

Sermon outline: The silent epidemic

Topic: A Christian response to domestic and family violence

Main passage: Proverbs 31:8-9

Other passages: James 1:19, Psalm 11:5, 1 Peter 3:7-8, Ephesians 5:21-33.

[Note: Consider including a trigger warning for people who have experienced trauma or abuse and give them the opportunity to leave, or give them the heads up the week before.]

Introduction – our silent epidemic

Australia is in the grip of a heart-wrenching epidemic:

- On average, one woman every eight days and one man every 14 days is killed by a current or former partner.¹

Yet despite all this, it is something that very few people ever talk about.

It is uncomfortable ... it is deeply personal ... it is kept in the dark ... and it is sadly, something that the church has been silent about for far too long!

The epidemic that I'm talking about is not a nasty disease **but the scourge of domestic and family violence** in Australia.

The language may sound dramatic but just consider this:

- It is actually a leading cause of homelessness in Australia.
- In fact, 40% of people who sought help from homelessness services in 2024-25 had experienced domestic and family violence. While domestic violence can affect both genders, 75% of those seeking help were female.²

What is domestic violence?

Let's firstly take a look at how to recognise domestic violence. I suspect some of you may think it's physical abuse. And yes, of course it can involve physical abuse - things like direct physical assault, destruction of property and forced sleep deprivation.

But it comes in other forms too, so it's really important to think beyond the obvious.

It can include:

¹ AIHW (2025): Domestic homicide 2023–24. <https://www.aihw.gov.au/family-domestic-and-sexual-violence/responses-and-outcomes/domestic-homicide>

² AIHW (2025): Specialist homelessness services annual report 2024–25. <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/homelessness-services/specialist-homelessness-services-annual-report/contents/clients-who-have-experienced-fdsv>

- Emotional abuse, like blaming the victim for all relationship problems, constantly undermining self-esteem and self-worth, or giving them the 'silent treatment' for long periods
- Sexual abuse, such as sexual activity without consent or causing pain, or using sexually degrading insults
- Social abuse, including systematic isolation from family and friends or forbidding or physically preventing the victim from social interaction
- Verbal abuse, for example continual 'put downs' and humiliation, either privately or publicly, focusing on intelligence, sexuality, body image or their role in the family
- Economic abuse, like taking complete control of all finances, not allowing access to bank accounts and providing only an inadequate 'allowance'
- And finally, spiritual abuse. This can involve things like preventing religious observance, forcing victims to do things against their beliefs, or using religious teachings as a reason for violence. We'll discuss this more later, as unfortunately it's more common in a setting like ours than in the non-religious population.

Before we continue, I'd like to invite any of you who are experiencing any of these things to come and speak to me or reach out to a member of our pastoral care team.

So how are we as Christians to respond to this problem?

- **Proverbs 31:8-9** - Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy.

We need to speak up! The church over the years has quite rightly been vocal on the sanctity of marriage, the value of a stable home and the permanence of the wedding vows ... but it has been rare for a sermon to ever mention, let alone tackle, domestic violence.

Perhaps the issue is too thorny or maybe there was a view that domestic violence only occurred in non-Christian families. Sadly, this is not the truth.

Whatever the reason for the silence, we must recognise that God expects his people to *speak up* and *defend* the weak and oppressed in society.

Domestic violence campaigner Rosie Batty did just that in her acceptance speech for the 2015 Australian of the Year. Rosie, who had lost her 11-year-old son Luke to domestic violence a year earlier, made waves around the nation when she labelled it an 'epidemic'. She said: "Family violence may happen behind closed doors but it needs to be brought out from these shadows and into broad daylight."³

How do we 'speak up' for the victims of domestic abuse?

1. **If a friend shares that they are experiencing domestic violence**

³ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-01-25/rosie-batty-named-australian-of-the-year-2015/6045290>,

It can be hard to know what to say, but there are a few really effective things you can do.

- **James 1:19a** - My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak

Listen to them. It's probably not an easy thing for them to discuss, so give them space to tell their story. Be empathetic and compassionate.

Validate and believe them. Often people are not confident to tell their story in case they are not believed. You can help them feel stronger by showing you believe what they say, no matter what they share.

Be clear they are not to blame. People who are experiencing domestic and family violence can often feel incredibly scared and unsure of themselves. You can say things like 'Violence is unacceptable; you do not deserve to be treated this way.' But avoid asking things like, 'Why don't you leave?', 'What could you have done to avoid this situation?', 'Why did they hit you?' as this might suggest they could control the violence by managing their own behaviour. It's not that simple!

Help them seek help. You don't need to try to fix the situation or be a counsellor. Refer them to services who can support them. But they are the ones who need to desire change and take the first step, so also be patient. If their life is in danger, they should call 000. Otherwise their best starting point is to call 1800 RESPECT or go to www.1800respect.org.au.

Pray. Don't forget to offer to pray with them, or for them if they're not Christian.

2. If we see or hear a friend abusing their partner or children

Let's be clear, any violence, physical, verbal or otherwise is never okay in God's eyes! God equates violence with wickedness and he hates it!

- **Psalm 11:5** - The Lord examines the righteous, but the wicked, those who love violence, he hates with a passion.

There is no excuse for violence, verbal abuse, manipulation or control in any marriage, let alone in a Christian marriage, which God designed as a living example of his love for his people and the church!

Those who claim the Bible is ambivalent on it are misguided and wrong! God clearly lays out how husbands are to treat their wives in 1 Peter:

- **1 Peter 3:7-8** - Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing will hinder your prayers. Finally, all of you, be like-minded, be sympathetic, love one another, be compassionate and humble.

