

Identity and Self-Love (Self-Esteem) in the Context of Domestic Violence

Some topics are tough. Domestic violence is one of them. One of the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns has been a dramatic increase in domestic violence cases worldwide. In Australia, there was a 75% increase in Google searches for help with domestic violence. Calls to domestic violence helplines in Cyprus increased by 30%, and in Rio de Janeiro, domestic violence cases increased by 50%. The number of women dying as a result of physical violence doubled in many places, from Egypt to India (1).

On the other hand, we would like to think that domestic violence never happens in a Christian home. However, a study conducted in Ecuador and Peru in 2013 showed that 70% of evangelical adults had experienced some form of domestic violence in the last 3 years. This research, conducted by Paz y Esperanza, Comunidad, and Restored, surveyed 2027 evangelicals. 60% of evangelical women and 40% of evangelical men in Peru reported being victims of sexual abuse as children. In Ecuador, the numbers were 40% and 20%, respectively. In Argentina, it was 30% and 20% (2).

A study in the UK found that 42% of respondents in churches had experienced some form of abuse in their relationships, and for most, it was long-term (3).

Domestic violence is precisely the opposite of love. If I had the power, I would make every woman in the world feel loved (4). Love makes us want to wake up every morning and do everything with joy. Love is what builds you up, edifies you, gives you purpose and a reason to continue. Domestic violence destroys, humiliates, and eats away from the inside. Look at how the Word of God says this: "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself! After all, no one ever hated their own body, but they feed and care for their body, just as Christ does the church," (Ephesians 5:25-29). And also, Jesus Himself says about the Church in Matthew 16:18: "On this rock, I will build my church, and the gates of hell will not overcome it." Jesus committed to build His church, and likewise, man should commit to building his wife.

For all Christians, I think it's always easier to recognize sins of commission (those committed through actions, behaviors, attitudes) than sins of omission or neglect. But the Bible is clear when it says in James 4:17, "Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it, sins."

Why do I mention this in relation to domestic violence? Because it's very easy to recognize domestic violence when there are physical marks (commission), but the psychological marks that certain types of violence leave are equally painful, even if many of them are not visible.

They result from sins of omission, in words against or in silence about the identity and self-love (self-esteem) of the woman.

The basis of our needs, according to Maslow's hierarchy, is physiological and safety needs. If these two categories are lacking (food, water, shelter, sleep, and family, body, and property safety, respectively), it is visible and can be immediately identified by others. However, if something is missing in the other three categories, it is not always immediately apparent (social, esteem, and self-actualization needs), although it can leave equally harmful marks inside the woman.

Most women, it is said, value the emotional aspect of relationships more (yes! there are gender differences in the brain; there are several scientific studies on this). Perhaps that's why they express needing the feelings of security, protection, and recognition more, as they rely more on the emotional side of relationships. Thus, they are highly affected in their self-esteem when these dimensions are lacking.

It is, therefore, important to recognize that domestic violence is not only physical; it is also emotional, verbal, or psychological.

The APAV (Portuguese Association for Victim Support) website talks about various types of violence: emotional violence, social violence, physical violence, sexual violence, financial violence, and stalking.

The Bible also addresses that violence is not only physical but can also be emotional and social: "Gentle words are a tree of life, a deceitful tongue crushes the spirit." Proverbs 15:4. What are these words that depress and destroy?

They can be about physical appearance, depreciative and sarcastic, "Look at that belly, you're so sexy." About your personal preferences, "There she goes showing off again." About your friends, "Do you think you have friends? You have no one to talk to." "See that friend of yours? If you end up like her, I'll divorce you." About your faith, "Go hang out with your church buddies, let them flatter your ego." About your work, to make you feel small and inferior, "Do you think they really like you at work? It's only as long as you're useful, because when you're not, they'll fire you like the others." About your spending, "You only think about spending money" (even if it's related to simple things like small hobbies). Trying to control your contacts/social media, "Are you texting your friend again?" Repeated threats of separation, "One of these days I'll leave, you'll be with the kids. It's better for each of us to go our own way." Humiliating words about and in sexual intimacy. The absence of words also destroys. "Silent treatments" are silences that persist for days or even weeks, sometimes hidden from others but tearing apart the intimacy of the home.

Another thing to consider is: if a woman is not confident in her identity, if she is not secure, if she does not have self-love and self-esteem, she can easily enter into a violent, abusive, or toxic relationship, from which it will be very difficult to exit, thinking that she has no value,

that she won't find anyone else, that no one else will want her, and her insecurity can serve the abusive partner who will reinforce it, making the woman feel guilty, believing that she is not a good wife, not a good mother, not trying hard enough, etc. All of this worsens if the woman has no support or someone who believes in her.

Another aspect of violence, whatever form it takes, is that it not only affects those directly targeted but also the children. If they are not directly affected by violence, they can witness the abusive or toxic model that occurs at home, potentially repeating it or accepting it in their own family when they have one.

And the Bible? What do we learn from the Bible about domestic violence? The best families in the Bible (Abraham and David, for example) had episodes of domestic violence. But not only that. Look at what happened to the Levite's concubine (Judges 19), who was sent outside for the wicked men of that city to abuse her (a Levite! someone educated in the procedures of worshipping God).

