What Is Domestic Abuse?

Guest: Justin Holcomb
From the series: Is It My Fault? (Day 1 of 3)
Air date: September 21, 2015

Bob: When we marry, we promise to love, honor, cherish another person; but sometimes, instead of loving, and honoring, and cherishing, we wind up intimidating, manipulating, seeking to control, or even bringing domestic violence into a marriage. Here’s author and speaker, Justin Holcomb.

Justin: That’s the term that most people go to—domestic violence—but the most helpful is domestic abuse because it is a broader category. We define it as a pattern of coercive, controlling, or abusive behavior that is used by one individual to gain power and control over another. It’s not just physical—it includes emotional abuse, spiritual abuse, financial withholding of medical equipment or access—any way that you can try to get power and control maintain it over someone in the context of an intimate partner relationship.

Bob: This is FamilyLife Today for Monday, September 21st. Our host is the President of FamilyLife®, Dennis Rainey, and I’m Bob Lepine. We’ll explore the issue of domestic abuse today and talk about what to do when this kind of abuse is present in your marriage. Stay tuned.

And welcome to FamilyLife Today. Thanks for joining us on the Monday edition. Today, by the way, is Day 21 of the FamilyLife 30-Day Oneness Prayer Challenge. We’ve had lots of couples, over the last three weeks, who have been joining us—praying together, each day, as husband and wife—taking a different theme each day and having both of you pray together in your marriage. Today’s theme is the need for honesty and transparency in marriage. We’re encouraging husbands to pray that God will keep both of you courageous and trusting enough to always be honest in your marriage and encouraging wives to pray that you’ll be able to process truth in your marriage with grace, especially if there has been deceit between you in the past.

We believe that praying together, as a couple, is an important discipline in marriage. If you’re not praying together each day, as a couple, why don’t you sign up and join us for the remaining days of our Oneness Prayer Challenge? When we get to the end of the 30 days, you can actually start back at the beginning and keep going on into October. Find out more when you go to FamilyLifeToday.com. Click the link in the upper left-hand corner of the screen that says, “GO DEEPER.” Sign up for the Oneness Prayer Challenge—receive a prayer prompt from us each day via text message, or email, or
through the My FamilyLife app. Again, go to FamilyLifeToday.com and click the link that says, “GO DEEPER.”

Now, the subject that we’re going to talk about today is—this is one of those subjects you wish you didn’t have to talk about / you wish this didn’t even exist.

**Dennis:** Yes. You and I first started talking about this about—what?—15 years ago, here on *FamilyLife Today*. We felt like someone had to speak up about domestic violence and really speak on behalf of women, who are being abused by men.

The other morning, I was reading the Bible—Colossians, Chapter 3, verse 19, for whatever reason. I know I’ve read this before / tons of times—but it just came across the page—it just kind of pierced me. It says, “Husbands, love your wives and do not be harsh with them.” That’s a good word for any man, who’s listening to our broadcast today, because we, as men—just on the basis of who we are as kind of rough-and-tumble—we can be harsh with our wives.

**Bob:** We can’t blame that on the testosterone and say, “That’s just how I’m wired”?

**Dennis:** No. No. Well, you can blame it on whatever you want to blame it on—you’re still responsible. The point is that harshness can turn into abuse.

We have a guest with us, Justin Holcomb, who knows a great deal about this. Justin, welcome to the broadcast.

**Justin:** Thank you very much.

**Dennis:** Justin and his wife Lindsey have been married eight years. You guys live in Orlando, Florida. You teach at Reformed Seminary / Gordon Conwell. You’re a minister. And you have co-authored a book called *Is It My Fault?*—and you co-authored it with a woman. I’m looking at this—at the bottom, Bob, look at it—it says, “Justin S. Holcomb and Lindsey A. Holcomb.” Now, my first thought was, “Well, it has to be his sister.”

