



Season 5 | Episode 20

Spiritual Abuse **Darby Strickland**

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Crystal Keating:

This is the Joni and Friends Ministry podcast and I'm Crystal Keating. I love bringing you real conversations about disability, finding hope through hardship, and sharing practical ways you can encourage someone in your life who's struggling. You can learn more about our podcast and find all of the helpful resources we've mentioned on the show at joniandfriends.org/podcast.

Recently I talked with Christian Counselor Darby Strickland about understanding trauma. This week, Darby is joining me again to talk through another form of deep-wounding spiritual abuse, working with individuals, families, and couples who face a variety of issues, Darby specializes in counseling, abuse, and marriage.

She teaches at Christian Counseling and Educational Foundation's online School of Biblical Counseling, leads a support group for oppressed women, and trains counselors and churches to care well for those affected by abuse. Listen, as she shares some of the markers of spiritual abuse and talks through what we as helpers need to be aware of when we're walking with someone who's been wounded by the misuse of scripture.

I originally heard you at the CCEF Conference in 2018. You were talking about restoring God's word to hearts that have been hurt by scripture. And it really resonated with me as someone who works at Joni and Friends and kind of is on the front lines of what we're hearing every day, and I really felt like we needed to have this conversation about spiritual abuse. And that's what we'll be talking about today because year after year, we're hearing from those with disabilities or ongoing chronic pain or illness or those with even life-changing diagnosis who are looking to their church community and their spiritual leaders for help. But sadly, they've been wounded by the misuse, even abuse of God's word.

And I think that's something that is really tender to your own heart. And I, you know, I think the most common way I've seen spiritual abuse happen, at least here at Joni and Friends is when a Christian is excluded from the life of the church 'cause they haven't been miraculously healed of their illness or their disability. And in some circles, the person with a disabling condition is looked down upon because their lack of faith and perhaps even accused of harboring hidden sin. So, I realize that this is a controversial topic, a sensitive topic to some, but I wanted to speak out on spiritual abuse because, you know, the mission of this podcast is to answer real questions and give practical ways to better welcome and embrace people with disabilities into every aspect of the life of the church.



So, with that said, Darby, I'd like to begin our conversation with hearing how you would describe or define spiritual abuse.

Darby Strickland:

Yeah, thanks. Spiritual abuse is coercively controlling or condemning another individual by another or an organization even by using doctrine or scripture or religious authority.

And that can include the misuse of authority of any leadership level in the church, or oppressive teaching, or intrusive healing ministries that you talked about in the opening. But one of the things I think is just really important that it's really crafty because oftentimes you are being spiritually oppressed and you don't even know what's happening because the things that are being distorted have a little bit of truth in them, or they have a scriptural address to them. And so, it's very challenging to untangle that it's abuse or that there's even damage happening. But I think it's also important to point out that sometimes spiritual abuser doesn't know he's abusin' because they're using truths to keep power. They oftentimes believe what they're promoting and teaching.

Crystal Keating:

Yeah. That is really true. And I think that says a lot about what we're gonna talk about, that there is a sense of God is gracious even as we're learning the scriptures and he's tender towards those who are in those situations. So, we really wanna speak to both of those issues. You know, in your many years as a family counselor, which I know you've done for a long time, especially working with people who are abused, what are some of the ways you've seen spiritual abuse create great wounds in the lives of Christian men and women, and especially those whose lives have been impacted by disability?

Darby Strickland:

Yeah, just starting with the overall populations. In, in Christian circles, you tend to see husbands spiritually abusing wives where they're told to submit with unquestioning obedience, which tends to lead to sexual abuse.

You know, God says your body is mine on its mine to use for my pleasure and not care for your heart. Sadly, I see quite a bit of that or the way that parents are training their children. You know, seek to control and shame them to produce good behaviors instead of shepherding their hearts. And I would say, again, just with people with disabilities, like you talked about, you know, you're in sin or you would be healed.

And there's just various healing ministries and I think Joni addresses greatly in her book, *A Place of Healing*. And for these people it's, it's tragic because what they're hearing obscures who God really is. They feel coated in shame, their suffering is compounded, and they're confused and feeling unworthy, and that God is inaccessible to them. And that I find to be most tragic.

