

THE LINK BETWEEN NARCISSISM AND LEGALISM IN THE CHURCH

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 68 of the Flying Free Podcast! Today is part two of a conversation that we had last week with Dave Orrison of "Grace for the Heart." Dave has been a pastor for forty-two years. He's happily married and he has eight grown sons. Last week we were talking about parenting, narcissism, and legalism. This is part two. The conversation got long, so I decided to turn this into two different podcasts. The second half of our conversation was more about the link between narcissism and legalism. It's extremely fascinating. If you didn't get a chance to hear last week's episode, you can hit that up on your favorite podcast app. It's Episode 67. Otherwise you can go to my website, which is flyingfreenow.com/67, and this one is housed at flyingfreenow.com/68. You can apply that trick to any of the episodes, by the way. If you don't like to listen and you'd rather read the transcript, you can find the transcripts on the website there. Let's get started on this second half of our conversation.

DAVE: That's a good segue to get back to this whole legalist/narcissist connection, because the fundamental, bottom line of narcissism is that you are not a real person. You are only some other person or force that affects my life. As long as you affect my life, then I have to deal with you, but I don't have to treat you as a real person because a narcissist literally does not see others as a real person.

Neither does the legalist: the legalist pastor, the legalist parent, the legalist church members. People say they don't understand the church. How can you be friends (and we've all heard this) and have such deep, wonderful friendships for years and you cross them one time, you do something where they think differently than you do, and all of a sudden you are a pariah? You are pushed away, they talk about you behind your back, and they are cruel. What kind of a friendship is that? That's a friendship that is self-serving. That's a friendship that didn't value you as a person, it valued you as someone useful in their lives. I'm not sure that makes me feel any better, but it answers the question and again is a connection between legalism and narcissism.

NATALIE: Yeah, I can totally see that. I was going to say earlier when we were talking about the Bible and how people pull out these verses, when you look at the whole Bible as the heart of the Bible, you can see the heart of God.

DAVE: You can.

NATALIE: When you look at the heart of a relationship, whether it's a marriage relationship or your relationship with your child, you can see and experience the heart of that relationship. A lot of times women in abusive relationships will try to explain the problems they are having by using specific examples, and other people on the outside can't grasp or understand it. Or you might be trying to explain the undercurrent of the feelings you are getting at your church... I really think people know instinctively, deep down inside they know, "If I make one wrong move, I am out." There is that underlying fear inside. It's an organic feeling of either safety in a relationship, being seen, being known, being loved, or it's an overall feeling of, "I'm only in this relationship only as long as I am a feeder or source of fuel for this church, for this God, for this husband, or for whatever." So the narcissist is like a parasite and you are just a host. If you are sensing in any relationship that you are a host, a source of fuel for somebody, that is your biggest red flag, I think.

DAVE: I agree. I use the word "depersonalize." It's such a big word and it's awkward, but I still haven't come up with a better one. I've toyed with that for probably fifteen years trying to figure out what would be a better word that really communicates that. But it's the idea that someone would see me not as a person. I always say that a narcissist looks at somebody as a tool, toy, or obstacle. You are either a tool for them to use, a toy for them to play with, or an obstacle in their way. But you are not a person, because they don't know "persons" other than themselves. They don't care.

People say, "Why do narcissists abuse?" It's not because they are mean-spirited, it's because they have no idea, no connection, and no interest in you as a person. If they can make a comment and get you riled, they are having fun. They are playing. Narcissists do that all the time. Or if they steal your work, steal your supplies, or steal whatever credit you think you should get, they just do that by nature. It doesn't matter to them. Talk about malignant narcissism. Somehow, I think that is supposed to be opposed to good narcissism, which I still think that's like saying there's a "good cancer."

NATALIE: Right.