**Bob:** Well why’d you think, “sister”?

**Dennis:** I thought—

**Bob:** Oh, because it didn’t say, “Justin and Lindsey Holcomb.”

**Dennis:** There you go!

**Bob:** Because it was two separate names—interesting.

**Dennis:** So tell us about this person, Lindsey Holcomb—how you met her and “What’s the story here?”
Justin: Yes. That’s my wife—not my sister. [Laughter] We’ve been married for eight years. We wrote a book, previously, on sexual abuse. When I met her, I was serving at a church and teaching at the University of Virginia. Well, she was working at a sexual assault crisis center and a domestic violence shelter. I mean, she was this amazing woman—who was on the ground, all the time, working with victims or survivors—I’m not worried about which word we use. She kept on saying: “Hey, you’re in the church. What does the church have to do with these issues?”

As we were dating, we’d go out for dinner. I’d say, “How was your day?” She’d tell horror stories of the things that she was dealing with, and some good ones of healing, and of some good things happening for these people who were suffering so much. I’m talking about grading papers at a university and working on a sermon. That actually brought our worlds together. We started writing and doing some teaching on “What Does the Bible and the Christian Faith Have to Say to and about These Issues?” This came out of her, on the ground work, where she was working at a shelter with women who were fleeing abusive husbands or boyfriends.

Bob: And there was a reason why her heart was drawn to these women.

Justin: Yes. This was her experience at home. Her father was not physically or sexually abusive. He was abusive—emotionally, verbally, psychologically, financially—with his wife, my mother-in-law, and her other sister. She would tell stories of him chasing them around the house, threatening—that was part of her story, as a child. When she started going through training for domestic violence advocacy, she realized then, “Oh, this is my story.” She didn’t know that until she was in college. She became a Christian in college—19—started doing domestic violence training. That year, when she was 19, was huge. Well, fast-forward—we got married.

Dennis: Well no, no. You have to tell a little bit of the story of “How did this move from writing a theological paper on domestic violence and sexual abuse to tying the knot?”

Justin: Oh, I realized that she was amazing and dazzling. I proposed as quickly as possible. [Laughter]

Bob: Didn’t need anything more than that—right?

Justin: She was a fellow in a local church—she was doing a fellows program. I thought: “She’s studying theology. She cares about ministering to people,”—like, “This is amazing!”

Dennis: So you tied the knot.

Justin: Coming back from our honeymoon, we’re driving back from the airport. She nervously said: “I have to use the bathroom. Can you pull over?” I pulled over at the
very next exit, and she went to the restroom. When she came out, she was crying. I said: “What happened, honey? Are you okay?”

She was like: “Yes. Ever since I was a kid, every time I had to go to the bathroom, my dad would yell at me and scream at me about why I was such a nuisance, and why I was so horrible, why I’m slowing him down. The fact that you pulled over so quickly and were happy to do that—I’m realizing the dimensions of how much his voice is living in my head.” And then she talked about the various looks / the kind of threatening looks that she would get and that her father would give.

Every once in a while, still to this day, sometimes I’ll give a look—I’m not a perfect husband—so sometimes, I do “the look” of disapproval—but sometimes, I’m not even doing a look / I’m thinking; and she thinks I’m angry at her. The look—I can see when the look goes to fear—and watching the effects of a little girl, growing up in a home with an abusive man—who was self-centered and did not care about anyone but himself—and the effects of that all the way down to her—you know, the identity, the sense of security, how you relate to God, as Father / all of these things—the effects. This hits home for us—of making sure that we can serve those who have been in that type of setting.

**Dennis:** And a lot of our listeners, right now—far too many / about one in four families experience domestic violence. There are listeners, right now, who are in a relationship and don’t realize they’re in an abusive relationship. Give us a working definition for what domestic abuse looks like.

**Justin:** Domestic violence—I thank you for using both terms—it’s helpful. Domestic violence—because it has the word, “violence,” in it, most people think it means only physical. We use that because that’s the term that most people go to—domestic violence. But the most helpful is domestic abuse because it is a broader category. We define it as a pattern of coercive, controlling, or abusive behavior that is used by one individual to gain power and control over another.