Crystal Keating:

I agree. I think there's a sense where when God is near and we know that he loves us, there is great strength in that. But when a person who feels spiritually abused or isolated, that just



compounds their suffering, I think. So why do you think people with disabilities and ongoing illness or pain may be particularly vulnerable to abuse in general and even spiritual abuse?

Darby Strickland:

For one, they tend to be more dependent and vulnerable. They are in a relationship where maybe there's a caregiver and it's not safe to terminate their relationship with them. They're also, they tend to be limited in their exposure sometimes due to mobility, or they just have barriers to creating community.

So, when you have a toxic relationship or a toxic community, it's harder to extract yourself and find a new one. But I also think that people living with disabilities many of them are deeply suffering. And when we suffer, when we all suffer, we tend to ask hard questions like Job did, you know, why me?

Or what did I do to deserve this? And so, you're in a great amount of pain looking for answers. And sometimes people swoop in, and they act like they have all the answers, and they can help. And if you follow my twisted teaching and do these things, you're gonna be healed, or I know what's best for you, and, and they're just easier to take advantage of.

Anybody is when you're weak and when you're wrestling, and I just say it's good to have questions and wrestle. The psalmist has lots of questions, but sometimes evil people prey upon these important questions. It's one of the psalmist's biggest fears is why if you turned your face from me, do you see me?

Do you not hear my cries? You know, my tears are my food day and night. You know? Are you not moved by my suffering? Do you hear me? It's sweet the way the Lord allows us to bring the questions about how he is relating to us, to him.

Crystal Keating:

Yeah, I, I've heard you say that when people who are suffering are asking questions, it's not necessarily that they need more information, although knowledge is good. I mean, can you talk more about that relational aspect of asking questions before the Lord?

Darby Strickland:

Yeah, I think that's a great way to even think about it. When you look at the Psalms, they're usually questions of faith, people saying, you know, like in Psalm 22 is a great example. My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

And it is a question of faith. They're addressing God. This is my God. And so often we interpret, we only hear kind of tone deaf to the person leaning in and saying that you're mine. And we only hear, why are you turning your face from me? We don't hear them as questions of faith, of people wrestling, how the Lord's relating to them.

And so, we often go into a theological answer. Well, God's all-powerful. He's all-knowing. He's, everything he does is good. When the person is typically asking a question that's centered on



themselves. Why is he doing this to me? Does he hear me? We miss the sweet me, the very local question they're asking.

Crystal Keating:

That's a good reminder. Yeah. It makes me think of the psalmist when he said, "How long oh Lord, will you forget me?" Well, God doesn't forget us. Right, but that's how it feels sometimes. And that's a good reminder for those of us who are coming alongside of people who are suffering and especially those who may have been spiritually abused.

You know, you really focus in on spiritual abuse, and you even talk about some markers or signs that a Christian may have been abused. Can you talk about those just so we're a little bit more aware and even, you know, I even say this as a helper, but for someone who's listening who may be abused and they may not recognize it, I think that's also important for you to speak to.

Darby Strickland:

That's a great, great question actually. And it's a difficult one to answer because there's just so many ways it can manifest. But there are some things you can look for. It's a few things. One is that they tend to be filled with shame. They tend to feel undeserving of God's love and just this pervasive sense of unworthiness.

Or they can have a fixation on their own sin. It's like their sin is the cause of my suffering. And that's just what they've been taught. And so, it oozes out of them. Also, that they're afraid to question spiritual authority or their teacher. And when you feel like you can't have questions or ask for clarification, that says there's something wrong. Good leaders and teachers welcome questions.

And they welcome wrestling and they want you to have a greater understanding. So that tends to be a good sign, is if you're afraid to disagree with somebody.

Crystal Keating:

Yeah, those are good things to be aware of. So, what do we, as those who wanna help, those who wanna come alongside people, especially those who are suffering or those who have been wounded, what do we need to be aware of or cautious about when walking with the wounded?

