is for freedom that Jesus Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yolk of slavery." This is in Galatians 5:1. And also he said, "You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of men," 1 Corinthians 7:23. At the root of all of this, we find that too many today have forgotten the incredible price that was paid in blood for our freedom in Christ.

Ephesians 2:8-9 says, "For we have been called to a spiritual life built upon the free gift of God's grace." And in verse 10 it says, "The works we are to do are only those that our God and Father prepared for us." And this is all taken from Jeff VanVonderen's book, "The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse." "It is to God alone whom we will answer for what we have done in His name and what we've failed to do." I highly recommend that book, by the way.

So between fourth and seventh grade, you guys, I was mercilessly bullied by several of my peers. And I'm not sure why some people get their kicks from bullying, but in my case, I didn't wear the right clothes, I didn't look the right way, I didn't have the right haircut, I didn't act the right way according to their set of rules. So they were in and I was out. Now, my current husband, Tom, he had a best friend for many, many years who came into some money and joined a country club. And suddenly he was too good for Tom, and it was very painful to see that this was the extent of the depth of that relationship.

So have you ever been part of an organization where one of the unspoken rules was to keep your mouth shut about any corruption that you might observe? I think a lot of us have maybe experienced that. And if you chose not to obey this rule, this unspoken rule about staying quiet, and you spoke up or you questioned it, you might have been shunned or even kicked out. Or maybe you're part of a minority group that has to deal with the hidden undercurrents of prejudice and privilege that are hard to expose and pin down. And if you speak up about it you're the bad guy, further persecuted for breaking the rules that supposedly make the world go around.

I think it's human nature to create categories and put other people into those categories. We've got fraternities and sororities and country clubs and political affiliations and religious groups and economic stations and minorities and majorities. We've got old and young, rich and poor, men and women, black and white, Jew and Gentile. These categories are based on a socially destructive belief system that says, "I will only love and accept people who are in the same club that I belong to. That means anyone who meets a certain set of qualifications, obeys a certain set of rules, or holds the same opinions I hold. And I am justified in disrespecting and dehumanizing anyone who doesn't do these things."

Wow. Jesus Christ came — thank God — He came to break these categories. The only polarization that's left is good versus evil. And good means truth, love, and life and freedom, and evil means lies, hatred, persecution, slavery, and death. Jesus taught that love trumps the law. Jesus taught that caring for the hearts of individuals trumps standing on your principles.

It's true. Jesus taught that we exercise self-control, not control, over other people, and Jesus never put anyone in a category. He never pushed anyone to do anything that they didn't want to do. He reached out in love to men and women right where they were at, Jew and Gentile and Samaritan, rich and poor, young and old. There was no distinction for Him except one.

He had hard words for one group of people. And it wasn't everyone in that group, because there were some individuals in that group who were quite interested in what Jesus had to say, and they were humble and open and teachable. But for the most part, most of the people in this group snubbed their noses at anyone who was not in their club of rules and regulations. And He called the people in this group whitewashed tombs full of putrid, dead men's bones. They looked good on the outside, but inside they were dead, and you know what? This group did not like that. And they didn't like it so much, they didn't just shun Him — they murdered Him. Now, that's the ultimate exclusion, right? This group was the group of religious leaders of Jesus' day.

So I want to speak to all of you women who belonged to your church club, because this is the part where we mixed up Jesus with everything that held us prisoner. Maybe you obeyed all the rules, including things like homeschooling, maybe wearing skirts or having long hair, baking bread, birthing a baker's dozen kids. Maybe you served in the church nursery and led a Bible study for stay-at-home moms, you obeyed your husband and your elders and your pastors, you kept your mouth shut so that you wouldn't break the rule about being a dripping faucet or a whiny wife or a rebellious Jezebel. And because as a woman those were your only two options in that club —

either number one, you could be a gold star, quiet, obedient-to-all-the-men-in-the-club women, or number two, be a rebellious Jezebel — so there was no middle ground like, say, Esther, Ruth, Lydia, Priscilla, or Deborah, to name a few — as long as you fit their mold and you got under their control, you were in like Flynn.

