

# Identifying Oppression in Marriages



by DARBY STRICKLAND

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When I think about the problems in troubled marriages, this quotation comes to mind.

Things are not always what they seem;  
the first appearance deceives many;  
the intelligence of a few perceives what has been carefully hidden.<sup>1</sup>

So often what we see before us belies what is concealed beneath.

Counseling Denise and Dan seemed like it was going to be sorting through typical marital issues. Denise identified her anxiety as the presenting problem. She expressed concern with her own anger and being snappy with their three young children. Dan reported that he was unhappy with Denise because she nagged him all the time, stating, “She always has a list of chores for me to do!”

But as I pressed in deeper, underlying complexities began to emerge. When I asked Dan how he feels about Denise bringing up her concerns he said, “I don’t bother to listen to her. She is always anxious about something.” This answer caused me to probe further into how they resolve conflict. It quickly became clear that issues don’t get resolved or talked about. Dis-

<sup>1</sup> Gaius Julius Phaedrus, *Fables*, trans. Henry Thomas Riley and Christopher Smart (London: George Bell and Sons, 1887), 411.

*Darby Strickland (MDiv) counsels and teaches at CCEF. She is especially interested in issues pertaining to marriage and abuse.*

agreements end with Dan going to sleep or playing on his phone. It seemed that Dan had a pattern of neglecting Denise's concerns and wellbeing. When I asked what a typical evening together looks like, it became clear that while Denise is tending to the children and the house, Dan remains disengaged from her. But then at bedtime, he desires physical intimacy.

In the next session, I met with Denise alone. She told me she is worried that she is hurting her husband by not meeting his sexual needs. Dan desires sex every night and Denise simply does not have the interest or energy to comply, so she wants help with improving her desire for physical intimacy. Again, this does not sound overly concerning. But while exploring the guilt she feels about it, she discloses that Dan accuses her of making him vulnerable to the use of pornography. This concerned me, so I probed further.

Wondering how Dan communicates his desire for sex, I learn that he will often wake her up in the middle of the night imploring her to perform her "wifely duty." When I asked, "What does Dan do when you do not give in?" Denise revealed that he will spend the next few days ignoring her and verbally attacking the children. Sensing that Dan's response is punitive, I asked, "Has he ever hurt you physically when he is upset?" Denise responded that when he gets really frustrated he punches her in the back while she is lying next to him in bed. But she does not blame him for hitting her. She feels responsible for his frustration because she turned him down yet again.

My closer and careful examination had exposed troubling dynamics. This was not a straightforward marriage problem, as it first seemed to be. When Denise does not meet Dan's desires, he becomes punishing and harsh. Even more disconcerting is that they are on their fourth marriage counselor and no one has previously unearthed Dan's punitive behaviors. Unfortunately, it is common for counselors, pastors, and other helpers to fail to identify abusive behaviors in a marriage. One reason for this is that the prevalence of such abuses<sup>2</sup> is

<sup>2</sup> An important side note about terminology: *Abuse* can be a tricky, loaded word. Depending on whom you speak with, it will carry different meanings and interpretations. The word *abuse* can describe so many different acts that it ultimately lacks clarity. Just like anxiety or depression, we need to become experts in describing and capturing each individual's experience of abuse if we are to speak wisely and biblically into people's lives. The same is true for the term *domestic violence*. The justice system and mental health field define it to include a spectrum of violating acts, including—but not limited to—physical violence.

vastly underestimated. We do not ask questions about things we do not think are happening.

It helps to know the statistics.

- 25% of marriages are considered abusive.<sup>3</sup>
- 24% of women and 13% of men report experiencing severe physical violence from an intimate partner.<sup>4</sup>
- 50% of the men who frequently assault their wives also frequently abuse their children.<sup>5</sup>
- Forced sex or sexual assault occurs in 40-45% of battering relationships.<sup>6</sup>

Shockingly, the prevalence of abuse is the same within the church, and, yes, even within the evangelical church. Justin and Lindsey Holcomb highlight the pervasiveness with this illustration:

In a church of 400 people (with 160 adult women and 20 teenage girls) 20 women would be currently experiencing physical abuse. And if you factor in emotional or verbal abuse, 80 women would be currently suffering. 60 men would have assaulted their partner at one time or another.<sup>7</sup>

These statistics should change our thinking about the prevalence of abuse in our communities.