This is done by using frightening behavior—intimidating, terrorizing, exploiting, threatening, blaming, injuring. What it is—is a pattern of abusive ways of relating to, usually, the wife or the girlfriend / the woman in the relationship. It’s not just physical—it includes emotional abuse, spiritual abuse, financial withholding of medical equipment or access—any way that you can try to get power and control and maintain it over someone in the context of an intimate partner relationship.

**Bob:** Is it most often a man who is abusing his wife?

**Justin:** Yes. Most often it’s a man abusing. As you know, culture’s changing—there’s so much of cohabitation—so it’s more helpful to nuance it and say, “Man abusing his wife, or girlfriend, or partner.” But there are men who have been abused by women. It’s not talked about because it’s so under-reported—because, not only is there shame from
being the victim of abuse—women would say that it’s a very shaming thing to say, “Yes, I’m being abused by a person I chose to be with,” / for a man that’s there—but also because he’s thinking, “What kind of man am I that my girlfriend or my wife is bossing me around?”

Bob: Right.

Justin: So, there’s an extra hit / so there’s even more shame piled on. We even said in the book—we said: “Hey, we know that there are plenty of men; but that’s another book. There’s another whole level for men who are abused. We’re going to write to the women.” So we wrote specifically to women; but I can guarantee you—and you know this—there’s going to be some men listening to this, going, “Everything that’s being said—this is applying to me.”

Bob: Yes.

Justin: That is very true.

Bob: Justin, I have to tell you—I’ve had conversations with wives, in the past, where a wife has said: “I divorced my husband. He was emotionally abusive.” And there’s this little thing in the back of my mind, going, “Now, is that just a convenient out for you to say, ‘Because he got grumpy, from time to time, I overreacted to his grumpiness and called it “emotional abuse” and I found my get-out-of-jail-free card with that’?” Is there a way to differentiate between legitimate abuse / emotional abuse and something that is just a part of the human condition that you’re living with a fellow sinner, who’s going to mess up from time to time?

Justin: Yes there is, I believe. Some people will likely use that, and I’m sure that they have—

Dennis: And when you say “use that”—

Justin: Use the emotionally-abusive husband—“That’s why we got divorced.” The story that you were saying—I don’t have a lot of those interactions—but I’m fairly confident that that’s been done before—especially the person who would do that would be in a church, where there’s pressure to not divorce and they need a way out.

Bob: Right.

Justin: So that person might use that as their get-out-of-jail-free card—has another relationship on the side or something else is going on, where they need a way out from the cultural pressure of getting divorced: “How do I get divorced?”

But most people—we can’t get people to actually talk about their experience because there’s so much shame. It’s more likely that people, who are saying, ‘emotionally
“abused” really are; and it’s probably worse than they’re saying. So, while your story, I think, has happened—I don’t think that’s the norm. I do think, if someone’s going, “I was emotionally abused,” if we say, “Would you like to tell me some of those stories?” you’ll hear stories that would be horrifying.

**Bob:** Like what?

**Justin:** One woman—this one, she was not physically abused, and this is a very important point, that many women who are abused have said: “You know what?—the physical stuff?—that actually has healed.” Yes, it hurts—and I’m not minimizing the physical pain—but the emotional, spiritual, and psychological—it sinks and hits home, and it stays there forever. You don’t forget those memories.

This woman was working with Lindsey. She told the story of how her husband routinely—if he didn’t like the meal that she made or if it wasn’t hot or ready when he came home—he would take the food, put it into the dog dish, put the dog dish in the corner of the dining room, and make her eat dinner in front of the children out of the dog dish to shame her.

**Dennis:** Oh my goodness.

**Justin:** And then he’d just sit there, and bark at her, and yell at her—and she just sat there. The thing that stung her the most was: “What did that do to her kids?”—the pain she felt / the humiliation—to be humiliated, by your husband, in front of the children.