Abraham, the friend of God, the father of faith, denied that Sarah was his wife, fearing they would kill him (Genesis 20). So, the king of that city took her as his wife, with all that it could mean at that time. In plain terms, it's as if Abraham were saying between the lines, "Sara, no matter what happens to you, as long as I'm safe!" On the other hand, Abraham and Sarah wrongly used Hagar, then cast her out (Genesis 21).

As for David's family, his son Amnon abused his half-sister Tamar, and because of that, his half-brother Absalom killed him (2 Samuel 13).

At that time, women had no voice, opinion, or opportunity to defend themselves.

Why do you think God allowed the inclusion of such stories in the biblical narrative? Surely to teach us and for us to learn from them. 2 Timothy 3:16-17 says that all Scripture is inspired by God and useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work. One thing we learn is that sometimes domestic violence knows no boundaries of faith or religious denomination.

I also want to present the story of another Bible couple, Nabal and Abigail (1 Samuel 25), where he would be a very unpleasant and difficult person. His name meant fool, but from what the Bible says, he had many lands and possessions, suggesting that he would manage his possessions well since he was rich and had many employees. However, in terms of relationships, he would be unbearable, willing to start a war with someone who just asked for help (David). In this regard, Abigail took the initiative to appease David. What I take from this story is that women should not let themselves be intimidated, even if the spouse has a difficult temperament. Imagine if Abigail got scared and thought, "What will Nabal do if he finds out that I talked to David?" Don't let yourself be intimidated – seek help. Another thing we learn from this story is that family conflicts do not only happen in families with few resources; they can happen at any social stratum.

Another important aspect to highlight is that women (girls) who are not validated, recognized, protected by their father, who do not have strong references at the family level especially, are more likely to fall into an abusive, toxic, or violent relationship because they will not have enough self-love to set boundaries, to say "no," letting the abuser gain space or dominating almost completely the actions, choices, and words of the victim. In this regard, consider, for example, the story of Dinah, the only girl among 12 brothers, the sons of Jacob. The Bible says, in Genesis 34, that she went out to "see the daughters of the land." Perhaps she felt alone or with little attention in such a masculine environment. Unfortunately, this situation resulted in tragedy, with her brothers promoting a massacre to avenge Dinah's violation by the prince of the land.

There are empirical indications that witnessing domestic violence in the family of origin can be seen as a risk factor for perpetrating domestic violence. But a recent study indicates that in 60% of the aggressors interviewed in that study, they did not witness violence in their original household (5).

This issue reminded me of something else very important, mentioned in the Word of God: we should not make any alliances with anyone without first being sure of God's approval. We see that this happened in Joshua 9, leading Joshua to enter into wars that were not his own (Joshua was deceived).

Another situation that must be considered is the following: if a person suffers domestic violence and is a Christian, they have to forgive. Yes, forgiveness is a command for Christians (Matthew 18:21-22). But that does not mean that people have to have the same closeness as before (6).

The Bible also reminds us that when someone sins against us, whether in domestic violence or another situation, we do not have to deal with it alone (Matthew 18:15-17). So, DO NOT BE AFRAID, ASHAMED, DO NOT FEEL GUILTY, for being a Christian and asking for help. At the slightest sign of realizing that this is not the love that God planned between man and woman, tell someone trustworthy, neutral about both of you, so that there are no preferences, someone reputable, experienced, and who can really help you think about what to do, with the help of the Holy Spirit.

I remind you that God's commitment is to build His church, to build You. If you live in something that does not build you up, maybe you need to do something about it, just as Jesus did when they wanted to stone him (John 8:59).

Indeed, the Bible says that blessed are those who are insulted and persecuted (Matthew 5:11), and it also says that we should turn the other cheek (Luke 6:29), but both situations are for the sake of the Gospel of Christ, which is a Gospel of liberation, and not for the love of a man who does not show that he loves us, or a relationship that does not build us up.

I believe that, despite forgiveness, despite "love bears all things" (1 Corinthians 13:7), God has a purpose for your life. He gave you gifts and talents to use in His service, He wants you to be built up and not destroyed. And if the violence you suffer, whether physical or verbal, prevents you from achieving God's purpose for your life, something is not right. If we are to live in the Kingdom of God, which is righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit (Romans 14:17), if something that we constantly experience takes that away, then we have to deal with that situation. Do not postpone, do not let it pass, do not hide; it may be important, it may be the key to putting an end to a cycle that can be so painful.

(1) A Biblical View of Relationships for Ending Domestic Violence, World Evangelical Alliance, 2020.

(2) Ibid, Ibid.

(3) Ibid, Ibid. This research was conducted by Restored, 2018. <http://www.restored-uk.org/resources/in-churches-too-church-responses-to-domestic-abuse/>

(4) Although this text refers to women as victims of domestic violence (statistically, they represent 85 to 90% of victims), we know that it can also happen to men.

(5) Tatiana Caldeira (2012) Psychopathological profile of marital aggressors and risk factors. Master's Thesis in Clinical and Health Psychology, University of Beira Interior.

(6) Booklet "A Biblical View of Relationships for the End of Domestic Violence," Christian Network for the End of Domestic Violence, World Evangelical Alliance, 2020.