Because it is likely that there are active abusers in our pews and counseling offices, we need to be able to look beyond appearances and know

<sup>3</sup> “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](http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/nisvs_report2010-a.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. This number is lower if male on male violence is removed from the statistic.

<sup>5</sup> “Violence by Intimates: Analysis of Data on Crimes by Current or Former Spouses, Boyfriends, and Girlfriends,” U.S. Department of Justice, accessed May 22, 2016, <http://bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/vi.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> “Nature and Scope of Violence Against Women,” National Institute of Justice, accessed May 22, 2016, <http://www.nij.gov/topics/crime/violence-against-women/pages/selected-results.aspx>

<sup>7</sup> Justin Holcomb and Lindsey Holcomb, *Is It My Fault?: Hope and Healing for Those Suffering Domestic Violence* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2014), 59-60. For another resource from the Holcombs, see “Does the Bible Say Women Should Suffer Abuse and Violence?” in the *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 28:2 (2014), 9-21.

how to identify them. This article seeks to help you with that. To start, I describe these marriages using the biblical term: *oppression*. Using this term for these coercive relationship patterns adds clarity. It helps us locate places in Scripture that speak into what we are observing. Then, to help you to recognize these patterns in marriages, I will provide questions and evaluative tools that will help you reveal power imbalances and identify an oppressor. Finally, I will sketch out initial steps to take in the counseling process and point you to resources for when you determine that oppression is present in a relationship.

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### What Is *Oppression*?

Marriage has a revelatory quality. Being in close relationship with another person helps us see our sins and exposes the flaws in our relationships with God and others. Though we are called to express Christ's love and grace to one another, we all fail to love our spouses perfectly because of sin. We say and do things we should not. Since this is true in every marriage, you might be wondering what makes an abusive marriage<sup>8</sup> different from other marriages that are "unhappy" or "hard." Since every marriage involves two sinners, aren't all marriages difficult? What makes abuse something other than typical anger or selfishness?

The biblical category of *oppression* describes the manipulative domination of one person by another. It captures the idea that someone is subject to another's harsh control. God first speaks about oppression when Pharaoh enslaves the Israelites in the book of Exodus. Pharaoh is ruthless and cruel in his domination. But the suffering of his people does not go unnoticed by God: "The cry of the people of Israel has come to me, and I have also seen the oppression with which the Egyptians oppress them" (Ex 3:9).

<sup>8</sup> While I prefer the term *oppression*, I will sometimes use the word *abuse*, since it is the term most readily used in our culture.

God hears and sees when his people are wronged.<sup>9</sup> Throughout the Bible, we repeatedly learn of God's great concern for those who are mistreated. He seeks deliverance for the oppressed. He is a "stronghold" for the powerless (Ps 9:9).

The biblical depictions of oppression provide a category for us to use in marriage. Specifically, I define oppression in marriage as a pattern of coercive, controlling and punishing behaviors whereby one spouse seeks to control and dominate the other. The tactics used by the oppressive spouse can vary. They can be behaviors that prevent personal freedoms, induce fear, exploit, terrorize, humiliate, withhold resources, isolate, threaten, demand obedience or physical harm. Living in these circumstances harms the oppressed person's emotional, spiritual, physical, sexual, relational, or economic wellbeing.

For example, when constant and coercive pleas for sex did not get Dan what he wanted, he ignored Denise, told her she was displeasing to God, and bullied their children. If she still did not give in to his demands, he would resort to physical abuse. Denise lived in constant fear of disappointing Dan because when she did not meet his expectations he would brutally lash out at her (and sometimes her children). Sometimes he would hurt her physically, but most of the time he would say deeply wounding things that hurt her emotionally and spiritually. It usually sounded like this: "How can you say you love Jesus if you don't love me? You are cold and withholding. It is no wonder no one likes you!"

But sometimes it is not as obvious as this example. So how can we know for sure when we are looking at oppression? Perhaps this analogy will help. Similar questions arise concerning the use of corporal punishment with children. What is an appropriate use of physical discipline? When is a spanking too hard, becoming harshly punitive and not lovingly corrective? We are all going to have different answers and tolerance levels, but at what point is a line crossed? To know the answer, we have to consider many things: the amount of force used, the amount of parental anger present

<sup>9</sup> To read about other instances when God shows his care for the oppressed, see 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.

and how it is expressed, appropriateness to the situation, age of the child, and implement used. There is not a simple answer devoid of context. Layers of information are needed to make an assessment. You must weigh a combination of factors and considerations to determine what crosses a line of appropriateness.