**Dennis:** De-humanized.

**Justin:** Yes; that’s exactly what he was doing.

And another one—there was a woman that my wife and I worked with. She was married to a man who held onto her visa—she immigrated. Unless they had sex the number of times that he would like—I don’t remember how many times / one or two times a week—he wrote up a contract and said, “If you don’t have sex with me one or two times a week, then you have to pay half the rent, half the car payments, half of this, half of this, half of this,” and “If you divorce me,”—he had this in the contract—“If you divorce me, I’m going to say that you’re abusive to the child; and you will not have our child.” He never physically touched her, but he was controlling and manipulating—was in her head.

This is the beautiful think about the story. She wasn’t a Christian when they got married—he was. She started reading the Bible. She confessed faith in Christ. Then she came to me and said: “I’m reading the Bible. You know what the Bible says about what husbands are supposed to do? Jesus laid down His life for me to deal with my sin so we can have a relationship / I’m reconciled with God. The Bible says that he’s supposed to lay down his life for me; right?”
I said, “Yes, that’s exactly what it says.” “Well, what’s happened to me is the opposite of this.” She told me because she didn’t know that this was wrong. I mean, she had a sense that it was wrong; but she thought, “Maybe this is what Christian men are supposed to do—they’re supposed to lead their wives.” Reading the Bible is what actually caused her to say, “This is horribly wrong,” and kind of stand up for herself.

Both of these women have slowly—the healing process has taken its time—but they are in good places / their children are in safe places. Both of those men, as soon as some light was on the situation, both of those men got angry, rebelled, spun out, went to another church / claimed to be victims. I mean, that’s the routine because men that abuse—there are two things about them—they are deeply insecure / deeply, deeply insecure men; and they are masters at blame-shifting and playing the victim. Those two character traits you can notice about them. That was all based on some of the stories, where it’s not just the physical. Those usually escalate to the physical, at some point. If the emotional and psychological control and domination doesn’t work, they will frequently escalate to the physical and see if that works.

Other men, who are abusive, actually, flip-flop that. Early on in the relationship, they’ll do something physical to have a marker and say, “Don’t make me angry or that’ll happen again.” There’s not a pattern for this. Some of them escalate to physical after emotional and psychological because that’s not working and they need the physical because it escalates. Others, again, flip-flop and do a physical act, early on, and then they don’t need to do anything physical, at that point, because their looks, and the words / their threats remind them, “You don’t want that pain anymore; do you?”

**Dennis:** Yes; the abuse starts a mind-game, early, in controlling the victim.

Over the years, I’ve counseled and talked to a number of women, who’ve been abused. You point out something, early in your book, that I want our listeners to hear on the broadcast. It’s the thing that you say every victim needs to know.

**Justin:** It is not your fault. We named the book *Is It My Fault?* because we realize that’s the question many of these victims were asking—especially the Christian ones. It is so sad to hear a woman, who has been emotionally, spiritually, psychologically, physically abused by someone, who has taken vows to protect, and love, and serve her the way that Christ does the church.

Then, when they start getting abused, their first go-to is—that they did something, that it was because they had an abortion when they were 14, because they had premarital sex, because they had premarital sex with their husband, because they’re not good wives, they’re not good parents, they’re not good daughters, [or] they’re not good sisters. They think there’s something that they have done—that they are being ignored or even punished by God. The default mode is: “It’s my fault. This is something I deserved, and I’m outside of the scope of the grace of God.”
And so, the two questions that we lead with are:

“One, is it my fault?” No. There’s nothing you could have done that makes you worthy and deserving of abuse.

“Am I outside of the grace of God?” No. As a matter of fact, the main heartbeat of the message of the Bible is that the grace of God is for sinners and sufferers. The deepest message of Jesus, in Scripture, is the grace of God—is for sinners and sufferers. Because of your suffering, you actually have God’s attention; and He loves to deliver people from suffering.

