

CAN CHRISTIANS BE NARCISSISTS?

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 67 of the Flying Free Podcast! Today we're going to be talking with Dave Orrison. He's been a pastor for forty-two years and is currently serving a congregation in Drake, Colorado. He's a happily married man with eight sons. I want to ask you a little bit about that in a minute because that's fascinating. He has a website called gracefortheheart.org. When we're done with this interview, if you want to go and see some of the things he's written and subscribe to his articles, you can do that.

Today we're going to be talking about the link between legalism and narcissism. Dave, let's first go back to that eight boys thing. Then I want you to tell us why you got into researching, studying, and diving into this world of legalism and narcissism. I'm fascinated to know how you linked the two of them. I've seen that as well in my own experience, but finding out how you make those connections is going to be interesting. But first, tell us about the eight boys.

DAVE: We have eight sons. I think the oldest is forty-two and the youngest is twenty-three. We used to tell people (and anyone with a big family probably understands this) when they'd say, "How old are your kids?" we would say, "Pick an age."

NATALIE: Right.

DAVE: And all their names start with "J" which just drove people nuts.

NATALIE: Oh wow! How could you even remember all of them?

DAVE: We would just go by numbers, you know?

NATALIE: That's hilarious! So how many grandkids do you have?

DAVE: Just two. We've got another one on the way. And guess what? A girl is on the way! An actual Orrison girl. We're pretty excited.

NATALIE: So your first two grandkids were boys also?

DAVE: Well, we have a little adopted girl, a stepdaughter. So she's there but wasn't born into the family. I told my son I'm glad that he connected with her so we could learn to love her. I was always afraid that I was too big to be wrapped around a little finger. Now she's taught me how to wrap around a little finger. She's sweet.

NATALIE: Now you know. That's awesome. I bet your wife is grateful, too.

DAVE: Oh yeah. She has always really enjoyed the boys. She's kind of a tom-boyish person herself. She loves outdoors and she loves "boy" things. So it's been good. She's really enjoyed the guys. We've even gotten a comment. Again, if you've walked in our circles you would understand a little bit better, but someone said, "You know Mrs. Orrison talks with her boys." That was like a revelation. "Well yes, as a matter of fact."

NATALIE: That's bizarre! Why wouldn't you talk with your boys?

DAVE: Well, we had families that just... If mom didn't connect with the boys, then the boys were pretty much on their own. That's what we saw. That's a little bit of the patriarchal part of the legalist, Bill Gothard stuff that we were in. There's a little bit of, "Well, boys will be okay because they are boys," so the moms focused on the girls.

NATALIE: That's so sad.

DAVE: It was not something that was ever spoken. It wasn't taught, but it was an undercurrent. Those undercurrents are powerful. They have a lot to do with expectations and comparisons. So she got a comment one time, "Mrs. Orrison actually talks with her boys." I thought that was my mom. So we've had quite a life.

NATALIE: That's tragic though, because when you think about all of the richness of relationships that get lost because of our preconceived ideas of relationships between men and women, boys and girls, and our view of each other is so twisted and warped, it's really sad.

DAVE: It really is. I think we have the desire to go with the easiest path, even though it's hard. So looking for a system to do our work for us is natural, right? If someone says, "Here's how to raise kids..." If you look back thirty years, how many different systems have come up on how to raise kids? And why? Partly because people are afraid and partly because people are just plain lazy. The relationships are work. They are hard sometimes. We have homeschooled all these years, and sometimes you feel like you'd rather go bang your head against the wall than take another minute of homeschooling. I suspect there's a lot of people feeling that right now.

NATALIE: Yes. I homeschooled for twenty years, and I haven't now for the last five. We're obviously back at it again. And yeah, I don't really miss it, I have to say.

DAVE: Yeah. That doesn't downplay the good times. There certainly were some benefits and some good times in all of it, but relationships are work. The closer they are the more work they are. I'm not downgrading anybody when I say it's easier in some aspects to send your kids off to school and have a free day, because homeschooling moms never get a free day, right?

NATALIE: Right.

DAVE: There's never a break, and those are hard things. I think if we could find something that was easier, like ship our kids off to some camp or have a system, then we know where we have failed or what we ought to do. It seems easier, anyway. The problem, of course, is that it doesn't work. You just keep needing new systems.