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Oppression is not a one-off incident, but the use of systematic punishments to maintain power and control in a relationship.

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The same is true with oppression. We all agree that certain behaviors are abusive, such as pushing a spouse down the stairs or choking. Yet we will not all be equally alarmed when a spouse is throwing things. This spectrum exists in all types of abuse. For example, it is easy to agree that forced sex is wrong. But how do we think about unwanted touching or peeping? How do we think about pressure to have sex?<sup>10</sup>

To determine when abuse is occurring in a marriage, we need to use a good deal of wisdom to assess the extent and severity of demands and punishing behaviors. In the next section, I will provide questions you can ask and other evaluative criteria to use when you are speaking with a spouse you suspect is being victimized.

### **How to Evaluate If a Spouse Is Being Oppressed**

Since there are not always definite criteria that allow us to instantly recognize oppression, we need to ask questions and evaluate other clues to uncover the exact nature of the situation.

*Questions to ask the oppressed spouse.* When abuse is not overt or identified by the victim, it can be easy to miss. Because any one story or conflict can look reasonable (or unreasonable!), these questions are designed to look for *patterns* of punishment and *imbalances* of power. By definition, oppression is not a one-off incident, but the use of systematic punishments

<sup>10</sup> There is an important distinction between lovingly pursuing your spouse for sexual intimacy and harassing or pressuring him or her. We need to be mindful of the line where such pleas become coercion.

to maintain power and control in a relationship.

Here is a sample of the type of questions to ask the spouse you suspect is living under oppression:

Do you have the freedom to give your input in decisions at home?

What happens when you say no to your spouse's requests?

Do you ever feel fearful around your partner?

Have you ever been threatened or physically hurt in this relationship?

Have you ever participated in a sexual act against your will?

Does your spouse blame you for things that go wrong? How?

Does your spouse monitor your interactions with friends and family?

How can you tell when your spouse is unhappy with you?

Do you ever change your behavior because you are afraid of your spouse's reaction?

Do you have a say in how your economic resources are used?

When you ask these questions, it is important to also ask for detailed examples. This can help you identify the frequency and severity of certain behaviors, the ongoing patterns, and assess the level of danger the person is in.

Have this conversation when the spouse in question is not present. It is not likely that a fearful spouse can be honest about the situation if the abuser is present. Further, revealing these things in front of an abusive spouse makes the oppressed spouse vulnerable to retaliation after the session.

**Explore the couple's arguments.** Another way to detect oppression is to gather precise information about how the couple argues. Oppressors do not engage in arguments to find unity and resolution. They view arguments as war. To assist in my detection of potential oppression, I have couples fill out an argument inventory in one of their early sessions. Using a checklist, spouses identify tactics that each spouse uses in an argument. The list is comprised of controlling behaviors—e.g., sarcasm, distorting what is said or done, sulking, refusing to respond or listen, towering over, physical intimidation, laughing, turning your complaint against you, acting like a victim, harsh criticism, name calling, and blocking a doorway.<sup>11</sup> Knowing how a couple discusses and resolves conflicts enables me to ask additional ques-

<sup>11</sup> For a complete list, see Lundy Bancroft's *Why Does He Do That? Inside the Minds of Angry and Controlling Men* (New York, NY: Berkley Books, 2003), 142-145.

tions that help me get a sense of the atmosphere in the midst of their fights.

In marriage counseling, we often talk about the content of the argument—the issues. But if we are to discover oppression, we need to know how an argument *looks* and *sounds*. This inventory gives me a window into what it is like during a conflict. I use it to ask questions that are more precise. For instance: “When he was yelling at you, where was he standing?” This gives a spouse the opportunity to report things like being cornered. Follow-up questions are critical. Here are a few: When he withdraws, how long does it last? What names does she call you? How does he change the topic? How does she distort what you said?

**Consider non-verbal cues.** The final way to evaluate if a spouse is being oppressed is through non-verbal cues that the couple exhibits during a meeting. Oppressors tend to control conversations, interrupt others, and fail to show empathy or connectedness to their spouse. In contrast, oppressed spouses often say very little and seem, in both posture and speech, to be deferring to their spouse.<sup>12</sup> Watch for non-verbal cues that demonstrate discomfort and guardedness.