But if you dared to open your mouth to call attention to sin or corruption in your marriage or your church, your head would roll. They'd jump all over you with accusations of being bitter, angry, unforgiving, deceived, rebellious, unsaved, and on and on and on. I've talked to literally hundreds of women who have gone through this. When this happens, it's your wake-up call that the church environment that you thought was healthy is actually covering up a thick, toxic lie.

Exclusive environments like this will use bully tactics, disrespect, and shame to maintain control over the lives of human beings that are in their church who were created to rest in freedom. Jesus didn't model this. Satan models this. Satan has a big foot in the local church. This is my opinion. I believe he does, and I believe he's laughing his fool head off at how everything is upside down.

Abusers are coddled and fawned over: "Oh, poor little abusers," while victims who have to make the painful decision to escape their abusive marriages and file for divorce are consequently turned out of the church with no financial assistance, no help for their children, and no emotional or spiritual support for their difficult future as a single parent mourning the loss of her entire life. Divorcing an abusive spouse is often a long, drawn-out nightmare, and the children are caught up in the crosshairs of one parent who's using them to manipulate the abuse target as well as everyone around them, and another parent who's desperately trying to protect them from the abuser's manipulations.

The church club's response to this situation is to forbid divorce and threaten and manipulate the abuse target to go back to her abusive situation, or "God will reject her." They instill this fear and deep sense of betrayal in that woman, thereby causing repeat trauma that she's probably going to spend a lifetime dealing with on many different levels.

You know, I wonder what Jesus thinks about that. Too many churches are invested in self-preservation. They're covering up literally cesspools of evil that destroy human lives. Toxic communities control people with lots of unspoken rules. Spiritually toxic communities control with rules too, but you know what the difference is? Their rules they claim are God's rules, and that's where the spiritual abuse comes in. You need to know that just because someone says that they're a follower of Jesus and says that they

are glorifying God by their rules and regulations and what they say is right or wrong, doesn't mean that they are. A person or a church's habitual actions and character are what define them, not their words.

Healthy trees bear healthy fruit, God says. Sick trees consistently turn out sick fruit or no fruit at all. Bullies are liars. They throw sand at another child in the sandbox when the teacher isn't looking, and then when the victim tells on them, they lie and say it was all the victim's fault. Now, a lazy, apathetic teacher will blame the victim for tattling, and the bully knows this. It's a perfect world for a bully. The church is the perfect front for an abuser.

So what should we do when we're surrounded by individuals who are only content as long as they can control the lives of other people? Well, we walk away. It's as simple as that. We say, "You know what? I don't trust you, and I don't need your lies in my life and I don't need your sand in my eyes. So long." And we go find another sandbox to play in. You see, the world is a great, big place, and your church is just one tiny, little drop in the bucket of humanity. The opinions of the controlling people in your life are just opinions held by a minority of people who desperately need help for their own pathology.

So if you've been characterized as a rebellious Jezebel for staying safe by separating or divorcing your abusive spouse, I want you to know that Jesus Christ is for you. He loves you completely and unconditionally. I am sorry that some of those who claim to be his people do not act like Him. They don't represent Him. He's not like them, and it's really important for you to separate them and their view of you from Jesus Christ and His view of you. This is probably the biggest piece of shrapnel to dig out of your heart.

Now, not all Christians behave like that. There are many Christians who refuse to control other people and instead focus on self-control. Many Christians will have compassion on you. They will listen to understand, and they will support you on your road to recovery. You are in the game, and you are an important player. There are a few haters in the stands who do nothing more than criticize the active players, but your experience is real and your voice matters. The active players like you are the groundbreakers. You're the warriors who fight against all the odds, so you need to stop looking at the haters and weighing their opinions. You need to keep your eyes on your Captain. That's Jesus Christ. Focus on Him and fight for freedom and justice.

I get this whole idea about the fighters in the field and the haters in the stands from Brené Brown. Here's another quote from her. She's the author of many books, but one of her books is called "Daring Greatly," and this is the quote: "Nothing has transformed my life more than realizing that it's a waste of time to evaluate my worthiness by

weighing the reaction of the people in the stands.”