DAVE: I think narcissists aren't necessarily malignant. They don't hate you. They just don't care about you which, by the way, is the right definition of hatred. The person who can look at you and not see you and use you for his own purposes, that's the real hater. Love takes the risk of opening to another real person. That's the challenge of love. That's another whole subject. There's another group in churches. The first group is the people who are attracted because they are users. They desire to be in charge, and

the church gives them that opportunity. The second group are people who want to follow. They don't want to think, they don't want to commit, they just want to be told what to do. So they expect to be sheep. Then there are the others, and I just put these all in a group. They are confused. They look at what's going on and they just don't quite understand. They are surprised when somebody betrays them in the church. They are disappointed. They might be oblivious to what's going on. They will learn. They will find out, and they will choose to either be a user or a sheep. Or they will get out because there really is no middle ground.

These churches do have a certain attraction and they do bring in new people. So you always must account for a group of people who don't really know what's going on. But that is also true in narcissistic relationships. Narcissists are the users who look for people. You used the word "parasite." I've used that in the past as well. Another good word for a narcissist is "predator." Really, it's the same thing, it's just that one is big and one is little. Predators look for people to use. We think about that when we think about serial abusers or sociopaths who go out and hurt people. But that is true in most normal relationships. There are some who are users, and they look for people to do that. Why do you suppose pastors are often narcissists? Because that narcissistic tendency to use people for your own power, privilege, or prestige, to get what you want, makes it quite easy for a pastor to do that. It's not so much that pastors become narcissists, it's that narcissists become pastors.

NATALIE: Right.

DAVE: Think about it. I've been a pastor for forty-two years. Think about an opportunity (and you hinted at this) where a guy gets in the pulpit and proclaims the word of God. You sit in his counseling office and he speaks for God. Nothing makes a narcissist happier than to have that kind of authority and attention. He gets into a pulpit that is higher than everyone else. They all sit quietly and listen to what he came up with during the week. It's a perfect system for narcissists. Some look at it and think we should just dump the whole thing. I don't think that's the answer, but I do think let's at least go in with our eyes open. Let's go in and understand what we've got. To think that a denomination would be somehow separate from a secular type of politics is nonsense. You are part of a mission organization.

I'll bet there is someone who will listen to this that has come out of a mission organization beat up, cast aside, and wondering how in the world these good mission people could do this. They might not say "good mission people" now. But they didn't know what happened. Because narcissists like mission organizations, they have so much power over the lives of the people they send out. They decide how much these

people make. They decide where these people go. They decide what these people do, how they communicate to their people. They are the measurement of their success. Narcissists love that kind of stuff. The door is wide open for narcissism in the church, I think.

I think the legalist system, where it is all based on performance, is the perfect system for the narcissist because... You might remember I said that narcissists have a superpower, the superpower of the narcissists. By the way, this is just as powerful as almost any superpower we think about in the Marvel network. The narcissist can manipulate what other people think of them. So a narcissist goes into a relationship and people think they are the most wonderful, gracious listeners. They are full of empathy. I've had people tell me, "My husband, I'm pretty sure he's a narcissist, but he's very empathic." I said, "No, he's not." I must get them to explain what they mean by "empathic." They'd say, "Well, he listens all the time." I'll say, "How does he use the information that you give?" "Well, usually he brings it back to beat me with it." That's not empathy.

NATALIE: No.

DAVE: That's gathering useful information, which is what narcissists do. They appear to be good listeners. They appear to be supportive. I've heard many times, "Narcissists I know are very generous." I would ask, "What is the contract that you entered into?" They'll say, "What?" "No, you're supposed to give him something now." They don't have any idea what I'm talking about. They think he's generous, but he's not. He's investing.

NATALIE: He's investing in loyalty too, because if anything ever does get exposed... I've been involved in two exposures of pastors from two different churches. Both of those situations had people who were on both sides of the issue. Some people were supporting the pastor and some people said, "No, we need to figure this out." Both eventually were exposed and were outed. But they had purchased the loyalty, or invested in the loyalty, of some people, because instinctively they know they will eventually be found out because they are doing naughty things. They are naughty people. They know they are deceiving massive amounts of people. They have to make sure they have all their ducks in a row on the back end so if anyone ever does try to expose them, those people will end up getting maligned and their reputations will end up getting ruined because of all the people they have on their side. The whole thing is sick and wrong and gross.