NATALIE: Right. I think that's because people, human beings, whether they are eighty, forty, or four, are individuals. They require wisdom in interacting with them. When you put everybody in the same box and run them through the same grid, some of them will be fine and some of them are not. Some of them aren't going to be fine. They are not going to fit in that box, they're not going to fit in that grid. If we as Christians aren't willing to look to God for wisdom and look at ourselves and the way we are reacting to that specific child who is extra challenging and look for answers, then we will run into more problems. We are going to beat our heads against the wall.

DAVE: Yeah. That's right. Or bang the kid's head against the wall. That's the frustrating part. You get angry when you get frustrated and you're not able to make that communication happen. Then that turns into anger, and that has another whole cost to it. That's what my wife went through. She homeschooled five kids in a row and then hit one whose learning style was very different. Well, you've got five who are still in process of learning their way. They are all doing about the same thing. Suddenly there is this one who must have some special attention and has to be off doing something else. That's challenging! That's hard especially if you have little ones coming up besides. It's a dynamic that is difficult. It goes back to whenever we have something that is difficult, the desire to have a system or a formula to make it easy is strong.

NATALIE: Yeah. And when people make that promise and say, "Here. If you do this, this, and this you will be growing kids God's way." Well, I want to grow my kids God's way, not my way, so I'd better do those things.

DAVE: Yeah, I know. As opposed to whose way? Who else's way are we going to choose, right?

NATALIE: Exactly! That was a genius marketing tool, by the way.

DAVE: And a classic legalist move.

NATALIE: Exactly. "God says so."

DAVE: "God says this, and I think that's right because with that comes the guarantee, right?" That's the trap, because the guarantee is such that if you do this, this, and this, God will give you this, this, and this. Now if God is not giving you this, then we must look at why. The "why" will always be your failure. You did not do the system the way it's supposed to be done because the system is holy. It's "God's system." So around and around it goes. It's no wonder people come out of there feeling discouraged and defeated, unworthy, shamed, all those words that come along with that.

NATALIE: Yeah. It's definitely a flawed system. So what is the link between all of that? A lot of people who are listening to this, most of them are women and most of them are women of faith, the Christianity version of faith (I've seen every denomination in that version across the board), and they've come out of legalistic thinking. So they are very familiar with that. If any of you listening are not familiar with that, thank your lucky stars. But most of them are familiar with that and are still trying to deprogram from that kind of thinking because it's been ingrained in them that they've got intertwined with their idea of who God is. So for them, to have faith in God means to have faith in this whole system also. We must somehow extricate who God is from the system that they bought into. But I'm fascinated to know what the link is between legalism and narcissism, which is something you've done a lot of work with. I know you have a lot of articles about narcissism in the church. You've written a book called "Narcissism in the Church."

DAVE: "Narcissism in the Church," yeah.

NATALIE: So is everybody who is legalistic a narcissist? Tell me about that.

DAVE: Let me step back and explain the journey I went through to get into all this, and hopefully I can do that quickly. I was a pastor in the Presbyterian church for several years, a conservative in a liberal group, and felt uncomfortable. I came into the evangelical church thinking, "Oh boy. This is going to be great." Bottom line, I found the same politics, the same compromises, the same frustrations, but just a bit better

defined system of faith. At least evangelicals said they knew what they believed. A few years later we were introduced to Gothard's stuff. In Gothard's stuff I found people who were very serious about their faith. They knew what they believed. They dedicated themselves to what they believed. It was attractive for someone like me coming out of the liberal church with a conservative background or belief system. So the Gothard thing looked like it was serious Christians serious about their faith. It had that attraction for us and for our family.

Now that is right at the time that we were starting our family. We had some little kids. We were pulling in trying to figure out how to protect them in this crazy world. And what do you know, there's a system. It looked good. Even though we sort of went in with our eyes open, the system still had some hidden parts. One of the tenants of legalism is that you never quite find out the whole story. Once you find out what you're doing wrong and change so that you are doing something right according to that, then they come up with another thing you are doing wrong. So you can never win in that system. It always continues to change. It's kind of like the secret organization that demands commitment, serious commitment, before they tell you their secrets. You must believe their secrets before they will tell you them. So Gothardism was that, legalism was that.