Interestingly, it has been my experience that oppressed women often come in with journals they either refer to in the session or use to take notes, especially while their spouse is speaking. This makes sense when we consider both their confusion and fear. Oppressors often accuse their victims of things they have not done. Because openly challenging their oppressor can result in retaliation or escalation, keeping notes about interactions helps them process and remember what really happened.

When the non-verbal cues in the room point to a disparity in relational power, it prompts me to ask targeted questions to determine the existence of oppression. If I suspect it, I ask to meet with oppressed spouse alone for the next session.

In addition to these evaluative tools, it is also important for you to be familiar with what oppressors are typically like.

<sup>12</sup> While this is the trend, it is not always true. I have seen people present in different ways in a session, and have even seen oppressed spouses who are vocal and angry. So an oppressed spouse's demeanor can be a key to discovering oppression, but if there is nothing remarkable about it, don't rule out the existence of abuse based on that alone.



## The Characteristics of Oppressive Spouses

Another key to recognizing abuse in a marriage is to know the relational patterns and personality traits of oppressors. In this section, I will identify seven common characteristics of oppressors. The first four focus on how oppressors relate to others.

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***Oppressive people feel entitled.*** Oppressors believe their spouses exist to keep them happy. They have an inflated sense of self and feel that they are owed preferential treatment. Entitled people prioritize their needs above others and feel justified in doing so, even when their preferences come at a great cost to others. For example, Dan believed that he was entitled to sex every day, and he also believed that it was his right to come home to a perfectly kept house. When the house's appearance did not meet his standards, Denise paid a price. Since oppressors believe that others are responsible for their personal happiness and comfort, they retaliate when they do not get what they want. And what they want is *always* most important. The needs and desires of others are irrelevant.<sup>13</sup>

***Oppressive people dominate others.*** Oppressive people express their sense of entitlement by dominating those around them, especially their spouses. Through manipulation and unrelenting pressure, they demand their spouses meet their needs by requiring them to live by a set of specific rules. These must be obeyed at all costs.

Here are some ways that Dan dominated Denise. He insisted she dress in a way that emphasized her shape so that other men would be jealous of him. He would monitor her exercise habits and ridicule her appearance to

<sup>13</sup> Entitlement is the core attitude of oppressors. For a detailed discussion of entitlement, see my article "Entitlement: When Expectations Go Toxic" in the *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 29:1 (2015), 19-33.

keep her “motivated.” He created a family budget with a large allotment for his golfing but required her to be impossibly frugal in grocery shopping. When Denise overspent the budget he allocated, Dan would keep her from important family events, saying they did not have enough money to go.

In a sense, then, dominant and oppressive spouses dethrone God. They want to rule over the other and require unwavering allegiance. They seek to exercise control over their spouse’s choices (e.g., money, menu, cleaning, clothing, friendships). And in doing so, they take away their partners’ God-given agency.

To maintain dominating control in the marriage, oppressors use both threats and actual punishments against a spouse. Let’s look first at threats.

**Oppressive people use threats.** Oppressors maintain control by creating a climate of fear. They use threats to manipulate spouses by reminding them of the retribution they face if they fail to comply. Threats can be overt, like these:

“Do not interrupt me when I am watching the game or I will make your life hell.”

“If you don’t have sex with me, I will tell the elders at church that you are not being a good Christian wife.”

Threats can also be covert. Because Dan did not like Denise to spend time with her friends, he would make it a point to scrutinize the cleanliness of the house on the days when she saw them. He would walk around the house, shaking his head in disapproval. Without Dan saying a word, Denise knew that if she spent time with friends she had better have her home in perfect order before she left. Eventually, Denise stopped going out because she could not bear his attitude when she did.

Oppressive people can also maintain control by threatening to harm themselves. When spouses share their hurt or disappointment, oppressors might threaten to hurt themselves.<sup>14</sup> Sometimes, in extreme situations, they even threaten to kill themselves. Again, this serves to control the spouse’s actions and reactions by manipulating the concern for wellbeing and safety.

<sup>14</sup> It is not uncommon for oppressors to follow through and actually self-injure, by doing something like punching themselves in the head, in an attempt to make their victims feel responsible for hurting them.