DAVE: It is. One of the things that bothers me the most, in fact, I wrote on that recently... It really ticks me off because it shouldn't happen in the church. Of all the

places in the whole world, of all the groups in the whole world, we should be able to go to the church and find love and acceptance and welcome and kindness and thoughtfulness. Of all the people in the world, other Christians should treat us as persons.

NATALIE: We should find Jesus!

DAVE: We should find Jesus, exactly. It's frustrating to me. I get these things on Facebook about the pastors who have fallen almost every day. I want to shut it off because I grieve every time. I don't shut it off because I need to know that reality. I just read one this morning of a youth pastor who tried awfully hard to seduce a fifteen-year-old girl. Finally, as you say, it was found out. But he has his supporters. It blows you away.

But narcissists can get supporters. Narcissists always have supporters. Chances are good that if you come up against a narcissist, you come up against a group by yourself. You know personally what I am talking about. You stand against a cohesive group of people. I call them sycophants, and someday I should encourage people to research what "sycophant" means. These are the people who come around behind and attack the accuser vehemently just so they can support the narcissist. Nasty and awful people, sometimes. They all have various reasons. They may have sold their loyalty to the narcissist, they may have desires to become part of it. A lot of times the people who follow a pastor like that who has been very popular want what he has got. They think that if they can associate with him... they're kind of second-class narcissists or second-step.

NATALIE: Right. They are in the big narcissist's little army.

DAVE: Yes. They think they get attention that way, and of course they do. It works for them. Not every narcissist has the same level of ambition. Some are content to rule their youth group or rule their group of friends. Some, honestly, are content to rule in their home. You might have the dad who follows the pastor and follows the rules and the church leadership, but then he is the dictator at home parroting all those rules. We saw a lot of that in the legalist church. I think narcissism and Christianity go hand-in-hand. I must be careful. That's not a statement to put in writing without explanation. The reason I say that is because Christians, most of us who come to Jesus, want to be accepted. We come in our weakness. We come in our rejection. We come in our pain. We want to be taken care of. How many Christians have you heard say, "All I want to do is get to heaven and sit on Jesus's lap or just have Him hold me"? Our heart of hearts is tender and desires peace and welcome. I think of any emotion, this longing for heaven

is a longing for acceptance and welcome, a place where I fit, a place where I am at home.

There is really a sadness when that is not the church. The church should at least reflect that. By the way, I'm not against the church. I think churches can still do that. I think it's harder. I think it takes a little more effort. I don't think you can get there by counting heads and taking attendance or what we used to say, "Buildings, bodies, and bucks." If that's your formula for church success, it's not going to happen. But if you are willing to just enjoy people and let them be people and mess up once in a while and still love them, I think you can find that in church. To me, that is what churches really ought to be about.

NATALIE: Right. So if you were to take the whole picture of the narcissist and narcissist-run institutions... And when we talk about abuse, we talk about power and control over other people, which would be the narcissist powering and controlling over other people, but the opposite of that is self-control and letting other people have the freedom to be who they are even if that means that they don't do what you think they should do. Even if that means that they disobey what the Bible says in certain areas because that is between them and God.

It's not our business. Jesus Christ came to this earth and all He did was love people right where they were at. He ate and drank with sinners. That's what He did, and that's what rocked the world. Our job is to be the hands and feet of Jesus, and it's His kindness that leads to repentance. I believe it is our kindness, love, and acceptance toward other people right where they are at on the journey that will lead them to repentance. The other thing we must remember is that their story isn't over.

DAVE: That's right.

NATALIE: Just because you live a chapter with somebody and they are in a chapter where their lives are falling apart and they are making some bad choices, it doesn't mean their story is over. You are not the catalyst to say, "I am going to turn this person's life around." That is not your job. Your job is to enter into that person's chapter and love and accept them where they are at.

I've done it both ways. I've been the homeschooling mom, the one who knows all the answers and is the Bible-thumper. I've entered people's lives like that and it hasn't been helpful. I've also entered into people's lives since I've come out of that where I let them make their mistakes and I let them do their "sinful" things and still love them anyway. I've watched them come to a place of recognition of that and how it hasn't served their

lives, and I never ever had to say anything. They were able to figure that out themselves based on natural consequences, natural feelings of unhappiness, and I was able to be the safe person they could come to. In the past, people sensed that I wasn't the safe person they could go to, that I might give them a lecture or tell them a Bible verse. Sadly, that's what I came out of.