At this point I'd like to call out a particularly dangerous and harmful practice among a very small number of men. I'm talking about men who call themselves Christian, but twist the Bible's teaching about submission in an attempt to excuse the violent,

manipulative and controlling behaviour they use over their wives. Ephesians 5:22 says “Wives, submit to your own husbands as you do to the Lord.” At face value it’s a verse that is challenging in our culture. We don’t have time to discuss it in detail today, but like anything in the Bible it must be read in context and I want to touch on a few surrounding verses to make it clear what the verse *doesn’t* mean.

The verse immediately before it (v21) says “submit to **one another** out of reverence for Christ.” A few verses later in verse 25 it says “Husbands, love your wives just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.” And in verse 28: “Husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself.”

So let me tell you what Ephesians 5:22 *doesn’t* mean. I want to be crystal clear about this – there is no wriggling room. It is never OK for men to control, abuse, hurt or intimidate their wives to get their way. Men and women are both created in the image of God and should live in self-sacrificial peace, love and unity. Misusing this verse (or any other part of the Bible) constitutes spiritual abuse and is completely and utterly unacceptable.

Even at a more basic level, in any relationship it’s not hard to see that any form of violence is the total opposite of loving your neighbour!

So what should you do if you hear or see a friend acting abusively?

Confront them. Tell them it's not right, there's no excuse for it and you want them to get help.

Have compassion but hold them accountable. They need to own their behaviour and get help. 24x7 phone counselling is available through Men’s Line (1300 78 99 78 or <https://mensline.org.au/>). They can also contact the Men's Referral Service (1300 766 491 or <https://ntv.org.au/>).

(INSERT PERSONAL STORY OR USE HEATHER’S STORY BELOW)

- I’d been with my husband Chris for eight years. Everything was fine at first, and I felt loved. Then life got hard. Chris became very jealous and controlling. I wasn’t allowed to have friends, and he even made me quit my job because my manager was a man. Every day he’d check my phone and go through my messages.
- Chris always had work but was no help to us. He gambled all our money away. We had to move in with his dad because we couldn’t pay our rent.
- Drinking made things worse. He attacked me verbally, then physically. Years ago he was arrested for hitting me when I was pregnant. I don’t know what happened that night...
- I kept thinking I needed to stay to support him, but things kept going downhill. For months I planned to leave, and a few times I actually did. But every time I’d feel sorry for Chris, sorry for taking Lucas away from his dad, so I’d go back. I tried to stick it out for my little boy. I didn’t want him to grow up in a broken home like I did. But no matter how much he said he’d changed and that it would be different, it never was.

- He ran down my self-esteem. He told me that nobody would ever want me, and I started believing all the mean things he said.
- One night we were out and he was shouting at me. I recognised a local police officer who was off duty and told him I needed help. He told me about Fiona from Mission Australia, and over a few weeks she helped me to develop a domestic violence safety plan. Fiona's help came at just the right time. It wasn't long before Lucas and I had to escape after Chris came home drunk and in a rage. We jumped in the car and took off.
- We spent the night in my car. It was freezing, and terrifying, but anything would be better than staying in that house. I don't think I've ever held Lucas so tightly.
- The next day I met with Fiona and she organised for us to stay in a safe house out of town. My family lives hours away on the coast. I didn't tell them about the abuse because I don't like to worry them. So it was just me. It's hard when you're trying to keep it all to yourself. I don't think I would have been able to do it without Fiona. I don't know what I would have done without her support and guidance. We only waited a week before a house became available. The waiting time for housing in our area is usually three to four years, but I know Fiona pushed hard for us. Mission Australia helped us move in. They gave us a washing machine and some other furniture. After walking on eggshells for so long, it was a relief to have a home where Lucas and I both felt safe.
- I had spent time in the safe house applying for jobs, and found out I was successful for one soon after we left. It was great for my confidence. It was the first time I'd felt excited in ages. Finally, I was getting my life and my independence back, and I could provide for my son.
- The change in Lucas has been remarkable too. Kids feel how you feel. Before, he was often unsettled and agitated, but now that we're away from all that stress he's much calmer and listens better. His school teacher says she's noticed a big change in him too. Fiona still checks in on us. It's important to have someone like her to talk to. It takes a lot of pressure off. It helps you to breathe. Fiona feels more like a friend than a case worker.

Three ways you can be part of the answer to domestic and family violence

1. **PRAY:** Pray for those in abusive relationships and for those working actively to help them. Pray for organisations such as Mission Australia that help people who have experienced domestic and family violence.

Sign up to receive Mission Australia's prayer diary at missionaustralia.com.au/prayer

2. **VOLUNTEER:** There are many ways to help, from simply offering a smile and warm conversation to giving of your time and talents to bless others. You could offer to read the Bible, pray, and encourage someone suffering from domestic violence. You could do the same to help hold accountable someone you know who is struggling with their anger and violence. Or your church could serve alongside a Christian

service organisation like Mission Australia. For ideas, go to missionaustralia.com.au/churches

- 3. GIVE:** Give of your finances to support the work of God in this area. As Jesus said in **Matthew 25:35** *For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in.*

This could be through your local church's ministries or you can donate to Mission Australia securely online at missionaustralia.com.au or by phoning 1800 88 88 68.

Know someone who needs help?

If their life is in danger, they should call 000.

For other concerns, the [National Sexual Assault, Family & Domestic Violence Counselling Line](https://www.nsv.gov.au) is available on 1800 RESPECT (1800 737 732).

Each state government has their own resources and support services available. You can access them from www.missionaustralia.com.au/what-we-do/children-youth-families-and-communities/domestic-family-violence.

Mission Australia's services are available at missionaustralia.com.au/find-support.