I'm not going to equate legalism and Gothardism. Gothardism, the teachings of Bill Gothard, were examples of legalism at work. Somewhat extreme, I suppose. Not as extreme as many of the cult groups, although certainly almost there. Cultic, if you will. I began to look at what in the world was going on, and I realized this whole thing was about performance. So I talk about performance spirituality. It's all based on the quality and quantity of my performance. In other words, if I do well enough (again, both quantity and quality) then God will notice me and bless me. If I do enough good things and I do them in the right way, God will notice me and bless me. You know as well as I do if you read the Bible with that grid in place, you will find support for that system. You will find proof texts that tell you that same message over and over. It says if you do well, you'll be blessed. So legalism has its roots in the Bible, but it's because of a certain grid... Do you understand what I mean by grid? I don't know if everyone will. Let's say a preconceived impression, a prejudice. That has other taints.

NATALIE: Like a pair of glasses. You're putting on a pair of glasses that have a certain color. Then you look around you and everything has that hue of color.

DAVE: Right. Certain colors get washed out because of those same glasses. So you see some things more and you see some things less. That's basically what I'm saying. There are scripture passages that support the legalism, and that's why a lot of people who

leave legalism also leave their faith in the scriptures and they don't want to read the Bible anymore. I've had people say, "I just can't read the Bible without seeing that stuff." My standard response to that is, "Well then don't. Pray."

NATALIE: Can I jump in here and say something? Bingo! I was an avid Bible reader for my whole entire life. I grew up in that conservative family where you read your Bible through every year. We did lots of Bible studies. I went to a Bible school. So I loved the Bible. My journals are full of Bible verses and my skewed thinking about what they were saying. But I literally had to set my Bible aside for probably two or three years. I'd pick it up occasionally and look at it, but then I'd put it back down again and say, "You know what? I'm still not ready." I just recently started picking it back up again with a different pair of glasses on my face, and I am reading it through a different grid. It is incredibly different! It's like I am reading a completely different book. It's so bizarre.

DAVE: Yes. Amen. I believe God will lead you back to the Bible because my personal belief is that that's His given word. He has desired for us to read the Bible, but I don't think He ever wanted us to read the Bible for the Bible. He didn't want us to look for the Bible in the Bible. That's what we were taught. That's what evangelicals were taught. That's clearly what the legalist is taught. You are supposed to go from one proof text to another, finding deeper and deeper support in the scriptures for the ideas that we have. So we look to the Bible for the Bible. But when you look to the Bible for Jesus (I'm getting on my soapbox preaching here)...

NATALIE: I love this!

DAVE: When you look in the Bible for Jesus, you'll find Him also. It's just that you are looking for a different thing. I always tell people, "When you do get called back to the Bible, go to the book of John and look at how Jesus loved people. Just look for that. Don't look for anything else. Look at how Jesus loved people because it's all through there." Suddenly it starts to open this idea of who Jesus is and who God is and you get a different perspective, a different grid. Now I look back in the Bible, and I look in the Old Testament and some of the stuff that seems so restrictive and law based, and I think, "Why did God give us the law? He gave us the law because He loves us."

So let's look at even the law from that perspective of Him loving us. Not as a book of rules, but as the same kind of love that we would say that... If your kids are off in college and you write something that is on your heart for them, it would be the same type of communication. You don't want them to look and say, "What does mom want us to do now?" You want them to hear the love in your heart as you write to them. Yes, that might have some specifics. But the point of those specifics is the love from your

heart. If we can look back even in the Old Testament and start seeing how God loved His people, how He loved them from the beginning and how He took care of them, I'll tell you what, it opens the scriptures in ways that the legalists have never heard of, sadly.

It's sad. That's kind of the point. Legalism makes the Bible a book of rules, almost a math book in the way that they do cause and effect, and certainly a book full of "If you do this, then you're going to get this." Then they look for the proof text. It becomes this whole book of rules and that kind of focus. God is the judge, the policeman, the great critic who knows every detail of our lives and judges us. Jesus, at the best, is some kind of mediator who holds God off. The message is that God wants to zap you and send you to hell forever, but Jesus holds Him back.

NATALIE: Yeah. I've written an article and I call that the abuser god. It's not the true God. It's an abuser god. When we worship an abuser god and we think that's the way God is, we find ourselves behaving in similar ways toward other people, then, instead of like Christ.