Darby Strickland:

You wanna really get to what specific teachings or specific passages have been used with a person. You wanna understand what has been used to harm or control them. How has the abuse shaped that person's experience of Christians in general, which will affect how they see you, or the church or marriage, or people in authority?

What's it like for them to pick up and read their Bible? You know, they feel like their Bible's yelling at them. You know, are only the condemning passages are what's highlighted to them? How are they experiencing God? Just getting a sense for what's it like for them. It's gonna be so different for you who go to church and it's, there's grace and love and care received from the Lord.



You're not gonna have a similar experience. You need to spend time and slow down and figure out what's it like for them because the experience is this alternate universe.

Crystal Keating:

You know, I do love lists and I love top 10 lists, I guess I would say. And I think you have a good top 12 lists, top 12 tendencies of those who have been wounded by scripture.

Can you talk a little bit about that?

Darby Strickland:

Yeah, sure. So, the first one is just recognizing that the spiritually abused person is really gonna fear you harming them. They have been tremendously wounded and they're right to be distrustful of you. So, you just wanna be cautious and allow them that freedom. Secondly, they might not be able to hear what you are actually saying to them.

I can't tell you how many times I've sat with a spiritual abuse survivor, and I'll say something, and they did not hear what I said. Our words are gonna get filtered through this warped grid they carry with them. We might use words that have different meanings like even sweet words like grace aren't gonna have the same meanings in their heart that I would want attached to them.

And I think thirdly, that just know that you're gonna hurt them. I say caring for people who've been abused spiritually is kind of like doing surgery in the dark. You aren't gonna be able to see or detect all the wounds that you're gonna bump up against. So, you kind of say, you know, I know that I'm inadvertently gonna hurt you and I want you to tell me when I say something you don't understand or something that hurts. Fourth, they most likely will struggle with assurance. They may not feel like God's precious child. They're gonna feel like the one he is so disapproving of. Fifth, Christian communities probably will feel scary to them, so you need to be thoughtful and wise about how they should engage in their church or small groups or Bible study.

We often tell people, go to a small group but we need to be mindful of what that experience would be like for them. Six, oftentimes we are counseling people or walking alongside people, and they are remaining in a community or a marriage or relationship where there's the wounding is continuing and it's really hard, if not impossible for people to heal when they keep getting hit and their abuse is ongoing.

So, we need to be mindful and patient with how long that process would be. Seven, know that they might be highly reactive people. They're in so much pain and so tender, like even a shadow or a remnant hurts them. I often, I, I kind of, I have a child with sensory processing disorder, and I liken it to when he was little, and he stood on the grass, and he felt like his feet were being cut up like it was glass.

He wasn't able to process how the information was coming in. It's processed in their system differently, so they're just gonna be more reactive. Eighth, they tend to have tender consciences



that God's words are valuable to them, and they have great grief and conviction. And it just speaks to how tender and sweet their hearts are and how important being right with the Lord is.

Nine, graces of the faith that are meant to build them up are usually inaccessible. There's a book called, *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse*. And they cited a quote from Mark Twain, which I thought was really helpful. And he said, a cat that walked on a hot stove would never walk on a hot stove again, but then again, it would never walk on a cold one either.

And so, so many abuse victims, fear church communion is particularly difficult. Sermons, fellowship, to them, it all just feels like danger. And so, we need to be really careful and tender with them in that. Ten, when you trust that God wants to heal them and restore them and bring them back, you are gonna be able to work at a slower pace and not push truths upon them.

It's just gonna be a glorious unfolding. It's gonna let you to do things slower and be more tender. Instead of having urgency like this is scary. This person is hurting. I wanna help them now. But trusting God with them just allows us to work at a different pace. Eleven, by sharing their story, they're exposing their shame.

And this is worship and it's glorious. And even sometimes it's gonna sound messy and they might sound angry. Anger is actually a good development because they now understand the harm that has been done to them. And God is angry about these things, and we see Jesus angry about these things. And again, so we're just trusting and praying that God is gonna shape their anger into lament and just allowing that to come from them and finally, just recognizing the healing journey is gonna be a long one.

God delights in being repetitive with us, and the scripture is highly repetitive. So, delight in being repetitive. And I think that's just so important. We often think, well, we've been at this three months and this is probably trajectory of years. I think that's helpful to keep in mind.