Keep in mind that once an abusive pattern is established in a relationship, words might not even be necessary to communicate the threat. Oppressors can indicate their intentions via a signal, such as a clenched fist, a raised eyebrow, a scathing glance or a pronounced exhale. These cues can become enough to reestablish dominance.

***Oppressive people punish others to maintain control.*** Oppressive people do more than threaten. They retaliate against their spouses by utilizing a variety of punishments to maintain their power. These punishments are not always physical. Constant blaming, humiliating, ignoring, isolating, deceiving, and monitoring are just a few. Non-physical punishments are tricky to discover, so we need to be familiar with them and diligent in detection. If we see one, we should not dismiss it as an outlier without finding out if there are others. We need to be looking for punishments across all relational dimensions—physical, sexual, emotional, and spiritual.<sup>15</sup>

To sum up, when relating to others, oppressors are entitled, dominating, threatening and punishing. Put simply, oppressive people enforce a form of slavery in their homes. They do so in order to keep the world the way they want it. Oppressors are willing to wound others to preserve their position of power. This stands in direct contrast to Jesus. Jesus was willing to be wounded because he loved us. His love is characterized by humility not entitlement, and it does not impose bondage. His love sets us free.

To complete the picture of oppressors, it is important to understand how they view themselves. They have little self-awareness and are profoundly self-deceived about their own behavior and intentions. This self-deception has three aspects.

***Oppressors are blind to the destructive nature of their behavior.*** Due to their sense of entitlement, oppressors are unable to find anything wrong in their dominating and sinful behavior. They are unaware of their own contributions to a conflict or outcome; instead, their negative behavior makes perfect sense to them. They are not getting what they want, need and deserve, so a punitive reaction is warranted. In talking with Dan, he was wholly unaware of ways that his behaviors hurt his wife and marriage. Even

<sup>15</sup> I will discuss spouse safety later in the article.

when he punched Denise in the back, he did not see it contributing to her lack of desire for him. She was not giving him sex, so he was letting her know he was upset.

***Oppressors feel justified in how they treat others.*** Since they are blind to the destructive nature of their behavior, they do not have sorrow for how they hurt their partners. ***They lack remorse and feel others deserve what they get.*** Dan would recount throwing something or yelling but had zero insight into how this was hurtful or damaging. To him it felt justifiable given that he perceived Denise was at fault for the situation.

***If oppressors do show sorrow, it is often self-centered and twisted.*** They might feel sorry for their own suffering when a situation deteriorates, or they might display contrition in a manipulative way in order to reestablish control over the relationship. But rarely do they have true remorse or empathy for the pain that they have caused others.

***Oppressors view themselves as blameless.*** Oppressors are masters of ***blame-shifting.*** They place blame on anything or anyone other than themselves—usually on a spouse. Since they do not see their fault in the relationship, they feel justified in their behavior. They will therefore not take any responsibility for it or the harm it causes. Dan would often say, “I had no choice but to look at porn when she refuses sex. A man has needs!”

These three ways oppressors are self-deceived cause them to focus only on their perception that others are sinning against them. As they do this, their consciences become seared. They lose the ability to be aware of their own sin and are in a dangerous spiritual position.<sup>16</sup> Since they do not see their brokenness, there is nothing internal that propels them to change. This makes it hard for them to see their need for Jesus or their need to love others.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>16</sup> “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.” (1 John 1:8)

<sup>17</sup> To keep perspective it is important to note that we all can sin along these lines. Each one of us can struggle with feeling entitled. We might even be somewhat controlling, threatening or hostile on occasion. But in addition to the differences in extent and frequency, a key question is, how do you respond when confronted with your sin? Most people can recognize the wrongness of their behavior. We admit our sin and repent. But oppressors resist seeing how their behaviors and preferences are sinful and harmful to others. Their sense of entitlement blinds them to everything but what serves them.

It does not take much imagination to see how damaging these seven traits would be in a marriage. One partner lives and works hard to meet the other's demands under the fear of punishment. This is not covenantal living. Over time, fear of the oppressive spouse replaces fear of the Lord. Working hard to keep another person from being angry and punishing is a frightening and impossible way to live. Couples like these need help. Let's consider how to help after oppression has been identified.

### **Initial Responses after Oppression Is Identified**

When you have assessed that there is a pattern of oppression in a marriage, you must respond wisely. Here is an outline of first steps to take.