DAVE: And sadly, that's the general perception of the church as a whole. "I'm not going to go to church of all places because they will just judge me." That breaks my heart. That is not what the church should be. Romans 14:4 is powerful because it is in the context of us looking at someone else's life and judging them. Paul says, "Who are you to judge another's servant?" In other words, you are only a servant. You don't get to judge someone else's servant. "To his own master he stands or falls." Only God can judge. Many times you stop there, but that's not the end of the verse. It says, "Indeed, he will be made to stand, for God is able to make him stand." In other words, at the last judgment God makes us stand. He doesn't care what our story has been. That's not the point. The point is do we know Jesus? Do we know His love? Do we know that He has walked with us? Do we trust that He is the one who saves us?

I'm not in the position of a judge. Never have been, even though I thought I was once. When I realized that I can't stand up and point at somebody's sin... Not only is that not my job, but the Master Himself isn't doing that right now. Maybe someday, but not right now. He's not pointing at that person's sin. They might be working on something else. But the bottom line is that God is able to make him stand. God will do His work in that person. God will love them. None of us arrive in heaven, none of us leave this earth, as perfect people. We all have sin that we continue to do.

I've got my theology about grace and who we are in Christ, but the bottom line is we all do things we ought not to do. So how do I say that mine is acceptable to God but theirs is not? That's what that passage is about. You don't get to say that. God gets to deal with those things, and He is dedicated to making them stand. He will do that, not just He "might" be able to: He will make them stand. To me, that is entirely freeing. I can walk with a gay person. I can walk with people who are cussing. I can live life with these people. I don't have to judge them. My personal theology and how I look at things... I may still say that they are wrong. I can understand that. Other people can look at me and say I am wrong in certain things. Okay, that's fine. It's just that I don't have the right to judge that person. I don't have the right to make anything of that.

NATALIE: Exactly. It doesn't have to mean anything for you personally and for how you feel towards them. If people are struggling with this, we just recently watched "Les Misérables" again. That is such a great story that kind of illustrates all this, the

difference between legalism and love, the way that we come at life looking at people as God's precious creation to love and to show mercy to, and what a difference that can make in this world versus coming at people as, "You didn't fit into my box. You didn't do what God's law says you should do, so therefore you will be hounded for the rest of your life."

DAVE: That's right.

NATALIE: It either brings a life-giving nature to the world or death.

DAVE: Yes. I see that now. Looking back on that, I see that as narcissistic. That is, when I don't look at the person as a person, I don't walk with them in their life, I don't listen to them... I am listening to an audiobook right now, Malcolm Gladwell's "Talking to Strangers." I'm not done with it, so I don't want to recommend it yet. So far I am impressed. He's talking about listening to others and why listening to others is so hard for us. It's because we bring only ourselves into the equation and we don't think about the other as a person. That's narcissistic. That's the wrong way to approach a relationship. That's deep! That's fundamental.

We've talked about it already, but that goes back to our spouses. We start to make ourselves pause and look at the other as a person and accept that maybe they saw things differently. Maybe they heard things differently. Maybe it affected them differently and that's why that response came to me. That changes that interaction. Same thing with our kids. Can you imagine a church that does that? It's hard. But that would be amazing, wouldn't it?

NATALIE: Yeah, it would.

DAVE: It would be amazing. To have someone stand up and talk about a personal victory that they had in their lives instead of people shaking their heads and saying, "Why'd you get yourself in that position in the first place?" but to just rejoice because they are rejoicing. That is sort of what the scripture says, right? "Weep with those who weep; rejoice with those who rejoice." Anyway, that's where the link is, this depersonalization.

NATALIE: Yeah, that totally makes sense. I don't think I will ever think about that the same. That is going to be woven into the way that I talk about this in the future. I really appreciate all these great insights. For those of you who are listening, if this podcast has benefited your life in any way, would you consider leaving a rating and review on Apple iTunes? Here's the thing: your rating and review let's Apple iTunes know that this

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