DAVE: Yes, because authority does filter down whether we like it or not. The one that we lift up and look toward, even if in our heart we hate them, are afraid of them, and would like to push them away, the one we put up in authority is still the model and the one we pattern our lives off of. I've told people over the years that as parents we will either consciously do differently than our parents or we will unconsciously do the same thing. So we have the same types of anger expressions that our parents do. We have the same type of marriage relationships that our parents do. Unless we purposely and consciously do different, which we can, but in times of stress we often don't stop and think that one through. Same thing in our relationship with God. If you think God is an abuser, if God is violent and angry, then you can justify your own anger and your own violence by appealing to God.

NATALIE: And people do.

DAVE: People do. I think legalism is all that in a package. From that legalism, from that idea of God being this performance-oriented Being who looks down on us and wants to see how well we are behaving so that He can reward us or punish us on the basis of our performance, He is the foreman in the sky or the policeman, as long as we do that, we create a system. To me, that is the legalist system. That is the system under that law that is performance based. Out of that comes guilt and shame, fear and failure, judgment, and comparisons. All those things come out of that.

We talked about this a little bit last time, but the comparisons within the legalist system. I said it this way: "I may not be as good as Jesus, but I can be better than you. I can be better than you in some areas." We maybe talked about this before, but the homeschool marketing system, which I tried to explain to people, is a true marketing system. I'll never forget the magazine from quite a few years ago (I think it was "Teaching Home" magazine) always had a family on the cover. It was these parents with twelve kids. All the kids are dressed alike. They are all smiling. They are holding their violins (because they all play violin) and everybody is so happy. I got in front of a homeschool group twenty years ago and I said, "You know what? I've known a lot of those families, and I know how incredibly miraculous it was to get that single picture."

NATALIE: Right.

DAVE: But that was the thing. Right there on the cover of the magazine was, "If you get our magazine and you read our articles and you buy our products, you can have a family like this." Look at the control. Look at the joy.

NATALIE: I was just thinking. Believe me, I remember those magazines. I remember one family, and I found out later the dad had gone off and had an affair with his secretary, got her pregnant, and ended up marrying her. Here's the thing I never realized back then. To get all those kids... What are the odds that everyone in the family has this passion for violin, for example? Not good.

DAVE: Not good.

NATALIE: There is coercion. There is power and control over the lives of children where they have to do one thing based on what the patriarch in the family is telling them to do, and they are actually not able to exercise their own God-given bent, their own God-given gifts and trajectory in life because they are being dictated by the patriarch who is basically standing in the place of God and saying, "No! I don't care how God created you, this is what you are going to do. You are going to do what I want you to do. We're going to look amazeballs. We're going to be on the cover of a magazine and everyone is going to want to be like us." Behind the scenes, I can almost guarantee that those families were not peace-filled. I'm sure that all those kids did not grow up to play the violin and be violin virtuosos.

DAVE: Exactly. I've known many of those families, and that same scenario repeats. They've got two or three kids who have just wandered because how could... If you don't mind me picking on one thing, it wasn't always the patriarch, right? Sometimes mom was the driving force.

NATALIE: Yes! You are absolutely right.

DAVE: I know dads who would not ever have gotten into homeschooling simply because they didn't want to deal with it, but mom was the one who wanted to look good. So they had to perform well in order to look good because performance is all about how you look, right? When the narcissistic boss comes in, all the employees work hard at looking like they are working hard. Appearance is everything. That's true in legalism and that's true in narcissism. What you described just now, the patriarch who says, "Everybody is going to play the violin," is a system where individualism is discounted. People are depersonalized. We don't care who you are as a person. All we care about is how you represent the family, particularly the dad or the mom, but how you represent us. That's all we care about. That is narcissistic abuse.

NATALIE: You're right. It is. I get it now. I get the link.

DAVE: It's an easy step from one to the other at that point.

NATALIE: That's why it really attracts people who have narcissistic tendencies.

DAVE: Exactly.

NATALIE: Because now they have the approval of God for their narcissistic worldview.

DAVE: Right. What's better than holy narcissism?

NATALIE: Oh my gosh, what a perfect storm.