Crystal Keating:

Darby, thank you for sharing that, especially for those who wanna help and have a sense of urgency and to, I guess, think the long view, think the eternal view about God's healing work by his spirit. One thing that you've talked about is embodying Jesus Christ in gentleness when you come alongside people, and that really stuck with me because as influential as the abuser has been on the abused, similarly, as you're displaying the love and gentleness and grace of Christ, that's gonna make an impact.

It has to. Right?

Darby Strickland:

Yeah, definitely. And I think we have to do two things, right? We're showcasing Jesus' gentleness as he was in scripture and we see that, like to me on the cross, as he's facing death, experiencing prolonged pain and separation from God, his focus was on the people around him.



You know, he sees his mom and John and he asks John to care for her, and he sees and shows concern for those responsible for his death. You know, he's saying, you know, forgive them for, they know not what they do and he's promising salvation to the repentant thief on the cross. And so, Jesus just has this concern for other people.

And we can tell people about that and we wanna showcase that in scripture. But really, when you have this kind of background, you're gonna have to capture that in your own being and in your embodying it for them. It's gonna be experienced more than it's gonna be taught. And Timothy tells us to gently instruct, you know. We are to exude tenderness and there's gonna be a times that we don't do this well.

We need to repent. And unlike their abuser, we're gonna want that feedback and that correction. And I think that's just hugely important. But really, we are just called to embody scripture and Jesus's heart for these tender souls.

Crystal Keating:

Well, when you talk about scripture, you know, one of the things that we here at Joni and Friends really emphasize is a good theology of suffering.

And that's something that you've talked about the importance of having a robust and well-rounded theology of suffering. Can you explain what that means to you and the ways you've seen a good framework for the theology of suffering? Helping someone who is truly wounded, you know, after being hurt and excluded because scripture was used against them.

Darby Strickland:

Yeah, I think even just backing up and most people have a theology of suffering that is very one dimensional, that suffering is a result of sin, and we really have to live recognizing that suffering is a result of the fall. And living in this fallen world, suffering comes on us from many fronts, and sometimes that's other people's sin.

And it's not our own. And that, that's a hard thing for Christians to wrestle with. You know, we're taught, we're all sinners. It's always important to have our sin in view and be repenting, but sometimes that isn't the most important thing in what is happening. Sometimes we're truly suffering because how someone else is sinning against us. Or there's just brokenness in this world and our bodies aren't working the way that they would have in the garden.

And so, by just recognizing there are many reasons why we suffer, really frees people up to engage scripture differently.

Crystal Keating:

That is something I think we need to keep saying over and over again because I almost think, you know, in our natural state, maybe our flesh agrees with because I've sinned, this is what's happened to me.



It's just a very linear, easy go-to. But the Bible says something very different in a grand scheme of things. And I think the more we keep talking about it and keep really going back to what has God said, that really takes deep roots. And you know, even just going back to that idea of you are suffering because of your sin.

We just got this message; this just broke my heart last week. Sometimes I'm like, I can't believe this still happens, but we got a message from a woman who's living with a chronic illness, and she has a son with disabilities and was rejected by her church because they said, don't come back unless you're healed.

Those were her words. Wow. And I have no church that would take me without judging my chronic illness that doesn't go away. I feel like I have no one and no Christian friend because I live like this. And I think, wait a minute, I can't believe this is still happening. So, what kind of encouragement can you share with this woman?

Darby Strickland:

Yeah, that just scripture speaks sweetly to that. It's just full of a cast of characters who are still wrestling with their sin and their suffering. And it is glorious and great to need a savior. And to be weak is just a beautiful thing. You know, it's just a tragedy to hear that line of thinking. But I hear it all the time and it isolates people from Jesus. And I think, I think it's helpful to know that it comes from people who are afraid. They condemn what they don't understand. It's much easier to think that someone is responsible for something than it can happen to them because suffering can knock on any person's door at any time.