Bob: There are some folks, who are listening to us talk about this right now, and they may have teared up, just hearing you talk about that, because of their sense of shame / their sense of bondage. You’ve given us permission to put a chapter from your book on our website. It’s a chapter that asks the question, “Does the grace of God apply to me?” It talks specifically to what you’re talking about. I’d encourage listeners: “If you wonder, ‘Am I to blame? Does God’s grace apply?’ go to FamilyLifeToday.com and read this chapter from Justin’s book because I think it’ll speak to you profoundly.”

Dennis: And we’ve also included an appendix, which is really an important one. It’s called “Making a Safety Plan.” You know, Bob, you never know who you’re talking to, here on the radio—a listener, who’s tuned in and caught this show by the sovereignty of God, He’s looking out for you—God loves you, and He wants to help you find a safe place; right?

Justin: Absolutely.

Dennis: And there is a plan that you can put in place to protect you from the violence continuing / the abuse continuing. I think a part of it comes from a diagnosis of, first of all, realizing you’re in it, and then, secondly, wisely determining what your action steps are, moving forward.

Bob: There are tools available to you, at FamilyLifeToday.com, to help you think through this issue in your own marriage, thanks to Justin and to his publisher. We have a number of chapters from his book available to help you diagnose just how serious the issue is in your marriage, if there is domestic abuse going on in your marriage. Go to FamilyLifeToday.com and click the link in the upper left-hand corner of the screen that says, “GO DEEPER.” Look for the link where you can order a copy of Justin’s book, Is It My Fault? Then also look for the link that has the available chapters from the book so that you can go through the material immediately.

Again, go to FamilyLifeToday.com and click the link in the upper left-hand corner of the screen to access this content; or call 1-800-FL-TODAY if you’d like us to send you a
copy of the book, *Is It My Fault?*, by Justin Holcomb. Again, our toll-free number is 1-800-358-6329. That’s 1-800-“F” as in family, “L” as in life, and then the word, “TODAY.”

You know, one of the reasons why we stress, as a ministry, how important it is for husbands and wives to be pursuing spiritual oneness in a marriage relationship is because we believe that the Bible promotes humility, and brokenness, and conviction of sin—the kinds of things we’ve been talking about today—and can help reverse patterns that are destructive patterns in a marriage relationship. Our goal, here at FamilyLife, is to bring the Scriptures to bear on the issues that we face in marriage and to provide you with practical biblical help and hope for your marriage and your family, day in and day out.

I just want to say a quick word of thanks to those of you who make *FamilyLife Today* possible—those of you, who will, from time to time, make a donation in support of this ministry—or those of you, who are regular Legacy Partners, and who are, each month, giving a gift to help support the ministry. We’re grateful for your partnership with us and very much appreciate hearing from you.

Right now, when you make a donation to support the ministry, we’d like to send you our 2016 FamilyLife prayer calendar. You can actually put this up right away, as soon as you get it, because it starts with October of 2015. It gives you things to be praying about each month / verses to meditate on, as a family, throughout the month. It’s our gift to you when you support the ministry today with a donation. You can do that by going to FamilyLifeToday.com and clicking the link in the upper right-hand corner of the screen that says, “I Care”; or you can call 1-800-FL-TODAY and make a donation over the phone. And you can also mail your donation to *FamilyLife Today* at PO Box 7111, Little Rock, AR; and our zip code is 72223.

Now, tomorrow, we are going to talk more about the issue of domestic violence / domestic abuse and what you do in a marriage relationship if this is present in your marriage. I hope you can tune in for that. And I hope, if you know somebody who is going through something like this, you’ll encourage them to join us tomorrow and to listen to this series, online.

I want to thank our engineer today, Keith Lynch, along with our entire broadcast production team. On behalf of our host, Dennis Rainey, I’m Bob Lepine. We will see you back tomorrow for another edition of *FamilyLife Today*.

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