***Make safety the priority for the oppressed spouse.*** Evaluate the level of danger.<sup>18</sup> Keep in mind it is not always wise and safe to confront an abuser. Confrontations often lead to more volatile, if not dangerous, situations for the oppressed spouse. Secondly, not all victims recognize the peril that they are in and need considerable time to process and develop their own response to their situation. Others who know or have a sense they are being abused have likely developed resistance strategies. Explore, support and build upon ways that the victim is already resisting abuse.

Sometimes the wisest course of action is for the victim to flee danger. Carefully plan for this by creating a safety plan.<sup>19</sup> Know that when women leave abusive spouses, it is the time when they are most in danger. Women are 70 times more likely to be killed in the two weeks after leaving than at any other time during the relationship.<sup>20</sup>

***Stop joint counseling sessions.*** Even when there is no physical dan-

<sup>18</sup> There are several tools for this. I use the One Love App, which asks a series of questions about the situation and gives a resulting score on the level of danger. If you are out of your depth, make use of local community resources: police, domestic violence shelters, counselors who are experienced with abuse, or the National Hotline that can refer you to local resources—call 1-800-799-SAFE. Victims of domestic violence should not suffer further from our inexperience.

<sup>19</sup> For a safety planning worksheet see: "Domestic Violence Personalized Safety Plan," National Center on Domestic and Sexual Violence, accessed June 15, 2016, [http://mnadv.org/\\_mnadvWeb/wp-content/uploads/2011/07/DV\\_Safety\\_Plan.pdf](http://mnadv.org/_mnadvWeb/wp-content/uploads/2011/07/DV_Safety_Plan.pdf).

<sup>20</sup> "Myths and Facts about Domestic Violence," Domestic Violence Intervention Program, accessed June 15, 2016, <http://www.dvpiowa.org/myths-facts-about-domestic-violence/>.

ger, safety needs to be the priority. Joint counseling stops. Anything that signals to the oppressor that this is a shared problem will likely fuel more abuse. Additionally, oppressors are skilled manipulators that will work to co-opt the counseling process and use it to gain more power and control. Some can do this in subtle ways that are hard to detect. Do not give them the opportunity.

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***Recommend individual counseling for the oppressor.*** Counseling for the oppressor should focus on the seven characteristics that fuel oppression. Keep in mind these same characteristics—particularly the blame-shifting and blindness to the impact of their behavior—make oppressors hard to influence. Know, too, that oppressors often feel that they are the victims and tend to flee counseling when counselors fail to agree with them. Plan for this by broadening the circle of who is involved in their care. Make sure all parties are communicating and the agenda is clear or else the oppressor will manipulate those trying to help.<sup>21</sup>

***Provide ongoing support to the oppressed.*** Offer protection, support and insight that will help victims make sense of the dynamics within their marriage. As you work with them, know that oppression usually obscures two important things. First, it obscures a person's identity. Through constant criticism and harsh treatment, the spouse may feel that he or she has no value. Second, living under oppression limits everyday life and normal freedoms. Counseling should therefore aim to help oppressed spouses increase their understanding of how much God values them and to help them regain aspects of their lives that have been overshadowed by the oppressor.

Further, if there are children in the home, assess their safety and whether counseling services are needed for them as well.

<sup>21</sup> This is when the resources of the church can be beneficial. Sometimes church leadership can work toward keeping the oppressor in counseling.

These initial steps are only the beginning of what care will need to look like to help a marriage heal from the damaging effects of oppression. On average, it takes an oppressor two years of weekly counseling to begin to see and own his or her sin. Since repairing the relationship cannot begin until all abuse has stopped, this is a lengthy process.

### **Participating in God's Rescue**

Oppressors are masters of deception. As God's people, we are called to expose their works of darkness, and bring them into the light (Eph 5:11). We are called to develop our detection skills so we will perceive what "has been carefully hidden." To do this ministry, we have the Scriptures that show us what love looks like in the flesh—Jesus Christ. His love and his actions are the complete opposite of everything oppressors do. His desire is to rescue the oppressed, and his love compels us to participate in that rescue. As we work prayerfully, carefully and diligently, we honor him, the oppressed, and the oppressor. May he make us as clear-minded as he is about oppression, about love, and about the power of his mercy, so that we will serve others well.