

Counseling in the Brambles: How to Help Oppressive Marriages



by DARBY STRICKLAND

Ashley sat motionless in her chair. Her husband, Clint, had just finished telling me that his wife desperately needed help. “She is cold and unfeeling. I cannot live like this any longer,” he pleaded. He clutched a book he brought with him, a book he believed would help his wife communicate better and respect him more. It was his expectation that I would follow his lead and focus on his complaints. In my youth and inexperience as a counselor, I took the bait. And I regret every minute that followed. Ashley uttered only a few sentences. Thinking back on it now, it was as if she was not even present. But she was. She was there watching me side with her husband when I validated his points about marriage and empathized with his pain. To this day, I am unsure why she came back week after week, but I thank God she did because he used the experience to shape how I now counsel couples.

For a few weeks, counseling looked the same. Clint shared his issues and wounds and I listened. At one point, I inquired further about something he said and he did not like it. He quickly became angry and lectured me for 20 minutes. His anger was intense. He would not let me speak and he would not back down. That hour I got a glimpse into what Clint was really like and began to reinterpret our previous sessions. What I came to understand is that I was not counseling him; rather, he was using me to control his wife. He

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portrayed himself as the victim of his wife's uncaring ways, but in reality he wanted to dominate her completely. Every week he came in and told me what I should address with her. He set the agenda and goals. He was quite effective in steering me. I asked her to show more interest in him, plan a date, and speak in a gentler tone when addressing issues. It still sickens me.

After that disastrous but enlightening session, I began to meet with them separately. God confirmed what I was only beginning to suspect. Clint was relentlessly dominating and controlling in their relationship. He is what the Bible calls an oppressor. Clint had oppressed Ashley for 25 years. His behavior did unspeakable things to her heart, mind and body. Ecclesiastes describes the plight of the oppressed this way:

Again I looked and saw all the oppression that was taking place under the sun:

I saw the tears of the oppressed—
and they have no comforter;
power was on the side of their oppressors—
and they have no comforter. (4:1)

It quickly became clear to me that normal marriage counseling was not going to help either of them. In fact, it would be harmful. The perverse and imbalanced dynamics of their relationship called for a different approach—one I did not yet have—but one I was committed to finding. This article describes the fruit of my search and how it revised my counseling methodology. But first I will lay out the problem in more detail.

Oppression and Why Normal Marriage Counseling Is Harmful

The word *oppression* is often used to describe political realities where a more powerful group takes advantage of another, weaker group. But it can also refer to patterns in personal relationships. In marriage, oppression occurs when one spouse seeks to control and dominate the other through a pattern of coercive, controlling, and punishing behaviors. The more common term for this pattern is *domestic abuse* or *domestic violence*. I prefer the term oppression because it is a biblical category that speaks to the domination involved. It also helps us locate God's heart for victims.¹

¹ You can see this in places such as Genesis 16; 1 Samuel 25; Psalm 146:7–9; Isaiah 1:17; Jeremiah 50:33–34; Zechariah 7:10; Matthew 6:13; and Luke 4:18–19.

The tactics used by an oppressive spouse can vary. They can be behaviors that prevent personal freedoms, induce fear, exploit, terrorize, humiliate, withhold resources, isolate, threaten, demand obedience or physically harm. Living under such evils harms the oppressed person's emotional, spiritual, physical, sexual, relational, and economic wellbeing.

One of the most important aspects of ministering to oppressive marriages is uncovering and identifying the pattern.

Prior to meeting Ashley and Clint I was unaware that patterns of oppression occur in one quarter of all marriages.² Since I did not know how prevalent it was, I did not look for it or consider that it might be a factor in their marriage. One of the most important aspects of ministering to oppressive marriages is uncovering and identifying the pattern. Ashley and Clint had been to six counselors prior to me. None of them had unearthed the abuses that were taking place. Now I make it a practice in marriage counseling to screen for oppression by having at least one session with each spouse alone. I ask precise questions that are meant to reveal—or rule out—power imbalances.³ It is not always easy to discern what is taking place in a marriage. Be vigilant and take the time necessary to get it right. Is it a shared problem with two people who are both provoking each other to create conflict? If so, we want to be careful and not wrongly label it oppression. Doing so would unjustly name one party as the guilty aggressor and the other a passive innocent. If, however, the marriage is a place of domination, then it is crucial that we call it what it is and proceed accordingly.

When oppression is identified, the counseling strategy needs to change. The destructive use of power and control in a marriage creates a dynamic that

² “The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey,” Center for Disease Control, accessed May 21, 2016, http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/nisvs_report2010-a.pdf.

³ For a suggested list of questions, see pages 12–14 of my article, “Identifying Oppression in Marriages,” *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 30:2 (2016).

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