But I find that a lot of people who have an alternative theology for that, it's a way that they keep themselves safe from the sin and the suffering in this world. They think that if they're good, they can control it. And that's just not a heart that is yielded to the Lord. And it's tragic that it wounds other people. But it just speaks to their failure to really understand who God is.

Crystal Keating:

Well, how do we as a church prove we're safe or build trust with someone who's been hurt, especially like that?

Darby Strickland:

I think like we've talked about, it's a little bit of showcasing the gentleness and leading that first, but I think it's really extending Jesus's invitation to people to rest.

You know, Jesus invites the weary and the burdened to come to him and find rest in Matthew 11. In Jeremiah 31 I love it, it says, for I'll satisfy the weary soul, an ever-languishing soul, I will replenish. And I think if people could think of themselves going to church, walking in the door as weary souls that are languishing, that church would be a place where the word and the sacraments and the worship music would be a place of replenishment.

It would just look so different versus having to walk in not needy. So, I think just being honest in our own micro struggles. Talking about places that are hard for us, being willing to talk, being an



environment or a culture where we're willing to say, these are the questions that I'm wrestling with.

And I think just recognizing, oftentimes we don't wanna debate or lecture victims. We really wanna acknowledge what happened to them is wrong. And sometimes we wanna use the Bible in ways that is just not helpful. We wanna really tend to somebody's heart first as Jesus would pursue their heart gently and graciously.

Jesus tends to ask questions. And he draws wounded people out. And sometimes our first line of defense is our intellectual. You know, chapter in verse or this theological system. But first, you really have to let the person know that you hear them in the cries of their heart.

Crystal Keating:

That's good. Well, you know, I really wanna speak directly right now as we close up with those who are listening that have a disability or believe they may be experiencing abuse. Maybe they feel like they're losing their sense of self or their sense of what's true, what's up, and what's down, Darby, what are some first steps a person can take to get help?

Darby Strickland:

It's more complex than you'd think. Sometimes finding the right person to share your concerns with is quite difficult. And so, my first thing I would tell someone is you wanna find somebody to which you can share your story or your questions with if you feel like you can pray 'cause sometimes spiritual abuse victims don't feel that they can pray, but I would just start by praying about who is safe and sometimes with this, the nature of this outside the system.

So, if this is something that's a pervasive teaching in your church, you know, where can I go online or to another Bible study or to another woman of faith from my history that I might ask questions of, you know? If it's, if it's happening inside your family, you don't wanna say to your dad, hey, what do you think about this?

You need to find someone who's outside that potentially abusive system, particularly if it's broadly taught in those places. And then you just really wanna start by asking good questions about what you've been told. Is this right? Does it sound right? Does this fit in with the whole of scripture? Does this fit in with the whole of God's heart?

And so really the way out is finding a safe place to share your story, where it'll be treasured, and the questions will be honored. And if you find someone who's shutting your questions down, you, you go somewhere else. You just really wanna be asked great questions and saying, hey, this is what happened. Is this right?

Crystal Keating:

Well, thank you so much for those wise words, those safe words, and that is really the heart of Jesus. And if you are listening today and you feel like you're in that situation and you're not really sure where to turn or if you have a safe person, you can always write to us at podcast@joniandfriends.org. We'd be happy to pray with you or send you some referrals to a



good Christian counselor or someone that's trusted. So, Darby, thank you so much for your time. Thank you for sharing honestly about this sensitive subject and directing people to the heart of God. You are such a blessing.

Darby Strickland:

Well, thank you so much for having me. It was my pleasure.

Crystal Keating:

Have you been wounded by the misuse of scripture or excluded from the church because you haven't been miraculously healed? Please contact our response team at podcast@joniandfriends.org and we'd love to connect you with resources to help you heal. If you'd like to learn more about ministering to someone in the context of abuse or navigating your church's response, care, and protection of someone who has been abused, please visit joniandfriends.org/podcast to access a free web-based training called, *Becoming a Church That Cares Well for the Abused*. This training was developed by Darby Strickland, along with other experts, and is available at joniandfriends.org/podcast. Thank you for listening today. To get our next episode automatically, please be sure to subscribe wherever you listen to podcasts. I'm Crystal Keating, and this is the Joni and Friends Ministry podcast.

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