Okay, so if obeying a bunch of rules is not the move here, what is? What does it look like to have an authentic faith in Jesus Christ? Well, John 15:4 says, “Remain in me and I in you. Just as a branch is unable to produce fruit by itself, unless it remains on the vine, so neither can you unless you remain in me.”

Now, at first this might sound like a to-do with a warning. “Unless you do A, B will not happen. So do A.” But you know what, this is really important. I hope you catch this. When you are a child of God, A, which stands for “abiding,” is the natural byproduct. You cannot help but remain in Him, and guess why? Not because you're keeping yourself there, but because He keeps you there. And this is where we get stuck. We think that it all depends on what we ourselves do. We have to do the action of abiding.

So what does abide mean? Well, people will tell you different things about what abiding means. Some people might tell you that abiding means to go to church every single Sunday, to read your Bible for fifteen minutes a day. Oh no, wait. Is it thirty minutes a day? Or if you're a beginner, maybe it's just five minutes a day. Should you pray with the ACTS method, A-C-T-S? Make sure you do the adoration and confession first, or God won't take you seriously when you get to the supplication part. Maybe it means being part of a small group at church, remembering to think godly thoughts throughout the day, never getting fed-up with your kids, never getting fed-up with your narcissistic spouse or parent. Maybe it just means sitting in a chair with a peaceful smile on your face saying, “HmMMM” over and over again. Yeah. That's not Christianity.

Christianity is living by the law of Love, and Jesus is our example. Jesus was the ultimate abider, and you know what He did? It's really simple. This is going to just blow your mind and it's going to give you so much relief. He lived. That's it. He was the Son of God, and what He did was live. He ate, He slept, He drank, He watched his dad work, He worked, He helped His mom, He loved His brothers and sisters, He took care of things, He took care of His body, and He stood up for the marginalized, disenfranchised rejects of the world. He told the truth about the world and about Himself and about false authority, and that got Him killed.

“Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you. Let me teach you, because I am humble and gentle at heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy to bear and the burden I give you is light” (Matthew 11:28-30).

Is the yoke that you are bearing easy? Is your burden light? If it's not, you are not

carrying the yoke and burden of Jesus Christ. You are carrying a yoke and burden put onto you by man, and you can't fly free under that, sister. How about dropping the yoke of man and abandoning yourself to the yoke of Christ? He is waiting with open arms to carry you into freedom. He wants you to have it so bad He died to give it to you.

To abide simply means to live. To abide in Christ simply means to live in Christ, to be in Christ. That's it. It's super simple. So simple that we throw it out the window at the first opportunity to prove our devotion with some kind of measurable yardstick. Maybe it's time to throw the yardstick out the window. As a child of God, you are simply to live the life you were given as Christ lived the life He was given: Speaking truth, being authentic, living in love, helping those who can't help themselves. The only work we're required to do is the work in front of us at any given moment. The person in the room with us is our work. The food in the pot in front of us is our work of love. The paperwork at our desk is our work of love. All we do belongs to Jesus.

Living the law of love, though, requires faith. There are no black and white, rigid rules to follow. We make our decisions at any given moment based on what love shows us to do in that moment. Jesus modeled that and He taught that over and over. You are not a perfect specimen. You know, there are good parts to both you and me and there are bad parts to us. We've got strengths and weaknesses. So we live our life knowing that the Holy Spirit of Jesus is in and around us. We're never going to be righteous enough no matter how hard we work. That's not our job to work at our own righteousness.

The miraculous, incredible inheritance you have right now in this very moment as you're listening to me is that His righteousness is imputed to you. That is amazing grace. If you've lived under the bondage of the law for a long time, this is going to seem foreign and even unbiblical compared to the biblical rules you so meticulously followed. The problem with these man-made rules is this: Who gets to decide where all the lines are drawn? You, me, your pastor, the author of a book, your husband, your parents? Every person on this planet has their own standards and convictions.