DAVE: So if you look at a legalistic church, take your standard legalistic church... By the way, that is also on a sliding scale. There are churches that are very friendly and gracious and only narcissistic or legalistic under the surface. Often people don't find this out until later. But I guess I would lump three groups of people in the legalistic church. The first group that I would address are the abusers, the users, the ones who come in to "lead" all these sheep. The second group are the sheep. They want to be led. They want to give their responsibilities and as much of their work in life as possible over to the ones who lead them. "Don't tell me that I have to go to the Lord and try to figure out what He wants me to do next. Just tell me what to do next and then I'll do that." The legalistic system offers that and people like that. They are already filled with fear. They are already filled with the idea that they will never measure up. They expect to fail. They almost expect rejection and abuse.

Something you said earlier was that we need a different view of God and that it is hard to come out of legalism because our view of God is so damaged by that. But also our view of ourselves. The chances are that people in legalistic churches grew up in legalistic churches. That's not always the case, but the chances are that they grew up in a legalistic church or at least grew up in a performance system where you were valued if you did what mom and dad said. If you didn't do what mom and dad said, then you were rejected.

That is something that every parent had to deal with in a conscious way. How do you discipline your kids without making them feel rejected? I think it is the natural process to think that discipline means rejection. So how do we do that? Frankly, most of our parents never even asked the question. They just did it. Go to your room and be alone. Get a spanking. Get physical pain from the one who says they love you. Those things are difficult for children to understand. Parents need to go the extra hundred miles to make sure that somehow discipline and welcome or acceptance don't negate each other. You must love your kids, and you have to discipline them. Both are the case.

NATALIE: Yeah. Can I jump in and share one little thing? Because I can hear women and what they are thinking. Some of them are thinking, "How do you do that?" I have my own ideas on how I have done that that I will quick share, but then I'm interested to know how you would also do that. The thing that I have learned about kids is that you can actually... If you look at all the things they love, the privileges you give to them, and the things that make their life happy, you can take away those things without taking away your love. Then you can give your kids the choice.

Our kids will grow up to be adults who will get to make choices about how they want to live their lives. They need to understand that while they may make a wrong choice, they may lose something wonderful. They might lose their ice cream for the night if they choose not to eat their dinner, but you still love them. You can take away their ice cream without yelling at them. If you are okay with your own feelings of, "Oh shoot! I wanted to control this kid. I wanted him to eat his dinner." If you are okay with, "No, it's okay. He gets to choose. If he doesn't want to eat his dinner, that is totally fine. He doesn't get his ice cream then, but that is totally fine," I'm still able to come at my child from a place of love, acceptance, warmth, and no guilt feelings on my part for not letting him have his ice cream. I wanted to give that example of how you could "discipline" your kids without losing any of your love and affection for them.

DAVE: That's exactly right. It's a contractual cause and effect. It's an understanding from the beginning. Actually, if you do that well with your kids, they will agree ahead of time to that type of punishment.

NATALIE: Yes, they will.

DAVE: If you say, "I don't want you to use your cell phone at the table. If you use your cell phone at the table, I am taking it away for a day. Do you understand that?" "Yep, that's fine." Well, there it is. It is already built in. Both sides have accepted it. It shows respect for the child. It takes the burden off the parent. You don't have to become angry to accomplish it. It's all right there. But I would say, and everybody needs to hear this one: you will do this poorly. This is hard work! This is not easy. Very few of us grew up with models that worked that way. So don't beat yourself up if you fail. It is part of the deal. We grow as we parent. You wish you could be a complete person with everything good in life before you get a kid. But God says, "I'm going to use these kids to help you grow up and help you learn some things."

NATALIE: This is your huge, amazing, incredible opportunity and training ground to figure out your own areas where you are emotionally deficient... I shouldn't say "deficient." It's where you have those opportunities to grow. Your kids and your marriage will be the things that help you to see where those are, and then you can do that personal work. It's sad that the church says, "It's so selfish to focus on yourself." If you don't focus on your own personal inner work, if you don't have a safe welcoming place for yourself, you are not going to be able to create safe welcoming places for anyone else.

DAVE: Absolutely! It's the same thing that they tell you on the airplane: "Put your oxygen mask on first." I tell that to people I counsel all the time. They say, "Oh, we've got kids." I'd say, "Get yourself healthy first. You've got to focus there first."

NATALIE: I decided to break this episode into two because Dave and I talked a long time. In this episode, part one, we focused a little bit more on parenting. In part two we get into more of the conversation about the link between narcissism and legalism. I hope you'll come back for Episode 68 next week and hear part two.

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