You know, one of my dearest friends abandoned me when I filed for divorce, and she would not let her daughter come to our home to visit my daughter. Our daughters were seventeen years old at the time, and they had been best friends all of their lives. So why wouldn't she do this? Because I was getting a divorce? Because that's her standard. Not Jesus Christ living in me and that we were sisters, but rather my marriage status. Is that love? Nope, that was the law.

Here's another example. There was a law-based family at our church who wouldn't let their son work on his school project with my son at the time. These two boys were

working on a group assignment where everyone had to contribute, but they all would share the same grade when it was over. Why wouldn't they let their son work on it with my son? Because it was Sunday and they don't work on Sunday. So the project was due that Monday morning, so my son had to do the entire assignment by himself and they both got full credit for it. Was that love? Nope, that was the law again.

Now, I'm sure you have examples of how the law trumped love in your own relationships, but Jesus never let the law trump love. He healed people on the Sabbath and broke that law. He and His disciples ate grain that they gleaned from the fields on the Sabbath, so He broke the law of working. He talked to Samaritan women and He drank from their cups. Well, one. He spoke hard words to religious leaders. He was accused of having a demon when He did that. He spoke kindly to a woman who was accused of adultery when the law said that she had to be stoned. All because of love.

Ladies, He loves you this way. If only I could get this from your head into your heart. I spent most of my life begging God to get this from my head into my heart. And you know what happened? I lost everything and everyone important to me and I had only Jesus left, and that's when it clicked into place. I had spent my life living by the law, not to win the love of Jesus, but to win the love of human beings — to win their acceptance and approval and love. So the law as defined by those closest to me at any given time was my measuring stick. What a tragic loss of years. What a futile chasing after wind.

Someone recently asked me if trusting God meant that she should sit and wait for him to move in her life or if she should take action. Many of us stay in our destructive relationships because we are genuinely trusting God to move in a powerful way. We trust that He sees us and hears our cries for help and that one day He'll set us free. Is that bad? Women who choose to leave often hear others rebuking them, saying, "You must not have trusted God. You took matters into your own hands rather than trusting God in your suffering." Is that right?

Let's just deconstruct this just a little bit and see if we can get some clarity. First of all, as a Christ-follower, our focus is on Christ, not people. We have His Holy Spirit living inside of us. We have his mind in us — 1 Corinthians 2:16. It's when we take our eyes off of Him that we start to feel a little bit dizzy like Peter in the raging sea, and we begin to sink in despair. Religion likes to have everything in black and white, but a Christ-follower lives a life of faith, and that requires an organic wisdom from his spirit as we navigate different life experiences.

This is part of what He tried to teach us when He demonstrated over and over again that love trumps the law. Now, this means that sometimes God may want us to wait on

Him, and there are lots of examples of this in the Bible, and sometimes God may want us to step out in faith and take action. And there are lots of examples of this in the Bible.

[Part of the episode in the recording is missing, hence the jump from one subject to the next.]

By comparison, you feel ugly and small. But when you grow up into your own, you're going to find your own people, the swans, and you will discover the beautiful creature God created you to be. You are not alone. Don't trust yourself, but trust the Holy Spirit in you to direct your paths. He may be telling you to wait right now, or He may be preparing you for the next step.

Or maybe you're feeling that strong sense that He's saying, "Now, my daughter," and you know that you must move in a certain area. You're afraid, but you know that He's pressing in on you. Susan David said, "Courage is fear walking." So it might be time to gather up the courage that God is giving you in the middle of your fear and start walking by faith. And when others start meddling, and I promise you they will, you just tell them, "Hey, I'm keeping my eyes on Jesus. He's got me. Thanks." And you keep waiting or moving depending on what Jesus is impressing on your heart.

And if your decisions lead you down a dark path, that does not mean you did the wrong thing or made the wrong choice. Often the best choices are the hardest roads to walk. Not always, but often. You take the jump because you must, and you know that He will catch you. He will always catch you, even if you make a mistake. And that is what it means to trust God. "Come to me, all who are weary and heavy laden, 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 load is light." Until next time, fly free.